A socio-cultural understanding of application to and participation in higher education for school leavers from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds in an inner city area

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ABSTRACT

There is considerable knowledge about why school-leavers from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds do not participate in higher education, however, there is less knowledge about why and how the minority of such young adults do apply and participate in higher education. From a policy and practice perspective, to increase participation in higher education, this knowledge is important. In Ireland, research from an interpretative socio-cultural perspective is particularly valuable, given the traditional dominance of research and policy based on the concepts of socio-economic group and barriers to participation, and a limited tradition of interpretative research.

This study, using a combined life history and case-study methodology, provides a socio-cultural understanding of the broad range of enabling factors supporting application to and participation in higher education through in-depth interviews with a group of twenty young adults from similar socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds in an inner city area, interviews with people they identified as influential in their education decisions and interviews with education and community personnel from the area.

The study shows that there were common elements in all of the young peoples' lives which enabled them to avail of increased education opportunities in the area and be in a position to consider applying to higher education. There was also evidence of diversity within socio-economic disadvantage in the form of three groups with differing orientations towards higher education, experiences of education, sense of identity and desires for their lives. Networks with different types of social capital and providing different levels of cultural capital specific to accessing higher education were key to understanding the differences between the three groups and understanding who did and did not participate in higher education. The study draws on and extends Bourdieu's work on the relationship between field, capital and habitus and Woolcock's work on social capital to provide an understanding of the factors affecting application to and participation in higher education for young adults from SED backgrounds.

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INTRODUCTION

Policy Context

Widening participation to higher education remains a key policy issue in higher education. Osborne, in a review of widening participation policy and practice in Europe, suggests that economic factors associated with globalisation and political concern with greater equity and social cohesion are key reasons for a policy focus on wider participation (Osborne 2003, p.6). He states that no institution, 'irrespective of historical traditions', is 'completely immune from the policy objectives of increasing and widening participation' (*ibid*, p.9). In Ireland, research on access to higher education has taken place since the 1960s, however, it is a relatively recent policy issue; it attracted significant attention in policy in the early1990s and has remained an ever-present policy issue.

Ireland shows similar patterns to many European countries in that the numbers of students from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds increased as participation in higher education increased greatly, however, some socio-economic groups remain significantly under represented in higher education and participation in concentrated areas of disadvantage remains far below average. How the debate is conceptualised influences the site of focus for widening participation research, policy and practice. In Ireland, the conceptualisation of the relationship between disadvantage and participation in higher education for school-leavers has primarily focused on under representation by socio-economic group and the barriers associated with accessing higher education. The absence of 'class' from the discourse, and a limited tradition of interpretative research, means that the developments in understandings of class and disadvantage that accompanied the turn towards critical theory, feminism and post-structuralism, and the insights into widening participation afforded by interpretative research, are not widely available in an Irish context. Thus, there is a significant gap in knowledge in Ireland on which to base practice to increase participation in higher education, particularly in areas with high levels of disadvantage.

Personal and Professional Rationale for this study

I have a strong commitment to widening participation to higher education and believe that higher education is a gateway to a wide range of individual benefits, resources and positions of influence in society, thus, who participates in higher education is important for individuals, communities and society. I also believe that a diverse higher education community is most productive for learning. Goodson and Sikes write that, 'most people's preference among research topics is likely to be for ones which have meaning to and interest for them, and this meaning and interest generally stems from something in their own lives' (Goodson and Sikes 2001, p.52). They argue that researchers should be 'as reflective and reflexive as possible and to make this explicit to readers' (*ibid*, p.52). Josselson states that understanding why the author chose the topic and its meaning in the writer's life is key but also notes that 'most of us have been educated away from this mode of expression and find it hard to speak in this voice' (Josselson 1993, p.xii). However, in research on access to education the issue of acknowledging the meaning of the research in the researcher's life has been addressed and many researchers have provided autobiographical information of relevance to their research (Ball 2003; Roberts 1998, p.110; Hoggart 1992, p.17; Marsden 1968, p.106; Anderson 2001, p.135; Edwards 1993a p.12; Mahony and Zmroczek 1997, p.1; Reay 1997; Lawler 2002, p.254; Skeggs 1997a, p.134; Walkerdine, Lucey and Melody 2001, pp.83-84, West 1996).

From my perspective as a reader of a research study, knowing the influence of the researcher on the genesis and nature of the research provides a more complete picture of the research. A combination of professional and personal reasons from my work, study and personal life influenced my area of study. As the child of working class parents, who left school at the age of thirteen and fourteen, I am interested in the relationship between class and higher education. As a young person in a family of eleven people, I was aware of the lack of surplus money but I did not see myself as disadvantaged and would not meet a number of the criteria that define socio-economic disadvantage. However, when I went to university, I became aware for the first time, in contrast to the majority of my peers, of that lack of income, of a parental level of education that did not include higher education or

upper second level and of my father's occupation as a working class occupation. Thus, on a personal level, I can relate to aspects of the experiences described by students from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds. Undoubtedly, my personal experience of some of the aspects of accessing higher education as a sort-of working class student and my career guidance studies and experience as a guidance practitioner working in a disadvantaged area led me, when I took up the position of access officer at a third level institution, to question the dominant focus on explaining participation in higher education as determined by socio-economic group in access research and policy in Ireland, and to ask if there is additional and different knowledge that we need in order to fully understand the relationship between disadvantage and participation in higher education for school-leavers from SED backgrounds. The focus for the thesis emerged from my studies during the EdD and ongoing analysis of, and involvement in, widening participation policy and practice. Thus, a combination of my personal, professional and doctoral student experiences contributed to the choice of research area for this study.

Research study

The study aims to provide a socio-cultural understanding of application to and participation in higher education for school-leavers from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds in a disadvantaged area.

The main research question is:
1. What enabled young people from an SED background, who lived and attended school in a disadvantaged area, to apply to higher education and what affected whether or not they participated in higher education?

The sub-questions in the study are:
2. What role do social networks play in participation in HE for young people from an SED background? Do young people identify network members as being a significant influence? If yes, who are the key influencers and how do they have an influence?

3. How does heterogeneity and homogeneity within the experience of socio-economic disadvantage affect application and participation in higher education? What are the understandings of the nature of the relationship between socio-economic disadvantage and higher education participation in relation to school-leavers from SED backgrounds? How are differences in education outcomes amongst young people from similar socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds explained? What are the implications of diversity within disadvantage for understanding the relationship between disadvantage and participation in higher education?

4. What insights and understandings does the research provide that could inform widening participation policy and practices to increase the number of students from SED backgrounds participating in higher education?

Structure of thesis

This thesis comprises of this introduction, five chapters and a conclusion. In chapter one, I review the literature on access to higher education for school-leavers from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds and identify what is known about this subject and the further questions that arise from these understandings. In chapter two, I discuss and critique the Irish research, policy and practice context and outline the conceptual framework and research questions that developed from this analysis and the understandings and questions identified in the literature review. I also outline the methodology used to answer the research questions. In chapter three, I provide a detailed description of the methods used in the study, outline the ethical issues and how they were managed during the research. In chapter four, I present the major research findings, which are then discussed in relation to the knowledge from other studies in chapter five. In the conclusion, I outline the contribution to knowledge that the study provides, the learning from the study, implications for practice and suggestions for further research.

The structure of the thesis reflects both the creative learning journey involved in the research process and production of this thesis and key ethical considerations. The understandings from the literature review and research,

policy and practice contexts in Ireland clearly influenced the research questions. In turn the nature of the research questions influenced the methodology chosen to address those questions. The nature of the study, research questions and the life-history and case-study methodology ensured that ethical issues were key to this study. Specifically, I decided to present the life histories, data from other interviews and the findings in chapter four without including any references to, and discussion of, other research in that chapter to ensure that the participants' stories and contributions had significant voice and weight in the presentation of the findings in the thesis. The knowledge that emerged from the interviews and interpretation of the data highlighted the central role of Bourdieu's work on field, habitus, capital and practice and Woolcock's research on social capital in understanding the findings and the significance of the findings and this research then is the focus of the discussion of the findings in chapter five. From the discussions of the findings, it was clear that broader understandings of the relationship between disadvantage and participation in higher education are required to capture the nuances and complexities of the relationship and the implications of this for research, policy and practice are addressed in the thesis conclusion.

CHAPTER 1: LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

In this chapter, I review the literature on access to higher education for school-leavers from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds. From the 1950s to the present, access to higher education has been a key area of research in sociology of education and I outline how the changing focus in access research reflected the key developments in the sociology of education. I also draw on two questions to examine the literature: what explanations or understandings are provided for the fact that access is not equal and what explanations, if any, are given regarding the participation of a minority of working class students in higher education. The first question enables me to highlight the progressive developments in understanding the unequal patterns of participation in higher education that occurred in this literature over time. The latter question puts the focus on the limitations of the research and the further questions that emerge from the review of the literature.

In section one, I review access research written from a structuralist perspective, focusing on research in the political arithmetic tradition. I note the enduring influence of this type of research and its value in providing a rationale for initiating attempts to change participation in higher education but also the limitations in providing explanations for the patterns of unequal participation. In section one, I also examine research that sought to address the limitations of structuralist research, particularly school-based ethnography and neo-Marxist research.

In section two, I review contemporary approaches to widening participation research. I highlight the impact of the turn to critical theory, feminism and post-structuralism on access research and review how they influenced understandings of class, the extensive use of qualitative methodologies, emergence of new themes in research, thus producing new understandings about key aspects of widening participation. I also review the key concepts used to understand the relationship between disadvantage and access to higher education and outline how the conclusion of much of this research draws attention to the contrasting experiences

of middle-class and working class students in considering, applying and accessing higher education.

In the final section, I focus on the knowledge about access to higher education and further questions emerging from the literature review. I conclude that the literature on access to higher education for young people from disadvantaged backgrounds has provided a strong rationale for widening participation work aiming to increase participation rates for SED school-leavers, and has provided a range of in-depth explanations outlining why many such young people do not participate in higher education. I also conclude that the review has shown that understandings regarding the current participation of a minority of socio-economically disadvantaged young people in higher education are less developed. From the research we know why and how the majority of middle class young students participate in higher education, we know why and how the majority of working class young students do not participate directly in higher education but there are gaps in knowledge which mean that we know less about the factors that enable working class young people to apply to higher education and the factors that influence subsequent participation in higher education.

SECTION 1.1: STRUCTURALISM AND INITIAL REACTIONS TO STRUCTURALISM IN WIDENING PARTICIPATION RESEARCH

Research in the positivist, structuralist tradition on access to higher education showed the considerable under representation of students from working class backgrounds or lower socio-economic groups and is effectively the entry point to any review of literature about widening participation. Structuralist research that had a significant and enduring impact on access is that in the political arithmetic tradition. In *Origins and Destinations* (1980) Halsey, Heath and Ridge describe the 'double intent' of this tradition:

> On the one hand, it engages in the primary sociological task of describing and documenting the 'state of society'; on the other hand it addresses itself to central social and political issues (Halsey *et al* 1980, p.1).

The initial focus on unequal access to second level schooling shifted to a focus on participation rates in higher education following the extensive increase in participation in second level education. In the Republic of Ireland, this work was conducted by Patrick Clancy initially (Clancy 1982, 1988, 1995, 2001) and, later by O'Connell, Clancy and McCoy (2006). This research took the form of a series of large-scale surveys of higher education entrants and showed that, while participation in higher education had increased over time, the participation rate of students from lower socio-economic groups and from disadvantaged areas showed that there was significant levels of under representation. This type of research has been conducted in many countries and international reviews show that the results are similar in many countries; while there has been an increase in participation rates across all classes in absolute terms as the number of places in higher education increased, students from working class and lower socio-economic groups continue to be under represented in higher education in relative terms (Skilbeck and O'Connell 2000; Skilbeck 2001; Halsey 1997; Clancy and Goastellec 2007).

The importance of this type of work in the access field cannot be over emphasised. As Lynch and O'Riordan acknowledge, in the first instance, this type of research:

> made an important contribution to educational thought as it provides a clear map of how educationally stratified our society is, in terms of social class, socio-economic and other terms, over time. It lays down the empirical (generally, but not always, statistical) floor (Lynch and O'Riordan 1998, p.450).

The expectation in the structuralist research written in the liberal tradition was that in highlighting patterns of unequal participation, policy-makers would implement changes to address the inequalities. There is an acceptance that these expectations regarding change in education producing equal representation in higher education were overly optimistic and have not been realised. The purpose of this research remains that of documenting patterns in participation in education and educational outcomes and any changes in patterns rather than examining how the patterns occur or how they could be changed. This is evident in the concern within liberal widening participation research on indicators to enable international comparisons and in the debates about whether the focus in examining inequality should be on absolute or relative rates of participation (Halsey 1995, Clancy and Goastellec

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2007). In providing the empirical floor, this type of research has been used as a justification and rationale for access initiatives, thus, continues to have a strong impact on access research, policy and practice (Kettley 2007, p.338; Ball 2004, p.3; Lynch and O'Neill 1994, p.312). Below, I examine the literature which challenged structuralist research from a number of different perspectives.

One of the early critiques of structuralism was that the impact of the process and experience of schooling itself on educational outcomes was not addressed and was a 'black box'. This critique was one of the ways in which the wider critique of the limitations of the positivist empirical tradition manifested itself in the sociology of education (Ball 2004, p. 4). Ball writes that the key element of the new sociology of education was:

> a shift from viewing schooling as a black box. . . a neutral arena in which differences and inequalities forged elsewhere were played out, to treating educational processes themselves, the processes of educational transmission – teaching, assessment, curriculum – as all imbricated in the production of inequalities within schools (Ball 2003, p.6).

The new site of focus was the school and the methodology favoured to research the processes of schooling was ethnography. Given the key role of ethnography in anthropology, it is not surprising that it was the School of Anthropology and Sociology in Manchester University that implemented the ethnographic research project that led to Lacey's *Hightown Grammar* and Hargreaves' *Social Relations in a Secondary School*. These studies drew attention to the negative effects of streaming and the elitist view of education on which school practices rested (Hargreaves 1967, p.192) and the impact of the development of anti-school sub-cultures amongst working class students arising from 'the organisation of the school' (Lacey 1970, p.192).

Research written from a neo-Marxist perspective in the 1970s also challenged structuralist understandings of educational outcomes and highlighted the role of schools in reproducing the class system and effectively preparing working class students for working class jobs (Bowles and Gintis 1976; Willis 1977; Roberts 1977). Bourdieu and Passeron's text, *Reproduction in Education, Society and Culture* (1977) drew attention to the relationship between the education system and cultural capital in reproducing class positions. The culture and curriculum of

schools was also identified as being unreflective of working class language usage (Bernstein 1977).

A number of studies in the 1970s focused on differential valuing and experience of education between middle class and working class families. Kelsall, Poole and Kuhn's study (1972) of graduates, reached the following conclusion about families of working class graduates:

> [They] tend to differ in certain ways from those of working-class people in general and to differ in the direction of greater 'middle class-ness' which can be seen as an indirect cause of differential mobility. A more direct cause is likely to be the outcome of the interdependent operation of all these factors in terms of family values – the acceptance of higher education as both desirable and within reach (Kelsall, Poole and Kuhn 1972, pp. 46-47).

Some neo-Marxist research questions the idea of passivity in the face of structural inequality. While Willis' study (1977) focused on showing how the school experience for working class students led to the development of resistance to school and learning and ensured that such young people were not in a position educationally or had any desire to participate in higher education, other studies influenced by the work of Freire (1970), argued that transformative action by committed professionals could change the educational experience for such young people from disadvantaged backgrounds (Byrne *et al* 1975).

The ethnographic research and neo-Marxist research described in this section provided better understandings of the relationship between educational outcomes and school processes, including streaming, curriculum, school culture, teaching practices and pupil-teacher relationships and highlighted the role education plays in reproducing the class system and contributing to class-stratified, post-school opportunity structures, including access to higher education. While it provided better explanations for the patterns of unequal access to higher education, the second question about the participation of a minority of students from disadvantaged backgrounds in higher education was not addressed in much of the research and, when the explanations were attributed to differential valuing of higher education in some working class families (Kelsall, Poole and Kuhn 1972), as Archer notes, there is an 'inability to explain why some working-class families place more value on higher education' (Archer 2003, p.9). Bourdieu and Passeron's

argument that working class participants in higher education had some familiarity with higher education through wider family contacts cannot explain all such participation in higher education and does not explain how these changes occurred. There is also little acknowledgement of the differences in participation in education within working class families.

SECTION 1.2: CONTEMPORARY APPROACHES TO WIDENING PARTICIPATION RESEARCH

In the section above, I highlighted the importance of structural and liberal political arithmetic research and outlined how the critique of structuralist research and the turn to classroom studies and cultural understandings in widening participation research reflected wider developments in research on class and sociology of education. A highly significant development in sociology of education was the turn to critical theory, feminist and poststructuralist research and in this section, I review the impact of these contemporary approaches to widening participation research on understandings of class, methodologies, research themes and understandings of widening participation.

A key feature of contemporary approaches to widening participation research was the questioning of occupation-based understandings of class, a focus on the subjective experience of class, the interlinking of class, race and gender and the processes of class formation and change. Within widening participation research, there was a recognition of the limitations of occupation-based approaches to identifying class, disadvantage and the relationship with higher education. The research acknowledged the impact of changing occupational classification systems on the process of identifying which groups are over or under represented in higher education (Archer *et al* 2003, p.9; Bernard 2006, pp.25-28; Blicharski 2000, p.179; Tonk 1999, p.7) and the difficulties in relation to identifying women's social background (Benn & Burton 1995, p.10; Archer *et al* 2003, p.10; Clancy 2001, p.53) and other people who are not in work. Drudy reviewed a labour force survey in Ireland and noted that, after excluding full-time students, 44.8% of the population

over the age of 15 were not in work (Drudy 1995, p.306). This research highlighted how understandings of class based on occupational definitions exclude then many parts of the population and do not provide an adequate basis for understanding the relationship between disadvantage and participation in higher education.

In the text *Higher Education and Social Class* Archer acknowledges the impact of Giddens' theories on individualisation (Giddens 1991; Archer 2003, p.15) and Beck's argument that people have a weaker sense of social class identity (Beck1992; Archer 2003, p.15), however, this is largely rejected within widening participation research, on the grounds that it obscures the reality of disadvantage and ignores the wider patterns of inequality in participation in higher education. Archer's argument in favour of a midway position is typical of recent widening participation research. Archer suggests that it is possible to adopt a position that retains a focus on structures while acknowledging the 'boundaries of classed identities and inequalities are . . . "fuzzy" and stratified by "race" and gender' (*ibid,* p.20). This is somewhat similar to Bradley's approach to class. She suggests that 'a reworked version of modernist analysis, benefiting from the critical insights of postmodern and post-structuralist thought, offers the best hope for an adequate understanding of the double and contradictory nature of contemporary society, both fragmenting and polarizing' (Bradley 1996, p.214).

The interlinking of class with race and gender was also evident in access research. Reay, David and Ball in a study of higher education choice (2005) concluded that their research reaches similar findings to that of Shiner and Modood (2002): 'Class tendencies are compounded by race. Just as most working class students end up in less prestigious institutions, so do most ethnic minority young people' (Reay *et al* 2005, p.162). In relation to gender, Archer, Halsall and Hollingworth's study of the influence of class, gender and sexuality on post-16 aspirations suggested that working-class women's performance of femininities led to conflict within school which could lead to their positioning as 'non-academic' and led to an earlier entering of the labour market than middle class girls due to the economic capital required to maintain the performances. They also suggested that female investment in heterosexual relationships 'impacted negatively on their educational engagement in a way that was not found to be the case for boys' in the form of 'lowering their

aspirations' (Archer *et al* 2007, p.177). While in Tett's study of working class participants in higher education (2000), men emphasised class over gender, in Archer and Leathwood's study, classed and racialised masculinities in the form of a focus on manual labour, on being 'cool' or on having responsibilities as 'breadwinners' came into play in explanations for not participating in higher education (Archer and Leathwood 2003, pp.179-182).

These developments in understandings of class and participation in higher education through the use of mostly interpretative approaches provided new knowledge about a number of themes. The role of identities in relation to access to higher education was fully explored for the first time in access research. While earlier research acknowledged the issue of identity (Jackson and Marsden 1966; Hoggart 1992), it was rarely explored in any detail. The research showed that identity came into play in a number of ways. A number of studies showed how a learner identity based on personal deficit acted as a barrier to further participation in education (Archer and Yamashita 2003, p.60; Lynch and O'Riordan 1999, p.110; Ball *et al* 2000, p.15). Other studies drew attention to the way in which a gendered working class identity as a person, not just a learner, could result in higher education being viewed as 'not manly' (Archer and Leathwood 2003, p.181).

The way in which a working class identity could lead to applicants limiting their higher education choices to institutions where they would 'fit in' was also evident (Reay *et al* 2001, p.864; Reay 2001, p.338; Archer and Leathwood 2003, p.178; Lynch and O'Riordan 1999, p.110). There is also some evidence that students from working class backgrounds may have to undergo some kind of identity change to access and successfully adapt to higher education. In research by Archer and Leathwood (2003) and Reay (2001), some students welcome identity change as a means of 'bettering myself' (Archer and Leathwood 2003, p.186) or escaping from a working class identity (*ibid,* p.187) and other students resist a change in working class identity (*ibid,* p.177-8; Reay *et al* 2001, p.866). Archer and Leathwood conclude that such issues lead to 'processes of disidentification' and possible 'identity costs of participation' (Archer and Leathwood 2003, p.178) for working class students while Reay, Davies, David and Ball draw attention to the 'complex psychological paradox' whereby students' involvement in 'acts of symbolic

violence, the engagement in processes of disidentification, are pivotal to thinking themselves into other, more privileged, spaces' (Reay *et al* 2001, p.867).

The idea that factors associated with schools do not have as strong an impact as other factors (Coleman *et al* 1966; Jencks *et al* 1972) continues to be firmly rejected within widening participation research, however, the focus on the experience of school for young people from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds seen in the ethnographic research of the 1970s has, in some respects, broadened into analyses of a number of aspects of schooling. Critical theory draws attention to the need for curriculum reform, teaching practices and changes in teacher expectations of working class students (Furlong 2005) in order to increase participation in higher education. There is also an emphasis on the need to make changes in the university and school curriculum to reflect working class and female culture and to develop different approaches to teaching and learning, including a better integration of the theoretical and the personal (Burke 2002; Fagan 1995; Ryan and Connolly 2000).

A strand of school-related research has focused on the impact of school choice and some interpretative research in the UK has focused on the processes of decision-making in relation to school choice (Ball and Vincent 1998; Ball, Bowe and Gewirtz 1995; Reay and Ball 1998). In Ireland, there has been less research on the processes of school choice. Byrne and Smyth in their recent study of parental involvement in education, referencing an earlier study (Smyth *et al* 2004), note the 'paucity of systemic research in Ireland on how and why students and their families choose particular schools' (Byrne and Smyth 2011, p.17). Byrne and Smyth's study provides a good understanding of factors affecting school choice, highlighting in reference to a survey in 1994 the high level of school choice in Ireland with 50% of students at the age of 15 not attending their nearest school (*ibid,* p.44). They conclude that there were two main types of parental approaches to school choice evident in the research study published in 2011: active choosers and taken-for-granted choosers. While there was evidence of both types of chooser across different groups of parents, in relation to parental choice and socio-economic background, the study concluded that parents with higher professional backgrounds were more likely to send their children to a school outside of the area in seeking the best school for their child. O'Brien's study of mothers' emotional labour regarding

the primary-second level transfer reached a similar conclusion (O'Brien 2005, p.232). Byrne and Smyth's study selected middle class and working class schools in different parts of Ireland; their study also captures the tendency of some parents in disadvantaged areas to educate their children outside of the area but there does not appear to be any studies examining the school choices between disadvantaged schools within a specific area.

Ball notes that there has been a move away from studying the role of families with the exception of work by Reay and David (Ball 2003, p.6) and, for the most part, this research is concerned with the relationship between home and aspects of the education system. Reay and Ball in a study of second level school choice concluded that in middle-class families parents usually made the choice while in working class families the choice was often made by the students themselves due to the fact that there is 'an ascription of educational expertise to the child' given that the child often had more knowledge about the education system than the parents (Reay and Ball 1998, p.434). It is not surprising then in a study by Reay about higher education choice that it emerged that working class students receive less support at home regarding this choice than middle class students. She also showed that they receive less support at school, that serendipity often played a role and concludes that working class students were often 'left to their own devices when making decisions about higher education' (Reay 1998a, p.526).

In a study of mothers' involvement in their children's education at primary level, Reay showed how the inequalities occur even at this early stage. She rejects the idea that middle class parents value and support education while working class parents do not and shows instead that all mothers in her study were actively involved in supporting education to a similar extent, regardless of class. However, she concludes that the lower incomes, lower level of educational qualifications, less educational knowledge and information about the system resulted for working class mothers in 'less effective practices, as working-class women found it difficult to assume the role of educational expert, were less likely to persuade teachers to act on their complaints and were ill-equipped financially, socially and psychologically to compensate for deficits they perceived in their child's education' (Reay 1998b, p.162).

Information and guidance continues to be the focus of much research within widening participation and research shows that in the key area of providing information and guidance about choices and important educational decisions the school does not fill the vacuum surrounding working class young people. While Jackson and Marsden's work was useful in drawing attention to the gap between working class levels of knowledge about education and the school's assumed level of parental knowledge (Jackson and Marsden 1966, pp.225-9), more recent research shows that it is not simply information content that is an issue but the form in which it is provided. Hutchings, in a focus-group study involving 118 non-participants and 85 participants in higher education, concluded that there were three ways in which working class people may be less well-informed: 'young working class people know fewer people who have experienced higher education; that schools and colleges supply less information to those from working class backgrounds; and that the information needed by working-class potential applicants is in itself more complex than that needed by their middle-class counterparts' (Hutchings 2003, p.101).

Ball and Vincent showed that there is a distinction between 'cold' knowledge such as prospectus, school presentations, league tables and school evaluations and 'hot' knowledge from the grapevines of family, friends, neighbours and acquaintances. They note that, 'there are many different grapevines and an individual's access to them is structured primarily by class-related factors (Ball and Vincent 1998, p.381). Most research on this issue concludes that people from a working class background are less likely to use or trust 'cold' knowledge (Hutchings 2003, pp.106-7; Ball and Vincent 1998, Connor and Dewson 2001). Hutchings then builds on Ball and Vincent's work on hot and cold knowledge and concludes that 'information needs to be provided in a way that makes it "hot" knowledge, that is trusted and valued' (Hutchings 2003, p.116). A greater understanding of individual experience of applying to higher education was provided. Reay, David and Ball note that applicants to higher education from working class backgrounds stated that they found aspects of the process 'really stressful', 'scary', 'really, really worrying'. 'terrifying' 'really, really stressful' (Reay, David and Ball 2005, pp.100-102).

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Financial barriers were identified as a key issue in much research on widening participation (Lynch and O'Riordan 1998; Furlong 2005; Connor 2001) and a number of studies examined this issue in depth (Callender and Jackson 2004; Hesketh 1999; Woodrow 1999). In Ireland, Lynch and O'Riordan's work identified financial barriers as the over-riding set of barriers. Connor and Dewson concluded that finance was not the only barrier but that there was a need for 'more relevant and timely information on student finance, as well as greater financial assistance made more accessible to those students in greatest need' (Connor and Dewson 2001, p.110). Hesketh (1999) drew attention to the relationship between gender, class and different attitudes towards finance and debt.

In addition to providing new understandings of class and knowledge about the widening participation themes outlined above, a key element of contemporary widening participation research was a focus on the relationship between structures and agency in the conceptualisations about the relationship between disadvantage and access to higher education. Bourdieu's concept of habitus and to a lesser extent field and capital and Roberts' concept of opportunity structures are key to recent widening participation research. Reay, David and Ball (2005) in their study of higher education choice conclude that:

> we like others have found Bourdieu "enormously good for thinking with" (Jenkins 1992, p.11) and have made extensive use of his conceptual framework, especially the concept of habitus . . . We found that higher education students were located in overlapping circles of individual, family, friends and institution but both institutional and familial habituses proved important in students' choices (Reay *et al* 2005, p.161).

They show that working class and ethnic minority students attend less prestigious universities than middle class students and conclude: 'The combination and interplay of individual, familial and institutional factors produces very different opportunity structures (Roberts 1993)' (Reay *et al* 2005, p.162).

Reay, Crozier and Clayton (2009) in a study of working class students studying at an elite university, concluded that a working class habitus with a high level of reflexivity from an early age enabled them to adapt to a new field of elite higher education. Brooks in a study of the role of friendship on educational choices states that while choices are not influenced through lengthy discussions with or obtaining

information from friends (Brooks 2005, p.162), friendships played a role in the constructions of the self within hierarchies of achievement which were then linked to the hierarchies of higher education institutions and that an explanation of their decision-making processes 'is provided by Bourdieu's concept of habitus and the theory of cultural reproduction that this informs' (*ibid,* p.169). Class, in terms of the relationship between disadvantage and participation in higher education, is also viewed as access to resources and often framed in terms of access to forms of capital (Bourdieu 1986), as seen in the research above on school choice, access to information and access to finance. Ball, Macrae and Maguire use Roberts' concept of structured individualism as a 'way between the "dissolution" theorizing of Beck and Giddens and a re-assertion of a simply categorical structuralism' (Ball *et al* 2000, p.145). They describe how 'these young people see their lives as "up to them" but the possibilities and probabilities of a "future" are constituted differently within the different social-class contexts' (*ibid*, p.145).

The research on accessing higher education for young people from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds reviewed in this section outlines the impact of the turn to feminist, critical theory and post-structuralist approaches which took place in sociology. New understandings of class and an explicit focus on the relationship between structures and agencies both reflected the challenges of understanding the relationship between disadvantage and participation in higher education and provided more nuanced and complex explanations about participation in higher education for young people from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds. These concerns and the methodological developments provided new understandings of the role of the family, school, information and guidance, finance and identities.

In relation to the question of providing explanations for the patterns of participation in higher education, the main conclusion of much of this research is that the experience of choice and decision-making in relation to higher education is different for working class students compared to middle-class students. Factors including sense of self, choice and experience of schooling, information and guidance, financial barriers and a lack of access to those resources result in either no engagement with the higher education application process or an engagement

with the process and institutional cultures characterised by lack and limitations in comparison with middle class students (Reay *et al* 2005; Walkerdine *et al* 2001; Ball *et al* 2000, Hodkinson *et al* 1996; Archer *et al* 2003; Connor and Dewson 2001; Lynch and O'Riordan 1999, Forsyth and Furlong 2000; Noble and Davies 2009). As Reay notes, 'All the intricacies of choice that middle-class students take for granted have to be learned and applied in a short space of time and in a new unfamiliar situation' (Reay 1998a, p.523). Reay *et al* conclude that 'their experiences of the choice process are qualitatively different to that of their more privileged middle-class counterparts' (Reay *et al* 2001, p.871). Reay, Crozier and Clayton's study (2009) of working class students in an elite institution does not reach 'a barriers conclusion' about such participation, acknowledges the role of reflexivity in contributing to their participation in higher education but highlights how the students adjust academically but not as well socially and the focus is more on their experience of higher education rather than on the bridges to accessing it. It also focuses on participants in education only.

Some of the research examined in this section does acknowledge the participation of some working class students in higher education and there are a number of studies that focus on this group. These studies were helpful in highlighting the challenges involved in that transition, noting that many students from working class backgrounds are accessing different types of higher education and identifying the links between class, race and gender in participation patterns for young people from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds, however, much of this research is characterised by an explicit focus on barriers or lack for such young people (Archer *et al* 2003, p.1; Lynch and O'Riordan 1999; Furlong 2005, p.381).

Kettley's argument that much of the recent research on widening participation showing a dichotomy of 'encouraging factors for a bounded middle class and discouraging factors for a bounded lower class' (Kettley 2007, p.341) is evidence of 'adherence of sociologists to categorical, dichotomous and contradictory thinking' does not acknowledge the focus, although limited, on class fractions within the working class or the concern in the research with the relationship between structures and agency. However, Kettley's reference to 'encouraging' and 'discouraging' factors is accurate and his argument that future widening participation research

'must deploy an inclusive definition of the social processes shaping higher learning ranging from those that promote (bridges) to those that inhibit (barriers) differential participation' (*ibid,* p.343) does highlight some of the limitations with research to date regarding young people from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds and participation in higher education. The concern with an excessive focus on barriers, particularly financial barriers, within the debates about widening participation was also expressed in the review of widening participation research conducted by Gorard *et al* (2006, pp.120-1).

SECTION 1.3: UNDERSTANDINGS AND QUESTIONS FROM THE LITERATURE REVIEW

In this review of literature on access to higher education for young people from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds, I have examined widening participation research within its relationship to wider trends in sociology of education and identified understandings and gaps in the literature, focussing on three significant stages: structuralism in the political arithmetic tradition, the questioning of the black box and school-based ethnographies and a focus on cultural explanations and contemporary approaches. I have explored and critiqued the main types of access research using two key questions: what explanations are put forward for the patterns of unequal participation in higher education/low participation in higher education for young people from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds and what explanations, if any, are provided for the participation of some working class students in higher education. In this section I summarise the knowledge about access to higher education provided by the widening participation research and the further questions that emerge from these understandings in knowledge.

What is known

This review shows that there is significant knowledge about participation in higher education for young people from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds. The structuralist research on access shows the enduring nature of unequal patterns

of participation in higher education. While participation has increased in higher education for SED students, notwithstanding the increase in supply in second and higher level education, participation remains low and under represented in relative terms for young SED students and, more recently, research has shown that such students, when they do access higher education, are less likely to attend elite institutions. This research forms the basis of the field of access and continues to provide a strong rationale for promoting change in the patterns of access but such research offered few explanations regarding the patterns it revealed.

In sections one and two, I highlighted how research from the traditions of school-based ethnography and neo-Marxism and research from a variety of traditions after the growth of post structuralism, critical theory and feminism, contributed in different ways to a better understanding of those broad patterns of unequal access and showed why the majority of students from a working class background do not participate in higher education. School-based ethnography drew attention to how school policies, practices and relationships contributed to the development of sub-cultures that had an impact on educational attainment; Neo-Marxist research showed how key economic and cultural barriers affected participation and how schools reproduced the class-stratified society in preparing students for a class-based labour market; research using resistance theory highlighted the impact of the school experience on behaviour and attitudes towards education; contemporary approaches to research led to a re-examining of specific familiar themes from access research. A focus on the choice and experience of school, information and guidance, financial barriers, relationship with debt and risk and young adults' sense of self provided understandings of why many SED students did not engage with, or were not in position to engage with, the process of applying to higher education.

With regard to the second question of how the research addresses the participation of some SED students in higher education, this question highlighted both the limitations of some research that ignored this group but also showed how more recent research drew attention to how such students had a difficult and limited engagement with the process of applying to and accessing higher education in contrast to the experience of middle class students. Combining the knowledge provided by the literature through an analysis of explanations for both the unequal

patterns and the participation of some SED students, it is clear that there is considerable knowledge about barriers and a lack of resources and capital. There is also considerable knowledge about specific factors, particularly school choice and experience, information and guidance, finance and the higher education application process. It is evident that there is also a range of understandings about the relationship between socio-economic disadvantage and higher education, including an awareness of the limitations of definitions based on occupation, the importance of the subjective experience of class, the relationship between class and lack of access to particular forms of relevant or dominant capital and the role of habitus in impacting on higher education participation.

Key questions from the literature review

Throughout the various developments in sociology of education, widening participation research has remained as a constant feature and the developments in sociology of education have ensured that new understandings of the low participation of young SED students in higher education have been provided to the extent that much is known about the reasons why many such young people do not participate in higher education. It is also clear that there are a number of significant questions which are key to building on current knowledge in this area. The most significant issue is further understanding of factors which enable participation in higher education for young SED students. Ball expressed concern about the move away from researching the role of family and argued that there is a need to consider 'the ways in which inequalities are produced in the complex interactions between the cultural, social and material sites of home, school and policy' (Ball 2003, p.7). However, aspects of the relationship between parents and school have been considered in widening participation research (Hanafin and Lynch 2002; Reay 1998c; Lareau 1987; Horvat *et al* 2003): greater understanding regarding the role of the family is required in relation to assessing the impact on participation in higher education of aspects of family experience in socio-economically disadvantaged families that are not necessarily linked to its relationship with the school system.

Providing more in-depth understandings of the impact from sibling and wider family relationships would build on research by Ahier and Moore (1999), which suggests such relationships are significant. Share, Tovey and Corcoran, in

highlighting the importance of considering community in understandings of class and class experience (2007, pp.194-198), demonstrate another significant area on which to focus in seeking to further understand participation in higher education for young SED students. While geographic area of residency is recognised as an indicator of disadvantage, in widening participation research with young people, we know little about how life outside of school and family could play a role in supporting participation in higher education. In essence to build on understandings about bridges to participation in higher education what is required is both an explicit focus on factors enabling participation in higher education in research and research that explores the interlinking of self, nuclear and extended family experiences and relationships, peers, community and participation or not in higher education for young people from a socio-economically disadvantaged background.

Some research studies on broader aspects of young people's lives indicate some themes that may be of relevance with regard to factors that enable application and participation in higher education. There is a focus on structural and personal turning points (Hodkinson *et al* 1996; Brooks 2005; Kirton 1999) and parental actions in primary school to transform the habitus (Brooks 2005 pp.171-2; Reay 1998b). Walkerdine, Lucey and Melody also examined how some working class girls achieved educational success. They rejected the 'conformist' literature that suggests that successful working class girls copied the behaviours, attitudes and values of middle class students (Walkerdine *et al* 2001, p.162) and argue instead that it involves a 'complex mixture of determination to live a different kind of life from that of their peers and an emotional support from parents that is not disrupted by the parents' distress at the difficulties their daughter has to face, bringing up, as it does, memories of their own failure' (*ibid*, p.214). They note that this involves an emotional trajectory involving both excitement and also fear and pain (*ibid*, p.214).

The themes from this broader research on young people's lives may be of relevance in understanding factors supporting participation in higher education, however, such themes are mainly by-products of research with a different or broader focus. Hodkinson, Sparkes and Hodkinson were examining issues relating to post-16 decision-making and training; Brooks was exploring the role of friendships in education decision-making; Kirton's study was focused on retention in further

education; Walkerdine, Lucey and Melody's study was concerned with broader issues of class and gender while Reay's study was also part of a broader consideration of mothering, class and education. The importance of also considering young people who do not participate in higher education has been identified (Gorard *et al* 2006). Research with a *primary* focus on widening participation and broad thematic focus on identifying factors enabling participation in higher education for young people from a socio-economically disadvantaged background would be particularly beneficial.

In order to contribute to a greater understanding of factors enabling participation in higher education for young people from SED backgrounds, further knowledge about diversity within socio-economic disadvantage is required. While there is some recognition in recent research of diversity within SED, much research continues to use specific indicators or limited definitions of disadvantage. As Gorard *et al* note:

> Students from specific target groups are often portrayed as a homogenous group without cause to attend to the diversity that exists at the family, individual, cultural and educational level within a particular target group. Diversity and disadvantage intersect and change, and thus simplistic formulations of target groups and the difficulties faced need to be avoided (Gorard *et al* 2006, p. 119).

Understanding this diversity within disadvantage is key to a better understanding of the relationship between SED and access to higher education.

Some recent studies have suggested that class fractions might provide insight into understanding diversity within disadvantage and explanations for participation in higher education. There are two types of research on class fractions in relation to widening participation research: one focused on narrower bands of occupations and the other concerned with attitudes, identity, culture, practices and circumstances. Examples of the former include recent research in Ireland focussed on the participation in higher education by two different groups based on occupation within the 'non-manual' socio-economic group (McCoy *et al* 2010) and Brooks' study which suggests that participation in higher education amongst young people from SED backgrounds can be linked to class fractions based on a narrow range of occupation (Brooks 2005). However, class fractions based on a narrower range of

occupations or incomes face similar critiques to that of much structuralist research on participation in higher education.

The second type of class fraction research offers a different type of insight into the relationship between disadvantage and participation in higher education. This was identified in Hoggart's work which acknowledged the fractions that existed within the working class (Hoggart 1992, pp. 21-22) and Jackson and Marsden's findings specifically focused on this issue in their study of the academically successful working class boys. They concluded that a number of class fractions constituted this group: small families, 'sunken middle class' . . . living in districts and schools with a mix of social classes . . . 'the foreman's child; the child from the isolated Conservative family; the child whose parents had been to grammar school themselves or who had been unable to take up a place they had won; the child whose father or mother were leaders in local groups; the son or daughter of the active Socialists' (Jackson and Marsden 1966, pp. 91-96). Reay, when describing her own background in Mahony and Zmroczek's text (1997) *Class Matters 'Working Class' Women's Perspectives on Social Class'*, notes 'just as there are many different middle class groupings, there are myriad different ways of growing up and being working class' (Reay 1997a, p.22).

Reay, David and Ball in their study regarding choice-making and higher education state the importance of intra-class difference and specifically draw attention to the way in which, 'belonging to individual or solidarist fractions within the working class generates different priorities, attitudes and actions in relation to higher education access and choice' (Reay *et al* 2005, p.105). Their study appears to attempt a merger of the two traditions in that they argue that 'working class individuals opting for higher education, even as mature students, could arguably be described as constituting a specific fraction with the working class. They are already atypical' (*ibid,* p.105) and note that they are an 'agentic' group. They then differentiate between 'individualist' and 'solidarist' class fractions and suggest that the individualists are more likely to apply to elite universities and are engaged in a 'process of disaffiliation' and 'striving to leave her working class identity behind' and prioritise challenge and risk in contrast to the majority of working class applicants (*ibid* p.97). While they hint at a broader understanding through their use

of 'solidarist' and 'individualist', they imply that there is an occupational link to this class fraction, stating in the example given of an 'individualist' working class applicant, that, 'she clearly inhabits a class hinterland. Her father was self-employed and so is her partner' (*ibid* p.97). There is still then a tendency to return to occupation-based understandings of class rather than developing the tradition of Hoggart's and Jackson and Marsden's work. We still know little about the types of class fractions that are significant, how a family enters such a class fraction and how it affects participation in higher education. Further understanding of the latter type of class fractions in relation to the working class, rather than fractions concerned only with narrower bands of occupations, may offer some understanding about the relationship between disadvantage and participation in higher education, however, they cannot offer a full explanation for participation as they do not easily explain differences in participation between siblings from SED families.

A further key issue from the literature review, and linked to the questions outlined above, is knowledge about the relationship between participation in higher education for young people and networks and an understanding of how such networks are formed, who is significant within the networks and how people in their networks can impact on application to and participation in higher education. Research on the role of information and guidance draws attention to the importance of 'hot knowledge' (Ball and Vincent 1998) and there is a need to further explore how networks function in relation to young people from SED backgrounds. It is surprising that there is limited widening participation research regarding young people, enabling factors and networks considering the extensive research examining bridges and networks relating to adult SED participation in further and higher education (Fuller *et al* 2008; Gorard & Rees 2002, pp. 102-103; Heath *et al* 2008; Quinn 2005;Webb 2001 p.41; Tett 2000; Webb and Warren 2009, pp.53-4; Learning Lives TLRP Project 2004-2008). This difference may partly be attributable to a lack of life history research into widening participation with school-leavers in comparison to adults as noted in the literature review of life history research conducted by the European Ranlhe research project: 'It should be noted that much of the biographical research on non-traditional students has focused on mature or older learners' (Ranlhe 2011, p.35).

From this review of literature on participation in higher education for young people from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds, it is clear that there is considerable understanding of why many such young people do not participate in higher education and some understanding of the challenges of participating for the minority who do access higher education. It is also evident that a number of further questions emerge from these understanding in relation to factors enabling application to and participation in higher education, particularly the role of community, nuclear and extended family experience and relationships and explorations of the interlinking between those themes and self, school and peers. Further question relate to the role of networks and influencers and to a greater understanding of diversity and the types of class fractions concerned with more than occupation within socio-economic disadvantage. These key questions draw attention to the areas in which additional knowledge is key to further understand the relationship between disadvantage and access to higher education in relation to young adults from SED backgrounds. In essence, research relating to young people from an SED background with a 'bridges' perspective, a broad thematic lens and a focused lens on the detail of the nature of disadvantage and its relationship with higher education would be particularly beneficial. Qualitative research using a life history approach would enable a rich exploration of the socio-cultural world in which their decision-making about post-school options takes place and allow a broad thematic examination of the factors affecting participation, young adults' networks and forms of disadvantage. In the next chapter, I outline the conceptual framework, methodology and research questions of my research study, drawing on the understandings and key questions identified in this literature review and contextualise the study within the widening participation discourse in Ireland.

CHAPTER TWO: CONTEXTS, CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK, RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND METHODOLOGY

Introduction

In this chapter, I outline the conceptual framework, research questions and the methodology used to address the research questions. I begin by analysing the widening participation research, policy and practice context in Ireland. I conclude that limited interpretative research on the participation of young people from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds in higher education and the dominance of structural research results in policies and practices based on categorical understandings of the relationship between disadvantage and participation in higher education and on the concept of barriers to participation and slippage away from socio-cultural understandings. I also conclude that there is a lack of knowledge on which to base practices that could address the low levels of participation in higher education for such young people from areas with high levels of disadvantage. In the second section of the chapter, I show how the conceptual framework for the research and the research questions developed from the key issues in research identified in the literature review and the analysis of the widening participation contexts in Ireland. I detail the research questions and give an overview of the methodology. In the third section, I describe in detail why the methodology was chosen and how it was used in this study to answer the research questions.

SECTION 2.1: CONTEXT OF WIDENING PARTICIPATION RESEARCH, POLICY AND PRACTICE IN IRELAND

In this section I outline how widening participation policy and practice in Ireland in relation to school-leavers from SED backgrounds is dominated by a reliance on the concepts of under representation by socio-economic group and barriers, particularly financial barriers. The main research that influenced the development of widening

participation policy and practice was studies by Patrick Clancy (Clancy 1982, 1988, 1995, 2001) and later by O'Connell, Clancy and McCoy (2006). These surveys of higher education entrants provided detailed analysis of higher education participation, including information on participation by socio-economic group, social class and geographical area. In these reports, it was noted that there was significant levels of under representation in higher education for students from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds. As noted in the literature review, this type of research provided the base for widening participation policy in many European countries and in that respect Ireland was no different.

The research on patterns of participation, particularly the high levels of under representation of certain socio-economic groups in higher education, had a very strong impact on policy and was used as a justification for widening participation in a variety of reports as access became a priority on the education policy agenda in Ireland (Department of Education 1992, p.6; HEA 1995, p.75; Department of Education and Science 1995, p.100; Commission on the Points System 1999, p.152; Osborne and Leith 2000, p.5; Action Group 2001, p.4-45; Skilbeck 2001, pp.46-47; Department of Education and Science 2003, p. 13; HEA 2008, p.25; Department of Education and Skills, pp.34-35). While the research was very influential in ensuring widening participation became a key policy and practice issue, it also contributed to a focus on categorical approaches to understanding the relationship between socio-economic background and access to higher education.

Socio-cultural understandings of the relationship between disadvantage and participation in higher education are also a feature of the widening participation discourse. In the national strategy for equity of access there are references to 'the discontinuity between the school and non-school experience of learners . . . the extent to which the cultural experiences of different groups in society are reflected (and validated) in the environment and curriculum of schools and educational institutions' (HEA 2008, p.16) and references to how 'social and cultural factors can exacerbate inequalities in the extent to which individuals derive benefit from our education system' (*ibid* p.17). It is also written that 'there is a very strong community dimension to educational disadvantage and in all countries, educational outcomes are poorest where we find concentrations of social disadvantage in

particular schools and in particular housing estates' (*ibid* p.17). The national research on participation in higher education includes research on participation by postcodes in Dublin, showing that participation varies by postcode from 11% to 86% and highlights the strong association between low levels of participation and areas with high levels of disadvantage (O'Connell, Clancy and McCoy 2006).

Research by Lynch and O'Riordan (1998), which aimed to 'unpack' the patterns identified in the research by Clancy, drew attention to some socio-cultural issues regarding access to higher education. Reviews of access programmes also highlighted socio-cultural issues (Kennedy and Fleming 1999; Fleming and Gallagher 2003; O'Brien 2002; Boldt 2000). In practice, extensive higher education-school links were developed and a supplementary access entry route to higher education, promoting increased participation in higher education for school-leavers from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds, uses some socio-cultural indicators to determine socio-economic eligibility, including attendance at a disadvantaged school and living in an area of disadvantage. There are also some examples of community-based approaches to promoting access to higher education through collaborations between higher education institutions, schools and area-based partnership companies, which were established in areas with high levels of disadvantage to address socio-economic disadvantage, unemployment and educational disadvantage (ACE; CHEAP; Boldt 2000).

The concept of under representation by socio-economic group and socio-cultural understandings have the potential for conflict in a positive sense, producing greater understandings of the relationship between young people from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds and participation in higher education, however, socio-cultural understandings remain undeveloped and are undermined in research, policy and practice by dominant understandings of disadvantage based on categories and barriers. In contrast to the dominance of large-scale research on socio-economic group, qualitative research on participation in higher education was not commissioned from 1996 to 2010 and there was little comment in policy about this lack of research or the need for the type of knowledge that such research could provide. Lynch and O'Riordan's research (1996) was innovative in focussing on interviewing students, teachers and community workers who were also parents in

areas of disadvantage, but mainly drew attention to barriers to access, particularly financial barriers. Research by Murphy reached a similar conclusion (Murphy 1996, p.24).

There is some evidence of a belated shift in the nature of research conducted by the Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI), a national research institution with a strong focus on policy-oriented research. Recent national research by the ESRI (McCoy *et al* 2010) on the low participation in higher education of students from a non-manual background is a welcome move towards including a qualitative life course methodology and interpretative approach in research on access in Ireland and it includes both participants and non-participants in higher education. In the conclusion, the research acknowledges concerns with categorical approaches to understanding the relationship between disadvantage and access to higher education, however, a major conclusion is that the category, 'Non-Manual', needs to be sub-divided into 'Intermediate non-manual' and 'Other non-Manual' and this suggests an ongoing concern with getting the categories right and further developing structural understandings of the relationship. These contrasting conclusions suggest a tension exists between these approaches to research that may continue to undermine the development of socio-cultural approaches to research on access to higher education.

While there are many references to socio-cultural understandings in the national strategy for access to higher education, in the critical area of funding, policy-makers introduced a new funding model for widening participation to higher education based primarily on numbers of students entering higher education from under represented socio-economic groups. The targets set in the national strategy are focused on socio-economic group, notwithstanding the fact that some of the participation rates by postcode area are lower than the lowest socio-economic group participation rates. In the national plan there are persistent references to SED young adults 'facing social and economic barriers' (HEA 2008, p.10; HEA 2010, p. 21) and addressing the financial barriers to access is identified as one of the key policy objectives (HEA 2008, p.11). The national strategy for higher education notes that a number of barriers exist and comments on the impact of financial barriers (Department of Education and Skills 2011, p.113). A report from a national

committee established to address educational disadvantage proposed a strategy to achieve education equality 'without barriers' (Educational Disadvantage Committee 2005, p. iv).

The focus on barriers and associated weak socio-cultural understandings is also evident in practice. One of the key themes at a national conference on access in 2010 was: 'Overcoming the educational and cultural obstacles and barriers to widening participation' (Pathways to Education Conference 2010). In a key part of a learning module developed to promote access to higher education for young people aged 15-16 by the National Access Office and the National Association for Curriculum and Assessment, students are asked to draw up a plan for their future and to discuss 'possible barriers to achieving this ambition and ways of overcoming these barriers' (National Office for Equity of Access to Higher Education 2010, p.2). Reports on access graduate outcomes for access students draw attention to barriers to participation in higher education (TAP 2010, p.5; UCC Plus+ 2010, p.7). Information about access on a website promoting access entry routes states, 'Students with disabilities, mature learners and students from certain cultural and socio-economic backgrounds, continue to experience a variety of barriers to reaching their full educational potential' (HEI Access Services) and the largest access entry route for school leavers from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds acknowledges socio-cultural factors and uses some socio-cultural indicators outside of socio-economic group but every eligible candidate must also meet at least one financial indicator (HEAR).

The strong focus on the relationship between income and participation in higher education in Irish access policy and practice is further evidence of a categorical approach to the relationship between disadvantage and participation. While income is an obvious indicator of general disadvantage, there is no research in Ireland examining the relationship between participation in higher education and actual income, as opposed to proxies for income, thus, this strong focus is surprising. Clancy notes the example of the west of Ireland where there was evidence of low income but cultural valuing of education which he argues might explain the traditionally high rates of participation in higher education in that region (Clancy 2001, p.176).

Thus, while socio-cultural understandings have had some influence on policy and practice, the conceptualisation of the relationship between disadvantage and participation in higher education for school leavers rests primarily on categories of socio-economic group and barriers, especially financial barriers. There are two obvious, interlinked gaps: understandings of class and a tradition of interpretative research. Ferriter referred to class as a 'neglected' in Irish history (Ferriter 2004, p.7) and Share, Tovey and Corcoran note that 'Irish society is often thought of as a classless society' and that 'public discussions of class inequality in Ireland tend to be framed overwhelmingly in terms of the "social problems" of poverty and social exclusion' (Share *et al* 2007, p.171). The focus on socio-economic group in widening participation research seems then to reflect a larger silence about understandings of class.

A related issue is the dominance of Irish sociology by structuralist research and limited interpretative research in Ireland (Share, Tovey and Corcoran 2007, pp.39-40; Clancy, Drudy, Lynch & O'Dowd 1995, p.18; Munck 2007, p.312; Bonnar 1996, pp.215-219; Kane 1996, pp.139-145). In an overview of sociology in Ireland, Clancy *et al* attribute this to the historical development of sociology in Ireland and draw attention to the historical emphasis on Catholic sociology, reflecting the role of the church in Irish education, and the historical developments that led to the dominance of structural research and rational action theory (Clancy *et al* 1995). Much of the research on class in Ireland has been conducted by the Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI) and its focus is on theories of social stratification and mobility. Bonnar argues that there is an absence of Weberian *verstehen* approach in Irish sociology (Bonnar, 1996, p.215) and that, 'Anglo-American empiricism (which is embedded in the modern project) rather than European continental theorising (which seeks to move some distance from the project) dominates Irish sociology' (*ibid*, p.219). Share, Tovey and Corcoran acknowledge the absence of interpretative research as 'problematic and puzzling' (Share *et al* 2007, p.40) and write of the 'dearth of research within Irish sociology of education that can tie together the experiences of students, teachers, families and the broader community' (*ibid*, p.217).

This silence regarding class and limited tradition of interpretative research in widening participation research in Ireland means that, in an Irish context, the understandings of the relationship between disadvantage and participation in higher education provided by such research are not available. Significant widening participation themes with regard to young people from SED backgrounds are not fully addressed, including the role of identity; the subjective impact of class; experiences of applying to higher education and agency. In addition, understandings of diversity within disadvantage are limited and the only focus on class fractions is on sub-groups of socio-economic groups. Widening participation research on the links between socio-economic disadvantage and gender and ethnicity is not available.

These limitations in relation to widening participation research in Ireland mean that there are gaps in knowledge on which to base widening participation practice. There has been a persistent recognition that access initiatives have not achieved the desired outcomes and targets (HEA 2004, pp.34-5; Lynch 2005, p.18; HEA 2010). The national strategy to promote equity of access stated that there had been some success in addressing educational disadvantage in households experiencing poverty in isolation but less success in areas of concentrated disadvantage (HEA 2008, p.26). Surprisingly, as noted above, this recognition did not lead to the setting of targets relating to areas of concentrated disadvantage and low levels of participation in higher education.

In addition to a gap in knowledge with which to address low levels of participation in highly disadvantaged areas, the dual rationale for widening participation outlined in policy may not emphasise the social justice argument for widening participation. Osborne, in a review of widening participation policy and practice in Europe, suggests that economic factors associated with globalisation and political concern with greater equity and social cohesion are key reasons for a policy focus on wider participation (Osborne 2003, p.6). While the issue of access to higher education was addressed in the 1960s in the report, *Investment in Education* (1965), it first became a key aspect of policy in the Green and White Papers in Education (Department of Education and Science 1992 and 1995). The dual emphasis on higher education contributing to economic development (Department of Education

1995, p.88 & 92; HEA 1995, p.120; *National Development Plan 2000-2006* 2000, p.90; Action Group 2001, p.13; National Office for Equity of Access 2004a, p. 5) and to promoting social justice in the form of equity of access (Department of Education 1992, p.45; Department of Education 1995, p.88 & p.92; HEA 1995, p.120; Action Group 2001, p.13; National Office for Equity of Access 2004a, p.5) has also been an enduring feature of Irish higher education policy. The *National Development Plan 2007-2013* addresses widening participation in two chapters: 'Chapter 9 Human Capital' and emphasises the importance of wider participation to support economic development (National Development Plan 2007, p.203) and in 'Chapter 12 Social Inclusion' (*ibid* pp.250-251). It is written:

> An increase in student numbers and participation rates is crucial in terms of improvement of individual quality of life and for social inclusion purposes. An increase is also necessary to feed an expanded fourth level demand for post-graduates and to satisfy the demands of the 21st Century workplace (ibid p.203).

This dual focus is viewed positively in the National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education. It is written that 'the fact that widening access to higher education is now critical to our economic competitiveness is a very concrete illustration of the complementarity and interdependence of our national social and economic objectives' (HEA 2008, p.15). While this interdependence is viewed as a positive aspect in the National Access Plan, concerns have been raised about tension between university widening participation missions and the ' "system" goals of survival, competitiveness and growth' (Bourgeois *et al* 1999, p.41). Archer also highlights the fact that the 'economic rationale does not necessarily fit easily with a social justice agenda because the easiest, most "profitable" way of increasing participation to the target level might not be the way that will best tackle social inequalities' (Archer *et al* 2003, p.196).

In this section I analysed widening participation research, policy and practice in Ireland and concluded that the conceptualisation of the relationship between socio-economic disadvantage and participation in higher education is characterised by categorical concepts, particularly under representation by socio-economic group and by barriers, especially financial barriers. The narrow conceptualisations of that relationship, together with the limited socio-cultural understandings, silences

regarding class and a limited tradition of interpretative research, result in significant gaps in knowledge regarding key widening participation themes, including the role of agency and identity and the subjective experience of class, and understandings of diversity and class fractions within disadvantage are limited. Bridges and enablers for students from disadvantaged backgrounds are not part of the discourse and there is little focus on the role of networks. There is an enduring problem of low participation in higher education particularly in areas of high levels of disadvantage, a gap in knowledge to develop practices to increase that participation and an acceptance of a dual rationale for widening participation in policy with little questioning of the risks associated with such a dual rationale.

SECTION 2.2: CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK, RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND SELECTION OF METHODOLOGY

The understandings and further questions identified in the literature review in the previous chapter and the critique of aspects of widening participation research, policy and practice in Ireland outlined in the section above shaped the conceptual framework of this study. In this section, I link the key questions which require further understanding from the literature review and the critique of policy and practice and then outline the conceptual framework of the study and state the research question which emerged from that process.

In Ireland, barriers dominate the understandings of the relationship between disadvantage and higher education and in the analysis of the literature. While there were understandings of bridges to higher education for middle class young people and working class adults, in the literature review, I showed that further research focusing explicitly on the bridges to higher education for school-leavers from an SED background and on factors influencing their participation or not in higher education would be particularly beneficial. Related to the need for greater understanding of bridges for SED school-leavers, is a requirement for further research on enabling factors emerging from family relationships and experiences, neighbourhood community and networks and the interplay of these areas with

school, individual agency and peers in impacting on participation in higher education. This further research is particularly important in Ireland given the absence of a strong interpretative tradition.

In Ireland, the dominance of the concept of under representation by socio-economic group and class silences together with an absence of research taking into account the interlinked relationship between class, race and gender means that there is a gap in knowledge about diversity within disadvantage, which impacts on knowledge about the relationship between disadvantage and participation in higher education. From the literature review, class fractions are identified as a possible way of developing that understanding further, however, there is less understanding of class fractions within SED compared to fractions in the middle class. The key questions and further understandings required identified above mean that there is still knowledge to be acquired about the relationship between agency and structures for young people from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds seeking to access higher education. There is a persistent problem in Ireland of low participation in higher education and differential patterns of participation by SED background and gaps in knowledge and insight to support developments in widening participation practice that could increase participation in higher education.

From this analysis then of the literature and Irish widening participation contexts, what is required is knowledge about factors which enable application to higher education for young people from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds living in an area of cumulative disadvantage and knowledge about what affects whether or not they participate. The study should be designed in a way that enables an exploration of any impact from structural issues and a broad thematic exploration of the role of family relationships and experiences, community experiences and any interlinking between structural issues, the above themes and school, individual desires, identities and peers. The study should also facilitate an exploration of any impact from social networks. A targeted study that can explore diversity within disadvantage and the nature of the relationship between disadvantage and access to higher education is important. A study that can examine issues of relevance for access practice and policy with regard to increasing the participation of SED young

people is also required. Thus, this research study was designed to address these issues.

The research focuses on students who were on the cusp of higher education during their final year in school, in that participants had considered applying to higher education at that time. In recent research, a number of authors have drawn attention to the importance of doing research which considers the views of students who are on the cusp of higher education. Fuller and Paton draw attention to the value of looking at 'potentially recruitable students' (Fuller *et al* 2008, p.8) and Brooks notes, 'while the enduring nature of social inequalities within the HE sector . . . suggests that such 'transformations of habitus' are not commonplace, it would seem that these changes warrant further investigation if the social composition of universities and colleges is to be altered in any significant way' (Brooks 2005, p.171). Hutchings comments that very few people reach a point where they make a specific decision about whether or not to participate in higher education in that for middle class students it is viewed as a normal thing to do and for the majority of working class students it is not an option that is considered and states that 'from the point of view of widening participation, this is a group to target' (Hutchings 2003, p.97).

In order to identify the factors enabling application to higher education and the factors affecting participation or not, the sample needed to include a majority group who had accessed higher education and a smaller group who had not participated in higher education. Thus, I interviewed twenty participants who had considered applying to higher education during their final year in school. Thirteen had participated in different forms of higher education upon leaving school, one participant attended higher education for two days, five applied but did not access higher education, although one of the five entered higher education some years later, and one participant decided not to apply immediately before application time. Eight of the participants were male and twelve were female which facilitates an exploration of the links between socio-economic disadvantage and gender regarding access to higher education.

In the literature review and above, I noted the limitations of using narrow conceptualisations of the relationship between disadvantage and participation in higher education and narrow definitions of disadvantage in comparison to the awareness of different understandings of class and disadvantage as a result of post structural and feminist research. In this study, to answer the research questions, I wanted an understanding of disadvantage that enabled an exploration of the subjective experience of disadvantage but did not lose sight of the impact of experiencing high levels of structural disadvantage, thus, required an approach to identifying disadvantage that could meet that understanding. The problems with using occupation as an indicator of individual disadvantage are well-documented, as noted in the literature review, but using only disadvantaged area as an indicator of disadvantage, while capturing some level of structural disadvantage, does not always enable an identification of individual socio-economic disadvantage (Osborne and Shuttleworth 2004; Blicharski 2000). There are no perfect indicators; every indicator offers possibilities and limitations as a means of identifying disadvantage (Bernard 2006; Blicharski 2000; Thomas and Quinn 2003; Tonk 1999). The main problems arise when a single indicator is used and applied rigidly.

This study focused on a group of young adults who lived in a disadvantaged area, had attended designated disadvantaged schools in the area and who were from individually disadvantaged backgrounds which enables the study to take into account the 'neighbourhood effect' and school effect of cumulative disadvantage while also ensuring the participants individually were from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds. The participants were from similar socio-economic backgrounds: parents were in non-manual or low-skilled occupations or were not working; in terms of family income, nineteen of the participants qualified for grants given to students in higher or further education from low income families. The other participant did not apply for a grant as he had not attended further or higher education participant but was living in rented public housing.

The majority of the parents of the young adults had no higher education experience, with the exception of three newcomer students. Newcomer student is a term used to describe young people from ethnic minorities who moved to Ireland during their schooling. While the parents of newcomer students had some experience of higher

education, one of the newcomer students was a refugee who had been a separated child with no parents in Ireland and the parents living in Ireland of the other two newcomer students were not able to draw on their educational experience in Ireland. One mother who had qualified in teaching was not working and receiving social welfare and the other mother, who had qualified as a nurse, had managed her own business and had been well-off, according to her daughter, was working as a beautician on a low income. Thus, the newcomer students' current socio-economic situation was similar to the other socio-economic participants. The inclusion of newcomer students enables an examination of aspects of the interlinking of disadvantage and newcomer experience and contributes to understandings of the impact of the changing nature of socio-economic background over the duration of people's lives. Choosing young adults who attended similar schools, live in a specific area and are from disadvantaged backgrounds ensures that data is gathered which enables the study to move beyond 'obvious' explanations for enabling factors affecting application and participation in higher education.

The study aims to provide a socio-cultural understanding of application to and participation in higher education for school leavers from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds in a socio-economically disadvantaged area.

The main research question is:

1. What enabled young people from an SED background living and attending school in a disadvantaged area to apply to higher education and what affected whether or not they participated in higher education?

The sub-questions in the study are:

2. What role do social networks play in participation in HE for young people from an SED background? Do young people identify network members as being a significant influence? If yes, who are the key influencers and how do they have an influence?

3. How does heterogeneity and homogeneity within the experience of socio-economic disadvantage affect application and participation in higher education? What are the understandings of the nature of the relationship between socio-

economic disadvantage and higher education participation for school leavers from SED backgrounds? How are differences in education outcomes amongst young people from similar socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds explained? What are the implications of diversity within disadvantage for understanding the relationship between disadvantage and participation in higher education?

4. What insights and understandings does the research provide that could inform widening participation policy and practices to increase the number of students from SED backgrounds participating in higher education?

In order to answer those research questions a methodology was selected with two key elements. Firstly, a life history methodology is used in the study, involving interviews with young adults and people from their networks, whom the young adults identified as influential to their decisions about education. The second element is a case study approach based in an area of cumulative disadvantage with low levels of participation in higher education. These two elements of the methodology were chosen to generate the data required to answer the research questions, which is discussed in more detail in section 2.3 below.

This research recognises that there are different ways of making sense of the issue of participation in higher education and different types of knowledge that enable an understanding of the relationship between disadvantage and participation in higher education. This study is interpretative in that it 'looks for culturally derived and historically situated interpretations of the social life-world' (Crotty 2003, p.67). In the introduction I wrote about how my personal and professional experiences led me to question the dominance of understandings of participation in higher education based on socio-economic group and to ask if other knowledge is required to understand the relationship between disadvantage and participation in higher education that moves beyond explanations based on socio-economic group, explanations expressed in terms of barriers and explanations that contrast middle class abundance of capitals with working class lack of capitals. At one level, this 'other knowledge' is knowledge of enabling factors and the role of networks but this study aims to seek and interpret that knowledge within the context of socio-cultural understandings of the case study area, of working class experiences and

relationships and the nuances of, and diversity within, disadvantage. Similarly to other researchers from types of working class backgrounds (Skeggs 1997a; Reay 1997a; Jackson and Marsden 1966), it is partly my own personal and professional experiences that led me to seek this other knowledge and to value research seeking these types of socio-cultural understandings in relation to class and participation in higher education. Munt argues that it is important that contemporary research continues this well-established tradition in the UK (Munt 2000). In the context of limited interpretative research in Ireland, I argue that there is a need to generate and value this type of knowledge. Below I describe the role and contribution of each element of the methodology in detail.

SECTION 2.3: METHODOLOGY

Interpretative qualitative life history methodology contributes to the generating of the data required to answer the research questions in a number of ways. Goodson and Sikes (2001), in a review of biographical research, outlined why it has increased in popularity in recent decades after a decline during the mid-late decades of the twentieth century. They outlined the development of biographical research from Thomas and Znaniecki's work, *The Polish Peasant in Europe and America* (1918-1920) through the work by the Chicago school under the influence of Robert Park and the work of Dollard (1949). Goodson and Sikes argue that life history research declined in popularity afterwards due to the growth in status of research based on statistical methods as sociology developed as a discipline and that even when there were developments outside of positivist methods, the movement was towards interactionism and ethnomethodology (Goodson and Sikes 2001, pp.10-13). Erben notes that C Wright Mills' text, *The Sociological Imagination* (1959) drew attention to sociology as the 'interaction between biography and history' (Erben 1998, p.1) but that it was the publication of Daniel Bertaux's edited volume *Biography and Society* (1981), Denzin's *Interpretive Biography* (1989) and an edition of *Sociology* (1993) dedicated to auto/biographical research that were key to the restoration of biographical research (Erben 1998, p.1).

This methodology became increasingly popular in research on access to education from the 1990s onwards (Edwards 1993a; Hodkinson *et al* 1996; Mann 1998; Page 1998; Kirton 1999; Ball *et al* 2000; Tett 2000; Reay 2001; Reay *et al* 2001; Webb 2001; Gorard and Rees 2002; Power *et al* 2003). Goodson and Sikes reference Munro to show why biographical research returned to prominence during the development of postmodernism and post-structuralism:

> The current focus on acknowledging the subjective, multiple and partial nature of human experience has resulted in a revival of life history methodology. What were previously criticisms of life history, its lack of representativeness and its subjective nature, are now its greatest strength (Munro 1998, quoted in Goodson and Sikes 2001, p.15).

Life history research sheds light on the 'subjective, multiple and partial nature of human experience', enabling an analysis of both a broad range of possible factors affecting participation in higher education and the individual's negotiations, actions, responses and emotions through their home, school, peer group and community experiences. In life history research, stories are viewed as the heart of human experience. MacIntyre writes that 'man is essentially a story-telling animal' (MacIntyre 1981, quoted in Goodson 2005, p.197) and the intertwining of stories and experience forms the core of life stories. It is not merely that stories enable a focus on experiences such as family relations, schools experiences and choices and decisions about post-school options. Rather, telling stories facilitates an understanding of our lives and our sense of self. Clandinin and Connelly write, 'stories are the closest we can come to experience as we and others tell of our experience . . . Experience . . . is the stories people live' (Clandinin and Connelly 1994, p.415).

It is not the case that biographical research involves a process of accurately reflecting an individual's life. The role of memory, reworkings and silences all come into play in the telling of stories. Scott references MacIntyre to highlight 'the traditions of understanding which allow us to say some things and do not allow us to say other things' (MacIntyre 1988, quoted in Scott 1998, p.32) and Lawler notes that 'memory is notoriously unreliable' and that, 'there in no "unbiased" access to the past . . . the past is constantly worked and reworked to provide a coherent sense of the subject's identity' (Lawler 2002, pp.248-9). It is certainly the case then that,

'all stories ... are fictions' (Denzin 1989, p.77), however, as Denzin explains, 'the sociologist's task cannot be one of determining the difference between true and false stories' (*ibid*, p.77) but rather, 'a preoccupation with method ... must be set aside in favour of a concern for meaning and interpretation' (*ibid*, p.25).

This view of narrative as being closest to experience is then linked with the idea that only narrative can provide access to certain understandings. Clough writes that 'stories provide a means by which those truths, which cannot be otherwise told, are uncovered' (Clough 2002, p.8). Erben's comment that 'the object of the biographical method is to provide more insight than hitherto available into the nature and meaning of individual lives' (Erben 1996, p.172) is very evident regarding the role of narrative in research on access to post-school education. Jackson and Marsden wrote, that they were trying to 'go behind the numbers and feel a way into the various humans situations that they represent' (Jackson and Marsden 1966, p.26). Ball, Maguire and Macrae note that 'they are striving for an understanding of the decisions made by young people' (Ball *et al* 2000, p.22). Hodkinson, Sparkes and Hodkinson ask in relation to their research regarding young people's decisions at the time of the transition from compulsory schooling: 'Did these stories give insight into the lives of young people as they went through a key period in their lives?' (Hodkinson *et al* 1996, p.160).

Research on participation in education also highlights the type of insight provided by narrative. Lawler explains that a narrative turns 'an attention to the subjective dimensions of classed experiences' which 'can provide insights into the mechanisms of class' (Lawler 1999, p.4). Reay notes that narratives draw attention to emotions that challenge 'fantasies of seamless transitions' from working to middle class (Reay 2001, p.339). Mann writes that a life history methodology was adopted to give insight into the thoughts and feelings that might underlie the educational choices' (Mann 1998, p.46). Walkerdine, Lucey and Melody (2001) used narrative to explore the aspirations, actions and emotional processes employed by young working class girls to access higher education. The process of telling stories is also shown to be a project of constructing identities and the sense of identity that accompanies or forms the narrative can influence whether an event is perceived as a barrier or a trigger regarding returning to education (Webb 2001).

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Goodson and Sikes write that, 'there is no identity outside narrative' (Goodson and Sikes 2001, p.45). Narratives also bring into focus the way an individual's identity affects their perceptions and their associated decisions about their options, as described in the career decision-making process explored in Hodkinson, Sparkes and Hodkinson's study (Hodkinson *et al* 1996). This research was particularly effective in identifying how individuals' emotions, thoughts and ideas impacted on their decisions about education (Lawler 1999, p.4; Reay 2001, p.339; Mann 1998, p.46 & p.57; Page 1998, p.88 and p.95; Gorard & Rees 2002, p.16 & p.82; Walkerdine *et al* 2001).

A life history methodology then enables a focus on the experiences underlying choices and decisions about education options; the emotions, thoughts and desires affecting educational decisions; the role of identities in decision-making; the relationships in a person's life and how all of these interact in shaping young people's lives and decision-making. The insight afforded by life history research is clearly not based on simply reporting life stories. Goodson and Sikes outline what is involved in the process of moving from life stories to life histories, writing that the concern is:

> to provide communications that cover the social histories and, indeed, social geographies in which life stories are embedded: without contextual commentary on issues of time and space, life stories remain uncoupled from the conditions of their social construction. This, above all, is the argument for life histories rather than life stories (Goodson and Sikes 2001, p.17).

A key reason for the choice of a life history methodology is its ability to draw attention to the role of structural factors and the relationship between individual agency and structures. In seeking to understand the factors affecting application and participation to higher education, this ability to examine how change might occur is key. Goodson and Sikes state that 'structure and agency collide around cultural storylines' (Goodson and Sikes 2001, p.9) and use the example of the scholarship-boy script to show how it was used in individuals' stories but also how it was rooted in 'a social and political milieu of optimistic meritocracy following the second world war' (*ibid*, p.83), thus arguing that stories are 'social constructions which allow us to locate and interrogate the social world in which they are embedded' (*ibid* p.86). Goodson, quoting MacIntyre, notes that 'the story of my

life is always embedded in the story of those communities from which I derive my identity' (MacIntyre 1981, quoted in Goodson 2005, p.197). Erben makes a similar argument, stating that 'the object of the biographical method is to provide more insight than hitherto available into the nature and meaning of individual lives; and given that individual lives are articulations of the cultural, it will provide insight also into the nature and meaning of society itself' (Erben 1996, p.172).

This ability of narrative to facilitate a focus on the relationship between structures and agency is evident in biographical research studies on access to higher education and education choices. Reay, David and Ball, in their study of higher education choice (2005), make reference to Nash's approach of ' "numbers and narratives methodology" ' (Nash 1999a, quoted in Reay, David and Ball 2005, p.17) and state that their approach has an emphasis on the narratives. They write that this 'involves attending to both "the constraining and enabling aspects of the economic, cultural and political structures that affects families, schools and students and the complex and creative set of responses" (Nash 1999, p.123) that these structures call forth' (Reay, David and Ball 2005, p.17). The study by Reay, David and Ball also provides a good example of how stories do not require individuals to be categorised in one way but rather allow people to express both their individual responses and also multiple identities associated with class, race and gender. Further examples of the role narrative plays in exploring the relationship between structures and agency can be seen in studies about educational decision-making and young people. Hodkinson, Sparkes and Hodkinson (1996) refer to the tendency to 'categorise actions and decisions as either determined by some external force, or the result of unfettered free will' and state that 'Neither view fits the experiences reported to us' (Hodkinson *et al* 1996, p.3). The narratives highlighted both structural turning points and turning points initiated by the young person or events in their personal lives and periods of routine during which young people reacted in different ways to both types of turning points (*ibid*, pp.154-156).

Other examples of the interlinking of structures and agency through narrative in biographical work on access to higher education are mainly drawn from studies involving mature students or academics from working class backgrounds. Webb's study of mature students drew attention to how 'narratives provided the linkage

between structural factors and individual agency' (Webb 2001, p.43) and showed how students 'attempted to provide plausible accounts of their positions as successful entrants to higher education, drawing on the available social, public and cultural narratives' (*ibid,* p.41). Lawler's study of women who moved into a different class through education or marriage (Lawler 1999) drew attention to the inequality of structure that showed itself in the desire for middle-class goods in the women's narratives. The narratives of working class academics all highlight both the impact of their class background and the family and individual reactions to that background (Reay 1997a; Parr 1997, Maguire 1997, Skeggs 1997a, Mahony and Zmroczek 1997; Lynch and O'Neill 1994; Goldman 1968, Hoggart 1992). These examples from studies relating to young people's education choices, mature students and academics from working class backgrounds all show how stories allow a focus on the personal in different forms: domestic issues, relationships, identities, emotions, individual actions, reactions and desires and also evidence of structural issues relating to class.

A key research question in this study focuses on the relationship between the individual and their social networks. The research explores who may be influential with regard to education decisions and access to higher education, their role, the nature of that relationship and how it is significant. A life history methodology enables this to be explored and is another aspect of the move from life stories to life histories. In addition to interviewing the young adults, I also interviewed people they identified as key to their education experience, their decision to apply to higher education and their decision to participate or not in higher education. As noted in the literature review, a number of recent life history studies focused on adult education decisions included interviews with network members as an aid to understanding factors affecting adult access to education but, reflecting the general limited use of life history research regarding young people and access to higher education, this is not a significant feature of research on access to higher education for young people. Broader studies on education or class included interviews with parents which provided some insight into widening participation issues (Jackson and Marsden 1966; Walkerdine *et al* 2001; Reay, David and Ball 2005; Hodkinson *et al* 1996) but Ahier and Moore draw attention to the role of other family members in their analysis of the transfer to post-16 education (Ahier and Moore 1999) and

the research projects focused on adult decisions about participation in education show the benefits of including non-family members (Learning Lives TLRP research project; Fuller *et al* 2008; Heath *et al* 2008). The young adults identified both family and non-family members as significant to their experiences and decisions about education in this study.

Using a life history methodology with a broad thematic lens generates data in relation to application and participation in higher education about the individual's experiences, desires, emotions and identities; the subjective experience of class; some understanding of the role of structures; the impact and nature of relationships with others and forms of agency. In this research to fully understand the enabling factors and socio-cultural contexts, to examine how heterogeneity and homogeneity within the experience of a similar type of socio-economic disadvantage affects participation in higher education and to examine understandings of that relationship between disadvantage and participation, a life history methodology alone would not suffice. Warren and Webb critique research that relies only on 'phenomenological accounts of learners', arguing that it is also not sufficient to merely 'deconstruct these narratives in order to understand how they are partly constructed by dominant discourses in society' but rather there is 'a further need to reconstruct these narratives in order to identify the links with wider societal discourse and social structures' which requires 'a particular kind of narrative-based research' (Warren and Webb 2007, pp.15-16). They highlight the importance in this type of narrative research of asking questions and examining the links between the structuring of local education, employment and training markets, the market position and culture of education centres and socio, economic and political factors (*ibid*, p.17). My study extends the life history focus on 'time and space' (Goodson and Sikes 2001, p.17), and Warren and Webb's concept of reconstructing narratives and their focus on the importance in research of understanding local structures and opportunities. My study examines the immediate socio-cultural context, the relationships between individual, networks and community and understandings of the relationship between disadvantage and participation in higher education in a community through the second part of the methodology: an area-based case study approach.

The study is based in a small area of an inner city. Using an area-based case study approach in a very local area allows the generation of key data to answer the research questions in a number of ways. As part of the case study methodology, the young adults who participated in the study lived and went to schools in the same area. As noted above, this approach meant that the young adults lived in a similar community, thus enabling a better exploration of specific factors enabling application to higher education that moved beyond obvious explanations such as attending non-disadvantaged schools or the impact of different types of communities. An area-based case study approach provides a rich socio-cultural understanding within which the research questions can be answered. There is an opportunity to understand if the highly localised socio-economic and cultural history and structuring of education and employment opportunities and changes in those structures affect participation in higher education. As part of the case study methodology, I did interviews with primary school principals, guidance counsellors in second level schools, home-school liaison teachers and people working in community organisations in the area. From their experience of working and/or living in the area, they provided insights into local opportunities, structures and culture and developments which impacted on education in the area. Data from reports and research are also used to provide understandings about the area in which the participants lived.

A key focus of the research is an exploration of the heterogeneous and homogeneous aspects of experiences within disadvantage and to examine understandings of the relationship between disadvantage and participation in higher education. The study aims to question and unpack the policy-constructed explanations, categories and traditional indicators of disadvantage to examine if there are other significant differences within this group from similar socio-economic backgrounds, thus moving beyond homogeneous categories to identify diversity within socio-economic disadvantage. Many of the explanations for low SED participation in higher education and the indicators used to identify disadvantage relating to access to higher education do not acknowledge or easily accommodate the fact that some people from disadvantaged backgrounds do access higher education. These include explanations and indicators based on school attended, family experience, occupation, income and place of residence. Using both

a life history and area-based case study approach with participants who lived in the same area, attended the same schools, are from low-income families and low-skilled or unemployed households, with different sibling outcomes enables an exploration of other types of diversity that may be significant in understanding participation and relevant indicators of disadvantage. For example, the dual methodology involving narrative and community enables an exploration of possible non-occupation-based class fractions within disadvantage and a focus on the subjective and local experiences of class.

Warren and Webb draw on Bourdieu's concept of 'doxa' to highlight how 'a taken-for granted common-sense world view is promoted in policy texts', which derives from the perspective of the dominant parts of society and that this can lead to research being captured by the discourse (Warren and Webb 2007, p.5). Above, I highlighted how access research, policy and practice in Ireland is dominated by concepts of socio-economic group, barriers to participation, silences regarding the subjective experiences of class and limited socio-cultural understandings. A significant explanation is the dominance of structural research and limited interpretative research. The combination of these factors appears to produce a type of doxa regarding the conceptualisation of the relationship between disadvantage and participation in higher education. In addition to highlighting understandings of this relationship in access research, policy and practice at a national level, this study also explores how that relationship is understood by education and community personnel working in the area and working directly with young people and their families. Did the 'doxa' of policy and national access practice extend to people in this local area? Or was there recognition of diversity within disadvantage in a local area? The case-study approach enables that exploration.

In these ways then the case study methodology complements and builds on the life history methodology to generate the range of different types of data required to answer the research questions. The study is also particularly concerned with understanding factors affecting application to and participation for young people in areas of cumulative disadvantage and low levels of participation in higher education because this is a gap in knowledge to support this key issue for access practice. Below I provide a brief overview of the case-study area.

The study is based in a specific inner city area with high levels of socio-economic disadvantage and low levels of participation in higher education. There has been a long tradition of case-study research in relation to working class areas from the work by the Manchester school (Frankenberg 1966; Hargreaves 1967) to more recent work by Charlesworth (2000); Savage, Bagnall and Longhurst (2005) and Devine (1992) and it has been employed to specifically examine issues relating to education (Reay and Lucey 2003; Evans 2006; Connolly and Neill 200; Quinn 2004). Jocey Quinn's work, focused on student withdrawal from higher education, highlights how this type of study can provide an understanding of how socio-cultural knowledge can affect participation in education with regard to retention. The study highlighted how local cultural scripts can contribute to students leaving higher education before completing their course (Quinn 2004).

The properties required of the area case study to enable the research questions to be answered were an area of high level, long-term disadvantage; an area where there was a low level of participation in higher education and where widening participation policies and activities applied; an area which had undergone structural change and an appropriate size that provided a sufficient number of appropriate participants but was small enough that it could be studied in this research study. The area was chosen because it met those properties.

The inner city area in which this research is based is a docklands and hinterlands community and has experienced similar socio-economic developments to that of many European inner city docklands areas. Niamh Moore in her book, *Dublin Docklands Reinvented*, outlines how the growth of air transport, larger ships and particularly containerisation resulted in the steady decrease in the level and type of employment in this area (Moore 2008, pp. 44-48). As industries moved from inner city areas to industrial estates on the edge of Dublin and a suburbanisation housing policy was implemented throughout the 1960s and 1970s, the population of the inner city decreased rapidly and the mismatch between the level of education required for the manual labour work on the docks and the work available led to increased unemployment. In the serious national recession of the 1980s, the area was particularly vulnerable to very high levels of poverty and unemployment and

the rate of unemployment increased by 91.6% in the inner city from 1981-1986 and in one street in the area 70% of heads of households were on the unemployment register by 1986 (Dublin Corporation 1986, quoted in Moore 2008, p.55).

The physical environment in Dublin inner city reflected the economic decline. Much of the public housing stock was in poor condition and a policy of allocating the vacant flats built for dockers in the area to at risk families from various parts of the city produced an area of families with high-support needs (Moore 2008, p.52). As noted in a recent report by the Dublin Inner City Partnership: 'Derelict sites stood like open wounds in the urban fabric, once grand Georgian houses crumbled: the city was dying visibly on its feet' (DICP & Haase 2008, p.5). Inevitably, the drugs problem and associated crime that developed in Ireland in the 1980s had a particularly strong impact on this area.

During the 1980s and 1990s, a combination of national and local political issues and European regeneration trends ensured that the area was identified for regeneration through Urban Renewal Acts and the re-development of the Docklands area based on developing a financial services quarter. The general area has undergone dramatic re-development physically and socio-economically and there is an acceptance that levels of absolute deprivation have decreased. However, specific streets and areas with high levels of public housing within the inner city quadrant remained highly disadvantaged (DICP and Haase 2008) and it is clear that 'the most deprived areas of the 1980s are still the most deprived areas more than twenty years on' (ibid, p.4).

In terms of education provision, there are five second level publicly-funded schools in the area which were all designated disadvantaged by the Department of Education. There is also one further education college and three higher education institutions all within one mile, however, while there has been an increase in participation in higher education, it remains low in the area. All of the schools in the area are involved in widening participation activities. It is equally clear that levels of education are increasing but remain significantly below average. The most recent research on admission rates in higher education shows that 22% of the cohort entered higher education (O'Connell, Clancy and McCoy 2006, p.102) compared to

an average of 50.8% 9 (*ibid*, p.95) in Dublin and highs of 86% in some areas in Dublin (*ibid*, p.102).

In this first part of this chapter, I provided an overview of the widening participation field in Ireland, focusing particularly on the conceptualisation of the relationship between disadvantage and higher education. In the second section, I outlined how the conceptual framework for this study emerged from the understandings and further questions in the literature review and the analysis of the impact and limitations of the widening participation discourse in Ireland and I detailed the research questions in this study. In the final section, I described how the dual methodology of life history and area-based case study enables the generating the data required to answer the research questions. In the next chapter I outline in detail the methods used in this study.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODS

Introduction

In this chapter I outline the methods used in the study. I show how the relationship between the researcher and participant is crucial to the success of life history research and highlight the role of imagination and the craft of writing in the process. As part of the exploration of the relationship between the researcher and participant in each stage of the process, I outline the risks and ethical issues involved in life history research and describe how they were addressed in this study. In the first section, I describe the sampling process and the process of the initial contact with the participants. In the next section, I address ethics, the relationship between the researcher and participant and describe some key aspects of the interview experience. In the final section, I describe how aspects of a grounded theory approach were used in this study and outline the interpretation and writing stages of the process.

SECTION 3.1: SAMPLING PROCESS AND CONTACTING PARTICIPANTS

In order to apply the sampling framework that enabled the research questions to be answered, it was important that the participants had been on the cusp of higher education in their final year in school, were from a socio-economically disadvantaged background, had attended a designated disadvantaged school in the case study area and lived in the case study area. The sample needed to include a majority group who had applied and participated in higher education and a smaller group who had applied but not participated in higher education. The sample should also include males and females and students from ethnic minorities. Thus the type of sampling used was purposive. Potential participants were identified from the cohort of students who had participated in access initiatives, including an access entry route, at a higher education institution from five designated disadvantaged schools in the area and who did their Leaving Certificate in a specific year.

Participants on access initiatives and applying or considering applying for access entry attended designated disadvantaged schools, were likely to be from disadvantaged backgrounds and were involved in the higher education application process during their final year in school. I then included participants in the two previous years to increase the numbers. One participant from a later year was included as she had accessed a specific form of higher education - teacher-training college - and I was interested in examining what had led her to choose that option.

From that initial group, I removed those who did not live in the disadvantaged area in the study. I checked that they were living in specific disadvantaged areas and excluded a small number who were clearly not from a disadvantaged background. I then tried to contact this group of forty-two participants and made contact with twenty-nine, of whom twenty took part. At the time of interviewing, the participants had all completed a minimum of one year and a maximum of three years of their post-school option. They had attended higher education, participated in further education and then started working or entered the workforce directly upon leaving school.

Participants were contacted initially, the project was explained and they decided whether or not they would like to take part. If they decided to take part, a time and location was agreed and contact details exchanged. Sometimes circumstances intervened and the interview took place at a later date or did not take place. For the latter group, it was difficult to tell if the participant had agreed to take part and then decided not to or that circumstances intervened to prevent them from doing so or if participants found it difficult to say that they would prefer not to take part. Just two people said outright that they would prefer not to take part in the research. Some of the people contacted received supports from the access service in which I work and extra care was taken to ensure that they realised there was no obligation to take part. Four of those people chose to take part.

Influential network members were identified during the course of the interviews. The young adult then checked with the network member if they wished to take part and asked permission to give me the person's contact details. I then followed up directly with the person. In the case of some of the network members, who were

working in education and the community, the young adult gave me permission to contact them directly. I interviewed fifteen network members identified as having a significant influence on their education experiences and decisions. I also interviewed an additional eighteen people working in education, training or community development in the area. The education and community personnel who were interviewed were identified on the basis of the second level schools in the area, the primary schools attended by the young adults, relevant community organisations and two higher education institutions in the case study area.

TABLE 1: Table of interviewees

Young adults
20 participants
People from young adults' networks identified as an influence who were interviewed
1 Primary School teacher
1 Guidance Counsellor (for two participants)
3 Parents
2 Siblings
1 Youth club leader
3 Sports coaches - a teacher and 2 vice principals in second level schools
2 Form and subject teachers
1 Subject teacher
1 Home-school community liaison officer
Education and community personnel in area
5 Guidance Counsellors (1 of whom was also interviewed as an influential member of the networks of two of the young adult participants and is included above)
5 Primary school principals
2 Home-school community liaison staff (1 of whom was also interviewed as an influential member of the network of one of the young adult participants and is included above)
6 Community personnel
2 HE Widening participation staff

In total fifty-three people were interviewed. The interviews took place at a location decided by the participant. Locations included the participant's home, a friend's home, places of work, colleges, a café and a hotel. Two interviews took place over the phone as one participant was living abroad and another participant had childcare

responsibilities. The duration of the interviews with the young adults varied from fifty minutes to almost three hours; the average was ninety minutes. With the members of the participants' social networks, the duration varied from twenty minutes to one hour and twenty minutes. With the education and community personnel, it varied from thirty minutes to one hour and forty minutes.

Most of the interviews were individual interviews, however, a number took place in pairs or groups. With the young adults, this occurred in one case because they were brothers and decided to be interviewed together. In the other two cases, the young people were friends and suggested they come together. It never felt appropriate to say no to that request. On two occasions influencers were interviewed when the young adults were present, which arose due to the circumstances of the interviews.

SECTION 3.2: ETHICS, RESEARCHER-PARTICIPANT RELATIONSHIP AND INTERVIEW EXPERIENCE

At the start of each interview, I explained again in detail what the research was about, discussed confidentiality, checked that the participant understood the research and asked if the participant had any questions. I explained that the research had received ethical approval through the University of Sheffield ethics process. I also explained that the participant was free to withdraw at any stage. Life history methodology is one that fully acknowledges the role and influence of the researcher and recognises not only that the researcher always influences the research and that it is useful to be explicit about the influence but takes it a step further: it is recognised that the influence is a key feature and strength of research and a resource upon which to draw. West states that, 'autobiography, far from being the enemy of insight and profound knowledge, is a powerful and natural resource to be used to understand others' life histories; and that empathy and relatedness are essential to telling stories' (West 1996, p.19). As Denzin notes: 'when a writer writes a biography, he or she writes him- or herself into the life of the subject written about' (Denzin 1989, p.26). I also acknowledge the importance of being sensitive to the risk outlined in Walkerdine, Lucey and Melody's text, 'of

making the researcher's voice more central than that of the research subject' (Walkerdine *et al* 2001, p.85). Throughout this chapter, I discuss the relationship between the researcher and participant, acknowledging my influence on the research but also showing that the research is always grounded by the data and that this ensures that the participants and their experiences are at the centre of the research.

I highlighted above the role of the researcher in making decisions that affect the shape of the research but, at the interview stage of the narrative process, the role of the participants is dominant, however, from my experience as a guidance counsellor working with both young people and adults, the actions of the researcher in supporting the young person to tell their story seem particularly important to this process. Younger people have had less time to reflect on their stories and in some cases have had less contact with a broad range of people and fewer experiences. As time, comparison with others and experiences are all key to understanding ourselves and developing the stories through which we live our lives, the stories may not be told as easily by young people. This may partly explain why there is less biographical research on access to higher education with young people than with mature applicants (Ranlhe 2011).

The consequences of this situation when conducting research with young adults is that it is particularly important to ensure that the participants understand the research, that time and attention is given to building rapport and that the approach taken by the researcher in the flow of questions, the nature of questions asked, the following up with subsequent questions and in other verbal and non-verbal communication is key. I used a semi-structured interview approach, however, the degree of structure varied from interview to interview. Sikes suggests that, 'On one level, perhaps, life historians have to accept that people tell the story that they, for whatever reason, want to tell to the person who is listening' (Sikes *et al* 1996, quoted in Goodson and Sikes 2001, p.28). This may be true at a broad level, however, Lawler gives a specific example of her intervention in an interview during a 'long pause' (Lawler 2002, p.247) and acknowledges that this simple intervention, does 'move the narrative along' and argues that the narratives 'are co-produced between the researcher and the research subject' (*ibid* p.254). There were many

examples in the interviews of how my responses influenced the narrative. In one interview the participant mentioned a sports club in relation to a member of his family in the middle of a story. I happened to be familiar with this club, knew that this was not a local club for the participant, and, given what I was researching, I was interested to know how the family member became involved in the club. My questions about this then produced significant knowledge about the role of a member of the participant's own network and how this network member had a relationship of trust with the participant as a result of her previous involvement with the other family member. The network member played a significant role in the participant accessing higher education. If I had not known this club and asked those questions, would the detail of this relationship have emerged? This impact of the verbal and non-verbal behaviour of the researcher during the telling and listening stage of the narrative process is often not acknowledged in biographical research, yet it is key to what is and is not told.

The researcher then is in no sense a passive listener and their skills, training and experience of interviewing are key to supporting the participant to tell their story. This aspect of interviewing does not receive the attention that you would expect in much life history research. Many studies refer to semi-structured interviews but say little about the detail of the process of telling and listening. I used an aide memoire (see appendix C1), which included areas of interest and some specific questions as a basis for the interview. This included a flow from the participant's current situation and recent decisions about post-school 'options' back through aspects of their life and the experiences of their families and back again to the time of thinking about and applying to higher education, however, the reality of the interview was quite different.

Some of the themes in the questions in the interviews emerged from my experience working in access, from a review of literature, from my previous work and study. Many questions were very open while others were quite specific. Issues that had emerged in earlier interviews with other young adults, network members or education and community personnel were included and comments that some of the participants had written in a narrative at the time of HE application about why they wanted to go to higher education were also discussed. Participants responded to

some of my questions with other ideas or simply raised other issues and we went with the flow of their ideas. Sometimes new ideas and questions occurred to me as I listened to their new ideas and we discussed these further. We discussed the lives of the young adults but also their understandings of how aspects of their parents', grandparents' and other family members' lives had affected them.

Active listening is often mentioned as key to interviewing but what this involves is rarely explained. From my experience, it involves listening closely to what a person is saying and showing that you are listening closely through appropriate verbal or non-verbal communication. At the same time it involves being alert to links between what they are saying and other themes and deciding whether to ask a further question about what the person is saying and what type of question; deciding to summarise and reflecting back to the person; deciding to seek clarification of something the person said; or deciding to move on to a different theme. That is quite a complex process and the decisions taken inevitably shape what is told.

In addition to that complex process, responding emotionally and appropriately to the topic under discussion is critical to doing ethical interviewing. In order to respond emotionally in an appropriate manner to the stories being told, observing both the participant's and your own non-verbal communication is key. It seems remarkable then with such a complex interaction taking place in the research interview, a context that is likely to be unfamiliar to the participant, that the issues of how the emotions that may arise in interviews are handled and the maintenance of boundaries in the questioning are also given scant attention in much biographical research. Atkinson, in a guide to doing biographical interviews, refers to the need to 'respect the boundaries that the teller presents' (Atkinson 1998, p.35) and states that 'people will let you know' if they do not want to discuss certain issues, (*ibid,* p.35), however, he does not say how to respect the boundaries, nor does he address the fact that some participants may be familiar with telling their story in other settings, such as a medical, guidance or counselling setting where the boundaries are established by the purpose of the interview, which is to assist the client in a specific area of their life. That is not the purpose of the life history research interview.

The purpose of the life history research interview is not quite as clear, thus, the boundaries are also not as easy to determine and require considerable skill and experience on the part of the interviewer to recognise the signs shown by different people that the questions are bordering on boundaries for that person and also to support the participant in reflecting on the process at the end of the interview. While much of the research appears to gloss over the details of the process of doing interviews, there are a number of feminist researchers (Renzetti and Lee 1993; Skeggs 1997b; Edwards 1993a, 1993b; Hawthorne-Steele and Moreland 2010) and researchers using aspects of psychoanalytic theories (Walkerdine *et al* 2001; West 1996) who have drawn attention to these key issues. Edwards, in her accounts of doing research, highlights the existence of boundaries that could have been transgressed (Edwards 1993a, p.50) and in a discussion on reciprocity gave an example of a participant who was upset after an interview (Edwards 1993b). In the interviews it was quite difficult to know when a question would produce a response in someone that suggested there was something they would prefer not to discuss. In one interview, in response to a question, the person's verbal answer was simply, 'I don't know' but the tone of voice and non-verbal response suggested a type of anxiety in complete contrast to the interview so far and I moved on. West also openly acknowledges the challenges, writing: 'I frequently felt lost and uncertain in particular interviews: about how far to allow a conversation to proceed, about where to stop, despite a clear code of ethics . . . on occasions conversations and their effects were unpredictable and the boundaries unclear' (West 1996, p.214).

In addition to the issue of boundaries within the interview, there is a wider ethical issue in doing this type of research regarding bringing to the participant's attention a stronger awareness of being from a socio-economically disadvantaged background and the impact of that background. I knew that some participants might have a strong sense of that or some sense of it already, as all of them had been involved in access initiatives for students from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds, but I was not sure if all participants would have developed understandings of disadvantage, inequality, social structures and their own circumstances. The extent to which as a researcher you draw attention to different understandings of disadvantage when in listening mode as a researcher is a key

question and, like the issue of boundaries, it is not always addressed in life history research.

The ethical issues also lead me to consider to what extent I think life history research can be used to support a better understanding of structural issues on the part of, in this case, young people from disadvantaged backgrounds. In essence, it is about trying to find a balance between assisting young adults who may be internalising structural inequality in a way that could negatively affect how they see themselves or affect their educational and career opportunities and not imposing my views of the world on young adults who are still creating the stories that shape their sense of self. The opportunities for and interest in reflexivity about these issues could vary from participant to participant. Thus, I always intended to be guided by the participant and this is the approach I tried to maintain during the interviews.

Trying to maintain that balance was not as straightforward as it sounds. Ecclestone, Hayes and Furedi's concerns that a rise in 'therapeutic professionalism', 'cannot offer a political springboard for insights about one's place in the world and one's capacity for agency' are relevant to this issue in life history research (Ecclestone *et al* 2005, p.196). Generally, the participants did discuss disadvantage in structural terms and could see the impact of area-based poverty and disadvantage on their experiences. However, a minority appeared to be internalising aspects of inequality. One participant spoke about how she did not want to apply for jobs outside of her area because of how she spoke. I asked more about what she meant and in response to her comments that she spoke too fast and that people outside of the area would not be able to understand her and might look down on her, I stated that she came across as very articulate, that I had no difficulty understanding her and given her experience in her area of work (about which she had spoken) that any school would be lucky to have her as an employee. Should I have ignored it? Were my comments patronising? But ethically how can you ignore that? When participants stated that they should have studied harder, yet studying in over-crowded public housing meant doing so late at night, after 11pm, or before 7am, what is the appropriate response? Stating that it must be difficult for the person or discussing housing policy and societal structures when the person is still living in

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the over-crowded house and still trying to find somewhere to study? I tried to find a balance and be guided by the participant.

I was aware that there might also be a need to suggest appropriate referrals to participants in some interviews, as outlined in Ball, Maguire and Macrae's study on post-16 transitions (Ball *et al* 2000, p.2), and with regard to education issues, this was a littler easier to do than with the issues outlined above. Alheit and Dausien (2002) identify the fact that a range of types of learning can occur during biographical work, that vary from individual to individual. I think that a skilled interviewer who shows that she is following and genuinely hearing the story and provides relevant information about education options can also support that learning, and I think that can be of benefit to the individual. In many interviews, I spent time explaining various aspects of the education system and we discussed how the young adults could progress from what they were doing into higher education if that was what they wanted but sometimes it was difficult to know when to stop. At the end of each interview, I addressed any ethical issues and issues relating to their future education that I felt to be appropriate. I also discussed the experience of doing the interview with each person. Some said that it was more or less what they had expected: others stated that they had been a little nervous and had not really known what to expect. Typical responses were that it was 'grand', 'good to talk about it', 'enjoyed chatting to you', 'good to see this kind of research being done' and I spoke about how much I appreciated their participation, how interesting it was to hear about their experiences and stated that they should contact me at any stage if I could be of assistance to them in accessing higher education. I spoke to most of the participants shortly afterwards and later to discuss findings.

At the end of the interview we returned to the issue of influential people in their networks, which was already mentioned when discussing the research, and I asked whether or not the participant would consider my interviewing the network member(s) they identified as significant. This broader focus regarding interviewing key members of their social networks allowed for a better exploration of the core issues in this research but it also introduced more complex issues of confidentiality between participants and significant network members. These issues were managed by discussing with the young adult what would be said to the network member

about why they had identified them as significant. The interviews with network members who had an influence on their experience of education or decisions about post-school options focused on how and why the person was significant to the young adult's experiences and decisions but we also discussed issues to do with the case study area, education, disadvantage and access to higher education. Again I used an aide memoire during these interviews (see appendix C2). Some people were surprised to hear that the young adult had identified them as an influence, however, the nature of the relationship became clear during the interviews. These interviews were key in both providing a broader understanding of the young adult's life, other factors that came into play, such as the peer group of the young adult or early experiences, and also gave an insight into how a person can have an influence, how the relationship developed and what was the nature of the relationship that enabled it to be an influence on the young adult's experiences or decisions.

As part of the case study methodology, I read documents about the area and did interviews with education and community personnel which were focused on their views about access to higher education, based on their experience in working and or living in the area, and I used a different aide memoire for these interviews (see appendix C3). They contributed to providing an understanding of the area, how the changes in the area impacted on education and generating of data about the understandings of the relationship between disadvantage and participation in higher education. The interviews were broad in content and many people, when discussing their experience of doing the interview at the end, spoke about how it provided a rare opportunity of time and space to reflect on their work.

In this section I have discussed what I term the early stages and interview stage of the research process and drawn attention to how the relationship between the researcher and participant is key to this stage. I outlined the ethical issues involved in this stage of the research and explained how they were addressed.

SECTION 3.3: INTERPRETING AND WRITING PROCESS

In this section, I describe the interpretative and writing stages of the research process. I used aspects of a grounded theory approach in this study combined with key features of life history research during a process that involves excavation, imaginative construction work and creative writing. As noted above, the separation between the interview stage and the interpreting/writing stage is an artificial one, as the process of interpretation was ongoing and interspersed with the interviewing. Interpretation and writing in life history research involves a blend of careful excavation of the various types of data, imaginative construction work to develop links to enable meaning-making, and creative writing to convey the understandings and meanings provided by life history. Throughout biographical research, there are many references to its links with literature and literary processes. Denzin states that at the core of the biographical methodology is 'a concern for meaning and interpretation' (Denzin 1989, p.25). Josselson notes that the 'aesthetic appeal of the presentation' seems 'necessary for meaning-making' and is one of the key criteria of a good narrative (Josselson 1993, p.xii). Denzin writes that, 'lives and the biographical methods that construct them are literary productions' (Denzin 1989, p.26) and recommends that features of literary interpretation and criticism should be applied when doing biographical research (Denzin 1989, p.25).

This link with fiction was one of the first distinctive features of biographical research on education which I noticed. When I first read the texts by Hodkinson *et al* (1996) and Ball *et al* (2000*)*, I physically read the texts as if they were novels: on the bus or with a cup of tea, sitting back in my chair without a pencil in hand, and they absorbed me in the way a novel does. Many biographical researchers reference fiction in their work (Page 1998, p.100; Goodson and Sikes 2001, p.20; West 1996; Jackson and Marsden 1966, p.17; Hoggart 1992). Steedman's text, *Landscape for a Good Woman* (1986), which involves biography, autobiography and social analysis, fully acknowledges the links in the fiction-like cover of the text. These associations with fiction seem to arise, particularly during the analysis and writing stages of the narrative process for a number of reasons. Erben identifies the key role of imagination in the analysis stage of narrative. He writes:

Imagination is the vehicle the researcher employs to aid recognition of significant moments in the data, to relate these to each other and to the overall lives of the subjects under study. In other words, imagination very often both fills the gap within, and develops architecture for, the research data (Erben 1998, p.10).

This use of imagination or speculation is evident throughout life history research on access to education and the role of imagination is clearly key to the process of interpretation and identification of public stories, structural issues and common themes that form one core element of the analysis needed to do and write biographical research (Hodkinson *et al* 1996, p.50; Marsden 1968, p.113; Hoggart 1992, pp.13-18; Lawler 1999, p.16; Ball *et al* 2000, p.19). The role the imagination plays in the narrative process is best captured in Mann's text:

Using this syntax suggests . . . conjures up . . . seems to be . . . It is possible that . . . Emma's narrative suggests. . . On the one hand, there is potential . . On the other hand there is the possibility that . . . may lead . . . may also have been . . . might mean (p.52) . . . perhaps demonstrates . . . may have also played its part (p.53) . . . seems to set . . . may have begun (p.55) . . . No doubt until fairly recently . . . It suggests . . . Perhaps seeking . . . seems to seek . . . may indeed suggest. . . could more easily . . shows signs . . . narrative suggests . . It is possible to see this . . . It can only be conjecture but . . . may have contributed . . . It is possible . . . may represent . . . (p. 56) . . . These educational life histories suggest . . . The life histories suggest . . . may map changes in social meanings. . . Such in-depth understanding may help (Mann 1998, p.57).

The use of such tentative language highlights both the fact that imagination is involved and also the key role it plays. It facilitates a linking process that enables the researcher to bring into the interpretative process their knowledge of the field and also other relevant knowledge. Given the issues highlighted above regarding the influence of the researcher's biography, it is not surprising that there are a number of examples of how the researcher's own experience affected the analysis. Walkerdine, Lucey and Melody noted how one researcher's experience of her own sibling relationships facilitated an understanding of a participant's relationship with her sister (Walkerdine *et al* 2001, p.97) and Sikes explained that becoming a mother changed how she listened to and interpreted similar events in participants' narratives when researching teachers' lives (Sikes 1997 p.10).

The researcher's imagination, influenced at least partly by their experiences, is clearly key then to these stages of the narrative process, however, in a similar process to literary criticism, that imagination is grounded by and in the various types of data used in life history. To continue the quotation from Erben:

> At all points, however, the researcher is required to fix imagination in empirical sources – it cannot be allowed free reign and take unwarranted liberties with the lives of subjects. The fact that biographical research findings are imaginative constructions does not mean that they need to be fictitious (Erben 1998, p.10).

Goodson and Sikes specifically address the issue of how researchers can acknowledge that the research process, and particularly the writing stage, is creative and ask how life historians 'can justify their position and differentiate themselves from straightforwardly avowed writers of fiction?' (Goodson and Sikes 2001, p.48). Quoting Bullough, they state that there is 'general agreement that " interpretations, however, tentative must be disciplined by data, and . . . we must proceed cautiously and carefully before proclaiming a plot" (Bullough 1998, p.29)' (Goodson and Sikes 2001, p.56). The various steps in my analysis process reflect this blend of cautious and careful excavation of the data combined with the imaginative construction work.

A grounded theory approach was used to analyse the data but also influenced earlier stages of the research process. One aspect of grounded theory used in the research that was important at earlier stages of the research was the simultaneous data collection and analysis as outlined above, which led to my asking additional questions during the interview process when listening to participants' stories. Another aspect of grounded theory was seeking new data as a result of analysis of initial data. These examples highlight the artificial nature of the separation of the stages of the research process outlined in this chapter. In contrast to the original grounded theory approach, I did the literature review before the data collection and that review had some influence on the nature of the data I sought in the research.

The interviews were transcribed by a transcriber and then checked and corrected by me. Often when reading the transcripts, they felt flat and did not seem to reflect the lively, interactive interviews that had taken place. My reaction to the written transcripts drew my attention to the need to listen again to the recordings and to

draw on my interview notes to re-capture and understand the emotions expressed by participants. Interview notes and listening to recordings also influenced the preparation of aide memoires and themes in subsequent interviews. I also wrote notes throughout the period of data collection and analysis as a form of ongoing reflection and analysis. The tables prepared during the data collection stage often ruled out some possible interpretations and focused the mind on other possible ones. All of these were drawn upon in interpreting the data.

During the coding process, I did open coding initially and used Nvivo qualitative software to analyse the data. Nvivo was particularly useful as a database and method to check ideas which emerged during and immediately after the interviews and as a systematic way of excavating the interview transcripts. These processes produced a comprehensive set of initial codes, detailed in appendix D, which were organised using the tree nodes facility in Nvivo. Nvivo was also useful for analysing in depth the content within a theme and the relationship between themes. However, there are risks in interpreting only on the coded, broken down data, particularly when conducting life histories. Therefore, I moved continuously between the coded 'database' of interview transcripts, recordings, interview notes, analysis notes and data about the area and education in the interpretative work and during writing work.

Reflecting the grounded theory approach and keeping in sight the lives at the centre of this study, I engaged in constant comparison and different types of readings. While I coded each transcript initially, I also returned to groups of related transcripts of the interviews with the young person, network members and education personnel in the young person's school; all of the transcripts of the young adults who went to HE and all of those who did not go; all transcripts of key players by type: the guidance counsellors, the home-school liaison personnel, all the community personnel, the primary school principals and this in turn led to re- and new coding. The interpretative process involved a constant going backwards and forwards between all the sources and forms of data, codes and the analysis ideas, knowledge from literature and personal and professional experience in a process of imaginative construction work. Memory also played a key role in this work as the

powerful impact of an interview while interpreting could trigger a re-reading of some data and re-coding.

This process is best explained through some examples of this interpretive approach and process of 're-construction'. Post-interview reflection notes drew my attention to differences between siblings and the participant regarding education experiences and outcomes. Reading the data coded on Nvivo under siblings and participant experience for some of the participants confirmed and detailed those differences. Knowledge of the changing environment in the area from the case study approach, together with my experience in my own family of the differences in upbringing environment between the 'first family' (the four older siblings in my family) and the 'second family' (the five younger siblings in my family), provided additional layers of insight. These forms of knowledge and insight, combined with my knowledge of Bourdieu's concepts of habitus, capitals and field, contributed to the conclusions about how change in education practices and outcomes can occur over time in a family.

Another example relates to the role of parents. My notes and strong memories of the comments the young adults made about their parents led me to identify this as an initial code. Reading the data under that code, I identified the combination of mostly admiration for their parents with undertones of feeling left to their own devices regarding education decisions. This resonated, to some extent, with my own experiences of parental support but also considerable autonomy and early granting of responsibility, compared to the experiences of many of my friends from slightly different backgrounds. These forms of analysis and insight, together with research about working class parent-child relationships (Reay and Ball 1998; Walkerdine *et al* 2001) and Reay's work on emotional capital (Reay 2000) enabled the identification/re-construction of findings about the complexity of the parental influence and the role of the early maturity of young adults in working class families in relation to participation in higher education. I compared these findings with my professional knowledge of comments and recommendations in research and policy about the role of parents in relation to supporting education and with some of the comments about 'poor parenting' and lack of valuing of education by parents from some of the interviews with education personnel. This process then

produced the findings about understandings of the role of parents within widening participation discourse failing to adequately take into account socio-cultural understandings of working class family experiences that impact on education practices and outcomes. These are some examples of the interpretative process used in this research.

I described the third element of the interpretative and writing process as 'creative writing' because this stage again required a balance of imaginative work and grounding by the data. It required story-telling, different forms of language usage, and decisions about finding the balance between the participants' voices, the findings in relation to the research questions, the conceptual framework and conclusions in relation to theory and other research. I tried to find that balance by using sample stories and quotations from the interviews to communicate the findings in chapter four and then in chapter five concentrating on the discussion of the findings in relation to widening participation research. However, the following quotation, used in the research by Hodkinson *et al* on young people's transitions from school to training, captures the challenges of this process:

> Deciding how to present voices and lives is a continuous problem for qualitative writers. Because we use the voices and experiences of the people we study, both for their own sake and as evidence of our credibility, we are constantly making writerly decisions about who gets to say what and how often in the text, and who the narrator talks about, how and how often. How do you write the voices and lives of interviewees and informants so that both literary and scientific writing criteria are met? This is not an either/or problem. Qualitative books are often critiqued as bad science, not because they necessarily are, but because the literary decisions regarding the presentations of lives is busily undermining the works' credibility (Richardson 1990, quoted in Hodkinson *et al* 1996, p.158).

It is difficult to fully describe the challenges of presenting the findings in life history research and it involved periods of intense writing, stepping back from the findings chapter for a few weeks, then periods of chapter re-structuring, change of content within and between sections, changes in quotations and language. The interviews produced rich narratives reflecting complex lives, however, many of the quotations and descriptions of those lives and experiences relating to education were removed, reduced and replaced with other quotations during the editing process. Limitations of space dictated that just enough, and no more, quotations

and descriptions could be included when presenting the findings. The focus on the craft of writing in life history research seems to be a combination of both a desire to do justice in the written narratives to the stories told by the participants and also a recognition that only well-written narratives will draw attention to the issues that the researcher is highlighting. At the end of their text, Hodkinson, Sparkes and Hodkinson ask:

> Did we manage to involve you? Did those stories give insight into the lives of young people . . . ? Has our theoretical analysis added to the understanding? . . . have we stimulated you to rethink some of the issues raised. . . ? It is against questions such as these that we would hope the quality of this book will ultimately be judged' (Hodkinson *et al* 1996, p.160).

My research study used a dual life history and case study methodology and this contributed to the limiting of space in the thesis to include quotations and the richness of the individual narratives. However, the use of the dual methodology and the data from the case-study approach provided both a better understanding of aspects of those individual lives relating to participation in education and had the benefit of enabling the research to address key questions regarding factors affecting application to and participation in higher education for young people from SED backgrounds and understandings of the relationship between disadvantage and participation in higher education.

In this chapter, I focused on the methods, describing in detail the various stages of the research from identifying and contacting the participants, conducting interviews and interpretation and writing. I drew attention to the importance of the researcher-participant relationship at each stage of the research and explained how ethical issues were addressed in the research. Denzin highlights the key role that emotions play in biographical research. He writes that the understandings of people's lives gained in life history, 'rest on an interpretative process that leads one to enter into the emotional life of another' (Denzin 1989, p.28). In this chapter, I described how this engagement in emotions arises from the content of stories and from the relationship between the researcher and the participant during the various stages of the narrative process and how the ability to engage, acknowledge and respond appropriately to emotions is key to both effective and ethical life history research. I outlined the potential benefits and risks involved in life history research for

participants and the steps that I took to maximise the benefits and reduce the risks. I drew on my training and experience in guidance counselling, and specifically in working with young adults, to ensure that I was an active listener and could support the participants in telling their stories. From my training and work, I also had the ethical understanding and experience to recognise boundaries, to ensure that it was a positive experience for the participants, to engage in discussions during and after the interviews and to take any follow up actions that seemed appropriate.

I also showed how aspects of a grounded theory approach were used in the analysis and examined the writing process in life history research. I outlined how a process of excavation of the data, imaginative construction work and creative writing was used to enable me to draw on knowledge from theory and my own experiences to analyse and interpret the various forms of research data and to communicate and discuss the findings. In the following chapter I present the findings from the research.

CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS

In this chapter, I present the findings from the research. In the first section of this chapter, as part of the socio-cultural understanding and drawing primarily on data from the interviews with education and community personnel, I give an overview of the impact of socio-cultural and educational disadvantage in the case study area. It is against this backdrop that the desire to participate in higher education and the experiences of the young adults in applying to and participating or not in HE can be understood. From the analysis three different groups within the 20 participants emerged with different orientations towards higher education and post-school options and these findings are presented in section 4.2. The analysis also showed that there were some common elements of experience – enabling factors – amongst all of the young adults, both those who participated and did not participate in HE. These common elements meant that the option of higher education remained open to them when they entered their final year in school. These findings are presented in section 4.3. In section 4.4, I focus particularly on the role of networks and influencers and show how these factors affected participation in higher education. In the final section, I present the findings about the understandings of the relationship between socio-economic disadvantage and higher education, drawing particularly on data from the interviews with the education and community personnel. I show that there are a number of key issues on which views differ and evidence of a polarisation of, and gaps in, knowledge, mainly based on position and experience in the education and community structures.

SECTION 4.1: UNDERSTANDINGS OF SOCIO-ECONOMIC AND EDUCATIONAL DISADVANTAGE IN THE CASE STUDY AREA

Given the socio-economic history described in chapter two above, it is not surprising that levels of participation in higher education have been low in the area. Historically, the levels of education matched the traditional employment

opportunities in the area and leaving school at the earliest opportunity was part of the culture. While participation in second level has increased, participation in higher education remains significantly below average. There was considerable agreement amongst the interviewees about many of the factors explaining the low participation in higher education. The majority of interviewees spoke about the early impact of high levels of socio-economic disadvantage on family stability, the impact of a lack of role models, poverty, a lack of knowledge about higher education and insufficient resources in schools to address the many education issues that arise from the levels of intergenerational disadvantage.

There was also some recognition that the education system did not necessarily meet the needs or reflect the experiences of the children. One community worker who had been a second-level teacher spoke about how the curriculum did not reflect working class experience and that their knowledge was not valued in the system. Many of the primary-school teachers spoke at length about different use of language and how the standardised tests did not use the language of the area but they generally concluded that the young people in the area needed to acquire the language of the education system to enable them to succeed in education and compete with other young people.

Each group of interviewees spoke in more detail of issues that affected their sector. The primary-school principals spoke of the impact of cumulative disadvantage in disadvantaged schools, particularly the lack of sufficient resources, especially for learning support and criticised a social service that did not put children first. They also spoke of the challenges of retaining skilled staff. The second-level school personnel explained how the socio-economic history and changing demographics in the area and the city had an impact on second-level schools in the area. In the case of the two single-sex boys' schools in the area, a significant percentage of their pupil intake had come from pupils travelling to the schools from outer suburbs and rural areas which did not have second-level schools. At that time, these schools were academically strong and attracted middle class students. As the population in those suburban areas increased, schools were built in the suburbs and fewer pupils travelled into the academic schools in the inner city area. At the same time the population decline in the inner city meant that there were fewer local pupils to fill

the places and all five schools had to adopt a number of strategies to survive. Two vocational schools were merged and developed a number of initiatives to attract students from other areas. A number of the schools welcomed newcomer students, many of whom, in a similar pattern to before, travelled into the schools in the inner city from suburbs. Within the second-level schools, lack of resources was an issue and one consequence of the school situation was that they were small schools with limited subject choice and level of subject. Together with the impact of disadvantage on educational attainment, this meant that subjects were not always available or students who wished to study them at a higher level were in a minority and the higher-level course had to be studied outside of class time or in a different school. One participant explained how it was not possible to do chemistry at the school and even with arrangements to attend a tutorial centre for this subject, it was not possible to do the laboratory work.

Community workers drew attention to the impact of a docklands culture evident in the desire of many of the boys to do hard, 'masculine' work and the particular identity pressures on boys. Gendered pressures regarding caring were also noted in relation to girls. Many of the community workers explained how there was a culture of being available to assist in the local area with errands and spoke of pressures if a young adult wanted to do something that was different to others in the area. Many noted that there were positive and negative aspects to the economic boom: parents could get employment and then afford to allow their children to remain in school, however, the availability of relatively high-paid, low-skilled work, particularly as construction labourers, meant that many young people left school early for work. There was considerable concern in the interviews about the potential impact of the recession in terms of community services and availability of work but also many comments about how further education now seemed more attractive to young people as there was little work for school-leavers. Thus, many of the familiar reasons associated with socio-economic disadvantage and education participation were addressed by the majority of interviewers, with greater detail given by specific groups in relation to their own sector.

SECTION 4.2: PARTICIPANTS - THREE GROUPS

The backdrop of disadvantage described above and in parts of section 2.3 in chapter two is an important context for the stories. The young adults all lived and had attended designated disadvantaged schools in the case study area and were from individually disadvantaged backgrounds and, somewhat surprisingly, it became clear that there were no obvious explanations for application to higher education or participation in higher education based on socio-economic factors, such as higher levels of parental education, employment status, occupation or type of housing. The socio-economic profile of each applicant is described in appendix E. What emerged from the analysis of the data were three groups from within the twenty participants with quite different orientations towards higher education, as a result of previous experiences and relationships, and different outcomes regarding higher education participation for participants in each of the groups.

The second-level school and exam system in Ireland involves a three-year junior cycle for twelve-fifteen year-olds with the majority of students studying ten subjects in the state exam, the Junior Certificate, at the end of that cycle. The junior cycle is followed either by entry into a 'transition year' focused on acquiring a broader range of educational experiences and skills or by direct entry into a senior cycle of two years. In senior cycle the majority of students study six or seven subjects for the state exam, the Leaving Certificate. Each subject can be studied at higher or ordinary level and, for English, Irish and Maths at foundation level with a different curriculum and exam for each level. Applications for higher education are processed through the Central Applications Office (CAO). Through this system, students can apply to up to ten level 8 honours degree courses and up to ten level 6/7 certificate or ordinary degree courses, listed in order of preference, by the deadline of the 1st of February. Places for the majority of higher education courses are allocated through a points system. Points are awarded based on the grade attained in each subject in the Leaving Certificate exam and a total points score is given to each applicant based on their six best exam results. The points scale varies from 100 points for an A at a higher level to 5 points for a D3 at ordinary level. Each applicant must meet the minimum academic entry requirements to be

considered for a course and then places are allocated to the applicants with the highest points scores until the number of places on a programme are filled. Most higher education institutions operate access entry routes for students from SED backgrounds, which involve reserving a number of places for such students at lower levels of points. An alternative senior cycle programme is the Leaving Certificate Applied which offers a less academic programme with continuous assessment. It is not possible to be considered for higher education courses on the basis of the Leaving Certificate Applied. All twenty of the young adult participants studied for the traditional Leaving Certificate and nineteen of the twenty applied to study in higher education through the CAO system.

There was no straightforward list of factors that led the participants, with the exception of one person, to apply to higher education and no dichotomy of enabling factors explaining participation for some and barriers explaining why the others did not participate. The life histories reveal a more nuanced and complex situation, best understood through the three groups. Table 2 provides an overview of the participants in each of the three groups and the post-school outcome for each participant.

TABLE 2: Three groups of participants and post-school outcome

Name	Gender	Post-school outcome
Group One		
Kate	F	HE Level 8 teacher training college - university
Kevin	M	HE Level 8 institute of technology
Patrick	M	HE Level 8 university
Louise	F	HE Level 8 higher education college
Michael	M	HE Level 7 and progressed to level 8 higher education college
Emily	F	HE Level 8 university
Brigita	F	HE Level 7 higher education college
Veronica	F	HE Level 8 university
Jane	F	Deferred HE place, two years of specialist training in further education, then degree in HE
Group Two:		
Rachel	F	HE Level 8 institute of technology
Jack	M	HE Level 7 institute of technology
Luke	M	HE Level 8 institute of technology
Karen	F	Accepted HE place, left after few days, attended part-time FE for one year, then working part-time in shop
James	M	FE qualification, then working as special needs assistant in local school
Frank	M	FE for one year, left and studying on a different FE course
Gary	M	Working locally in docks
Catherine	F	FE qualification, then working as special needs assistant in local school
Group Three		
Alison	F	HE Level 8 higher education college
Fiona	F	HE Level 6 higher education college
Michelle	F	FE qualification, then working as special needs assistant in local school

The nine participants in group one viewed higher education as the only post-school option to the extent that other options were not considered, participation in higher education was key to their sense of identity and the entire group participated in higher education. There was a sense that they were 'on track' for higher education. In the second group, the young adults wanted to make their way in life but saw a number of ways of doing that. Seven of the eight young adults applied to higher education but it was only one of a number of options that they were considering.

Six of the group were offered places in higher education and three of the group accepted their offer and participated in higher education at institutes of technology. The participants in group three were clear about the kind of life that they did not want and participating in higher or further education became a means of avoiding the life that they did not want. All three participants applied to higher education and two of the young adults attended a local higher education institution. Below I give an analysis of each of the groups, drawing initially on one individual story and then drawing on all participants' stories in the group to give an overview of how they reached the stage of applying and then participating or not in higher education.

Group One: 'On-track'

Kevin's story illustrates the experiences and features of group one.

Kevin's story

Kevin was twenty-one and studying an honours degree course in business and computers. He felt strongly about access to education and spoke about the issues in his area that affected participation in education. Kevin was the youngest of four children and lived with his mother and older siblings; his parents had separated when he was two. Kevin's background was typical of the area in that his mother left school at age fourteen or fifteen and received social welfare and did some part-time work in the local shop during Kevin's childhood. They lived in a house rented from the city council and had lived in the area all of their lives, previously living in the local flats. Both of his parents were from the case study area.

When he entered 6th year, higher education was the only option he was considering. He explained:

> What was I thinking in sixth year? I just presumed I was going to college. I said even if I don't have the money, I'm going like. I have to work more hours or whatever. But like it was never like an issue to say like you are not going to college, I would have got a lend of money but it just meant I would have had to pay a lot back when I finished college. Because I realised the benefits. So college, I made sure that I was going to go on to college.

Similarly to all in group one, his main concern was not whether or not he would access higher education but rather choosing the best course and college for him. He had an understanding of the HE system and explained that he applied to business and computing in an institute of technology because he wanted to be in small classes where he could ask questions because he felt he learnt best that way. He

found the Leaving Certificate exam stressful but was confident after the exams that he would get the points required for his course. He got 410 points and received and accepted his first choice.

Kevin stated from the start that his circumstances were different to many of the other young people in the area because his two older sisters went to higher education, thus:

> My two sisters went on to college, my two older sisters. And I suppose all throughout the years they had an influence on me talking about college. I think it was the familiarity, it wasn't new to me, I wasn't scared of it. Because it was familiar, I was like, I can, it wasn't an obstacle. Where a lot of people that are not familiar with college they see college, 'oh college like, I can't, I wouldn't like to take that on'. But because I seen my sisters probably the same intelligence as me at my age, plus they put in a bit of hard work so. They were like ambassadors on me basically, that was showing me that, like you can go to college if you want.

There was a significant age gap between Kevin and his oldest sister and she started in higher education when Kevin was eight or nine. The participants in group one generally had some familiarity with higher education either in their immediate family, extended family or through friendships. In addition to enabling Kevin to acquire a familiarity with higher education and showing him the benefits of higher education as their careers progressed, his sisters played an interesting role in encouraging him in education generally. Kevin explained how they helped him with homework and encouraged him to read the paper and how they subtly encouraged him by telling their friends in front of him that he was great at reading the paper. Kevin's sister also explained how she helped him with different school projects and tried to help him to think 'outside the box'.

It is important to note that Kevin's older brother, the second eldest in the family, did not access higher education and left school at fifteen, thus while siblings play a role, it is not an automatic guarantee that if one sibling participates in higher education, they will all do so. There were a number of participants in this study in similar situations where one older sibling had accessed higher education while other older siblings had not accessed higher education. Thus, it is important to consider Kevin's own experiences also. In addition to his sisters' influence, he spoke about how his neighbours and others influenced him:

> I have a neighbour who is in his sixties and through the years he has always dropped in to the house and he's like a dictionary like, he knows everything. . . . he worked on the boats for years, sailing all across the world. And I always said to him, 'you have to be the most intelligent person I know'. Because he knows - like if I have a pub quiz I'd want him on me team, one of these ones - and I said 'you never had any formal education like how did you do it like?' . . . He left school at eight, he goes being honest he loves reading, he goes that did help me but one thing he said, 'try to stay in school as long as possible.' He would talk about his time on the ships, real interesting stories, none that would bore you, he wouldn't preach. I would say 'you are so intelligent like'. He goes, 'yeah but I still would have loved to go to college' . . . So different people dropping in did have an influence . . . just different people feeding in have different stories to tell you . . . my house is kind of like that, like you would have neighbours drop in or you have local friends and me sisters friends . . .

Kevin generally enjoyed primary school, becoming interested in computers during his time in school. One of his teachers noticed this interest and arranged for him to stay after school to use a computer. His class and group of friends all transferred as a group to the local second-level school, which was located on the same grounds. He settled in to second-level school easily and spoke of it, thus:

> I think they had a good measure of your ability. And then kind of set the bar a little bit above you and then pushed you to reach that bar, but not too much pressure, nothing where you were like kind of collapsing and your nerves were gone and you were in bits. It was just like they seen your potential, maybe you didn't see it, and put the bar a little bit above you so you were able to reach it.

He developed strong relationships with a number of teachers and identified one teacher as being particularly influential, saying: 'I had a close relationship with him . . . he was just a normal, no airs and graces about him and he would just tell you normal stories . . . he made college to be normal.' This teacher was his form teacher from 1st year, the teacher was also involved in projects with developing countries and Kevin quickly became involved in this work, fundraising and travelling to a developing country with the school. He also became involved in debating. Kevin, similarly to all in group one, took up every opportunity offered and sought out other opportunities in a seemingly conscious way to acquire skills that he thought would be useful. Kevin described what he learnt in school through being involved in extra-curricular activities:

> It was actually the secondary benefits that I got from it, like learning how to talk to other people from different backgrounds. And being open to other

people's stories and knowing how to talk in front of a crowd. Skills like that like - obviously I got practical skills like how to pass your Leaving and who Shakespeare was.

Kevin said that he worked hard in school and said that he was not the brightest but, in a further example of actively seeking out additional opportunities, he chose to do an extra subject for the Leaving Certificate, studying the course during lunchtime with a teacher, and did well in that subject. Kevin's story shows how the actions he took and the relationships developed supported his movement towards higher education. His sisters had made the process easier and Kevin was quite clear about that. From his sister's experience, Kevin had an early familiarity with both the experience and benefits of higher education and had an easier journey towards and into higher education than his sister. Academically, he adjusted easily to college but socially, found it was more of an adjustment and his friend from home and school who did the same course dropped out in first year. He graduated recently and is now working in a graduate job in his field.

Group one generally

The participants in group one viewed higher education as the only post-school option to the extent that other options were not considered.

> Oh I don't know, it was never a kind of decision I had to make. It was just a definite, it was just something I was always going to do really. . . like I did that programme when I was eight [a programme for talented children in a HEI] and like that was it. Like from then I knew like I wanted to go to somewhere like that (Jane).

> Yeah I suppose like it was just always, I was always going to go, it was never a thing will I, won't I. I will go to college and I'll get the job that you want and stuff. That's it, just like I always knew and that was it (Kate).

They were a driven group, determined to succeed and accessing higher education was part of a wider career plan. Emily stated: 'what else are you going to do if you don't go to college . . . you are going to end up in some little shop or something . . . I won't be happy until I get a good job' and Jane explained: 'I really would love to come back with my degree and like either have dance introduced like maybe as an exam subject. Or else I would love to like have my own school.'

Accessing higher education was part of an identity that had education at its centre. They had a positive experience of learning from a young age and the desire to learn and succeed academically was part of who they were, part of their sense of self. Patrick said: 'Like I don't really want anything else in life. We have education.' There was no deficit of aspiration, and raising aspirations regarding a desire for higher education was not required. They were knowledgeable about the higher education system and courses and considerable effort was focussed on choosing a course, which was generally linked to their experience of a subject in school or an activity in which they had undertaken extensive classes outside of school. All of this group were offered and accepted places in higher education, with the exception of Jane. Jane was offered an honours degree course in business in a university but decided to defer her offer in place of a two-year course in dance. She had a similar profile to the other students in the group, she fully expected to go to higher education and was very anxious about the decision to defer her place in higher education. By the time I spoke to her, she had just started a degree in dance performance. For this group, their main concern was whether or not they would get the course they wanted rather than whether or not they would participate in higher education.

This strong desire for and view that higher education was the only option appears to be linked to the fact that they had some familiarity with higher education from a young age. All of the participants in this group, with two exceptions, had experience of higher education in their immediate families or extended families. Jane, like Kevin, also spoke about the influence of a much older sibling who had participated in higher education when she was a child. Veronica and Brigita had a parent with higher education qualifications from their own country, although they were not recognised in Ireland. Michael arrived in Ireland at the age of 16 and had no family in Ireland but spoke about how his father and aunt had higher education qualifications. Louise and Kate were first-born children and were the first to participate in their immediate family but upon asking about their extended family, it became clear that there was higher education experience in their extended family. Kate's aunt had participated in higher education and many of her cousins were in higher education. Louise explained that a number of her cousins were in higher

education and one in particular had influenced her choice of course. Louise's mother also explained:

> Well there was eight of us and me brother was in college, and me other brother was in college. I don't know, I think me mother just wanted the boys in college and the girls went to work. That's the only thing I can explain.

Emily had a cousin who had started but not completed higher education and spoke about being similar to one of her uncles who had always been expected to go to college but did not do so. She referred to a combination of a high level of support from her guidance counsellor, encouragement from her mother, competition with friends who expected to participate in higher education and her own desires as being key to her accessing higher education. Patrick had no experience of higher education in his immediate or extended family but he attended one of the single-sex, second-level boys schools, which in the past had been a traditional, academic school with many students from middle class backgrounds. In first year, he became good friends with a group of boys from diverse areas and backgrounds, including a teacher's son. One of the group had been to the *Gaeltacht*[1] previously and encouraged Patrick to attend the *Gaeltacht* during the summer holiday after first year; it was actively promoted in the school also. He began to spend a lot of time in the *Gaeltacht* every year, where he became good friends with a group of girls who were all intending to study in higher education. In interviews with the two people from his network he identified as being influential, they spoke about how the *Gaeltacht* experience meant that he was mixing with teenagers from a different background to his own, including this group of high-achieving girls, and that this opened up ideas for him. There was a culture of promoting Irish in the school and he later went on to study Irish in higher education. In many ways, the school history and culture indirectly provided him with an opportunity which he accepted

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The *Gaeltacht* refers to districts in which the Irish language is the main or only language spoken. The majority of the areas are on the western coastal areas of Ireland from north to south. It is a long-standing tradition amongst young teenagers in many parts of Ireland to spend three weeks of their summer holiday attending an immersion programme of Irish language and culture classes in 'Irish college' and living in houses in the Gaeltacht areas. Students pay for this programme, Irish must be spoken at all times and many students attend it partly as a means of improving their Irish and achieving a higher result in their exam. Irish is a compulsory subject at all stages of the Irish school system. However, attending the Gaeltacht is also viewed as a holiday and allows young people to become friends with other young people from different areas in Ireland. It is not a tradition in areas of disadvantage and very few students in the case-study area attend the Gaeltacht. Some scholarships area offered to students to promote attendance at the Gaeltacht.

and then through the culture of the school and his own actions it became part of his sense of self and his desires and ambitions.

In addition to having some experience of higher education experience in immediate or extended families or expectation in their close friendship group, they put a lot of effort and determination into all areas of their lives, including their learning. They also actively sought or were quick to avail of self-development opportunities including attending the Gaeltacht, volunteering, public speaking, drama and supervisor positions at work and they seemed very aware of the benefits of these opportunities in terms of development. These young adults had wide networks from quite a young age and, through their involvement in other experiences, not only did they acquire additional skills but also developed additional relationships with people from different backgrounds who saw higher education as the normal post-school option and who could give them information and guidance about courses and application if required.

Participating in higher education was necessary to maintain the sense of self they had developed. While they were fully on track in terms of desiring and aiming for higher education, this does not mean that the process of applying was straightforward and some of the group availed of access entry routes to achieve a higher course preference, though they were not reliant on this to access higher education. Information about grants was very important for them and some of the group also encountered some difficulties in adjusting socially to higher education. While the participants in group one expected to participate in higher education, their emotion on accepting their offer was one of relief. It was only within this group that students entered university and it is likely that to make that higher leap, being on track from a young age is a requirement.

Group two: 'I wouldn't have gone without a push from . . .'
In Jack's story we can see the features of group two.
Jack's story
Jack was a very engaging and open twenty year-old, who was studying level 7 engineering in an institute of technology. He was very upfront about the fact that he had not intended to participate in higher education, joking that he was probably 'one

of the ones not listening' when Access staff were in his school discussing higher education, but he was now enjoying college after a period of adjustment. In contrast to the participants in group one, he was not 'on track' for higher education and it was clear that he could as easily have not participated, as participated, in higher education. He lived in a house rented from the city council, having moved from nearby city council flats when he was sixteen. He was the eldest of two children and lived with his mother and younger sister. His mother was also from the inner city and he was part of a large interconnected, extended family in the inner city. His mother had done the Leaving Certificate and his father had left school after primary school. His mother received a social welfare payment and also worked part-time as a community regeneration worker and had also worked in one of the second level schools as a classroom assistant.

Similarly to all of the male participants, Jack did not go to the nearest primary school but went to the feeder primary school for one of the traditional second level schools slightly further away from his home. He went straight through from the feeder primary to the second level school with the majority of his primary class. He enjoyed primary school but wanted to go to one of the other second level schools in the inner city with his friends from where he lived, however, his mother said that St Francis was a better school and he remained there. He found going to second level school a big change to primary school and wanted to finish school early and tried to persuade his mother to let him but she said that it was not an option and he remained in school. He attained five honours (A-C) at higher level and five honours (A-C) at ordinary level in his Junior Certificate.

The experience of school was quite mixed for participants in group two and many of them struggled with particular subjects or with the school culture. He did not enjoy his last two years in school, saying:

> I just couldn't hack it any more, me and my friend were in trouble all the time. It's just I hated school actually I couldn't handle it anymore. . . it's just all the years you had to be there and it's so close to ending do you know what I mean. And then everyone's on your back about the Leaving Cert and things, and it's just all getting on you, and you just want to get out of it like.

Jack identified one of his teachers as being particularly influential in his staying and coping with school. He and a friend were asked by this teacher to help out with the

junior football teams and said, 'we got close with her, and we managed a football team with her, so I think that's kind of what got me through. Because it was more like just focusing on the managing the football team and all that for the last two years.'

In addition to the impact of this relationship with the teacher and his involvement with the football team, his extended family were encouraging him to stay in school and consider going to college rather than doing an apprenticeship. Jack had done work experience with an electrical company on a building site in Transition Year and thought he would get an apprenticeship, saying: 'I enjoyed what I was doing, goes I'll try for that.' Jack is from a large interconnected family living in various parts of the area and, while no one in his family had ever participated in higher education, his uncles and cousins who were electricians encouraged him to go to higher education and get qualified as an electrical engineer because he would earn more. Jack explained: 'they encouraged me to go for this course and things like that but I said, no, no, no.' He was concerned that college would be similar to school and that he would be treated like a child. His mother said that he could make his own decision once he finished his Leaving Certificate.

He did not want to apply to higher education form but the guidance counsellor, whom he also identified as a key influence, insisted he at least apply and in the end he did so. He applied to four courses. He explained that, 'it was the last week for the CAO that I filled it in. My career teacher battered me until I filled it in . . . there were a few of us that were saying we're not filling it in.' He describes her role as:

> she had a big thing getting most of us to apply, she was on our backs for months like. . . You're looking at her, will you just leave me alone. . . She knew how I felt, you know the way colleges come in to talk to you and all. I can't stand this, I'm going and all, you know.

He explained that she did not stop encouraging him to apply, because:

> she wants the best, she knows, she wants the best for you like. She knows that you're able for college as well and there's something there that you'd be interested in . . . she won't give up . . . with me it made a difference.

He said that at a family gathering his uncles and cousins told him he had done the right thing. Thus, similarly to all of the participants in group two, someone encouraged him to at least apply to higher education.

The Leaving Certificate was stressful but he did better than he expected. He did not add up his Leaving Cert points on the day of the results, saying: 'I forgot all about adding them up actually, me mate did it . . . whatever I don't care . . . I don't like that system at all. I don't like it, I hate it, I think it's stupid, it's unfair I think.' When he got the offer, he had a circle of people with whom he discussed it, including his mother, guidance counsellor and friends and critically, everyone encouraged him to take it. He accepted it but remained ambiguous about it and kept other options open. He said:

> I was like I'll try it and drop out and get a job, or even put in for something else like do a course or something . . . There was always the thought of going into college like, but it was never really a main thought, only the last in sixth year it kind of became an option really like . . . I goes, I'll try it out anyway. . . and see what happens like, but it was never always a main thing with me to go to college.

Jack had considered dropping out of college early in the first year but was encouraged by his access student support officer to stay on and he said that 'I got to like the way it's freedom and I just goes well there's no point in dropping out', and was enjoying higher education.

Group two generally

The participants in group two considered a broader range of post-school options, of which higher education was only one option. Their orientation towards a discipline was not as strong. They wanted to get on in life but could see a number of ways of doing that. James explains what he was thinking in fifth year, 'yeah, going on to do like teaching and then I would have thought I could go to the army . . . go and get a trade . . . sports as well like. There was five or six options like you'd loads.'
Rachel explained that she was interested in studying social care but also applied to a number of courses in further education. Catherine applied to study business, had an offer to do Montessori teaching and also the option of continuing to work in a bank. Generally, they had a positive orientation towards education for much of their schooling but for them education appeared to be a means to an end and was not as

central to their identity as in group one. Luke explained that he decided to apply to study hospitality in higher education because:

> that's the one like I'd get the most travel out of. There's one on the [HEI] website and like third year you go away for the six months. So that then kind of interested me and then I was thinking there's hotels all around the world - hospitality.

Their decision to apply to higher education came only in senior cycle and often in 6th year. Luke explained that thinking about post-school options and college happened in 6th year whereas when he was fifteen, 'I wasn't thinking about it at all . . . I don't really know really. It's all kind of the second part of sixth year, like after Christmas it all kind of went really fast.' The process of applying was far more tentative than group one, there was less of a connection between experience of the subject at school and course choices and they had far less knowledge about the process. Karen explained that she completed the CAO application at school and that, 'she would hate to do it at home' because she did not know how to choose a course. Jack stated that he did it over the internet in class, explaining that 'the career teacher went through it with us, because we didn't know what we were filling out like, what's going on. . . she'd go around us all one by one.' The choice of course often came from an interest or reaction to work experience. Frank explained that he chose to apply to a cookery course because:

> I always did a bit of cooking at home, I had a job as well like in kind of a few places here and there doing catering and all. I just kind of liked it. Like if me ma or that wasn't there, I would cook me own dinner and all like that, and I enjoyed it so I might as well go further on.

Some of the participants had some familiarity with higher education through siblings or a cousin but, in contrast to group one, their siblings were only a little older than them and they had not seen the benefits of higher education in the same way as group one and did not speak about them having the same type of influence on their decision to apply to higher education. Others had little experience of higher education. Karen stated: 'my brother left [school] in third year, he didn't go to college like. None of my cousins went to college. And none of my neighbours or anything went to college either actually.'

As seen in Jack's story above, the idea of applying to higher education was often attributed to other people. In their narratives, people from their networks who actively promoted higher education permeated the stories and they stated that they probably would not be in higher education without that push. Seven of the eight applied to higher education, however, only three of the group participated in higher education with a fourth person dropping out after a day or two. Most of this group identified people who influenced and encouraged them in education generally, however, for the participants in this group who participated in higher education, they appeared to be reliant on a persistent push towards and into specific courses in higher education from someone with whom they had a very close relationship. For Rachel, the youth club leaders were key. She explained: 'if I hadn't have got the push off [youth club leaders] . . . I kind of think where would I have been.' Without that push, it seemed that those who accessed higher education could as easily have not participated in higher education and those who did not could as easily have accessed higher education if they had received that specific type of push towards particular courses and accepting and adjusting to their higher education course.

For Luke, the guidance counsellor was important in encouraging him to apply. He explained that he could not decide whether or not to accept his course and only accepted it after the guidance counsellor, his mother and a friend all encouraged him to accept it. For Frank, the guidance counsellor was important in encouraging him to apply to higher education but at the moment of decision when he got an offer, no one appeared to push him and he did not accept the offer. His sports coach in school and his Irish teacher influenced James, in that they encouraged him to play sport intensively and to study Irish at higher level, however, they were not involved in his higher education application. James did not get an offer, however, his grades were such that he would have been considered for an access offer for the course he wanted in one institution but had not applied because he did not know that the course was available in that institution.

Two people in this group did not identify any person of influence in their networks and the absence of this support was striking. Gary had taken part in an access initiative in the summer of 5th year and intended to apply to higher education, however, there was a significant change in his home life which upset him greatly

and he explained that he could not think about applying to higher education. There appeared to be no one in his life at that time who could encourage him to apply, regardless of his circumstances. Karen was part of a group of peers who were applying to higher and further education and she accepted a place in an institute of technology. She left after a day or two and described why she left:

> Because everyone else seemed to know what she was talking about. The whole class knew what she was on about, but I was like I don't know this . . . and I was just sitting there like and then we were watching this film right, it was like a red telephone or something right, and it wasn't even in English right, it was subtitled and everyone else is yeah, yeah. I was just sitting there going, what's going on right and some girl turned around and goes yeah that red telephone is a symbol for this and this and I was like where did she get that from a red telephone like? I was like no that's just a red telephone. She [the lecturer] was saying yeah very good, very good like that's very good and I'm like, no it's just a red telephone like. I was like no I'm just going to be lost all year in this course, so I just left.

At this moment there was no person with whom she could discuss this and who could reassure and encourage her. In Catherine's case, a teacher, to whom she was close, discouraged her from accepting a higher education offer because the teacher thought it did not suit her; this was the only example of a network member who discouraged a student from accepting a higher education course.

For these students, there was a moment of decision and for some, the input from significant influencers in their network was sufficient to ensure an effective application to and acceptance of a higher education offer. During that moment of decision, their fears were mainly about whether they would enjoy college, whether it would be like school again, whether it would suit them and whether they would cope. Their emotion was one of uncertainty and there was a sense that they were still developing their sense of identity. For those who participated in higher education, there was also a period of adjustment but by the time I interviewed them they were doing well academically and socially. They were attending an institute of technology. There seemed to have few concerns about fitting in socially and they appeared to bring their life experiences to their higher education studies.

Group three: 'I just didn't want to be working in shops, to leave school to have a baby, on the labour, in the street . . .'

Michelle's story illustrates the key elements of this group.

<u>Michelle's story</u>

Michelle was a softly-spoken 20-year old. The interview took place just after her first day in a new job as a special needs assistant in a local school. She had completed a two-year course in further education after her Leaving Certificate and was delighted with her new job and pleased with her experiences on the first day of the job. However, she had taken part in a number of access initiatives during school, applied to higher education, had done well in her Leaving Certificate but had not attended higher education and I was interested to understand the reasons for this.

Michelle's parents and grandparents were from the local area and she had always lived in the area. Her parents left school after primary school. Michelle's mother worked as a machinist when she left school, then did some cleaning and catering. Her father died when Michelle was fourteen. He had been a roofer and worked on oil rigs before Michelle was born. After Michelle's father died, her mother got a position on a community employment scheme and was nearing retirement. Michelle had no experience of higher education in her immediate or extended family. She was the youngest of six children with a gap between her and her four older brothers and older sister. Her sister had done a further education course and was working. Two of her brothers did the Leaving Certificate and were working as a plumber and in a building providers and her other brothers left school at fourteen and sixteen; one was also working as a plumber and one did not have work and had gone to Australia.

Michelle attended the local primary school and did not enjoy her early years in primary school due to difficulties with maths and difficulties within the class. However, these issues were mostly resolved with support from her mother and the school and she enjoyed her later years in primary. Michelle transferred with most of her primary school class to the local second-level school and adjusted easily. She

found the work easy, even maths. Michelle spoke about other people in her school and area leaving school early and having children at fifteen and sixteen and explained that that was not what she wanted in life, but rather that: 'I wanted to stay in school as long as I could . . . I always wanted to be better, like not better than other people but better in myself. I always wanted to have something that I can actually do and I'm able to do.'

A notable feature of the participants in group three was that they had to show considerable determination and focus to keep education options open. Michelle was one of just two students in the year who did the higher-level course in English, history and French for the Junior Certificate. She explained that they were offered a choice of doing the higher-level in some subjects, were given no choice in Irish and Maths as the whole year-group did those subjects at ordinary level because 'it was just I think they thought it was too hard for us' and, in the case of English, Michelle asked if she could do the higher-level paper, 'just to try it anyway'. She explained that with her friend, 'we just really did it all together like . . . if one was trying it [higher-level paper], we would both try it.' She described how they did the ordinary-level course with the rest of the class all week and then did an extra hour per week studying the higher-level course with a teacher after school, although in one subject she only had one higher-level class for the whole year. In the Junior Certificate exams, Michelle attained six honours (A-C grades) at higher level, three honours at ordinary level and an honour grade in the common-level paper. Michelle said that the desire to do the higher-level course came from her and her friend, not from the school or from home, explaining that Michelle's mother:

> never really minded, and then she wouldn't push it because me brother
> got pushed into doing Honours [subjects at higher level] by the school that
> he was in for his Junior Cert and he failed, well some of them, so he left that
> school. So me ma wouldn't push me into doing it, she just said whatever
> you are able for.

Michelle said that, 'I would have went mad if I didn't do it [exams at higher level]'.

The friendship with this girl seemed to be very significant and they both encouraged each other to study some subjects at higher level. This pattern continued for the Leaving Certificate with Michelle and her friend convincing the class to do the subjects that they wanted to do for the Leaving Certificate. Michelle, her friend and

two other students studied higher-level courses initially, however, Michelle and others dropped down to ordinary-level courses in a number of subjects shortly before the exams. In one subject, in which she was the only person in the school still studying the higher-level course, she dropped down to the ordinary level on the day of the exam, despite getting Ds and Cs in her practice exams at higher level. She felt that she would not do well in the higher-level exam and felt it was more important to get a higher grade at ordinary level, rather than a lower grade in the higher-level exam.

Michelle knew no one in higher education and appeared to know very little about the application process and the courses available. She did apply but it is difficult to do justice to how Michelle spoke about that process. Michelle found the process of applying to higher education difficult, saying: 'I hated doing it . . . it was very nerve-wrecking . . . I didn't know what to pick like, what do I do like? It was very hard trying to pick what I wanted to do.' It was not that she did not have information; she had the prospectus and used the internet but the information did not meet her needs and there seemed to be a huge gap between what she knew, the information available and what she required. She explained that her mother and sister tried to help her, but, with no experience of higher education, their assistance was limited:

> I didn't like doing it, because I was only seventeen. I didn't like having to decide what I wanted to do for the rest of me life. . . you had to go through everything on your own. To me like I just couldn't make heads or tails out of it.

In the end Michelle submitted a limitation application to higher education, applying for only four honours degree courses in Art and Religion, Early Childhood Care and Education and Nursing and one ordinary degree/certificate in dental nursing. Her points score was 325 but did not meet the minimum entry requirements for an honours degree by one grade and was just below the points requirement for dental nursing. She had the minimum entry requirements and points for many certificates and ordinary degrees in higher education but she had not applied for any of them. She explained that it did not occur to her to repeat two of the Leaving Certificate subjects the following year or to re-apply to ordinary degree or certificate courses as

she did not know that you could apply to the CAO again: 'I didn't really know a lot about that, like I wouldn't have known that I would have been able to put down other choices and send it in then again.' After doing a course in a further education college near where she lived, she was employed in a local primary school as a special needs assistant. She thought that she would continue to live in the local area and is happy working and living in the area for the foreseeable future, saying: 'I love it down there, I really do, I love just where I am because I know everyone.'

Group three generally

The participants in group three were Michelle, Alison and Fiona. Fiona and Alison were both studying in a higher education institution near their homes. Their orientation and focus in terms of post-school options throughout school was primarily about resistance to the life they saw about them rather than any orientation towards higher education. There were many similarities in their stories. All three lived in a specific area within the case study area and attended the same local primary school and transferred to the same local second-level school with the majority of their class. Alison and Fiona were in the same year in school and were close friends and Michelle was a year ahead. Michelle and Alison were the youngest in their families and Fiona was the second youngest, none of their older siblings had attended higher education and the majority were working in low-skilled work or receiving social welfare. Fiona's younger sister had already left school early.

These young adults were very clear about what they did not want; namely low-skilled work, being unemployed or having children at a very young age, and many of their comments were about resistance to that. Their sense of identity was focused on what they did not want to be and Alison explained:

> I was thinking it, even to do your Leaving Cert because I know a lot of
> people around here didn't do their Leaving Cert so I thought it was even
> good just doing my Leaving Cert like . . . I didn't just want to be working in
> shops and things like that because everybody here, it's just like if they're not
> working in the shops up town they're on like . . . on the labour.

They did not know anyone in their circle in higher education and, similarly to Michelle, Fiona and Alison did not have a lot of knowledge about higher education.

As they had very little contact with anyone in higher education and there was no one with knowledge pushing them towards higher education, it was hardly surprising that their emotions were directed towards not wanting to work in shops or receive social welfare rather than specifically towards applying to higher education. In narratives written as part of their application to access entry at the time of the their higher education applications, they referred to their lack of role models and the impact of the area. They seemed to have different options available to them than their older siblings, which was partly attributable to the fact that there were more options available in the area by the time they left school. In addition, at this time their families were perhaps under less pressure financially as they were at the end of their family and they seemed to have quite different desires to those of their older siblings.

They had a very positive view of education - in many ways their strong belief in education was similar to group one - but, for this group, education seemed to be a way of escape and a type of life-line away from aspects of a life around them that they did not want, although this was not necessarily a desire to leave the area. As could be seen in Michelle's story, they put tremendous effort into keeping education options open. In this group the decision to apply to higher education was a very late decision and it seemed to be almost happenstance that they did apply. Alison explained that she thought about applying in 'sixth year. I think it was like January or something when [a local HEI] came out like.' If she had been asked before that whether or not she was going to go to college, she explained:

> I didn't even really know much about it like. I honestly didn't even think that I would because I only put like two things down on my CAO form. Like hardly anybody was even filling out their CAO forms. Because nobody — we weren't even really talking about it like.

They found the process of applying to higher education very stressful and did not have a lot of knowledge about the process or options available.

Alison and Fiona both entered a local higher education institution five minutes from their homes and were succeeding academically and enjoying the experience. A critical factor in their accessing higher education was the fact that this higher education institution had moved into the neighbourhood and was involved in

promoting access for local students. It is difficult to imagine that they would have accessed or at least remained in higher education without this situation. Fiona explained that after the HEI gave a presentation in their school, she looked up the courses in that HEI and applied for those courses. Alison and her mother discussed this local HEI:

> Mother: Because even the mothers were saying it like that their young ones want to try and get around into [higher education institution].
> Alison: Yeah it's grand and handy, it's great around there, yeah, like it's in our community now.

The young people in this group were engaged in a remarkable attempt to, on the one hand, avoid aspects of a life that surrounded them in their families, peer group and area and yet, on the other hand, remain geographically and emotionally in this surrounding landscape. The only people they identified as influential were their mothers in encouraging them to have a different type of life to their life and their friends who were trying to do something similar. Alison and Fiona were part of a friendship group which included Louise in group one and Karen in group two and another group of girls, most of whom had entered further education. In effect, they were trying to make a transition without any particular support from someone who could guide them and ease their way. They were not involved in many activities outside of the area and their world was very local. They went to the local primary school and then transferred to the local second level school. During the summer break when they were in higher education, they helped out in the local community and did courses in the local training centre, which were usually designed for young people who were unemployed. They had different views about the area but their focus was local and the connection was very strong. Alison, Fiona and Michelle are still part of their neighbourhood on a daily basis through the location of the higher education institution and place of work but they have avoided the life that they did not want through their participation in higher education and Michelle's employment in a local school.

In this section, I have presented some of the findings explaining application to and participation in higher education through the three groups, showing that there is no simple dichotomy of factors to explain those who participate in higher education and those who do not. Rather, there are three groups with different orientations to

higher education, different types of networks and knowledge of higher education, different identities and experience of education, which affected higher education application and application outcome. Participants in group one seemed to be on track for higher education, viewed higher education as the only option and success in education was key to their sense of identity. They had considerable knowledge about, and some familiarity, with higher education. For group two, higher education was one of a number of options they were considering, they had less familiarity with, and knowledge about, higher education, their engagement with it came at a later stage and they were reliant on significant input from a key influencer in their network. For group three, they had very little knowledge about, or familiarity with, higher education, their application seemed almost happenstance and their identity was primarily concerned with having a life that was in some respects different to the familiar options surrounding them. In this section, I highlighted how the differences between the three groups affected whether or not they participated in higher education and the nature of their higher education participation. However, it was also clear from the analysis of the findings that there were a number of key common factors that enabled all of the participants to be in a position to consider higher education as they were entering their final year in school. In the next section I outline these common factors.

SECTION 4.3: SUMMARY OF COMMON ELEMENTS

There were a number of common elements in the participants' stories which are presented in this section, grouped under three headings.

Successful negotiation from primary to second level school reflecting a positive primary school experience

The participants living in Ireland at the age of twelve were in a stream or band from first year of second-level school which allowed them to study at least some subjects at a higher level for the Junior Certificate exam and did not study subjects at foundation level. This allowed them to study subjects at a level in senior cycle which enabled them to apply or consider applying to higher education. All of the

participants were quite clear about the importance of being in a higher-level stream and described the consequences and challenges of being in a lower-stream class. They spoke of how those classes did a lower level of work, how there were challenges in the classes regarding behaviour and spoke in terms of a clear divide between the classes. They stated that no one transferred from those classes into their class during their schooling. This negotiation of the transfer to second level appears to be critical, given the structures of the school system.

It was interesting then to examine the processes of transfer from primary to second level and the earlier education experiences which impacted on this negotiation. With regard to the transfer from local primary schools to second-level schools, there were three main patterns. The boys in the study attended two primary schools which were the main feeder primary schools for the two boys second-level schools in the area. These two schools in the past were academic, middle class, second-level schools with students travelling to the schools from many outlying areas. Places had become available in these schools due to the socio-economic and demographic changes in the city and the local area, outlined in chapter two and above. For the boys in this study who attended these two schools, there appeared to be a conscious decision on the part of the parents to by-pass the nearest primary school and the boys then transferred directly into the second-level schools. Many students in these two schools were in streams that studied subjects at a level that ensured higher education remained an option. From the interviews, there was evidence that the culture and student mix of those formerly middle-class schools assisted the boys in moving towards higher or further education. None of the boys in the study had attended either of the two co-educational schools and there were references in the interviews to a pooling of boys in the lower stream in those schools.

The girls in the study attended the two co-educational schools or an all-girls school. The majority of the girls in Ireland at the age of twelve in groups one and two above were part of a minority in their primary school class who transferred to a different second-level school to that of the rest of their class (Kate, Jane, Emily, Rachel). Louise was the only other girl from group one or two who was not in this type of minority. Her mother explained that she had tried to send her to a school outside of

the area but that she had not been accepted and her mother was reluctant to ask questions about the reason and challenge the school on the issue for fear that her daughter would receive negative treatment as a result by teachers. The other girls transferred with the majority of other pupils from their primary-school class and they entered one of the top-stream classes (Michelle, Fiona, Alison, Karen, Catherine). Newcomer students entered the schools at a later stage when they moved to Ireland and chose them for a number of reasons. Firstly, the schools were near where they lived. In the case of Veronica it was the only school with a place available at a later time of the school year. Brigita's choice of school was partly influenced by a recommendation from a woman who worked with Brigita's mother. Michael was recommended to attend his school on the basis that the school provided good support for students whose first language was not English. With a period of adjustment, they also entered a class that was doing higher-level subjects.

This successful negotiation into a stream that kept open the option of higher education appears to rest on earlier experiences of education in primary school. The young adults had generally enjoyed their primary school experience in some respect or, where there were learning difficulties, they received support to resolve them. Participants described primary school as, 'just good times in that school', 'it was grand, no problems', 'I loved it . . . all me friends went, like we were all in the same class', 'I loved it, it was great'. They referred to approaches to teaching which were fun and interesting:

> It was like hurling and football were kind of mixed together with your learning. Like if you were in class, they'd use diagrams of footballers instead of matchsticks, say, if you were doing maths and stuff like that, so it kind of added up like that, you know (Patrick).

Fiona stated how she loved maths in primary school and described a competition that the teacher did with the class every day when teaching tables which ensured that the learning was both fun and effective. Many of the participants also spoke about experiences such as writing and performing a drama, playing sport all the time and going to France with the school.

Where there were difficulties the participants received support from the school. Fiona and Frank had similar experiences of successful intervention through being

advised to attend a different school for their last year or two of primary education. This school was designed to assist pupils with specific learning difficulty and they spoke about how it made a significant difference to their learning and confidence. Many working in education spoke about the lack of resources available for assessment and delivery of learning support, thus, in that respect Fiona and Frank appear to have been some of the lucky ones.

Strong sense of identity from family and community combined with maturity
It was noticeable that the participants from the area had close family relationships with parents and siblings and extended family living locally. Their lives at this stage were enmeshed with family and these close ties seemed to be part of their identity; even for those participants who were the only person in the household to finish school, let alone attend higher education, they had a rootedness in their families that contributed to their sense of self. There appeared to be a close parent-child relationship, particularly with the mother. This was evident in the constant references to family and the numerous examples of discussion about family, education, disadvantage and other issues and time spent with their parents. It was seen in the ease of the interaction between parent and young adult that I witnessed. It was voiced in the comments about wanting to remain in the area and be near their mothers long-term; in the comments wondering about how parents had coped with young children and very little money; and in the comments from parents and young adults about the pride parents felt in their children's achievements. While there were tensions in sibling relationships, particularly in relation to finding space to study as they usually shared a bedroom with one or more siblings, they constantly referred to getting help with homework from older siblings and assisting with homework with younger siblings and involvement in choice of school. Many of the participants were also involved in minding nieces and nephews and caring for family members.

In addition to sibling relationships, they had close relationships with their extended families, which were large and often lived close by. Indeed for some young adults there was no real distinction between immediate and extended families as extended families often lived together or next door. They made constant references to their relationships and time spent with grandparents, aunts, uncles and cousins. Close

relationships with neighbours also featured for many participants. In many cases they appeared to live in open, lively houses. The fact that I, as a stranger, was welcomed into some of their homes and anyone who passed through the house generally took some part in the conversation is also evidence of that.

In addition to this confidence and strong sense of self from their family and community connections, they had a maturity that seemed to come from the early responsibilities expected in their community and family lives. Such responsibilities included assisting with minding younger siblings, nephews,nieces and elderly relatives and household jobs, including cooking, cleaning and 'getting the messages'. In one case, where the young participant had the highest level of education in the family as a teenager, she helped the family to understand the medical terms used when her father was ill by asking the teacher at school and then explaining them to her mother. Noticeably and not surprisingly, there was an acceptance of early financial responsibility for themselves and their family through part-time work. Rachel explained, 'just if I'm working I'll give her probably forty euro out of it like . . . I have to hand up something or else help around the house.' Frank explained how he felt guilty when he could not get part-time work and give money to his mother. Older siblings and other family members often contributed to family income and some of the participants expected that they would probably assist their families financially once they graduated from higher education.

The three newcomer students also showed high levels of maturity, particularly in their sense of independence, ability to cope with change and their ability to reflect on the school and community in the case study area and their sense of identity. Understandably, the sense of identity for the three newcomer students was not the same as they did not have that rootedness in the area and family or extended family living near them. If their experiences had resulted in an uncertainty about their sense of identity, it had also provided them with maturity. They had developed that high level of maturity from the experience of adjusting to living in another country and living and studying in a different language and school system.

Understanding of impact of disadvantage, example of challenging that impact, a desire for a different kind of life and an ability to 'do your own thing'

There was awareness and openness with regard to discussing disadvantage, which was shared by all participants and my concerns about drawing attention to disadvantage were unnecessary. The young participants had both direct experience of the impact of socio-economic disadvantage in their own lives and the lives of their families. Michael was a refugee, had arrived in Ireland as a separated child and had had to cope with all of the socio-economic and emotional impact of that life. The difficulties associated with socio-economic disadvantage were clearly communicated to the young adults to the extent that they could also discuss this in terms of structural disadvantage. Alison and her mother discussed the situation openly:

> Alison: Yeah, like you have a better job and more chances in life, you're just going to have like a job where you have more money and things. I know money is not everything like but you can just do a lot more.
>
> Mother: She won't be living off the dole.
>
> Alison: Yeah like I won't be living off €200 a week like what my friends is going to be living off.
>
> Mother: And I'm after struggling all my life so she knows what it's like.
>
> Alison: I know, like with seeing people around me doing it.

In addition to taking part in open conversations with their parents about the difficult aspects of their parents' lives, the young adults also clearly had examples of people actively 'challenging' that disadvantage, an awareness of new opportunities and the benefits of education. The extent to which parents, siblings and extended family were involved in the community or in learning was striking. This took the form of parental paid community work, often through employment schemes or volunteering, fostering, politics, a return to education on the part of parents or an older sibling or extended family members who had accessed higher education at a much earlier stage. These were families who were actively involved in the community and learning and through this had acquired and communicated both an understanding of the benefits of education and examples of how to challenge the impact of that disadvantage. Fiona, in explaining that her mother would like her to get 'a good job', spoke about the difficulties for her mother of coping on social welfare payments and said, 'she did work but it was just a cleaning job . . . She wants me to be happy with what I do in life. She wasn't happy being a cleaner, she did it

because she had to do it for money.' She explained that her mother had not been able to read but had gone back to learn to read as an adult when Fiona was in school.

Patrick and James' mother also went back to do junior and leaving certificate subjects when they were young and they explained it thus:

> Patrick: I think she got a pain in her face cleaning at that stage like, you know, because that's all she knew. Like she'd worked in factories and cleaned in factories and stuff so that's all she knew because not many people went on at that stage, you know.
> James: It was out to work it was then.
> Patrick: But it was kind of if you had the money you went on but then after that if you hadn't, you were . . . Well in fairness she'd fourteen brothers and a sister so she didn't.

This combination of understanding and example of challenging disadvantage seemed to be a critical element in the desire to have a different kind of life. They explained further:

> Patrick: Sure mam and dad never went to school so they always, like it was always put into us you always have to go into school.
> James: You were pushed to go to school.
> Patrick: You always had to go to school, you can never leave because you won't get anywhere so that's why.

Karen explained:

> I suppose your ma and da had to work their asses off to get what they had like, whereas if they had have went to college and that would have been easier but it's obviously easier to get a job and all if you have something behind you as opposed to having nothing.

Part of their sense of self was also their ability to 'do their own thing' which helped them to resist peer pressures in the area, to consider doing something that was not the norm and, together with the maturity described above, to cope with that transition. Participants called it 'character', 'strength' and having a 'strong mind'. Jack explains:

> It's a tough area to grow up in, and coming up and seeing drugs and stuff whatever, they just kind of turned that way and don't want, like they drop out after school or if they do stay on, they just want to work or hang around the streets and stuff . . . I mean I lived in the inner city all my life, but I don't know, there's certain people that would be real like, what, just do their own thing, mind their own business, you know. . . even other there like [in the flats] I know all them, say alright, but I just mind my own business, go in and out like you know.

Kate describes the pressures of growing up in the area and how she coped with those pressures:

> It's almost cool to do bad things . . . when you are younger and you are not doing what they are doing, you are made to feel inferior almost, like you are the outsider. Even remember like say fifth and sixth class like [someone] going 'oh I was in a robbed car last night with somebody and that was great' and if you were to say 'oh like that's terrible robbing someone's car' then you are the one looked at like . . . Like I'm not really like follow the pack or whatever, I'm more like you know like if I find something I like I'll just like do it. Like they don't even actually really have to tell me all the time like, even when I was young I always just knew to do things or I always just took the initiative to do it myself and stuff.

The participants spoke of people questioning why they were going to further or higher education when they were not getting paid. Fiona spoke about the joking that went on amongst their group of friends, many of whom were not in higher education:

> Fiona: They say sometimes, just say I have loads of work going on, coming up to the exams I wasn't able to go out because I was studying and they were saying, 'ah yeah you are never out or anything anymore'.
>
> I: And say for the friends who aren't in college, what would you say back to them?
>
> Fiona: 'Yeah well I have college work to do. I wasn't the only one. Well we are not wasters like yous'. Yeah. Cause they are just going to leave it then.
>
> I: And what would they say?
>
> Fiona: 'Yeah well we are getting paid so'.

It was not merely a question of making this decision regarding higher education but also having the confidence to hold to that decision when others were questioning it. Veronica had some experience of higher education in her family in her country of birth, however, even for her, after attending school and living in the inner city, she considered rejecting her higher education offer at a university when friends spoke about how only 'snobbish people' attended that university and that she would not fit in and succeed in that university. Some of the participants also spoke of people they met through college making disparaging remarks or 'jokes' about they area in which they lived. They generally coped with both the comments in their community and the comments in higher education by not reacting to the comments from either group of peers, although one participant did challenge a lecturer who

repeatedly spoke about the area in which she lived in a negative way. They seemed to have an ability to manage situations and manage a broad range of relationships in college, home, amongst a diverse peer group and the community, in such a way that eased the transition and perhaps helped them to manage the identity tensions and 'hidden injuries of class' (Sennet and Cobb 1977) encountered through doing something that was not the norm.

In this section, I presented the findings about the common elements in the young adults' narratives. These elements did not mean that participants automatically applied to higher education; rather they provided a foundation for keeping post school options open. These common elements were enablers in that they ensured that the participants were in a position academically to consider further study after a successful transfer to a particular school or class stream following a positive primary school experience; that they had a strong sense of identity and maturity from their family and community which supported their transition; that they understood the impact of disadvantage, had examples of how to challenge that, had a desire for a different type of life to that of their parents or area norms and the emotional and relationship skills to resist area pressures and cope with transition. These were common enabling factors but in section 4.2 above, I showed that there were three different groups of participants with very different orientations towards HE and different experiences of applying and different outcomes. These differences were largely associated with the impact of the nature of their networks and people who influenced them. In the next section, I present the findings about these networks and influencers in more detail.

SECTION 4.4: NETWORKS AND INFLUENCERS

In this section, I present the findings about the impact of networks on the young adults' experiences of education and decisions about post-school options. I outline who in the networks is influential regarding education and how they contribute. I then outline the findings about key influencers in the networks, focusing on parents, siblings, education and community professionals and the peer group. An overview

of the network members of significance and the members who I interviewed is provided in appendix F.

It was very clear from the stories that the young adults identified various contacts from networks that played a role in providing encouragement, ideas, information and guidance about education and provided academic support and interventions. These network members included immediate and extended family, neighbours, school personnel, youth workers, local and school friends, friends gained through hobbies and interests, family friends or contacts through parents' activities and sports mates. Participants in group one had wider networks to draw on and generally had more family experience of higher education in their networks or peer group. For the participants in group two, their networks were more mixed and some of the participants had some experience of higher education in their family. For the participants in group three, their networks were very local and they had no experience of higher education in their families.

At a basic level some members of the networks provided advice or information or about post-school options. When Kate was trying to decide between a degree in drama or in teaching, she spoke to a head of education in a university, who knew Kate's parents as they were involved in running a local choir. When Louise was trying to find out about grants, she spoke to a local politician with whom her father did voluntary work. Frank got a place on a further education course when someone in his gym mentioned the course to him and told him that the following day was the final day of interviews. There were two more significant types of influential network members that the young adults identified: people who supported them in their education and development and people who actively promoted and pushed higher education. The significant network members in these two groups were mainly parents, siblings, education and community personnel and friends. In the sections below, I examine the role of each of these groups and focus on how they were an influence.

Parents

The role of parents in promoting access to higher education is complex. There was clear evidence in all of the stories of some common parenting practices that

supported education. In the first instance, there was a clear determination to keep their children 'on the straight and narrow'. Given the social problems and risks for young people in the area, this required considerable parenting skills and energy. Both young adults and parents spoke about what this involved and described either a strictness, or more commonly, simply a parental expectation that the children would not engage in certain activities and a child's awareness that there would be serious consequences if they had engaged in those activities. One parent explained:

> We didn't let them hang around the areas. And then at night they had to be in at 7 o'clock, they were in bed for half 8 or something. There was just a strict regime with them I think ... you have to in this area, you have to draw a line. have the line there and they know that they can't go over it.

With regard to education, while there was a wide range of approaches to specific education issues, common elements included insisting on children attending school with a number of the participants speaking about winning prizes for attendance and stating vociferously how not going simply was not an option. There were also examples of how parents supported the child with difficulties at school where required. Generally, there was also some parental involvement in checking homework, signing journals and attending parent-teacher meetings. Beyond the shared parental practices outlined here, parental practices regarding support for education varied. While practices varied and undoubtedly some of the practices benefited students academically, in terms of enabling factors in support of further or higher education the important shared parental practices or attitudes seemed to be the following: support or at least tolerance for further education; that difficulties at school were at a minimum discussed at home together; an expectation and insistence that they did not get involved in any trouble and an insistence that they attended school.

While all of the young adults spoke of this broader role that their parents played, amongst the 17 participants, whose parents had not attended higher education, there were only two examples - Jane and Emily - of where the young adults identified their parents as persistently pushing higher education. A more common response was that the decision was the young person's to make and that there was general support for any post-school option and whatever decision facilitated the young person's happiness. There seemed to be three key factors explaining why the

decision rested with the young adult. Firstly, the young people had more knowledge and experience of education than most of their parents, thus, it was difficult for parents to take on a position of actively encouraging something with which they were not familiar. The second key factor is the nature of the working class parent-child relationship. Parents stepped back at various stages of the child's life with considerable autonomy given to the child to make their own decisions. This often started from the age of twelve when deciding which second-level school to attend. As part of this space and autonomy to make their own decisions, the young adult also had to take responsibility for the consequences of those decisions. Kevin explained that his mother 'would always take a step back if you get me and let me make a decision' and his sister, who also attended higher education, expressed a similar view: 'My mam was just very much, well she was always very encouraging, she would have left us very much to our own devices in terms of, you know, how much effort we put in.'

The responsibility given to 'children' in the inner city at a young age was criticised by many education workers as poor parenting, however, it seems to be far more complex than that and the early granting and accepting of responsibility seems to be a key element of these young adults' stories. As Kevin explains further:

> There's this guy called Rousseau, he's an economist theorist and basically he said, me ma is one of these without even realising it, he said don't try to influence people, let them lead their life and they will do what's best for them, they will learn from their mistakes. So he gives the example of a little boy, let's say he smashes a bedroom window, the parent doesn't give out to him, and he only realises what he did when he's sleeping at night and he is cold . . . The wind is on his back and then he will ask, 'actually would you be able to get that fixed?', do you know that way? That's Rousseau's theory and I think that's kind of a reflection of me ma. Me ma is Rousseau without even realising, do you know that way?

Many of the parents were working themselves from the age of thirteen or fourteen and contributing to the family income and perhaps this was a factor in their viewing their child of the same age as a young adult.

Parents also stated that the children made their own decisions and that the child's happiness was to the forefront in this relationship. Alison's mother explained that

when Alison was studying late at night for the Leaving Certificate, she said the following:

> Well I said to her if that's what you want like . . . but I told her not to really be pressurised with it or anything. I said if you pass you pass, if you don't you don't, you tried your best and that's all you could do. I'm still delighted that she went for it, once she's happy that was the main thing.

Rachel's mother stated:

> I never said to them, you have to go to college or anything like that. But I always encouraged them to do whatever they wanted to do and I made sure they went to school and . . . the only thing I would say is that I would like them all to be happy . . . Like even now if Rachel gave this up [HE], I wouldn't say 'You are after putting in a year's work'. I would just let them be happy.

Finally, it is important to note that in the ten families in which the participant was not the eldest or an only child, at least one older sibling had not participated in higher education; thus, it is very difficult for a parent to actively promote higher education without seeming to criticise their other children. In discussing parents' pride in their children's successes, Karen explained that her parents were glad that she was doing something with her life rather than being proud of her achievement in studying in further education and stated that her brother had left school at fifteen but she assumed that they were proud of him too. Her views about this really captured the fact that parents have a very careful balancing act to perform in the families in this area where siblings have very different education outcomes.

Siblings

In contrast to parents, siblings who have attended higher education have the knowledge, experience and space to actively encourage their younger siblings to access higher education. There were a number of examples of this in the stories with Kevin, Jane, Luke and, to some extent, Rachel speaking about the influence of siblings. Understandably, siblings who were a lot older appeared to have a greater influence. In some respects, siblings, with a higher level of knowledge of the education system and requirements and the authority that goes with knowledge, inevitably take on almost a parental role regarding education. The young adults took on a high level of responsibility and worry about their younger siblings and often spoke in ways that showed that they were almost desperate for their siblings to

succeed in education and really worried if they did not appear to be succeeding educationally. Kevin clearly greatly admired his older sisters and wanted to explain how important they were to him but there are also hints of the pressures that this can involve in Kevin's story. He explained:

> I was kind of lazy, I hated homework. I would want to go out and play with me friends and me sisters always kind of had an eye on me. It was unusual like, they always had an eye on me and they would, I don't know why. But they checked me homework and I used to be terrified because they would make me do it again, 'that's not good like I can't read it' and I'd cry like, this was now in primary, and I'd cry and they would make me do it again.

Rachel explained how when she was writing her access application her sister, who was in higher education at the time, criticised Rachel's 'sloppy writing', did not like what Rachel was writing and re-wrote the application adding in sections, using 'fancy words' and said to Rachel, 'you have to write it like this'. It is likely that what appeared to Rachel to be mere sibling criticism was an expression of her sister's desire for her to also attend higher education. Emily spoke about how she was worried about her younger sister's lack of studying, she explained that her younger sister admired her but also explained how she did not want to show Emily her end of year report, 'because I'd say something like, "oh you should have done better" . . . I just don't want to see her end up in like Tesco all her life.'

It is a remarkable responsibility for young adults and it must also be difficult for parents, who may not have the specific knowledge about school or the natural authority that goes with that knowledge, to witness that dynamic, to step aside slightly and facilitate that sibling bond and responsibility. A high level of autonomy and responsibility on the part of the 'child' in the working class parent-child relationship was noted; but a high level of sibling responsibility also appears to be a feature of working class relationships in this study. A number of the parents in this study had been raised by older siblings; in large families siblings were actively involved in minding younger siblings; older siblings who were working contributed to the family income which in some cases enabled younger siblings to stay in school and enter further or higher education; siblings contributed to decisions about which school to attend; siblings helped constantly with homework and siblings who had not attended higher education were also influential in acting as an example of what not to do and in some cases directly spoke about their own

experiences of leaving school early and encouraging younger siblings to do something different. Significantly older siblings who had participated in higher education then acted as a key influencer for some participants, siblings closer in age seemed to act as a general encourager of education for other participants and, in a minority of cases, siblings' experience was shared as an encouragement to avoid their circumstances and achieve higher levels of education.

It is also noteworthy that there were hints of consequent pressures or potential pressures on these sibling relationships. For the most part, sibling relationships appeared to be strong and the young adults were very grateful to older siblings who had assisted them and the young adults, who themselves were older siblings, were already playing an influential role with younger siblings and spoke of this as the norm. They did not anticipate any issues in sibling relationship if they were the only sibling to attend higher education, however, it would be interesting to look at the relationships between siblings at a later stage in their lives. Kevin's sister spoke about how it feels for the one sibling who did not access higher education. The hints of pressures suggests that there may be costs in terms of sibling relationships as a result of the transformations associated with higher education participation.

Education and community personnel

Education and community personnel were also identified as being an influence by some of the young adults. They included a primary school teacher, vice principals, class teachers, guidance counsellors, youth club leader and home-school liaison officer. It was notable that in the main they were not chosen as influencers due to their teaching but rather through broader activities and the relationship they developed with the young person. They supported the young people through giving them ideas about careers, provided self-development opportunities and contacts for further opportunities and they encouraged and believed in them but it was a combination of what they did and, perhaps more importantly, how and why they gave this support that was particularly significant.

They built up a relationship with the young person, interweaving this relationship-building and encouragement into their teaching or extra-curricular activities, particularly sports. Patrick, James, Catherine, Frank and Jack all identified sports

coaches in school as having a significant influence on their experience of education. The teachers showed a clear commitment to addressing disadvantage and an understanding of the challenges regarding accessing education in the area. They had very definite and very similar views about the approach to teaching and the relationships that worked with young adults from disadvantaged backgrounds in the area. Kate spoke about the influence of her primary school teacher:

> I had a teacher at primary school like and she is still there now and I loved drama and she always encouraged me to do it and she like was the one that like arranged for us to go to the theatre. She was really interested in it and she would tell us stories and stuff about when she was in New York and like big acting schools and stuff and so it was always something like you think oh I'd love to do that.

When I met with the teacher, she explained what she did and why:

> They were a really chatty class, they were really good at telling stories. I just noticed they were really good at drama and because they would have been a little bit restless when you would try and just maybe chalk and talk the work, you know . . . they are very theatrical, they are very funny, so we did a lot of work through drama.

> But I think as well with down here they have a lot of tragedy in their lives – there is, they are faced with things that a lot of other people aren't faced with. And they lose the element of being playful. And I think being playful is a huge part of the primary school and I would be a big advocate of play – full stop. Being playful and playful in learning and if we are enjoying ourselves – we are going to be open to so much more.

A number of teachers, whom the young adults identified as significant influencers, spoke about how, in disadvantaged schools, you had to give more of yourself, that it was important to let students know you and develop a genuine relationship with them. The quotations below from the young adults and education personnel identified as influential capture the relationships:

> My experience is that if you completely wrap yourself in a vacuum and you give nothing of yourself, you will just fail miserably. You will have no longevity in this career anymore, in this school. What they like is snippets – and impersonal a lot of the times – like none of them would know if I have kids. None of them necessarily know if I was married, do you know that sort of way and . . . but they would know certain things that you cherry pick and just drop into conversation. And then of course the volunteering thing. That was a big deal, because that crosses, that was over three weeks in company with each other and so . . . and then we kept contact after they left, you know (Kevin's teacher).

I think again in disadvantaged schools they have to know that you are
genuinely interested in them and that you really, really like them. No matter
what they do. You know, if you have some bad days or whatever you have
to draw a line under it, you know. And you move on. Like I would start
every day afresh, I wouldn't be looking back at what happened the day
before (Kate's teacher).

Jack stated:

But all the teachers they do kind of look after you, in your years in that
school you get close to them, you know. Like we had a lot of trouble with
principals and all and friends going to hit principals and things like that, but
in the end, you do you get very close to them.

His teacher explained:

I don't know what to say, like I think, they know that they, they are loved
like, do you know what I mean and sometimes that's my only way of
phrasing it, that they, just everyone wants them to be fantastic like.

Catherine's teacher explained:

I gave them all a Christmas card and I gave Catherine a Christmas card and I
remember writing on it 'The cream will rise to the top' and just stick with it,
I know you feel like that. Catherine and I would have little conversations
and you know, I do think the relationship building and the little
conversations and do you know that kind of pushing does sometimes pay
off.

It is clear that teachers are in a position to greatly influence a young person but it
seems to be most effective when certain approaches and beliefs are in place. In
some cases, the influencers were from working class backgrounds themselves and
drew on this experience in their work but others were not. It would be interesting to
know if there was space in many disadvantaged schools to discuss and debate these
approaches and beliefs and whether or not these issues are addressed during teacher
training.

In addition to having an influence on the young adults' experience and success in
education, I described in section 4.2 above that, for participants in group two,
having a key education influencer who persistently pushed higher education,
provided specific information and encouragement about how to apply and about
specific courses and reassured and encouraged the student to accept their offer were

key to their participation in higher education. From the analysis of the interviews with the young adults and influencers, it was evident that the young adult and professional had built up a strong trusting relationship before the issue of higher education arose. This relationship was developed through actions on the part of both the young person and the education professional. The guidance counsellor who persuaded Jack to apply to higher education explained that Jack's friend had started to come into her office a few years previously and by way of encouraging him she asked if he could help her to tidy the office and that Jack then came with this friend and through this she got to know Jack well. Luke explained how the guidance counsellor was a key influence for him in encouraging him to apply, supporting him through the application process and encouraging him to accept the offer when he was trying to decide. He explained:

> And she'd be making sure we don't mess up and everything like. I mean she didn't pick any of the courses like…she just did the information bits like…if you needed anything like, if you couldn't understand it she'd tell you. Like it's a small school so all the teachers interact with you and everything and get to know you and everything.

He explained that he and his family knew her well because she had been his brother's sports coach and helped him to join an athletics' club which then supported him through the process of applying for a sports scholarship in higher education.

Rachel identified a youth club leader as a critical influencer and explained that he was like a brother to her and that her group spent a lot of time just chatting with the leaders over tea each week for many years. She admired the leaders immensely and began to ask about how she could train as a youth leader. Critically, the leaders gathered exact information about the relevant course, reassured her that she could do the course, would be excellent at the job and then persistently encouraged her to do so. When someone in her school suggested that higher education would not be the best option for her, she told the youth club leaders who stated that the teacher was wrong to say that and wrong to believe it and again encouraged Rachel to apply. Rachel was quite clear about the influence of the youth workers, stating, 'If I hadn't got the push from [x] I am not sure what I would be doing'. It was interesting to hear from the youth club leader that he and his colleagues had to

defend the value of this approach of informal conversation with Rachel and her group to the managers of the youth service.

As described above, the absence of this type of key relationship in their networks clearly an impact on the education outcomes for the other participants in group two. I also noted that the teacher who was a critical influencer for Catherine discouraged her from accepting her higher education offer. Catherine explained that her teacher thought studying business would not suit her personality and the teacher confirmed this, stating that she had encouraged Catherine to consider working with children as she felt that suited her. Catherine clearly appreciated all that this teacher had done and the teacher appeared to genuinely want to help Catherine choose the best option. Catherine was also very happy with her course and was enjoying her job, however, it does appear that she had been 'cooled away' (Colley *et al* 2003) from higher education. This situation shows some of the risks for the young adults in their reliance on a critical influencer.

Close friendships

The other significant influencers in the young adults' networks were peers. For Patrick and Emily, who had little experience of higher education in their family, they were part of more diverse peer groups from a young age, in which all members were applying to higher education and this culture, in addition to other key influencers in their networks, contributed to their viewing higher education as the only option. For the participants in group three, the main influencers that they identified, in addition to their mothers, were their own group of friends. For Michelle and her friend and for Alison, Fiona and their group of friends, the friendship group seemed to act as a significant influence by generating and protecting a sense of difference and desire for a different life. It also acted as a source of shared strength, of support in education issues and decisions and a source of energy providing momentum towards further and higher education. Fiona explained:

> Me and my group of friends, we are just different to the street. We were all in crèche together. We just wanted to do better in life. I know our ma's did their best they could at the time but we just want to not be on the street or anything. It depends on who your, what group you are in as well. Me and my friends, like you know the way most of us went on to college except two

of them or something. There's people that's like there is a group and that all of them just is on the labour or something like that. It's not that we all wanted to go to college – we all just wanted to do better.'

While these friendships were clearly a significant and powerful influence, there were also limitations in deriving this type of support from friends alone rather than the other groups of influencers in networks, described above. The main limitation was that no one in the group had direct experience of higher education in their immediate family, they were all under pressure at the same time and there was no one who could intervene when required. A minority of Fiona and Alison's friendship group accessed and remained in higher education. In addition, similarly to the situation with siblings noted above, there are issues for the long-term relationships with this type of pressure resting on the friendships and with the consequences of the transformations that may occur as a result of participation in higher education. Fiona was confident that she would remain friends with her childhood group of friends and stated that she had not changed from the group but she also understood that she would 'be different in myself' through going to college. Michelle's friend accessed higher education after further education and Michelle spoke of this change:

> sometimes like because even now, she's after changing a lot different like, especially the way she talks and the way she goes on. I think because she's a bit more, people like that wouldn't be from town or . . .

In this section, I have shown that networks clearly play a role in education and participating in higher education. I have outlined who is significant in the young adults' networks and the role they played. While all of the participants had some networks to draw on, it was also clear that the nature of the networks varied between the three groups of young adults. I outlined the findings about parents, siblings, education and community professionals and peers, describing how they influenced the education experience and decisions, the benefits of that influence, the risks and the consequences of its absence. In relation to education and community professionals in the young adults' networks, who were particularly influential in their accessing higher education, the features of this influence were that a close relationship existed before the issue of higher education came into play, that the

young person trusted that the adult wanted what was best for them and that the adult was persistent in promoting education and specifically higher education.

SECTION 4.5: DIVERSITY OF DISADVANTAGE AND UNDERSTANDINGS OF THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN DISADVANTAGE AND PARTICIPATION IN HE

In the sections above, I outlined the findings in relation to the main research question about the factors affecting participation or not in higher education and the minor research question about the role of networks and influencers. In this section, I present the findings about the research question regarding understandings about the relationship between disadvantage and access to higher education. I draw again on data from the education and community personnel, in addition to data from the interviews with young adults and people in their networks. As described in section 4.1 above, there were many shared views about the relationship between disadvantage and access to higher education but there were also a number of issues on which there were differing views and issues that were not considered. There is a polarising of knowledge and some significant gaps in knowledge, which means it is difficult for community and education personnel to see the diversity within disadvantage and this can limit understandings of the relationship between disadvantage and access to higher education.

There were a number of critical issues on which there were opposing views. The four key issues were differing views about: the role of parents; about a lack of aspiration and laziness versus a lack of familiarity and confidence regarding education; about the role of money with regard to access to higher education; and about the role of information and guidance.

While most acknowledged the impact of the lack of familiarity with higher education in the family, when commenting further about the role of parents, in essence there were two views: either that parents did not value education and did not encourage and motivate their children or that parents certainly valued education

but did not know about the various steps required. A teacher explained: 'If they have a value on education there would be a lot of encouragement for their sons, daughters.' Another teacher stated that the main factor in young people in the area accessing higher education was, 'the encouragement they get from home.' However, no one could really explain why some parents valued and encouraged education and others did not. One third-level education worker noted that parents were very engaged in primary school and wanted their children to do well but stepped back during second level due to lack of experience of second level. The findings above show that a critical factor is the nature of the working class parent-child relationship and the space given to the young adult to make their own decisions but also to take responsibility for the outcomes of those decisions, which was not discussed by many of the community and education personnel. This space, autonomy and respect for young people to make their own decisions and take responsibility for them was then often attributed to a lack of valuing of education on the part of the parents or even poor parenting or, at best, the parents' lack of experience of school, but was rarely explained in the context of working class parent-child relationships based on socio-cultural understandings of that relationship.

Money was another aspect of the relationship between disadvantage and access to higher education, on which views differed. A fourth common element amongst all of the young adults' stories was financial pressures and a range of coping strategies on their part and their families. They were very reliant on grants and lack of money was a pressure and concern throughout their time in further and higher education. However, once they were aware of the grants and received clear information about applying and how much they could receive, it did not seem that low income would actually prevent them from participating in higher education although, for some in group two, it appears that a reasonably paid job with training and prospects could be tempting.

From the interviews with education and community workers, there appeared to be both an underplaying or complete lack of understanding of the emotional toll and pressures of a lack of money for young adults and their families in the community by some, and an overstating of the impact of money by other interviewees. One

teacher spoke about how she was spending two and a half thousand for grinds[2] for her daughter to help her get top marks in her Leaving Certificate and said: 'This wouldn't come into the realms of their thinking, that you might pay to do extra work' but made no comment about the fact that the majority of pupils could not afford to do grinds and that a number of them attended extra tutorials outside of normal school hours, for which there was no cost.

More typically, people spoke about family pressures to get a job and the difference between the small amount from the higher education grant and the amount received on community training or social welfare and some suggested that paying young people to attend higher education the same amount as on training courses or social welfare could improve the numbers going to higher education. However, the findings suggest the situation is more complex. The young adults interviewed did not consider community training courses or social welfare; their sense of identity and desires for their lives ensured that these were not options under consideration.

The critical issue regarding money for this group seems to be information about the higher education grants. The issue of information about the grants highlights a key issue generally about information and guidance. There seems to be a mis-match between the content, timing and methods of information provision by education workers and the diversity of needs of HE applicants from SED backgrounds. Giving information about higher education grants in 5th year and early 6th year is likely to be important for those in group one, however, some in group three spoke about how they only started to think seriously about higher education when they received an offer in August before entry in September and it was at this point that they needed detailed, individually-specific information, ideally from a trusted source. There was a general lack of awareness on the part of education workers interviewed of the diversity within such a group of young people and of the different requirements amongst the group of young adults in relation to information.

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[2] Many students attend private schools offering extra tutorials specifically focused on exam preparation during the evenings, weekend or holidays during senior cycle to improve their exam results. The aim is to increase their 'points' and gain access to higher education courses, for which there is considerable competition.

Another area in which there were differences of opinion related to the students' approach to learning. Two education workers spoke of students always wanting to 'take the easy option' by doing subjects at ordinary or foundation level, however, some of the young adults told a story of lacking confidence in their ability, avoiding risk and fears about failing. It was clear that there was often a ripple effect, whereby, when a couple of students chose to take the lower level subject in an exam, others quickly followed suit, concerned that they would not be able to cope. Two young adults explained how this had occurred on the day of the exam itself in their school. Some people interviewed blamed the students for this, others spoke about the lack of role models and familiarity with the exam process in the families and one community worker, who had been a teacher, spoke about the impact of the gap between the young adults' own knowledge and experiences and the curriculum in second level.

In addition to differing viewpoints within the group of education and community personnel interviewed and differences compared to the findings described above, there was also a polarisation of knowledge, largely based on position and experience in the education and community sectors. Primary school principals were very aware of the choices taking place about primary school and second level and usually had a familiarity with the very local area but had less knowledge about the progression to higher education and the factors that came into play during second level. Second-level and third-level education personnel understood the processes that affected learning and exams during second level and the factors that could influence the process of applying to higher education. However, many were not familiar with the potentially positive impact of aspects of the young person's life outside of school, of the level of higher education in the immediate and extended family, and the extent and impact of the family networks and involvement in community networks. One teacher said, 'the two places are school and home, that's where they spend their time.' Community personnel provided a good understanding of the local pressures and impact of local cultures, the additional challenges of parenting in a disadvantaged area and the identity pressures on young adults in the area. Many of them seemed unaware of the types of school choices within the area being made, the issues regarding subject choice and the supports that the schools made available and the fact that many young people identified teachers as being

particularly influential. One community worker said, 'The choices are stark, it's either education or the drugs in the street.' Another community worker stated that no one from the inner city applied to higher education and was very surprised to hear that many had applied and some had accessed higher education.

As part of this polarisation there was considerable critique of each sector by the other. The primary-school personnel asked how children, who left primary school performing well, subsequently performed poorly in exams and were particularly concerned that the young people did not seem to understand the fact that they were doing lower-level exams and the consequences of that. One primary-school principal spoke about how they were going to Paris with the pupils to expose them to a different country and to encourage them to think about doing a language in second level school. A foreign language is a requirement for many courses in higher education and they wanted to inform pupils of the importance of choosing to study a language in first year in second-level school. However, one second-level teacher complained about how all the first-year pupils were annoyed about not studying a foreign language, explaining that they all wanted to study a language but that there was no chance that they all had the ability to study it for the Junior Certificate. There were similar opposing views about the processes that resulted in some students doing the Leaving Certificate Applied.

Lastly, there were general gaps in knowledge. The obvious gap was an understanding of the exceptions; how those from disadvantaged areas accessed higher education. In most of the interviews, we first discussed the low participation in higher education in the area and the reasons for that situation. Then I asked about the young adults who did apply and participate and the factors enabling application and participation. The reactions to this question were very interesting. Some people questioned whether or not there were any applying to higher education, which was largely attributable to the fact that they were working with specific parts of the age cohort in the community sector and did not have the information or awareness that some young adults in the case study area had applied and successfully participated in higher education. Others expressed resistance to considering, or concern about telling, those stories due primarily to a concern that the high levels of poverty and disadvantage would be ignored. While this was an

understandable concern, there is a risk that this can lead to emphasising deficit notions of disadvantage. This could be seen in the reference to 'poverty of the mindset' in a description of disadvantage by a community worker:

> And that creates the multiple nature of disadvantage, that it's not just income poverty, it is poverty of resources, but it's also poverty of the environment, poverty of the mindset, poverty of the psychology.

However, the main reaction was one of not knowing. One participant commented that, 'that's the mystery puzzle isn't it?' A community worker said:

> It would be really interesting to see who they are. What's different about them, as opposed to asking the opposite question. Because I can give you chapter and verse on the opposite question.

For those who were working with the young adults in schools, they were usually aware of who had accessed higher education from their school, however, the was less awareness of differences in application or participation rates based on gender or residence in specific areas of disadvantage. There was also very little comment about the broad range of influences that impacted on a young adult's education decisions, very little awareness of the changes that take place over time in a family and little comment about the different groups among those who are disadvantaged who considered applying to higher education. The different views about key issues, polarisation of knowledge and gaps in knowledge, particularly in relation to this diversity within disadvantage, result in understandings of the relationship between disadvantage and participation in higher education that do not reflect the full complexity of the relationship. Notwithstanding the gaps in knowledge identified in this study, it was clear that there was extensive knowledge about disadvantage and education across the education and community sectors and, for the most part, a strong commitment to promoting education for young people in the area. However, some interviewees spoke about how there was no forum and suitable space in which to discuss and debate the issues and share knowledge regarding the relationship between disadvantage and access to higher education with colleagues from all education and community sectors. The impact of this absence could be seen in the polarisation and gaps in knowledge.

The findings from the study, presented in this chapter, show that there is a broad range of factors over time, which affect application to and participation in higher education. There is clear evidence of the impact of structural disadvantage on experience of education in the case study area but also evidence of increased opportunities influenced by interlinked socio-economic, demographic and education changes in the case-study area and beyond. The findings also showed that there was no simple identification of bridges to applying to, and then further bridges and barriers regarding participating in, higher education. Rather, application to and participation in higher education was better understood through the three groups which emerged from the research and the common enabling factors across all participants' lives. In section 4.2, I described the three groups that emerged from the study and the significance of the differences between the three groups regarding access to higher education. In section 4.3, I described the findings about the common elements in their lives that acted as enabling factors in keeping post-school education options available to the participants.

Members from the young people's networks also proved influential on their education experiences and, for some of the participants, were critical to their participation in higher education. I highlighted the significant network members, describing the role played by parents, siblings, school sports coaches, teachers, guidance counsellors, a youth club leader and friends. The findings showed that different types of networks were available and played different roles for the participants in each of the three groups. The networks were formed through actions on the part of the young adult, immediate or extended family members, education and community professionals and friends. These relationships brought benefits to young people, particularly in relation to specific knowledge and encouragement about higher education for some of the participants. The nature of the relationship was very significant in enabling some people to influence the young adults but there was also evidence of some pressures on sibling and peer relationships arising from this role.

The findings also show that the outcomes of applying to higher education mark a critical turning point for this group of young adults from SED backgrounds, in that only one of the participants who entered further education subsequently entered

higher education. They were very close to accessing higher education at the age of seventeen or eighteen, and a number of them had offers of higher education places. After participating in one or two years of additional learning in further education, the fact that they did not consider applying to higher education from further education is surprising and of concern. They appear to move further away from participation in higher education if they do not access it at the stage of leaving school.

In the final section, I presented the findings about understandings of the relationship between disadvantage and access to higher education, drawing attention to the fact that there was a range and depth of knowledge about this relationship and many shared views, but also a number of significant issues on which there was disagreement. I also showed that there was a polarisation of knowledge based on positional in the education and training system and some key issues about which there was little knowledge, including the type of diversity evident in the differences between the three groups. A consequence of these opposing views, polarisation of knowledge and gaps in knowledge is that there are limitations in understandings about the relationship between disadvantage and access to higher education. The implications for access practice of the range and depth of available knowledge, polarisations, gaps and limitations is discussed further in the thesis conclusion. In the next chapter, I discuss the findings presented in this chapter in relation to other research.

CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

In this chapter, I discuss the findings described in the previous chapter and return to the issues discussed in the literature review and conceptual framework. The study aimed to provide a socio-cultural understanding of the enabling factors supporting application to higher education and the factors influencing subsequent participation or not in higher education. Through this socio-cultural understanding, the research aimed to move beyond the 'barriers' explanations often provided regarding the relationship between disadvantage and participation in higher education and to address the key questions which emerged from the literature review regarding understanding what enabled young adults from SED backgrounds to apply to and participate or not in higher education. This focus on barriers and gap in understanding is particularly pronounced in Ireland given the limited tradition of interpretative research, class silences and undermining of socio-cultural understandings. The study also aimed to examine the impact of networks on participation in higher education for young people and the formation, make-up and functioning of those networks. The study questions the dominance of categorical understandings of the relationship between disadvantage and higher education, particularly the focus on socio-economic group in Ireland, and asks if there is diversity within a group of young adults from an SED background that is significant for understanding this relationship.

The findings show that there is a broad range of factors affecting application to and participation in higher education, including structural change in education and in the case-study area, and common elements in the young adults' experiences in this study, which enabled them to avail of the increased educational opportunities arising from these structural changes and to be in a position to consider applying to higher education. There were also factors associated with networks and significant influencers, knowledge and familiarity with higher education and individual desires and sense of identity which enabled some of the participants to participate in higher education.

Bourdieu's work on field, habitus and forms of capital and the work of other researchers drawing on Bourdieu's work in the area of access to higher education forms an important part of the analytical framework of this study and is discussed in section 5.1. I extend an understanding of how change in education participation occurs through incorporating working class forms of capital and emotional capital into Bourdieu's equation on the relationship between those concepts. I outline how change in habitus takes place gradually and incrementally between and within generations through agency to enable transformations to occur in a specific empirical reality. I argue that an extension of the type of class fractions outlined by Jackson and Marsden, specifically in relation to education rather than focusing on fractions based on narrower definitions of occupation groupings, is important to understanding changes in the patterns of education participation.

In section 5.2, I draw on and extend Woolcock's typology of social capital by applying it to an analysis of networks in relation to application to and participation in higher education by young people from SED backgrounds. The formation, membership and functioning of networks is explained through an understanding of how different types of social capital are generated and activated in working class relationships and the study provides an understanding of the significance and benefits of that activation of social capital in relation to application to and participation in higher education by young people from SED backgrounds. This builds on research suggesting social capital can be a significant factor in education, provides new knowledge about access to, and the role of, social capital for SED young adults regarding participation in HE and challenges research that suggests such young people do not have access to significant social capital.

In section 5.3, I discuss the findings in relation to understandings of the relationship between disadvantage and access to higher education, focussing on the differences between the understandings from the findings of this study and the understandings that underpin the research, policy and practice discourse relating to access to higher education for young adults from SED backgrounds. The study describes the type of diversity that exists which is not necessarily linked to traditional indicators of disadvantage, highlights the complexity and nuances of the relationship between

disadvantage and participation in higher education and challenges current understandings of that relationship.

SECTION 5.1: FIELD, WORKING CLASS FORMS OF CAPITAL, HABITUS AND CLASS FRACTIONS

The young adults in my study were involved in a process of change with regard to application to and participation in higher education in the case study area and, for the most part, in their families. In this section, I draw on Bourdieu's concepts of field, forms of capital and habitus and the relationship between these concepts and transformation as a theoretical framework. I also draw on the work of other researchers who employed these concepts and relationship. There are two key issues which I argue provide a better understanding of how change can occur: firstly a broader understanding of 'capital' in Bourdieu's concept. I develop an understanding of forms of capital by identifying working class forms of capital; show how they are enabling factors in support of application to higher education, particularly the concept of advantageous working class cultural capital; highlight the value of bonding social capital as an enabler and provide a more nuanced understanding of economic capital in a disadvantaged area and its relationship with education. I also draw on the concept of emotional capital. Secondly, I focus on the incremental type of changes that occur in families over time through agency which shape the family habitus.

As noted in the literature review, Bourdieu's concepts of forms of capital, habitus and field have been used extensively in literature on access to HE (Brooks 2005; McDonough *et al* 1997; Noble and Davies 2009; Reay, David and Ball 2005; Reay, Crozier and Clayton 2009). To theorise change using Bourdieu's theoretical framework the concept of field must be incorporated. Bourdieu states that the school system is a field (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992, p.102) and Wacquant summarises a key aspect of this field as: 'the field is a critical mediation between the practices of those who partake in it and the surrounding social and economic

conditions' (*ibid*, p.105). Education in the case study area in this study is one such field with wider factors influencing the field.

The findings in this study show that structural changes were a contributory factor in participation in higher education for the young adults. There were changes in the economy in Ireland and greater opportunities for people with higher education qualifications. There were also changes in the local field of education in that there were more school places available in previously middle class schools for boys, reflecting wider economic and demographic changes in the local area and nationally. There was an increase in widening participation activities, reflecting broader changes in the education field, and a higher education institution moved into the area as part of the area regeneration, which was active in prompting education in the community. From the findings, these changes were significant for some people in this study in that they were aware of the role of education in enabling access to the wider range of opportunities available than had previously been available. For some of the boys, the habitus of the once middle class schools appeared to be a contributory factor in facilitating relationships and opportunities that were significant in their movement towards applying to higher education. For some of the girls in group three, the fact that they could both attend the new higher education institution in their area and remain in the area enabled them to maintain or balance competing desires. Thus, national and local structural changes and associated changes in the field of education in the local area had some impact on participation in education at second and third level.

The changes in education opportunities and knowledge about the opportunities and benefits of availing of them were, in one sense, available to everyone, however, only a minority of young people in the area chose to attend those schools, took part in access activities and accessed higher education and there were differences in levels of sibling participation in education. The question then is how were these young people in a position to avail of the opportunities arising from a certain level of structural change in the field? An extended understanding of forms of capital and habitus are key to answering that question and explaining the significance of the common enabling factors outlined in chapter four.

Bourdieu outlines how the four forms of capital are key to the reproduction of social advantage. He writes:

> The scholastic yield from educational action depends on the cultural capital previously invested by the family. Moreover, the economic and social yield of the educational qualification depends on the social capital, again inherited, which can be used to back it up (Bourdieu 1986, p.48).

He argues that issues relating to economic capital underlie the other types of capital, referencing the 'brutal fact of universal reducibility to economics' (*ibid* p.54). Bourdieu describes symbolic capital as the form other capitals take when they are legitimised and not recognised as capital (*ibid* p. 49). He emphasises the key role of the 'domestic transition of cultural capital' in educational reproduction (*ibid*, p.48) and describes how the 'embodied state, i.e. the form of long-lasting dispositions of the mind and body' (*ibid*, p.47) is at the root of the other two forms of cultural capital, the objectified state and institutionalised state (*ibid*, pp.49-50). Bourdieu's concept of forms of capital was very effective in outlining how the middle classes reproduce their position through education and, as noted in the literature review and above, understandably had a significant impact on research on access to higher education.

Bourdieu's concept of capital contributed to an understanding of the patterns of access to higher education. However, the concept has also contributed to the dichotomy of explanations regarding patterns of higher education participation based on middle class experiences providing automatic bridges and working class experiences providing barriers, as outlined in the literature review. This has occurred due to limitations in Bourdieu's work regarding the working class and due to the ways in which his concepts have been used by other researchers. There are two main problems: firstly, the indicators of cultural capital used in research are often very specific and aligned to the objectified and institutionalised states, thus failing to capture the breadth of the concept and often reflecting middle class experience and, secondly, there has been little examination of specific working class capitals.

Taking the example of cultural capital, Laureau and Weininger suggest that there has been a dominant interpretation of cultural capital in English language literature

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as meaning 'highbrow' culture and they write, 'We suggest that the "highbrow" interpretation was not essential to Bourdieu's conceptualization of cultural capital. We therefore assert that it has unnecessarily narrowed the terrain upon which cultural capital research operates' (Laureau and Weininger 2003, pp.568-9). The indicators of cultural capital include 'highbrow' cultural activities (Noble and Davies 2009), but also parental income, parental occupation, parental level of education and knowledge of the higher education process (Halsey, Heath and Ridge 1980; Karen 1991; Reay, David and Ball 2005; Tierney 2002; Walpole 2003). Winkle-Wagner concludes in relation to quantitative research that the majority of such studies 'have used the "holy trinity" of variables as proxies for cultural capital: parents' educational attainment level; parents' occupation, and family income' (Winkle-Wagner 2010, p.86). The full understanding of the embodied state, at the root of the concept according to Bourdieu, is missing from these indicators of cultural capital. Youdell's research on education exclusion in second level schools highlights the value of understanding the embodied aspect of Bourdieu's concept. She references Bourdieu's work, noting how 'the practices, or dispositions, inculcated through the habitus are sedimented in what Bourdieu calls the "bodily hexis. . . a life-style made flesh" (Bourdieu 1991, p. 86)' and shows how identities and subjectivities linked to gender, class and race (Youdell 2006, p.2) may be expressed in ways that are 'so incompatible with school discourses of students and learners that they may be rendered *impossible' (ibid,* p.101) and lead to exclusion. Winkle-Wagner notes that interpretations of cultural capital in qualitative studies are 'generally more nuanced' than in quantitative studies and 'allow for potential discrepancies' (*ibid*, p. 87) regarding the application of cultural capital but that much of this research 'does not indicate how . . . cultural capital actually comes into the analysis and interpretation of the data' (*ibid*, p.88).

While Bourdieu's concept is broader than the indicators used in many research studies, he did little research on the working class, which, together with the emphasis on middle class dominance in his research, facilitated the use of middle class indicators of cultural capital. Inevitably, many studies then compare the levels of cultural capital as identified by such indicators in middle class families with working class families and note the deficit arising from such comparisons. In Reay, David and Ball's study of higher education choice, in relation to working class

participants, they refer to how working class students 'lack the necessary capitals to cope and respond successfully' to the transition to higher education (Reay, David and Ball 2005, p.106) and to the lack of emotional capital (*ibid,* p. 103). In contrast, they draw attention to the 'copious reserves of cultural, social and economic capital' of the middle class participants (*ibid,* p.32) and noted the input of a friend, who was a lecturer, which helped a working class student to apply to higher education and described this as an example of 'the work of social capital, more typical of our middle class respondents' (*ibid,* p. 97). The possibility of relevant working class cultural capital that needs to be identified in and of itself is rarely explored in relation to participation in higher education and, of course, middle class families are never assessed for evidence of its existence and levels.

I argue that the common enabling factors seen in the findings reflect working class forms of capital of importance to participation in higher education for some people from disadvantaged backgrounds in the case study area and argue that the socio-cultural approach used in this study enabled these forms of capital to be identified. The common enabling factors seen in all of the participants were a positive primary school experience and successful transfer to a class in second level that ensured education options remained open to them; a strong sense of identity and maturity from family and community life; a structural understanding of disadvantage, examples of people who challenged that disadvantage and accompanied by a desire for a different type of life, an ability to 'do their own thing' and manage transition and relationships; and family and individual financial coping strategies. In essence, these common elements reflect forms of working class capitals, which themselves reflect a type of working class habitus and class fraction in relation to education participation.

In my study there was evidence of what I termed advantageous working class cultural capital. In chapter four, I outlined the understanding participants showed of the impact of socio-economic disadvantage in their parents' lives and the lives of those around them and how that understanding of disadvantage was seen in structural terms rather than perceived as an individual lack in their family. I also described their understanding of the role education played in providing access to opportunities that were now available, as well as access to a different type of life. I

showed how they had seen people in their family networks challenging and changing the impact of disadvantage; sometimes through education and that they had a belief that this could be done. As this combination of awareness, structural understanding of disadvantage and belief in change contributed to the development of a desire that fuelled many of the participants towards a different kind of life to the norm, and could only be available to people who had direct experience of the impact of disadvantage, I termed this a form of advantageous working class capital. It is clearly working class capital in that it is only available to those who have experience of disadvantage. It is advantageous in comparison to other working class people, in that it is only available to that part of the working class which has a structural understanding and experience of challenging that disadvantage, giving rise to the belief in change and desire for a different type of life.

As outlined in chapter four, it was notable that there were high levels of working class social capital in these families, the second key capital in the habitus. The majority of the parents in this study were involved in paid or voluntary community work, in local politics, were members of school committees or involved in their children's schools, were participating in adult basic education or held quite public roles in the community in the local shop or crèche. Many of the participants referred to being part of large, interconnected extended families in this area and some parents were from exceptionally large families. These community connections provided the family with high levels of bonding social capital, which contributed to a strong sense of identity and confidence for the young adults in those families. These contacts and experiences also provided the family and young person with both an understanding of disadvantage in structural terms and examples of people who challenged that disadvantage.

Adams argues that reflexive awareness of structural disadvantage in people from SED backgrounds, when 'uncoupled from resource realization . . . does not bring choice, just a painful awareness of the lack of it' (Adams 2006, p.525). Some of the education and community personnel interviewed in my study gave examples of how some children and young teenagers reacted to that knowledge in such a manner, but it is important to note that the examples related to circumstances in which there was no stability in the child's life, and the people interviewed felt that this type of

'painful awareness' was justified. In these circumstances it appeared that this knowledge of structural disadvantage was not accompanied by knowledge of people in their own family networks who had challenged the impact of disadvantage.

In addition to cultural and social capital, emotional capital is key to understanding the habitus of this fraction. From the findings, it seemed that experience and understanding of disadvantage as structural and examples of challenging that disadvantage in the family was also accompanied by the emotional skills to manage the pressures and transitions associated with having different desires to the norm and applying to higher education. The concept of emotional capital, developed by Nowotny (1981), addresses a gap in Bourdieu's forms of capital. Reay used this concept in her study of parental involvement in primary school. She states that, 'within the context of this research it can be understood as the emotional resources passed on from mother to child through processes of parental involvement' (Reay 2000, p.569). Reay notes that this approach of extending Bourdieu's forms of capital is a key feature of Bourdieu's concepts, as he writes that they are 'open concepts designed to guide empirical work' (Bourdieu 1990, quoted in Reay 2000, p.569). Reay states that her understanding of the concept comes from Nowotny (1981) and Allatt (1993) and that from Allatt, it can be understood 'as the stock of emotional resources built up over time within families and which children could draw upon' (*ibid*, p.572). While the term 'emotional capital' may be a relatively recent term, the interlinking of educational success, emotional capital and emotional well-being is part of a history of research into education which considers both success and accompanying emotions and psychological tension (Hoggart 1992; Jackson and Marsden 1966; Lacey 1970). More recent studies in this area have explored in greater detail the psychological processes and relationship dynamics involved in seeking to attain that educational success, in addition to addressing the absence of studies involving working class women (Reay 2000; Walkerdine *et al* 2001).

The evidence of emotional capital in my study included boundary setting in relation to general behaviour in childhood, insistence on attendance in school and completing homework, support during primary school by mothers to address learning difficulties where required, all of which supported the successful

negotiation of the transfer to second level. These findings were similar to those in studies by Reay (2000) and Walkerdine, Lucey and Melody (2001). Similarly to the findings in the latter study (*ibid,* p.138), there was no clear relationship between the parent's own experience of education and their engaging in activities in support of their child's education. Other examples of emotional capital in the findings were open family communication about the impact of disadvantage and the nature of the family relationships in a working class culture. The parent-young adult relationship was characterised by high levels of trust and responsibility given to teenagers in relation to decision-making. The emotional capital was also evident in the parent-older sibling-younger sibling relationships in which parents stood back but older siblings stepped forward. The nature of these relationships facilitated the development of maturity in young adults and high levels of sibling support.

Reay draws attention to the risk of emotional damage in pushing educational success but notes that some working class mothers avoided negative impact on emotional well-being and levels of anxiety by separating the child's happiness from educational success and 'prioritising the former over the latter' (Reay 2000, p.582). As noted in the previous chapter, there was considerable evidence in the stories in my study of Reay and Ball's findings (1998) about the 'child as expert' in relation to education in working class families and of the idea that the child's happiness is the dominant concern of parents with regard to education. Far from being poor parenting, these are features that are embedded in working class experiences and are examples of emotional capital.

This form of emotional capital is not necessarily linked exclusively to education but acts as an enabler in support of education in families in this class fraction. One element of that stock of emotional resources seen in this research is the ability to have a desire for children to have a different kind of life to their own without children interpreting that as a lack in the parent and without children reacting against such a desire. As noted in chapter four, the participants do show an awareness of their parent's difficult life and desire something different, but there is little evidence of the risk that: 'Wanting something different, something more than your parents implies not only that there is something wrong with your parents' life, but also that there is something wrong with them' (Walkerdine *et al* 2001, p.158).

The evidence in my study suggests that the combination of working class social capital, advantageous working class cultural capital and emotional capital provides a basis for wanting something different but not in a way that leads them to see an individual lack in or reject their parents. The young adult's desire to 'do your own thing' and the emotional and relationship skills to cope with pressures in the area and with transition are further evidence of emotional capital.

Another key form of capital is economic capital and, as noted in the literature review, there is considerable focus in access research on money in relation to disadvantage and participation in higher education (Lynch and O'Riordan 1998; Furlong 2005; Connor 2001; Callender and Jackson 2004; Hesketh 1999). The findings from my study show that there is no simple relationship between income and participation. The relationship between economic capital and other forms of capital was an important element in Bourdieu's theory on reproduction (Bourdieu 1986) but the indicators used to operationalise economic capital are quite limiting and may not reflect the experience in relation to income in areas of disadvantage. In *Distinction*, Bourdieu used, 'total incomes, rural and urban property, shares, industrial and commercial profits, wages and salaries' (Bourdieu 1984, p.127), however, economic capital may not be as easily identified by such indicators in disadvantaged areas. Research by Leonard on informal economic activity in a disadvantaged area drew attention to high levels, and different forms, of informal economic activity outside of the formal labour market (Leonard 1995).

A second issue in relation to assessing the relationship between economic capital and participation in higher education is identifying the appropriate unit of analysis for economic capital. From the narratives in this study, the capital available to young adults varied depending on who was contributing income to the household at a particular time. There were references to siblings, partners living outside the home and extended family members making financial contributions. A further point is that the levels of economic capital can vary greatly over short periods of time, particularly in disadvantaged households. Participants spoke of parental casual employment, parents losing or gaining state allowances and benefits, fluctuations in their own part-time earnings, fluctuations in household earnings and costs as family members moved in and out of the home and the financial impact of

ill-health. It is difficult to find a study that takes into account the challenges outlined above in identifying and assessing economic capital in disadvantaged households and the tendency to use proxies and the limitations of that approach are recognised (Kelleghan *et al* 1995; Blicharski 2000). It is difficult then to adequately examine and theorise the relationship between economic capital and participation in higher education.

What is required is openness to the possibility of a more nuanced understanding of the relationship between economic capital, other forms of capital and participation in higher education. Bourdieu argues that economic capital underlies all of the other forms of capital (Bourdieu 1986, p.54) but also explains that people possess different combinations of forms of capital and this will affect how they play the game (Bourdieu 1993a, p.34). Clancy makes a similar argument in highlighting the relationship between low levels of income but high levels of participation in higher education in the west of Ireland (Clancy 2001). One of the young adult participants in the study, when discussing the issue of the impact of money, pointed out that the families of drug dealers had a lot of money but were not attending higher education. The findings in this study show that the desires the young adults had for their lives meant that they did not consider certain options which would have provided higher levels of economic capital in the short term, thus the relationship between a young person's desires and orientation towards higher education needs to be considered in relation to the issue of income and participation in higher education.

Rather than levels of economic capital determining participation in post-school education opportunities, what is significant is that, at that moment in time, the family did not require the young adult to contribute to economic capital to the extent that the young adult would have had to work full-time. The families coped without that income due to a number of factors: sufficient capital was available from parental employment or from partners not necessarily resident in the family home; older siblings made significant contributions to the family income; there were fewer children remaining in the family home at that stage compared to earlier years and family costs were lower; the young adult continued to or started to contribute some income from part-time work; the young adult's participation in higher education had a neutral impact in the short-term in that they did not require

additional capital to attend higher education due to receiving grants. The emphasis is on possessing sufficient capital merely to cope and neutral impacts from the young adult's or family member's perspective; all were from low-income families.

The common elements then identified in this study are evidence of working class forms of capital. These forms of capital can be identified through seeking a socio-cultural understanding of application to higher education, using a broader understanding of forms of capital and being open to the possibility of the existence of enabling factors in working class experiences and life. They reflect the habitus of a class fraction in the case study area with regard to education, which can explain how this group of young adults were in a position to gain from the changes in the field of education in the area. Habitus is a more contested concept than forms of capital but is key to understanding Bourdieu's theory. Habitus develops from social and economic conditions, reflects these wider conditions and individual and collective histories and influences the dispositions and practices of the individual (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992, pp.124-136). The concept is offered as a balance between structure and agency and Bourdieu writes: 'To speak of habitus is to assert that the individual, and even the personal, the subjective, is social, collective' (*ibid* p. 126) and that the 'theoretical intention' is to 'escape from under the philosophy of the subject without doing away with the agent (Bourdieu 1985) as well as from under the philosophy of the structure but without forgetting to take into account the effects it wields upon and through the agent' (*ibid* pp. 121-2). Bourdieu also explains that it becomes embodied, stating how it 'become (s) durably incorporated in the body in the form of permanent dispositions' (Bourdieu 1993a, p.86). The physical aspect of habitus has been particularly important in research on working class experiences (Skeggs 1997b; Charlesworth 2000) and in my study there were many references by participants to issues of accent, clothes, ways of speaking that were used to indicate a type of background, a form of habitus, in addition to other types of dispositions which influenced practices in relation to education.

Bourdieu stated that habitus can be identified only in relation to a specific empirical reality, noting that it 'reveals itself . . . only in reference to a definite situation' (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992, p.135) and that, 'one cannot grasp the most profound logic of the social world unless one becomes immersed in the specificity

of an empirical reality' (Bourdieu 1993b, p.271). Reay was critical of the tendency in education research to ignore these aspects of Bourdieu's concept and to overlay findings with the concept of habitus, rather than putting it to work as a tool during interpretive work (Reay 2004, p.440). In detailing the common enabling factors in the participants' stories in relation to education and describing how they are working class forms of capital, which reflect a habitus of a fraction in relation to education in the case-study area, I am both applying it to a specific empirical reality and using it in interpretive work. As Nash writes: 'What could be done to develop the connection between agency and social classification? This must surely be a matter of investigating the specific habitus of the groups in whose practice one has an interest' (Nash 1999b, p.178).

The main criticism of Bourdieu's concept of habitus in relation to understanding class and education outcomes is that it allows for little agency and that ultimately structural factors determine outcomes (Jenkins 2002; Devine and Savage 2004; Vester 2004; Crompton 2008, p.102). Bourdieu rejected this critique, however, he appeared to be reluctant to release the notion of constraints and limitations imposed by habitus. There appears to be a tension between reproduction and space for transformation in his later writings on habitus. He describes habitus as a 'kind of transforming machine that leads us to "reproduce" the social conditions of our own production but in a relatively unpredictable way' (Bourdieu 1993a, p.87), but then writes that, 'the adjustments that are constantly required by the necessities of adaptation to new and unforeseen situations may bring about durable transformations of the habitus, but these will remain within certain limits, not least because the habitus defines the perception of the situation that determines it' (*ibid*, p.87). In conversation with Wacquant, he rejects the accusation of determinism but promptly states, habitus:

> is durable but not eternal! Having said this, I must immediately add that there is a probability . . . that experiences will confirm habitus, because most people are statistically bound to encounter circumstances that tend to agree with those that originally fashioned their habitus'

and then concludes that it is 'an extremely complex question' (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992, p.133).

Bourdieu explains further that there is scope for change through the relationship between habitus and field. When habitus and field are similar, the person is like a 'fish in water' (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992, p.127) however, 'radical disjunctions' between habitus and unfamiliar fields can also occur (*ibid,* p.130).

Researchers using the concept in access to education studies are keen to make the argument for some level of transformation and movement away from structural determinism in seeking to explain the existence of working class students in higher education. Reay, David and Ball write: 'For Bourdieu, although habitus reflects the social position in which it was constructed, it also carries within it the genesis of new creative responses, which are capable of transcending the social conditions in which it was produced. Otherwise, we would not have working class applicants' and they note that, 'the working class applicants to university in our study epitomise habitus at its most agentic' (Reay *et al* 2005, p.26). While their study provides understandings about the challenges of applying, there are few explanations about how it is that this minority reached the stage of applying to HE and were in a position to avail of the increased opportunities; that agentic habitus is not explained in any great detail.

Other researchers have argued the case for a 'reflexive habitus' as an explanation for such transformations. Reay, Crozier and Clayton (2009) in their study of working class students in elite universities argue that they had a reflexive habitus from childhood which, together with academic dispositions, supported their transition to elite universities (Reay, Crozier and Clayton 2009, p.1115). Sweetman writes of a habitus in which ' a continual and pervasive reflexivity becomes . . . habitual' (Sweetman 2003, p.541). Their work does challenge Bourdieu's argument that this type of reflexivity is not easily available in a conscious manner given the role of structures in influencing the ability to engage in this type of reflexivity (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992, pp.136-7). However, the difficulty with the idea of a reflexive habitus in those research studies as an explanation for participation in higher education by young people from SED backgrounds, is that there is no explanation for how some people develop this reflexive habitus in youth which renders them 'fish out of water' in their school (Reay, Crozier and Clayton 2009. p.1107). Describing them as possessing 'almost superhuman levels of motivation,

resilience and determination' (*ibid*, p.1115) further disconnects them from their socio-cultural experience. At the same time, Reay *et al* argue that, in contrast to similar research on working class participants in higher education, there is little evidence of a social disconnection from their family (*ibid*, p.1105). There is little in the descriptions of habitus in these studies that adequately explains how these changes occur. From the findings in my study, I argue that a focus on the level and timeframe of change occurring in a habitus, fully acknowledging past and present, together with the understanding of forms of capital outlined above and of changes in the field, provides a framework for understanding how change in participation levels in education can take place within a family.

To return then to Bourdieu's definition of the relationship between field, capital and habitus, Bourdieu writes that the relationship is '[habitus x capital] + field = practice' (Bourdieu 1984, p.101). I argue that only an expanded understanding of the concepts in this equation can provide an explanation for how change occurs in relation to participation in higher education. Reay provides an understanding of this relationship as habitus underlying cultural capital + field = practice (Reay 2004, pp.435-6). However, Bourdieu writes that 'habitus is a capital' (Bourdieu 1993a, p.86) and also explains that different combinations of forms of capital and levels of capital will influence practice. He writes, 'those who have lots of red tokens and few yellow ones, that is, a lot of economic capital and little cultural capital, will not play in the same way as those who have many yellow tokens and few red ones' (Bourdieu 1993a, p.34). In understanding the role of forms of capital regarding participation in higher education for young adults from SED backgrounds, I noted above the importance of adding to Bourdieu's understanding of forms of capital, the concept of emotional capital. I also described above the need to add to Bourdieu's concepts the understanding my study provides of working class forms of capital as enablers, a recognition of advantageous working class cultural capital and a more nuanced understanding of economic capital and its relationship with education opportunities. Thus, firstly, the relationship regarding change is better described as habitus x different levels and combinations of extended forms of capital + field = practice.

Secondly, more attention needs to be paid to the level of change which occurs and the timeframe of that level of change. Bourdieu writes that 'the habitus is also a power of adaptation, it constantly performs an adaptation to the external world which only exceptionally takes the form of a radical conversion' (Bourdieu 1993a, pp.87-88). The transformations that took place in the lives of the participants in my study, particularly those who accessed higher education, may look like 'radical conversions', and there is undoubtedly change in the family practices in relation to education. However, in examining how a family habitus develops to enable the young adult to be in a position to consider availing of increased education opportunities, it is clear that the changes that took place appear to be gradual nudges and shifts over time between and within generations, rather than radical or sudden conversions towards the end of the young adult's schooling. Bourdieu states that habitus 'constantly reminds us that it refers to something historical, linked to individual history' (Bourdieu 1993a, p.86).

My study shows that this family habitus emerged due to agentic actions on the part of immediate and extended family members. These actions produced nudges and shifts which over time changed the habitus of the family in relation to education. An understanding of class as process is key. Archer, referencing Mahony and Zmroczek's work (1997), writes, 'researchers need to understand how class both structures people's lives and is reconstituted by them' (Archer *et al* 2003, p.13). Using a life history research methodology enabled an exploration of those issues in the interviews. I noted already that the parents, siblings and extended family members were involved in a high level of community activity, volunteering and education which provided both access to knowledge about the changing opportunity structures and role of education qualifications and also served as an example of how the impact of disadvantage could be challenged. This involvement by family members was an example of an action that could shift a family towards acquiring higher levels of education and these experiences contributed to the working class cultural capital and social capital described above.

The involvement in community work, volunteering and education seems to have developed from a range of sources: the parents' reaction to their own experience of disadvantage; their own experience of education including feelings of regret at

leaving school early and frustrations with the lack of opportunities to progress at that time; from their interests and hobbies; and from a parental desire to protect their children in the school system. The size of extended families and activities embedded in working class culture that maintain close links within extended families also provided a large bank of experiences and knowledge about the structures of the world of work, which a nuclear family could draw on or react against in understanding how to avail of opportunities. There was also evidence of parental agency and access to social capital outside of the case study area in their youth; a number of the parents had travelled abroad when they were young. There was also evidence of emotional resilience on the part of parents, in contrast to the parents' siblings, and a number of young adults spoke about the choice of partner by their parents' siblings as a reason for the contrast. One of the mothers interviewed spoke about how she consciously sought to develop a more equal relationship with her partner and a closer emotional relationship with her children as a result of and reaction against the domineering, patriarchal behaviour of her own father. An older sister of one of the young adults also explained how her desire to succeed educationally and then occupationally was partly due to the fact that her mother had emphasised the importance of female independence, and the role of education in providing that, after the mother's marriage finished. As Nash explains: 'habitus develops a history and generates its practices, for some period of time, even after the original material conditions which gave rise to it have disappeared' (Nash 1999b, p.184). These are some examples of the shifts, nudges, actions and reactions that facilitate the development of the family habitus and working class forms of capital that explain the common enabling factors identified in the findings.

This habitus and forms of working class capital reflect a class fraction in relation to education in the case study area. I noted in the literature review that, in contrast to research on middle class fractions, 'there is far less work on diversity and heterogeneity within the working classes' (Reay *et al* 2005, p.105). Bourdieu devotes less space to understanding these fractions in contrast to the fractions within the other classes (Bourdieu 1984) and when examining working class experiences does so from the perspective of the working class as a dominated class (Bourdieu 1999). This is a limitation of his work generally that has attracted criticism (Savage, Bagnall and Longhurst 2005, p.121; Vester 2004, p.70; Reay *et al* 2005;

Rupp 1997, p.224). In the literature review, I described the two traditions of research studies involving class fractions in relation to access to education: one is primarily concerned with narrower occupational groupings and the implications for class classification systems; the other is focused on broader understandings of class groupings not necessarily or at all associated with occupation. I also noted an attempt in some studies to try to merge the two traditions of class fractions but a tendency to return to occupation-based explanations is evident. Similarly to Brooks (2005), Reay, David and Ball suggest that class fractions may best explain the participation of working class people in higher education and refer to class fractions involving individualist and solidarist approaches (Reay, David and Ball 2005, p.96), but revert to occupations as indicators of class fraction borderlands (*ibid*, p.97).

Jackson and Marsden's work (1966), while not denying some links with occupations, offered a broader understanding of class fractions but there has been little development of their work on class fractions and education. Bourdieu's work on forms of capital, habitus and field offers a theoretical framework to develop their rich exploration of the relationship between class fractions and education, but perhaps the lack of focus in Bourdieu's work on working class capitals and fractions and ongoing concern in research with structuralist determinism in Bourdieu's work, has hindered these developments. In my study, in the common enabling factors identified above - these forms of working class capitals, including advantageous cultural capital - and the understanding of habitus and working class fractions, my findings build on the broader understanding of class fractions in the tradition of Jackson and Marsden. This is a class fraction in relation to participation in education, rather than reflecting specific occupations or higher levels of income.

The habitus of the families in this study at that moment in time, involving high levels of advantageous working class cultural capital, working class social capital and working class emotional capital and a nuanced relationship between economic capital and post-school education opportunities, enabled the participants to be in a position to avail of increased education opportunities arising from changes in the field. The habitus, capitals and changes in the field contributed to a desire for a different type of life, though not necessarily or exclusively focused on accessing higher education. This study showed that some of the participants applied but did

not enter higher education, that many of the older siblings of the participants had not participated in higher education and that some younger siblings were viewed as unlikely to go to higher education. These circumstances highlight the fact that this understanding of class fraction and family habitus alone is not sufficient to explain the participation in higher education of the young adults in this study. In the next section, I discuss these other key factors that affected participation in higher education.

SECTION 5.2: NETWORKS, SOCIAL CAPITAL, AGENCY AND IDENTITY

In addition to the common base of enabling factors and changes in the field, there was clear evidence of diversity within the group of participants in that three groups emerged from the study with different orientations towards higher education; in effect these were sub-groups of the class fraction described above. The distinguishing factors between the three groups were the extent of their networks, knowledge and familiarity with higher education and their desires and sense of identity, all of which affected their application to higher education and outcome. A key factor in influencing participation in higher education was the input from people in their networks. In this section, I draw on Bourdieu's and Woolcock's concepts of social capital to explain the role networks play in young people's participation in higher education. The research also extends an understanding of social capital and networks in relation to participation in higher education for young people from SED backgrounds.

The findings showed that that each of the three groups had different types of networks and these are best understood in relation to concepts of social capital. Social capital was an important element of Bourdieu's work on how reproduction in education occurs (Bourdieu 1986). The concept was also developed by Coleman (1988) and popularised more recently by Putnam (2000). As Field notes, referencing Edwards and Foley, the value of the concept of social capital is:

What social capital brings to social theory is an emphasis on relationships and values as significant factors in explaining structures and behaviour. To be more precise, it contributes new insights by focusing on . . . "meso-level social structures" such as family, neighbourhood, voluntary associations and public institutions as integrating elements between individuals and wider social structures (Edwards and Foley 1997, quoted in Field 2008, p.160).

Woolcock identifies three types of social capital: bonding, bridging and linking social capital (Woolcock 2001). He describes bonding social capital as 'the relations between family members, close friends, and neighbors' and bridging as referring to 'more distant friends, associates, and colleagues' (*ibid*, p.10). He describes linking as a vertical rather than horizontal connection and as 'forging alliances with sympathetic individuals in positions of power' (*ibid*, p.10). Interestingly, Woolcock then states that:

A multi-dimensional approach allows us to argue that it is different *combinations* of bonding, bridging, and linking social capital that are responsible for the range of outcomes we observe in the literature, and to incorporate a dynamic component in which optimal combinations change over time (*ibid*, p.11).

He then appears to deny this combination to people from disadvantaged backgrounds by referencing a number of studies on social capital and concluding that such people:

typically have a close-knit and intensive stock of bonding social capital that they leverage to "get by" . . . a modest endowment of the more diffuse and extensive bridging social capital typically deployed by the non-poor to "get ahead" . . . and almost no linking social capital (*ibid*, p.11).

Again there is a familiar situation regarding forms of capital whereby people who are disadvantaged are viewed as lacking this combination of types of social capital and there is a limiting of the value of bonding social capital to 'getting by'. Notwithstanding this familiar gap in the applications of the concept of capital, the outline of the three types of social capital is useful in understanding the nature of the networks in each of the three groups of participants.

In contrast to the argument by Woolcock above, this thesis draws attention to the value of bonding social capital with regard to participation in higher education, not merely to 'getting by', and also shows how some young adults from SED

backgrounds have access to bridging and linking capital in relation to education. Participants in group one had social networks and influences in their lives from outside of the area from a relatively young age and at least one person in their network encouraged them to participate in higher education. They generally had some knowledge of higher education in their networks and there was evidence of bonding, bridging and linking social capital. Social capital for this group provided a familiarity with higher education and support in relation to choosing higher education courses and institutions.

Participants in group two did not have as broad networks and had less or no familiarity with higher education but did have some bridging and linking social capital. For participants in this group, in order to participate in higher education, they were reliant on a linking relationship with someone who persistently encouraged them towards and into higher education. For group three, the focus was very local and they did not have those broad networks. The main social capital they had was bonding social capital. A key element of that bonding social capital was the friendship pair or group and this was critical in ensuring that they maintained their desire for a different kind of life. The desire for a different kind of life was formulated and expressed in terms of the type of life that they did not want, rather than in terms of participation in higher education. Quinn's concept of imagined social capital, identified as a resource amongst mature female students in higher education, is useful and she writes: 'The re-imagined university draws its strength from resistance to a destiny shaped only by supermarkets, call centres' (Quinn 2005, p.12). It is clear that the young adults in this study who accessed higher education had networks and social capital which they could draw on and that this played a very significant role in accessing higher education.

An important element of this thesis is identifying how the functioning of the networks activates the benefits of social capital, which is a current issue in research. Field writes:

> Future research will need to pay attention to the way in which people activate their social capital. Coleman's conceptualisation in particular has been criticised for confusing the sources of social capital (relationships) with the benefits (resources) and failing to disentangle possession of social capital from its activation (Dika and Singh 2002) (Field 2008, pp.165-6).

The main benefit of social capital seen in this study is the provision of cultural capital, specific to accessing higher education. This is available to participants in group one from their networks and the impact of having this cultural capital in networks from an early age is evident in the expectation within participants in group one that they would attend higher education. The provision of this specific type of cultural capital through relationships with education and community professionals was very significant for the participants in group two who accessed higher education and the impact of its absence was also clear. For group three, the bonding social capital in their peer group was significant in contributing to and maintaining a desire for a different type of life, which enabled the participants to take actions during their schooling that ensured post-school education options remained open to those participants.

The family habitus outlined in section 5.1 above provides high levels of bonding social capital but networks, particularly relationships providing bridging and linking capital, are developed through agency on the part of family members, young adults and education and community professionals and peers. There are many examples of these actions: Kate's parents through their involvement in music knew a head of a university department with whom Kate could discuss her education options; siblings and cousins who had accessed higher education actively provided assistance to the young adults; Patrick through his friendships chose to spend every summer at the Gaeltacht and developed contacts with people from different backgrounds; some young adults volunteered and saw that as an opportunity to acquire new contacts and familiarity with speaking with people from different backgrounds; some teachers and community workers actively developed relationships with young adults and sought out opportunities to get to know the young adults and encourage them to access higher education; peers with similar desires sought out each other and maintained this desire through the friendships.

Key features of the bridging and linking relationships are the nature of the relationship between the young person and a person they identified as influential. The relationship preceded decisions about higher education and it was a close, trusting relationship and these two features meant that the information and guidance

provided was 'hot knowledge' (Ball and Vincent 1998). It seems likely that the space provided for the young person in working class parent-child relationships regarding educational decisions (Reay and Ball 1998) allowed for the development of relationships with other adults, including siblings, in which the young person trusted that the adult cared for them and also knew that the adult had experience and knowledge specific to accessing higher education that their parent did not possess.

The activation of this social capital through agency by individuals and professionals seems to be key to understanding how a person can move from group three to group two or one and there is further evidence of how the relationship between field and habitus and different and changing combinations of forms of capital can facilitate change in the form of gradual shifts over time. Kevin clearly belonged to group one but, from the interview with his oldest sister, it appeared that her experience was typical of group three participants in her second level experience, but she had then developed a close relationship with a teacher who pushed her towards applying and staying in higher education, and that seemed to move towards experiences typical of group two. Developing that type of relationship and accessing this linking social capital is likely to be significant in moving from group three and not participating in higher education, to moving to group two and participating in higher education. Kevin's brother, who was second in the family, did not attend higher education but his second sister did attend and, by the time Kevin came to the stage of applying to HE, the effect of having two sisters who had graduated ensured that he belonged to group one. This suggests that incorporating social capital and agency into class as process (Mahony and Zmroczek 1997; Savage et al 2005) understandings of class fractions and sub-fractions regarding education is important.

There was some evidence of a relationship between gender and social capital: in this study the two boys schools, which had once had a high percentage of middle-class students, an academic school culture and still had an active old boys' network, seemed to have a lingering habitus from that period which provided the boys with social capital directly in terms of their relationships with the teachers and indirectly through the opportunities provided to acquire further social capital. The schools were particularly active in providing extra-curricular activities and using the school links to provide additional contacts. Luke admired his older brother for travelling to

the US on a sports scholarship and travelling abroad was his own reason for wanting to participate in higher education. He explained that his older brother took up the sport in the school, his sports coach in the school then introduced him to a sports club in a more mixed area, that club then arranged for him to apply for the scholarship and the school supported him to do the academic tests for the scholarship. There were numerous such examples of the use of social capital from the boys' schools and this was not evident in the girls' narratives relating to school. Field notes that the 'old school tie' metaphor regarding elite education pathways is 'well known', but, 'it has, though, rarely been conceptualised in terms of social capital, and even more rarely applied to all school types' (Field 2008, p.54). Field notes that the influence of social capital is 'a benign one' in relation to disadvantage and educational attainment in research to date (Field 2008, p.54). This study is not focused on attainment but does show that social capital through the functioning of networks provides benefits regarding participation in higher education. However, the study also shows that there are risks in terms of relying on those relationships with regard to accessing higher education. As evidenced in Catherine's story, there appears to have been a gendered 'cooling out' (Colley *et al* 2003) of her ambitions as part of that linking social capital relationship. There are also risks involving mis-information or limited knowledge by the network member and, for participants in group three, a high level of bonding social capital is not always sufficient in order to access higher education and may limit choice of higher education institution. There may also be risks regarding the impact on the relationship between the young person and influential network member from the pressure and responsibility regarding the active pushing of higher education. This is particularly the case when the influential network member is not a person working in the school or the community but rather someone with whom the young person has an enduring personal relationship, particularly with siblings and friends. The findings from my study suggests that research drawing on the concept of social capital with regard to education needs to incorporate the understandings provided by access literature on the identity ambiguities and costs of class transformations through participation in higher education (Anderson 2001; Archer and Leathwood 2003; Green and Webb 1997; Mahony and Zmroczek 1997; Reay 2001; Skeggs 1997b).

In the literature review, I provided an overview of the access research on identity and noted how it developed as part of an understanding of the role of individual agency and desires. The relationship between the impact of the different types of networks and knowledge of higher education, agency by the young adults, education experience and identity and desires is particularly interesting. In my study, actions supporting participation in higher education varied across the three groups, were linked with desires and identity, which in turn were linked with the nature of their networks and associated levels of knowledge of and familiarity with higher education. This combination appeared to be the fuel for the agency displayed by the young people in seeking out opportunities, building relationships, gaining new skills or keeping their education possibilities open through effective subject choices and doing extra classes during lunch and after school. For some participants in group one, there is a conscious move towards higher education and they engaged in identity work and development opportunities. For participants in group two, their identity work was focused on choosing the right option for them and for members of group three it was concerned with maintaining the desire for a different kind of life to that of their parents and the norm of the area.

There was some evidence of embracing identity change (Archer and Leathwood 2003) and aspects of the activities of 'associational embracement' through friends and other relationships, 'associational distancing' in relation to some separation from particular groups of peers who did not have the same desire and limited 'presentations of self' regarding a conscious acquiring of public speaking skills or a change in accent (Kaufman 2003), particularly for some participants in group one. But this was not prevalent across all of the HE participants' stories and much of this identity work in support of further and higher education was also balanced with maintaining connections to their local community and family, and managing any related tensions in relationships. This does not seem to be a resistance to identity change associated with participation in higher education but rather reflecting the reality that they live in a close community.

Reflexive agency is one element of understanding the move towards higher education for some participants in group one and for these participants it is unlikely that such a move would be possible without some level of reflexive agency, but it

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would be a mistake to view these participants as engaged in a choice biography (Du Bois-Reymond 1998), given the range of factors involved in successful accessing of higher education and the challenges involved in their experiences of adjusting to higher education. For the participants in group three, their desires were expressed in a familiar female focus on 'bettering oneself' (Archer and Leathwood 2003, p.184) and Lawler's work (1999) about wanting to both escape from and preserve working class identity is evident in their stories. As noted earlier, all of the participants drew on high levels of emotional capital to manage the identity tensions involved in the movement towards applying to higher education and particularly in the experience of participation in higher education.

SECTION 5.3: RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN DISADVANTAGE AND PARTICIPATION IN HIGHER EDUCATION

The findings from this study question understandings of the relationship between socio-economic disadvantage and participation in higher education in access research. In this section, I outline the significance of the three groups and nature of that diversity for categorical understandings of that relationship and then highlight how the findings pose challenges to other understandings of the relationship between disadvantage and access to higher education in access literature. Finally, I argue that class fractions in relation to education are likely to be useful in understanding the relationship.

The findings suggest that the diversity amongst the group of SED young adults, that is significant in understanding the relationship between disadvantage and participation in higher education, can be masked by traditional indicators of disadvantage. As Steedman writes: 'Our household and the registrar general's socio-economic categories mask a complicated reality' (Steedman 1986, p.55). There does not appear to be a clear relationship between disadvantage identified by traditional indicators and participation in higher education within the cohort. Taking occupation as an indicator, this study shows that some participants' parents have limited experience of work and could not be easily categorised by socio-

economic group, that economic status changes and that much of the work can be very casual and part-time. It can be difficult to determine whether the occupation of a parent who is not in the home should be taken into account and trying to categorise newcomer students based on their current situation may not reflect the parental occupational history. This research confirms that of other research regarding the limitations of occupation-based approaches to identifying disadvantage in research on access to higher education (Archer *et al* 2003; Benn and Burton 1995).

Taking the example of geo-coding, Osborne and Shuttleworth (2004) showed that some individuals within a geo-coded area were not individually disadvantaged; Blicharshi (2000) highlighted other limitations of geo-coding regarding boundaries and Tonk (1999) drew attention to similar technical difficulties with geo-coding analysis as with occupation-based approaches. This study takes this issue further and shows that there does not appear to be a clear relationship between place of residence and outcome regarding HE participation amongst those from individual SED backgrounds within a specific disadvantaged area. Kate, Michelle and Fiona lived only streets apart but had very different education outcomes; Karen and Louise lived around the corner from each other but had different outcomes. The difference in outcomes between siblings in this study also poses challenges for understandings of the relationship between disadvantage and participation based on traditional indicators of disadvantage.

It is also evident that an indicator can mask very different situations and that disadvantage is complex. Thomas and Quinn conclude that 'first generation entrant' is the best indicator of SED (Thomas and Quinn 2003, p.90), however, Fiona, Louise and Kevin were all first generation entrants to higher education but had completely different levels of familiarity with higher education in their immediate or extended families. The difficulties with using income as an indicator were described in section 5.1 above.

Much of the research addressing the issue of problems with traditional indicators of disadvantage and categorical approaches to understanding disadvantage and participation in higher education is focused on one indicator or concerned with

missing people who are disadvantaged or including those who are not disadvantaged. However, this study has problematised the issue of categorical understandings further, showing that, even within a group who meet a similar combination of indicators of disadvantage, such categories mask different levels of knowledge and familiarity with HE; cannot explain the participation or not in higher education of the participants in the study and mask different orientations towards HE within a disadvantaged group. Burke draws attention to the value of post-structural perspectives in questioning the categories and underlying assumptions, and asks: 'What are the implications of such technologies of classification? For example, in what ways do such classifications homogenize groups of people?' (Burke 2012. pp.37-38).

The nature of the findings points to a complex and nuanced relationship between disadvantage and participation in higher education, which challenges many of the understandings of that relationship in access literature. Firstly, the fact that participants from disadvantaged backgrounds participated in higher education questions the idea of a simple relationship between disadvantage and participation based on structural explanations and determinism: while there was considerable evidence of structural disadvantage, participants from similar backgrounds had different education outcomes and some accessed higher education. Secondly, there was evidence that changes in the patterns of participation in families can and do occur and this challenges the idea that disadvantage is simply reproduced through either school or family processes. Some young adults from SED backgrounds from each school in the area accessed higher education. The education outcomes also differed within a group of siblings.

Thirdly, it is clear that there are considerable resources in working class experiences to draw on and which act as enablers in relation to education, particularly for a class fraction in the case study area. This calls into question the validity of the notion of barriers and the tendency in much research to present middle class experiences as leading automatically to higher education and working class experiences as providing barriers for SED young adults. Even the issue of economic capital is not straightforward and needs to be considered in relation to other issues, rather than in isolation. Clearly low income affects the experience in higher education but there is

evidence that a sense of identity and desire for a particular type of life or higher education can bring into play financial coping strategies by families and individuals once there is an awareness of, and access to, higher education grants. Fourthly, there is also considerable evidence of the role and impact of agency by young people and by members of their networks of immediate and extended families, friends, neighbours and education and community professionals, which plays a contributory role in a positive experience of education and participation in higher education. Finally, the existence of the three different groups is evidence of diversity within a group of participants from an SED background.

There is a need to move beyond categorical approaches based on indicators of general disadvantage and the dichotomy of middle class bridges and working class barriers to fully conceptualise the relationship between disadvantage and HE participation. In the context of access research in Ireland, the belated move to incorporate qualitative approaches to research and socio-cultural understandings of this relationship is an overdue and welcome development. The conclusions regarding the value of both rational action perspectives and cultural explanations in the ESRI research by McCoy *et al* (2010) on participation in higher education by the non-manual socio-economic group are similar to Crompton's argument in a chapter on families, social mobility and education 'for the need for a multi-faceted, pluralist approach to the question of class and class reproduction' (Crompton 2008, p.134), however, such understandings do not go far enough in addressing the nuances involved in transformations.

The socio-cultural approach in this research combining a life history approach and an area-based case study approach in examining application to and participation in higher education suggests that a broader understanding of that relationship is required to capture the full complexity of the relationship. Few theoretical frameworks used in research on the relationship between disadvantage and access to higher education adequately explain the application to and participation in higher education of young adults from SED backgrounds. At best, comparative deficit models or models examining one or two factors are offered, neither of which can then explore the nuances of that relationship. Morley highlights the risks of an approach based on deficit models, noting: 'There are dangers of a remediation ethos

as the different forms of knowledge, lifestyles or practice, they [students from under-represented groups] bring, is rarely given epistemic recognition' (Morley 2003, p.147). Burke notes how conceptualisations of widening participation can focus on the individual's low aspirations and accompanying ideas of individual and community deficit (Burke 2012, p.2, p.94; Burke 2010, p.71). She emphasises that, 'it is crucial to understand that aspirations are not constructed exclusively at the individual level but are tied in with complex structural, cultural and discursive relations, identities and practices' (Burke 2012, p.119). Conceptualisations of the relationship between disadvantage and participation in higher education must recognise both the heterogeneous experiences and diversity within disadvantage and the broad range of homogeneous enabling factors that allow some young adults from disadvantaged backgrounds to access higher education, including changes in the field; working class forms of capital, particularly advantageous cultural capital; gradual changes over time in family habitus; networks and agency; knowledge of higher education and sense of identity and desires.

The findings suggest that developing an understanding of class fractions and sub-fractions specifically in relation to education rather than in relation to broader issues of class and disadvantage might offer a framework for understanding the relationship between disadvantage and participation in higher education. One issue in the use of such fractions is that there is a need to look beyond the individual and parents as the unit of analysis for identifying an individual's class fraction position regarding education in a disadvantaged area and to incorporate siblings, extended family and possibly peer groups. In this study, group one appears to be characterised, for the most part, by an extended family with some experience in higher education and working in graduate jobs; for the participants in group two, it seems that members of the immediate family are seeking to participate in higher education and for group three, it is the individual only who is trying to participate in higher education. However, peers also play a significant role for two of group one and are particularly important for participants in group three. Bourdieu's work and the extended understandings of his work and Jackson and Marsden's approach to class fractions outlined in section 5.1 above, together with an extended application, and understandings, of the role of networks and social capital outlined in section 5.2 above, provide a theoretical base for further developing understandings of this type

of class fraction and sub-fractions regarding disadvantage and education. Proposals for further research and developments in practice based on this broader understanding of the relationship from the findings in this study are outlined in the concluding chapter in the thesis.

THESIS CONCLUSION

In this conclusion I identify the key contributions and value of the thesis. I also comment on the learning from the thesis, implications for policy and practice and the further research questions arising from this study.

Thesis argument and contribution to knowledge

Access to higher education matters for a number of reasons: it is a gateway to resources for individuals and communities; it is an opportunity to reach educational potential; for higher education institutions a diverse student body brings an enriched learning and teaching environment; and for society, the under representation of parts of society in higher education means that their experiences and knowledge are not equally represented in many positions of influence in Ireland. Thus, who attends higher education is a key issue.

Access to higher education has been a key element of sociology of education research and the developments within widening participation research largely reflected the wider developments in research in sociology of education. In the literature review I concluded that there was extensive knowledge about patterns of access and about why many young people from working class backgrounds did not attend higher education but that that there was less knowledge about those who reached the stage of applying and those who then participated in higher education. I noted that one of the main limitations of this research was the strong focus on barriers to higher education for young SED students and a dichotomy of explanations for access patterns based on barriers for young people from an SED background and bridges for young people from a middle class background. I noted that this focus and dichotomy resulted in limited understanding of the factors enabling access to higher education for young people from an SED background. I also drew attention to the need for further understanding of the impact of family relationships and experiences, the role of community and networks and the interplay of these areas with school choice and experience, individual agency and peers.

In chapter two, I described how socio-cultural understandings of access to higher education were underdeveloped due to the dominance of a barriers discourse in Ireland, a focus on socio-economic group, class silences and an absence of a strong tradition of interpretative research. This put limitations on the understandings of the relationship between disadvantage and access to higher education to the extent that the complexity and nuances of that relationship have not been fully explored. These gaps mean that there is insufficient knowledge on which to develop access practice in order to increase participation in higher education, particularly in areas of cumulative disadvantage with low participation rates in higher education.

As a result of this review of the literature and the specific context in Ireland, the aim of the research was to produce a socio-cultural understanding of participation in higher education for SED school-leavers and I argued that this knowledge was valuable and necessary to gain a full picture of the relationship between disadvantage and access to higher education. The major research question in my study was: what enabled young adults from an SED background living and attending school in a disadvantaged area to apply to higher education and what affected whether or not they then participated in higher education. The sub-questions in the study were concerned with the role, membership and functioning of networks in relation to application to and participation in higher education; heterogeneity and homogeneity within the experience of disadvantage which affects application and participation in higher education and understandings of the relationship between socio-economic disadvantage and participation in HE and the impact of diversity on understanding that relationship. The final sub-question focused on insights for widening participation policy and practice to increase the numbers of students from SED backgrounds participating in higher education.

In order to generate the data to answer those research questions, I used a methodology that combined life-history research with an area-based case study in a small area with high levels of disadvantage and low levels of higher education participation, which had undergone structural change. This dual methodology enabled the study to go beyond obvious explanations for participation in higher education and uncover the broad range of factors affecting application to and participation in higher education. The methodology enabled an understanding of

the impact of structures and change in the area, the importance of socio-cultural understandings and the role of experiences, emotions, desires, actions and relationships that affected the young adults' post-school education outcomes. The methodology also facilitated the generating of data about limited understandings of the relationship between disadvantage and participation in higher education and the existence of diversity within SED experience that is significant to understanding the complexity and nuances of that relationship between disadvantage and participation in higher education. The findings emerged from a grounded theory approach to data analysis involving excavation of the data and imaginative construction work. A type of creative writing, disciplined by the data, enabled the findings to be communicated.

The study contributes to knowledge on a number of levels. The study addresses a key issue in widening participation knowledge by providing additional knowledge about enabling factors for school-leavers from an SED background in an area with low participation in higher education and high levels of disadvantage. It highlights that there was a range of factors enabling application to and participation in higher education, which included a combination of common enabling factors supporting education generally and ensuring some young adults were in a position to, and wanted to, avail of increased educational opportunities, though not necessarily higher education. The study identifies three groups with different orientations towards higher education and factors specific to each of the these groups affecting whether or not people participated in higher education. The study provides knowledge about the role of networks and how they function in relation to participation in higher education. The study provides knowledge about homogeneous and heterogeneous experiences, drawing attention to the importance of recognising and understanding diversity within disadvantage. The study provides evidence of the range and depth of knowledge about disadvantage and education amongst education and community personnel, but also polarisation of that knowledge and gaps regarding understandings of that diversity and of the complexity of the relationship between disadvantage and participation in higher education.

With regard to theoretical understandings, the study makes a number of contributions to knowledge. Drawing on Bourdieu's work on habitus and capitals, addressing some of the limitations in his work particularly in relation to working class experiences, and drawing on work by other researchers using Bourdieu's theories, my study extends an understanding of working class forms of capital in relation to participation in post-school education opportunities. The study shows that there is working class knowledge and experience which can enable people to avail of educational opportunities. The study confirms the importance of emotional capital, highlights how economic capital can operate in particular ways in areas of disadvantage and draws attention to the nuances of the relationship between economic capital and access to higher education. The concept of advantageous working class cultural capital is key to understanding how some people from disadvantaged backgrounds are in a position to avail of increased education opportunities.

The study also extends an understanding of how change occurs within a broader understanding of Bourdieu's theory on the relationship between habitus, capital, field and practice. By incorporating the forms of capital outlined above into that equation and taking into account the shifts, nudges and reactions that occur in a family over time, the study provides a theoretical framework for understanding the changes that occur in family practices relating to participation in further and higher education.

These processes produce a type of class fraction in relation to education participation. The study contributes to the tradition of class fractions and education used by Jackson and Marsden by providing an updated understanding of the elements of a class fraction in relation to changes in education practices and participation and an understanding of how that fraction is constructed. The study also draws attention to the sub-fractions that exist with regard to participation in higher education and shows that it is necessary to look further than the individual or parents to identify the sub-fraction to which a person belongs: it is necessary to also take into account siblings, extended family and peers.

The study also shows that Woolcock's outline of types of social capital (2001) can be applied to understanding the process of young people from SED backgrounds and area applying to higher education. This study provides new knowledge in showing that some young people from these backgrounds do have access to the three types of social capital, that each type of social capital can play a role in a move towards applying to higher education and that agency by extended and immediate family members, professionals and young people and their peers is involved in creating and activating social capital. The study outlines how social capital is activated in the formation of networks, and the benefits and role it plays in enabling such young people to access higher education, the impact of the absence of that benefit and the risks in terms of relationships involved in the role social capital plays in this process.

With regard to knowledge about the relationship between socio-economic disadvantage and participation in higher education, the study provides knowledge about the limitations in relation to traditional indicators of disadvantage, about diversity within disadvantage and about the complexity and nuances of this relationship. The diversity and nuances highlight limitations in understandings of this relationship in access research, particularly understandings based on one or a limited number of explanatory factors. Perhaps there is a need for sociology of education research to develop its own indicators for examining disadvantage and education, rather than seeking to apply indicators used for other sociology research.

In the context of research in Ireland, the approach of the study and the findings provide knowledge of particular significance given the limited interpretative research on access to higher education, particularly in relation to young people from areas with high levels of disadvantage and low levels of participation in higher education. The findings of the study challenge dominant structural understandings and a barriers discourse about the relationship between disadvantage and participation in higher education and identifies the value of socio-cultural understandings.

Finally, below, the study provides detailed knowledge about developing widening participation practices and research required to support further development of

practice to increase participation in higher education for young adults from SED backgrounds in areas of disadvantage.

Learning from the thesis

One of the strengths of the research is the broad thematic approach that produced the knowledge about the range of factors that affect participation in higher education. However, it is clear that many of the themes that emerged would benefit from further examination, which was not possible to do in this study. A study with a longer timeframe may have allowed for a focus on some of the particularly interesting themes and their relationship with theories of class transformation through education. With the benefit of hindsight, there are also a number of things that I would have done differently. Firstly, a snowball approach to sampling would have been very interesting. Throughout the interviews, people referred to other young adults by way of explaining their views or as a contrast, and taking a snowball approach would have allowed for a flexible exploration of issues. Using this approach would have facilitated meeting with peer groups to examine further the role of peers. This would be particularly relevant to group three and group interviews with the peer groups might have allowed for a deeper exploration of some of the key themes.

Secondly, a specific focus on a small number of families, in which all members participated in higher education, some family members and only one member participated, would also have been an interesting approach and again would have enabled a deeper exploration of the relationship between family habitus and individual agency and identity. Thirdly, using an approach that specifically identified a group of young adults, who considered applying to higher education or who were in a position to do so but who decided not to apply, would be an interesting addition to the research, particularly to see if they belonged to groups two and three or if there was an additional group with a different orientation towards post-school options and decisions. Finally, an ethnographic study in a very local community and smaller area within the case-study area might have enabled a deeper understanding of some of the key findings.

In seeking to provide further knowledge on enabling factors regarding application to and participation in higher education and address the key questions identified in the literature review, there is a risk of understating the impact of disadvantage. Concerns about producing these 'stories of success' were voiced by interviewees, including concerns about access programmes 'life-boating individuals' rather than raising education participation in communities generally. A very different story could be told about the education experiences of young adults in the case study area, about ongoing disadvantage and new elements to it; but many of these stories have been told in research already. The stories in this study are needed to understand issues relating to access to higher education but there is a risk that these stories imply that anyone can access HE and a risk of underplaying the impact of disadvantage, a risk described by Reay in her article on the 'double-bind' of the working-class feminist academic (Reay 1997a). Perhaps the stories and findings in this research can only be told after and because the previous research has been done; maybe they should only be read in conjunction with the research described in the literature review, which outlines the extent of the impact of structural disadvantage and poverty. In addition, in these 'stories of success', there was evidence of hidden injuries of class (Sennet and Cobb 1977), evidence of considerable pressures on some of the young people when they graduate to support their families and contribute to their communities, evidence of relationship pressures and down-playing of the costs of these 'trajectories' (Mahony and Zmroczek 1997). Some of these issues are discussed below in relation to further research.

Implications for Practice

> Pointless stories are met with the withering rejoinder, 'So what?' Every good narrator is continually warding off this question; when his narrative is over it should be unthinkable for a bystander to say, 'So what?' (Labov 1972, quoted in Steedman 1986, p.12).

One of the strengths of doing a professional doctorate is being in a position to identify the implications for practice of this research and, as a committed practitioner, one of my key reasons for undertaking this study was to understand and, if required, seek to change policy and implement changes in practice in order to increase participation.

From the findings it is clear that changes can and do take place in relation to family participation in higher education over time and it is also evident that the difference between those who went to higher education and those who did not in groups two and three was slight, that there were not significant barriers for those who did not go, thus, an increase in higher education participation for such young adults is achievable. A number of changes in practice would support this increase. The socio-cultural approach used in this study highlights that there is a considerable wealth of knowledge about disadvantage within the education and community sectors in the case study area and commitment to addressing disadvantage but also shows that there is a polarisation of that knowledge and little acknowledgement of the breadth of factors affecting participation in higher education. This means that the limited conceptualisation of the relationship between disadvantage and participation in higher education in research and policy is not always challenged by practice. Thus, it is important that space is found in widening participation practice for socio-cultural understandings and a recognition of the range of factors and relationships that contribute to someone from an SED background and area applying to and participating in higher education. The evidence of the importance of the working class knowledge and experiences that young people and their families drew upon challenges the deficit and barriers discourse that is a feature of widening participation. The discourse of barriers is too limiting and does not reflect the experience of school-leavers from SED backgrounds. Quinn notes that:

> the university in the age of widened participation is a richer one because students have access to this sort of knowledge and make it part of their communal informal learning experience, even though my research indicated that its contribution was seldom formally recognised or drawn upon by lecturers (Quinn 2005, p.12).

It is also important that this knowledge is recognised and drawn upon at earlier stages of widening participation activities and HE entry. Burke writes that, 'it is not enough to identify patterns of under-representation or to develop "quick-fix" solutions to "life barriers" (Burke 2012, p.35). She argues that 'praxis of widening participation is needed to develop deep understandings, which draw together critical theories of inequalities in higher education, practice-based perspectives and lived and embodied educational and pedagogic experiences' (*ibid*, p.35).

One of the questions posed by the socio-cultural understanding is whether or not widening participation services should focus on working with parents or working more with young people as young adults. Often there are recommendations about working with parents in relation to second level school choice, subject choice and the higher education application process:

> Parents make a significant contribution to the educational development
> of their children through the advice and assistance they provide
> to them as they move through the schooling system. The challenge in
> policy terms is to support the parental role in such a way as to maximise
> student choices and outcomes (Byrne and Smyth 2011, p.197).

While work with parents may not do any harm, the findings suggest that such recommendations may be based on middle class understandings of the parent-child relationship and their respective roles in education decision-making. From this research, the working class 'child' has considerable autonomy and that autonomy and maturity is part of the process and move towards higher education. This could explain why parents in disadvantaged areas might not attend meetings about higher education decisions. A recurring theme in the research is that the key influencers in young people's networks engaged with the young adults as young adults and for those who spoke about challenges in school, many of their concerns revolved around being treated as a child. Perhaps the key issue is to work with parents through a community setting and focus on supporting parents to engage in learning themselves rather than expecting them to provide advice and guidance about education and post-school options to their children.

A related issue is the importance of working in partnership to promote access to higher education. For this to work effectively, it is important that the barriers discourse is rejected and that the full range of factors is recognised and voiced. It is also important that widening participation practitioners understand the local area, opportunity structures, patterns and trends in local school choice and school cultures, work in partnership with schools, with young people individually and in their specific peer groups and engage in extensive partnership working in the community. In light of the findings about the reserves of knowledge about disadvantage but also the polarisation of that knowledge, this partnership approach is key. Working in partnership to increase participation in higher education is likely

to be best achieved through the developing of radical careers education and guidance programmes, specifically designed for young people in disadvantaged areas. This radical programme should do the following:

- Harness the knowledge and experience of structural disadvantage that young people possess and place that knowledge in the context of sociology of education or politics with a focus on information about the rates of participation in higher education and discussion about why they are low in some areas

- Recognise and draw on the role of networks and influencers

- Provide a detailed understanding of the benefits of higher education from local role models

- Provide a comprehensive programme that explains graduate jobs and the links between a young person's current knowledge, HE programmes and such occupations

- Include a process of persistent pushing of higher education by guidance counsellors and other influential people in the pupil's network

- Present information in terms that are relevant to such young adults, for example, using hourly rates of pay rather than annual salaries to explain the financial benefits of graduate jobs.

This programme can only be delivered effectively in partnership by the education and community sectors with open space for education and community personnel from the different sectors to voice and discuss their concerns about the other sectors and to share their extensive knowledge and commitment. Many of the interviewees spoke about how there was no space to discuss and debate these concerns with other education and community sectors. Thus, higher education widening participation services could provide the structure through a widening participation network to facilitate discussions and practice that move beyond the traditional sectoral divides in Irish education and community training structures. This type of radical careers education programme may pose challenges for guidance programmes based on theories of matching or individual decision-making. Law's proposals for careers education programmes based partly on community-interaction theory (Law 2002,

1999, 1981) may offer a partial framework for this type of careers education programme.

The findings about the three different groups within the participants in the study highlights the diversity that exists within SED, even within a small disadvantaged group attending similar schools, from the same area and a similar background. Related to this diversity are two distinct but inter-related key issues for widening participation: access to more prestigious courses and institutions and access to higher education. For the young people in group one in this study, the issue was not access to higher education per se but access to certain courses and institutions. For students in groups two and three, the key issue was access to higher education. A key question for widening participation activity is whether the priority is facilitating someone to get a higher preference from their list of HE course choices who is on track for some form of higher education or whether the priority is assisting students from groups two and three into higher education. If resources are limited or institutions have specific agendas this should be voiced openly. A risk is that widening participation activities with schools aimed at raising awareness or familiarity with higher education are directed towards, or availed of, by those in group one who, by virtue of their networks and knowledge about higher education, are already considering higher education. Thus, it is critical that activities are also targeted specifically at students in groups two and three.

In order to implement these diverse approaches, a way of identifying students in second level is required and it seems likely that this could be achieved with a questionnaire and/or interview early in the junior cycle. This questionnaire/interview could involve questions about their primary school choice and experience, transfer from primary school, their immediate and extended family experience of higher education, their own knowledge of higher education, their activities and networks, their sense of identity and what they want in life. Thus, indicators of disadvantage for access related activities that reflect the key issues impacting on access to higher education and the diversity within SED are required, rather than indicators of disadvantage used for other purposes.

Many of the students spoke of difficulties adjusting to higher education socially and it is also clear that achieving a graduate job is particularly important for the individuals and communities, thus providing post-entry support and pre-graduation support is important for students in all three groups. Access entry routes and outreach activities to promote access to the more prestigious courses are also important for participants in group one. In addition to the above, for those in group two, resources and access activities at decision stage and senior cycle together with specific additional academic support would be helpful. In addition to all of the above, for group three resources and access activities early in second level would be important. Such activities need to draw on issues concerned with their experience of disadvantage and individual and peer group identities and desires.

In relation to higher education grants, it is very clear that these are a key support and that information about them is important. All participants were reliant on grants and they were critical to helping them cope with and stay in higher and further education. If fees are reintroduced, information about grants becomes especially important. It would be very difficult to sell a student loan system to some of the students as few of the participants or their families have any experience of taking on that level of debt and for students in groups two and three quality employment opportunities might be more attractive.

The issue of an information gap and better information and guidance is a familiar recommendation regarding access for young adults from an SED background. Simplistic policy recommendations based on an 'information barriers' discourse are unlikely to address this issue. My findings are similar to those of Hutchings (2003) but from my research, 'hot knowledge' solutions are not simply widening participation personnel available in a high street 'shop' or having informal taster programmes; rather it must also involve working through the school and community and those network members who are key influencers. It is also not simply a matter of providing information and guidance: often the information is provided but it does not resonate with individuals due to content, method or timing. Diverse strategies involving content, method and timing for different groups are required, depending on their orientation towards higher education.

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There is a specific information issue regarding the difference between higher education and further education. The hiberno-English use of 'college' with reference to any post-school education option seems to contribute to the confusion regarding the differences between the FE and HE sectors. Students who attended further education appeared to be closer to accessing higher education at the point of leaving school than they were at the end of their FE programme; in effect they moved further away from higher education notwithstanding an additional one or two years of education. It seems likely then that access programmes in further education and access entry routes targeted at students from an SED background, similar to those in second level, would be of benefit.

If the changes outlined above were introduced some increase in participation in higher education could be achieved for such students from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds. However, there are wider key questions that need to be addressed. Currently in Ireland many higher education institutions reserve places for students from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds at a lower level of academic entry requirements, however, if the aim is to achieve equal representation this approach would not suffice: either places would need to increase across higher education or an increase in representative targets/quotas for students from SED backgrounds with a decrease in places available for non-SED students would be required. The national strategy for higher education acknowledged the need for a continued focus on access but emphasised that the admissions process 'must continue to be - and to be seen to be - rigorous, fair and objective' (Department of Education and Skills, 2011 p.54). More recent national discussions about entry to higher education from second level, as part of a wider debate about the relationship between second level and third level, question whether or not a process that leads to such disparity in patterns of access could be described as 'fair' (NCCA and HEA 2011). The discussions about a possible re-introduction of fees are also bringing into focus issues about disadvantage and participation in higher education. From the findings of this study, it is clear that there are a number of issues missing from these debates: there needs to be a greater recognition of heterogeneous experiences and diversity within disadvantage; greater understanding of how this diversity and different orientations and desires impact on participation in higher education; and an acknowledgement of the interlinking of identity,

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desires, income and financial coping strategies in relation to young adults' decision making about post-school options from low income families.

The nuances and complexities of the relationship between disadvantage and participation in higher education need to be acknowledged and taken into account in the development of policy and practice. The findings also suggest that the current indicators available to identify disadvantage in relation to access to higher education may be misleading in terms of where to place a focus for widening participation if the concern is addressing low participation in disadvantaged areas, rather than a concern only with increasing numbers. Who participates in higher education, the relationship between disadvantage and HE participation, definitions and indicators of socio-economic disadvantage, the number of HE places and the operation of quotas remains an issue and needs thorough analysis.

It is clear that there are changes in widening participation practices that would likely result in some increase in participation directly from second level school and from further education. However, the comments from participants in the research, including young adults, network members and education and community personnel suggest that entry into specific classes in first year in second level school is key if higher education is to remain an option. This transfer appears to reflect both earlier primary school choice and primary school experience, which itself appears to be linked to wider issues associated with socio-economic and familial disadvantage. It appears that for some young people in the case study area, higher education is effectively ruled out for them from an early age. Research by Gillborn and Youdell (2000) on the operation of streaming and 'setting' practices in second level schools highlighted how it led to disproportionate numbers of Black students and students from working class backgrounds in lower sets in the schools (Gillborn and Youdell 2000, p.132). The findings also showed it had a negative effect on students in lower sets (*ibid,* pp.70-71 and pp.168-9) and concluded that the concern about students in lower sets becoming disillusioned with education 'was well-founded' (*ibid,* p.175). This is a key issue in relation to widening participation and there is a need for higher education widening participation services and policy-makers to, at a minimum, reflect and state clearly how they position themselves in relation to this issue, and the extent to which they engage with these broader concerns.

In relation to achieving higher levels of change, one of the difficulties in Ireland is that there is still insufficient research on which to develop practices and a need for additional types of research. There is a need for a widening participation research network in Ireland which could bring together current researchers in the area, influence the development and commissioning of national research, argue the case for a broader range of research and debate the different types of knowledge required for access policy and practice. The recent actions by the national office for equity of access to establish such a network are very positive developments. In the next section, I outline some recommendations for further research arising from the findings of this study.

Further Research

There are a number of further research studies that could build on this study.

1.   Area-based case studies

Further area-based case study research on educational outcomes is required with studies conducted in a number of different types of areas. Such a study would examine educational outcomes, including participation in higher education, and include analysis based on address, second level school attended, primary school attended, gender, socio-economic data and newcomer status together with individual socio-economic information, position in family and immediate and extended family experience of education. This is complex research but it is only this combination of data that will highlight the complexity of analysing participation in higher education and will provide knowledge about opportunity structures, school choice and the relationship between disadvantage and access to higher education in Ireland.

2. Research on how change in education patterns occur

Further research on the role of networks and community experiences in relation to education outcome and participation in higher education would be useful in understanding the role of social capital.

A study with parents, siblings and extended family of applicants and participants from SED backgrounds in higher education, independently of the young adults, might enable a deeper understanding of significant actions that shape a family habitus with regard to education practices.

A study examining the class outcomes and children's educational outcomes and experiences of a group of siblings or a group of friends who had different post-school outcomes might provide insight into how intergenerational shifts occur and possible implications for understanding the relationship between definitions of disadvantage and participation in higher education

3.   Research on the benefits and costs of transformations

Comments from participants in this study about their sense of self suggest that a study with graduates from an SED background examining the impact of participating in higher education and the impact of being from an SED background on their sense of identity, family and peer relationships and career development would be valuable.

A study examining sibling influence on education and the implications for sibling relationships would provide understanding about the process and possible costs of transition or not to higher education.

4.   Life-course study

A life course study of a group of young adults from an SED background and disadvantaged school as they entered and completed their final year in school would be an interesting development of the study, however, such a study might raise ethical issues for anyone whose work involves promoting access to higher education. This type of study might clarify whether or not there are significant numbers of students who could apply to higher education but who do not, and examine the factors that influence that decision. This might contribute to a better understanding of class fractions in relation to education.

5. <u>Longitudinal study on consequences of not accessing HE at school-leaving stage</u>

In this study the young adults who did not access higher education upon leaving school appeared to have moved further away from higher education in the subsequent years and had no intention of applying to higher education, notwithstanding the fact they had attended further education and many were working in education settings. A longitudinal research study involving young adults from an SED background who applied but did not access higher education would enable insight into the significance or not for participation in higher education of the school-leaving turning point and the impact of their experiences in further education.

6. <u>Qualitative comparative studies on enabling factors</u>

A study comparing factors affecting access to higher education for young people from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds in an inner city area of disadvantage and access for young adults from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds in a mixed area and non-disadvantaged schools would be a valuable addition to understanding the relationship between disadvantage and participation in higher education.

Concluding comments

My rationale for doing this thesis was a commitment to widening participation and belief that access to higher education has implications for individuals, communities, higher education institutions and society. From my personal, professional and learning experiences, it seemed that the focus in access research, policy and practice on barriers, structural perspectives and viewing the experiences of young people from SED backgrounds through a comparison with the experiences of students who were not from that background, produced limited understandings of the relationship between disadvantage and participation in education. It seemed that additional knowledge was required about enabling factors in their own socio-cultural experiences in their locality to fully understand the relationship between disadvantage and participation in higher education and to develop practices to increase participation in higher education. Practitioners, especially those with some

level of personal experience of accessing higher education from a type of working class background, are particularly well-placed to work with young adults to generate a different type of knowledge that recognises the resources and relationships in young people's lives, families, schools and communities in areas of disadvantage and to drive for change at as many levels as possible.

Undertaking this doctorate and thesis has enabled me to understand the value of different types of knowledge, to better understand the relationship between disadvantage and participation in higher education and the broad range of factors affecting participation in higher education. The experience has also highlighted the value of research and of a range of types of research and provided me with an understanding and confidence to seek to influence policy and practice through research. Finally, listening to people's stories has strengthened my desire and commitment to challenge dominant understandings and seek change and has enabled me to identify and implement changes in practice to support increased levels of participation in higher education for young adults from SED backgrounds in disadvantaged areas.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A: Participant Information Sheets

A 1. Participant Information Sheet: Young Adult
Research project title: The factors affecting participation in higher education in Ireland for students from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds.

Invitation to take part in a research project
You are being invited to take part in a research project. Before you decide it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please take time to read the following information carefully and discuss it with others if you wish. Ask me if there is anything that is not clear or if you would like more information. Take time to decide whether or not you wish to take part. Thank you for reading this.

What is the aim of the research?
The aim of the project is to explore the factors which affect who does and who does not participate in higher education in Ireland for students from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds from the inner city. Specifically the objectives of the project are to explore what factors led to you applying to study in higher education and what factors influenced whether or not you started in higher education.
The project will begin in July 2008 and will be completed by June 2010. You are being asked to participate by meeting me for one or two interviews during 2009.

Why have I been chosen?
You are being asked to participate because you attended a school in the inner city and because you applied or considered applying for access entry to higher education.

Do I have to take part?
It is up to you to decide whether or not to take part. If you decide not to take part, this will not affect you in any way. If you do decide to take part you will be given this information sheet to keep (and be asked to sign a consent form). If you decide to take part at this stage, you are still free to withdraw at any stage and without giving a reason.

What will happen if I take part?
You will be asked to meet with me for one or two interviews for approx 1-2 hours during 2009. During the interview I will ask questions about your experiences and decisions about education and about what influenced those experiences and decisions.

I will also ask if there is any person who was key in your decisions about college and if I could interview that person. There is no problem if you do not want that or if the person does not want to be interviewed.

I will ask your permission to record the interview (s) on a dictaphone. The recordings will be stored securely and will only be used to transcribe the interview into written form.
I will also ask your permission to use the information from your access application form (if applicable).

What do I have to do?
Answer questions about your experiences and decisions about education.

What are the possible disadvantages and risks of taking part?
The main disadvantage is that it will take up some of your time and you will have to think about your experiences and decisions.

What are the possible benefits of taking part?
The main benefit to you is that you will have a chance to reflect on the decisions that you have made and possibly look at why you made some of those decisions. This may be of help in making other future decisions about education or career. It is also hoped that this work will give greater understanding of the factors which affect why some students from inner city schools go to college and some do not. With that greater understanding we could then develop better supports for students from those schools.

What happens when the research study stops?
The results will be written up for a doctorate in education with the University of Sheffield during 2009 and 2010.

What if something goes wrong?
The research is being done under the ethical guidelines of the University of Sheffield and care has been taken to minimise the risk of anything going wrong. You will be given an opportunity to say how you felt about participating in the research. If you have any complaints about the experience, please discuss them with me. You can also contact the supervisor of the research, Professor Sue Webb, on the number below.

Will my taking part in this project be kept confidential?
All information which is collected about you during the course of the research will be kept strictly confidential. Any information about you which is disseminated will have your name and address removed so that you cannot be recognised from it.

What happens to the results of the research project?
The results of the research will be written up in a doctorate which will be available in a library in the University of Sheffield from 2010. If you would like a copy please contact me and I will provide a copy. The data from the research may also be used for future publications and may be discussed at meetings about Access. However, you will not be identified in any way.

Who is organising and funding the research?
As I am working in the Access Service in xxx, xxx pays my fees for the doctorate.

Who has reviewed the project?
Before contacting you, a committee of staff at the University of Sheffield reviewed the project to ensure that it meets ethical requirements.

Further information
Julie Bernard: Tel. xxx
Project Supervisor: Professor Sue Webb, University of Sheffield   Tel. xxx

A 2. Participant Information Sheet: Network member

Research project title: The factors affecting participation in higher education in Ireland for students from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds.

<u>**Invitation to take part in a research project**</u>
You are being invited to take part in a research project. Before you decide it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please take time to read the following information carefully and discuss it with others if you wish. Ask me if there is anything that is not clear or if you would like more information. Take time to decide whether or not you wish to take part. Thank you for reading this.

<u>**What is the aim of the research?**</u>
The aim of the project is to explore the factors which affect who does and who does not participate in higher education in Ireland for students from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds from the inner city. Specifically the objectives of the project are to explore what factors led to people applying or considering applying to study in higher education and what factors influenced whether or not they started in higher education.
The project will begin in July 2008 and will be completed by June 2010. You are being asked to participate by meeting me for one interview during 2009.

<u>**Why have I been chosen?**</u>
You are being asked to participate because _____ identified you as being key to his/her decisions about college. _____ was asked to participate because he/she attended a school in the inner city and because he/she applied or considered applying for access entry to higher education.

<u>**Do I have to take part?**</u>
It is up to you to decide whether or not to take part. If you decide not to take part, this will not affect you in any way. If you do decide to take part you will be given this information sheet to keep (and be asked to sign a consent form). If you decide to take part at this stage, you are still free to withdraw at any stage and without giving a reason.

<u>**What will happen if I take part?**</u>
You will be asked to meet with me for one interview for approx 1-2 hours during 2009. During the interview I will ask questions about how you were key to _____ decisions about education and college.

I will ask your permission to record the interview (s) on a dictaphone. The recordings will be stored securely and will only be used to transcribe the interview into written form.

<u>**What do I have to do?**</u>
Answer questions about your possible influence on _____ education and

decisions about college.

What are the possible disadvantages and risks of taking part?
The main disadvantage is that it will take up some of your time and you will have to think about your experiences and decisions.

What are the possible benefits of taking part?
The main benefit to you is that you will have a chance to reflect on your role in _____ decisions about education and college. It is hoped that this work will give greater understanding of the factors which affect why some students from inner city schools go to college and some do not. With that greater understanding we could then develop better supports for students from those schools and area.

What happens when the research study stops?
The results will be written up for a doctorate in education with the University of Sheffield during 2009 and 2010.

What if something goes wrong?
The research is being done under the ethical guidelines of the University of Sheffield and care has been taken to minimise the risk of anything going wrong. You will be given an opportunity to say how you felt about participating in the research. If you have any complaints about the experience, please discuss them with me. You can also contact the supervisor of the research, Professor Sue Webb, on the number below.

Will my taking part in this project be kept confidential?
All information which is collected about you during the course of the research will be kept strictly confidential. Any information about you which is disseminated will have your name and address removed so that you cannot be recognised from it.

What happens to the results of the research project?
The results of the research will be written up in a doctorate which will be available in a library in the University of Sheffield from 2010. If you would like a copy please contact me and I will provide a copy. The data from the research may also be used for future publications and may be discussed at meetings about Access. However, you will not be identified in any way.

Who is organising and funding the research?
As I am working in the Access Service in xxx, xxx pays my fees for the doctorate.

Who has reviewed the project?
Before contacting you, a committee of staff at the University of Sheffield reviewed the project to ensure that it meets ethical requirements.

Further information
Julie Bernard Tel. xxx
Project Supervisor: Professor Sue Webb, University of Sheffield Tel. xxx

Appendix B: Participant Consent Form

Title of Project: The factors affecting participation in higher education in Ireland for students from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds.

Name of Researcher: Julie Bernard
Participant Identification Number for this project:

Please initial box

1. I confirm that I have read and understand the information sheet dated *[insert date]* for the above project and have had the opportunity to ask questions.

2. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time without giving any reason.

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

4. I give permission for members of the research team to have access to data from my application to xxx access entry (if applicable).

5. I give permission for the interview(s) to be recorded.

6. I agree to take part in the above research project.

_____   _____   _____
Name of Participant   Date   Signature
(*or legal representative*)

_____   _____   _____
Name of person taking consent   Date   Signature
(*if different from lead researcher*)
To be signed and dated in presence of the participant

_____   _____   _____
Lead Researcher   Date   Signature
To be signed and dated in presence of the participant

Copies:
Once this has been signed by all parties the participant should receive a copy of the signed and dated participant consent form, the letter/pre-written script/information sheet and any other written information provided to the participants. A copy for the signed and dated consent form should be placed in the project's main record (e.g. a site file), which must be kept in a secure location.

Appendix C: Interview Protocol and Areas of Focus in Aide Memoire

C 1. Young Adult

1. **Introduction and thanks**
2. **Explanation + Questions**
3. **Consent + Questions**

4. **Current situation**
   What doing at the moment?
   How is it going? Like/not like/ different

5. **What led to applying to college?**
6. **Experience of education**
   School choice
   Junior cycle experience, subjects, results
   Streaming?
   Transition year?
   Senior cycle
   Attainment
   Experience of education enjoyed/not etc
   Role of teachers
   Culture of school
   Guidance counselling

   Primary school choice
   Primary school experience
   Transfer from primary to second level

   Many other students apply to Higher Education?
   Morning/evening routine?

7. **Friends**
   What are friends doing now?;
   Friends during school discussed with
   Relationship with friends in college and those not in college.

8. **Role of neighbourhood/community**
   Not many go to HE – why is that?
   Have you always lived in the area?
   Parents and grandparents from the area?
   Extended family in area?
   Own home or type of housing?

9. **Family**
   Anyone else in HE? (whole family)

Family history of education?
Homework, learning games
Exams
Strict about study?   Where study?
Attitudes to education?
What do your parents want for you?
Similar or different kind of life to them? (Occupations)
Where do you come in the family?
Who is at home? Sibling occupations/education
Health and caring roles?
What did they think about you applying to HE? Positive/negative?
Family relationships
Coping with transition + Happiness
Impact on child-parent relationship?
Involvement with school?
Family involved in neighbourhood or local politics/union/education?

10. **Self**
How would you describe yourself?
Hobbies/interests: what, why, where, when, with whom, what role in your life?
Part-time work?
When first wanted to go to HE?
Any key experiences that influenced this?
Who did you know in HE?
Turning points?
Sense of having choices?

11. **Back to why applied to HE & Process of applying**
Which courses + why? (Level 8/ level 6/7)
Why those colleges?
What did you know about college?
What did it feel like?
Who was involved in the application process?
(Pull towards HE/course or away from?)

12. **What happened from February to September?**
Preparing for HE; managing the transition? Feelings about it?
Leaving Cert experience, subjects, results?
Change of mind?
When got results
When got offer (above or below?)
How feel preparing for HE? (identity?)
Reaction of family, friends?
How feel re access?

13. **Other factors affecting participation in area?**
What do you think?
Role of money?
Grants: eligible for or receiving grant?

Role of grant?
Family income and sources
What would change the situation?

14. **Networks and significant influencers?**
You mentioned _____
 Is there anyone else who is key?
 People key possibly interviewed?

15. **Draw to close**
Address any education/ethical issues and questions
Feedback on experience/impact of interview?
Questions?
Follow-up contact
Thank you

C 2. Network member

1.   **Introduction and thanks**

2.   **Explanation + Questions**

3.   **Consent + Questions**

4.   Why do you think xxx identified you as an influence?

5.   Nature of relationship

6.   Actions

7.   Consciously promote higher education?

8.   Impact of actions/relationship?

9.   Participation is low in area: Why
   Why and how xxx participate in HE?

10.   Other comments?

11.   **Draw to close**
    Address any issues or questions
    Experience of interview?
    Questions?
    Follow-up contact
    Thank you

C 3. Education and Community Personnel

1.   **Introduction and thanks**

2.   **Explanation + Questions**

3.   **Consent + Questions**

4.   Why is participation in higher education low in the area?
        Follow up on comments and themes

5.   For those who do participate, what are the factors?
        Follow up on comments and themes

<u>Other areas to discuss</u>
6.   Role of schools – primary and second level?
7.   Role of family?
8.   Nature of community and impact?
9.   Perceptions and attitudes towards higher education?
10.   Role of peers?
11.   Individual?
12.   Money?
13.   Influencers?
14.   Other factors?
15.   What produces change – how is it some do participate in higher education?
16.   What could lead to increases in participation in higher education for young people from the area?
17.   Other comments

18.   **Draw to close**
        Address any issues or questions
        Experience of interview?
        Questions?
        Follow-up contact
        Thank you

Appendix D: Initial Coding

Primary School
Primary School Choice
Primary School Experience
Role & impact of primary school
Reading
Literacy
Early identifying of students
Language use and standardised tests
Actions to encourage further education
Teaching approaches
Role of principal
Role of teachers
Issues re teacher retention and motivation
Lack of resources and facilities
Difficulties with social services

Second Level School Experience
Choice of second level school
- Differences amongst siblings
Favourite Subjects
Not like subjects
Subject Choice
- Junior Cycle
- Senior cycle
Junior Cert exam
Senior Cycle

Leaving Cert Experience
Dropping from higher to lower level

School Issues
Schools market and relationships
Schools reputation & school-specific issues

Primary-secondary gap and differences
Streaming, banding or not
Comments about other classes in year
Resources

Transition Year
Leaving Certificate Applied

Quality of teaching
Managing poor teachers
Role of principal
Early school leaving
Bullying and problems with other students
Pupil-teacher relationship

School culture
- Sport
School providing contacts and opportunities
School actions re promoting HE
School potentially limiting HE
- Limited subject choice
After school study
Extra support

Education policy
Impact of Home-school-community-liaison
Impact of School Completion

Parents own experience
Who at home
Parents where from
Parents' families
Parents own experience of education
Parents work
Parents travel abroad

Parenting
Approach to parenting and practices
Parents emotional capital
Parent-child relationship
- Change in relationship with parent since or result of going to FE/HE?

Attitudes to education
- Mother
- Father
Parent attitude to applying to HE
- Encouragement
- Issue of happiness
Parent involvement in application process
Parent reaction to college offer

Parents desire for child
Parental reflexivity re wanting something different
Similar/different life to parents
Parental agency
Parent-parent relationship and influence

Siblings
Position in family
Siblings' education experience
Siblings' post-school outcomes
Relationships with siblings
Influence of siblings
Younger siblings

Extended family
Size of extended family
Grandparents
Experience of HE in Extended family
Influence of Extended family
Family narratives of two different trends

Home-school
Attendance
Homework & study
Morning/evening routine
Parental Involvement with school
Teacher-parent relationship

Family involved in community
Paid community work
Voluntary work
Return to education
Politics
Public role/job

Individual
Understanding and experience of disadvantage
      - Internalising structures
Identity
      - Class identity
      - Academic identity
      - HE and identity
Attitudes to education

Personality and characteristics
Motivation
Confidence or not
      - Avoiding risk
Values
Responsibilities

What want and don't want
- Not settling
- Desire to do better
- Different kind of life
- Enjoy and interest
- Wanting to make people proud
- Role model
- Determination, remaining strong, resisting pressures
- Ability to cope with change

Individual agency – active steps towards a different kind of life
- Keeping education open

Hobbies and Activities
- Sport
- Gaeltacht
- Other
Volunteering
P/t work and work experience

Peers
'Choice' of Friends
Role of group of friends
Peer group determination and support
Doing their own thing

Class/year group
Different groups within cohort

What friends doing post-school
Reaction of friends to HE
Friendship patterns
Relationships (boyfriend/girlfriend)

Area history and development
History of area
Contrast with other areas
Regeneration& Boom
Recession
Area Change
- Education activities & attitudes
- Education outcomes
- New HEI in area

Local education trends
Impact of other policies

Community
Poverty
Housing
- From flat to house
- Where study

Own area and what is viewed as local
Perceptions of area by people outside the area and impact

Area pressures
- What is valued
- Crime and drugs
- Cars
- Pregnancy when young
- Impact on young people

Area 'mentality'
Attitudes towards HE & pressures for young people doing something different
Young people applying to HE and relationship with others in area
Others in HE in area

Ill-health
Caring and other responsibilities
Young people and freedom/growing up early

Community spirit
People know everyone or not
Connection to area – stay or leave

Neighbours

Reasons for applying to HE
Job
Travel
Independence
Be a role model
Make someone proud
Meet new people
College activities
Study and subjects
Do something different
Avoid/escape disadvantage
Better life
Earnings
Encouraged by someone
Interest

Benefits of HE: hoping/believing/knowing

Information and Guidance

Applying to HE
Age first thought of HE
Course choice
HEI choice
Knowledge of post-school options
Knowledge of application system
Knowledge and experience of HE
Experience of application process
Process of applying
Not applied

Results, Offers and Decisions
Getting results
Receiving an offer
Making decision re offer
Reaction of others to offer and HE

Influencers and networks
Nature of networks
Who involved
Any influencers?
Why X an influence?
How an influence
Other comments from influencers re influence
Person's background
Not to be interviewed

HE Experience
Preparing for HE
First day in HE
Adjusting to HE
Will going to HE/FE change you?
Future after HE/FE - what want in life
Pressures on YP after HE
Dropping out of HE

HE sector issues affecting participation in HE

Access
Access initiatives

Access entry routes
Access post-entry
Role of access

Other Post-school options (FE/work/return to education)
Further education applying, recruitment and experience
Full-time work
Return to education?

Turning Points

Impact of Money?
Pressure to get a f/t job
Pressure to work part-time
Grants
    - Information about grants and lack
Coping strategies re HE/FE and money
Guilt re money
Young person 'handing up' money
Money as a barrier or not?
Family income

Gender issues

Newcomer students and ethnicity
Changes faced
School choice
Experience of education
Comments about
Life before move, why move and impact of moving on education

Specific comments about 'Exceptions'
How explain/not know
None
Apply but do not access?
Can be identified early
Parental encouragement
Answers to question: if parents from similar background, how come some 'value'
HE
Home stability or lack
Personality
Parents politicised
Social capital
Resilience, persistence

Interventions
Concerns about focus on those who access

Class
Indicators of class
- Access
- Appearance
- Clothes

Class fractions/stratification
School and class
Class transition

Criticism of education sectors
Primary schools
Second level
Higher education

Additional comments re why numbers in area in HE are low?
Curriculum not reflective of experience and knowledge
Home-school gap

Lack of knowledge and understanding of school system
Limited knowledge and experience of HE
Limited parental knowledge and experience of ed
Lack of role models
'College' as all post-school
Parent desire but not knowing
Criticism of parents
Lack of social capital

Attitudes towards HE
Low parent expectation
Lack of parental encouragement
Values
- Lack of valuing of education
- Different values
No homework culture/insistence of study

Confidence – lack of
Fears
'Not getting above yourself'

Low teacher expectations
Poor teaching

Poor resources in school
Poor social services

Inadequate learning support

Difficulties in school
Don't like school
Individual issue
Interest in job
Laziness
Lack of aspiration
Education attainment and underachievement

Area pressures
Family difficulties
Availability of work – docks v education
Financial pressures
Attitudes of others towards area

Lack of student motivation
IQ/genes

Suggestions for further change

Appendix E: Socio-economic background of young adult participants

Name	Type of housing	Parent(s) occupation and economic status	Parent(s) level of education	No of Siblings + position in family + sibling education and occupation
Kate	Unknown	M: working in home F: taxi-driver	M: early 2nd level F: early 2nd level	Oldest Two younger sisters in school
Kevin	Public housing rented	M: part-time shop assistant and receiving social welfare F: not known Lives with mother	M: Inter (Junior) Cert F: Leaving Cert	Youngest Older sister: degree, working in bank Older brother: Junior Certificate, electrician Older sister: degree and studying at postgraduate level
Patrick	Public housing rented	M: community worker F: taxi-driver, previously working in removal company, jewellers	M: early 2nd level F: early 2nd level Mother did some Junior and Leaving Cert subjects as an adult	Middle: 2nd of 4 Older sister: further education, legal secretary Younger brother in further education Younger brother in school
Louise	Unknown	M: cleaner F: taxi-driver	M: early 2nd level F: primary level	Oldest Younger sister in school Younger brother in school

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Name	Type of housing	Parent(s) occupation and economic status	Parent(s) level of education	No of Siblings + position in family + sibling education and occupation
Michael	Private rented by self	Not known Refugee and former Separated Child	M: 2nd level and further education F: higher education	Not known
Emily	Public housing rented	M: not working, receiving social welfare. Previously worked in after schools club, charity shop on community employment F: no contact	M: early 2nd level	Oldest Younger sister in school
Brigita	Private rented	M: not working and receiving social welfare. Previously worked as a chef. In country of origin, had qualified in teaching but did not practice. F: diving instructor Parents divorced and lives with mother. Father not in Ireland.	M: higher education but cannot use qualification in Ireland. F: further education	Only child
Veronica	Private rented	M: beautician; managed own business and qualified nurse in country of origin. D: engineer Parents divorced and lives with mother. Father not in Ireland.	M: higher education but cannot use qualification in Ireland. F: higher education as mature student	Oldest Younger brother in school

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Name	Type of housing	Parent(s) occupation and economic status	Parent(s) level of education	No of Siblings + position in family + sibling education and occupation
Jane	Public housing rented	M: not working and receiving social welfare, previously cleaner F: scaffolder, handyman; U/E Lives with mother	M: primary level F: primary level	Youngest Older brother: masters, accountant Older sister: Leaving Cert, crèche worker Older sister: degree, office work
Group 2				
Rachel	Public housing rented	M: working in the home, previously shop assistant F: carpet fitter, sometimes not working	M: early 2nd level F: primary	Middle Older sister: degree Brother studying in higher education
Jack	Public housing rented	M: part-time community worker and receiving social welfare, previously classroom-assistant F: taxi-driver Lives with mother	M: Leaving Cert F: primary level	Oldest 1 younger sister in school
Luke	Own house	M: working in home, previously cleaner, shopworker. F: factory worker	M: early 2nd level F: early 2nd level	Middle: 3rd of 6 Older brother in higher education Older brother: Leaving Cert, travelling. 2 younger brothers in school 1 younger sister in school

Name	Type of housing	Parent(s) occupation and economic status	Parent(s) level of education	No of Siblings + position in family + sibling education and occupation
Karen	Own house	M: bookkeeper F: taxi driver	M: Inter (Junior) Cert F: Inter (Junior) Cert	Middle Older brother: junior cert, apprenticeship, working in trade Younger sister in school
James	Public housing rented	M: community worker F: taxi driver, previously worked in removal company, jewellers	M: early 2nd level F: early 2nd level Mother did some Junior and Leaving Cert subjects as an adult	Middle Older sister: further education, legal secretary Older brother in higher education Younger brother in school
Frank	Public housing rented	M: not working and receiving social welfare, occasionally works as home-help F: not known Lives with mother	M: early 2nd level F: not known	Oldest 3 younger siblings in school
Gary	Public housing rented	M: not known F: fire warden Lives with father	M: 2nd level F: 2nd level	Oldest of 3 2 younger siblings in school

Name	Type of housing	Parent(s) occupation and economic status	Parent(s) level of education	No of Siblings + position in family + sibling education and occupation
Catherine	Public housing rented	M: cleaner, not working and receiving social welfare F: not working and receiving social welfare, occasionally carpet-fitting	M: Inter (Junior) Cert F: Inter (Junior) Cert	Middle of 5 Older brother: Junior Cert, electrician Older brother: Junior Cert, plumber 2 younger brothers in school
Group 3				
Alison	Public housing rented	M: cleaner, worked in crèche, fruit factory, sewing factory F: deceased, delivery man	M: primary level F: primary level	Youngest Older sister: early 2nd level, worked p/t in shop; employment training Older brother: early 2nd level, not working and receiving social welfare Older brother: Junior Cert, training programme
Fiona	Public housing rented	M: not working and receiving social welfare, previously general operator F: not working and receiving social welfare, previously painter Lives with mother.	M: primary level F: primary level Mother did some Junior Cert subjects as an adult	Middle: 4th of 5 Older sister: Junior Cert, not working and receiving social welfare. Older sister: Junior Cert, works p/t in crèche on community employment programme Older sister: Leaving Cert, works p/t in after-school club Younger sister in youth training

Name	Type of housing	Parent(s) occupation and economic status	Parent(s) level of education	No of Siblings + position in family + sibling education and occupation
Michelle	Own house	M: community employment programme, previously machinist, cleaning, catering F: deceased, roofer, worked on oil rigs	M: primary level F: primary level	Youngest Older sister: further education, working in finance Older brother: Early 2nd level, plumber Older brother: Leaving Cert, plumber Older brother: Leaving Cert, building company Older brother: Junior Cert, not working.

Appendix F: Chart of network members who had an influence on education experiences and decisions about post-school options

Name	Members of networks who were influential by promoting and 'pushing' higher education	Network members identified as having a significant influence on their education	Other network members who provided information, advice or encouragement about higher education or further education	Experience of HE in network at time of HE application	Network members interviewed
Group 1					
Kate	Primary school teacher	Parents	University education lecturer, who was parents' friend and who provided advice about studying education	Aunt and cousins: graduates	Primary school teacher
Kevin	Two older sisters Form teacher Neighbour	Mother		Two older sisters: graduates	Older sister Form teacher

Name	Members of networks who were influential by promoting and 'pushing' higher education	Network members identified as having a significant influence on their education	Other network members who provided information, advice or encouragement about higher education or further education	Experience of HE in network at time of HE application	Network members interviewed
Patrick		Gaeltacht principal and subject teacher in school Sports coach and vice-principal Friends from different social backgrounds Girls in Gaeltacht Parents		None	Gaeltacht principal and subject teacher Sports coach and vice-principal
Louise	Cousin	Friends Mother	Local politician, with whom father did voluntary work and who provided information about grants	Cousins in HE and graduates	Mother (Some of the friends were also participants but were not interviewed as network members)
Michael	Home-school community liaison officer	Parents		Father and aunt: graduates	Home-school community liaison officer

Name	Members of networks who were influential by promoting and 'pushing' higher education	Network members identified as having a significant influence on their education	Other network members who provided information, advice or encouragement about higher education or further education	Experience of HE in network at time of HE application	Network members interviewed
Emily	Guidance counsellor Friends Mother	Uncle		Cousin: graduate	
Brigita	Mother		Older friends who were in higher education and who provided information about higher education institutions	Mother, grandmother and aunt: graduates	
Veronica	Mother		Older friends who were in higher education and who provided information about higher education institutions	Mother, father, aunts and grandmother: graduates	

Name	Members of networks who were influential by promoting and 'pushing' higher education	Network members identified as having a significant influence on their education	Other network members who provided information, advice or encouragement about higher education or further education	Experience of HE in network at time of HE application	Network members interviewed
Jane	Father Older brother	Mother Neighbour who was a dance teacher		Older brother, older sister and cousins: graduates	
Group 2					
Rachel	Youth club leaders	Mother Sister		Older sister completing HE and brother entered HE at same time as Rachel	Youth club leader Mother
Jack	Guidance counsellor	Sports coach and teacher Mother Uncles and cousins		None	Guidance counsellor Sports coach and teacher
Luke	Guidance counsellor	Mother Brother		Older brother in HE	Guidance counsellor

Name	Members of networks who were influential by promoting and 'pushing' higher education	Network members identified as having a significant influence on their education	Other network members who provided information, advice or encouragement about higher education or further education	Experience of HE in network at time of HE application	Network members interviewed
Karen		Friends		None	(Some of the friends were also participants but were not interviewed as network members)
James		Sports coach and vice-principal Gaeltacht principal and subject teacher in school Girls in Gaeltacht Parents		None	Sports coach and vice-principal Gaeltacht principal and subject teacher
Frank		Guidance counsellor Sports coach in school Mother	Friend in gym who provided information about a course and interview dates	None	

Name	Members of networks who were influential by promoting and 'pushing' higher education	Network members identified as having a significant influence on their education	Other network members who provided information, advice or encouragement about higher education or further education	Experience of HE in network at time of HE application	Network members interviewed
Gary				None	
Catherine		Form teacher Sports coach and vice-principal Mother Brothers		None	Form teacher Sports coach and vice-principal
Group 3					
Alison		Mother Brother Friends	Neighbour who provided information about grants	None	Mother Brother (Some of the friends were also participants but were not interviewed as network members)

Name	Members of networks who were influential by promoting and 'pushing' higher education	Network members identified as having a significant influence on their education	Other network members who provided information, advice or encouragement about higher education or further education	Experience of HE in network at time of HE application	Network members interviewed
Fiona		Mother Friends		None	(Some of the friends were also participants but were not interviewed as network members)
Michelle		Friend Mother Sister		None	