

'Mature Students' narratives of Irish Higher Education: a critical  
Bourdieuian analysis.'

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## **Abstract.**

This thesis examines the experiences of mature students on entering Higher Education within the Republic of Ireland. The research question is “***What do the experiences of mature students who are undertaking an under graduate degree programme in applied social studies reveal about the field of Higher Education in the Republic of Ireland?***” A narrative approach was employed drawing on data from the narratives of 6 mature students within an Institute of Higher Education within the West of Ireland. The conceptual framework for the inquiry is built on Bourdieu’s Theory of Practice, particularly the concepts of habitus, capital and field. Six key themes emerged from the narratives these were; *Experiences of first and second level education; Family support; Going to college; Balancing study and work and family commitments; Supportive networks; Pleasant surprise.*

The lack of economic, social and cultural capital and the disparity between their habitus and the institutional habitus impacted upon their experiences of Higher Education. They revealed the difficulties faced when trying to amass social capital, managing the transition of first year in Higher Education and the challenges they faced due to lack of cultural and economic capital. The field of Higher Education is uncompromising in terms of curricula delivery and time commitments which did not at times suit the lives of the mature students. However the mature students were pleasantly surprised by their experiences of Higher Education particularly because of the pedagogical practices of shared learning and a sense of equality between the academic staff and the mature student

The narratives revealed the need to consider the overall structure of the field of Higher Education aligning systemic and structural aspects with mature students’ requirements. Educational policy should address the lack of social, cultural and economic capital through the development of flexible programmes. The habitus of the mature student needs to be valued to enhance pedagogical practice.



## **Dedication.**

This thesis is dedicated to my three wonderful children; Saoirse, Seamus and Sean. Thank you for your kindness, brightness, laughter and love.



## **Acknowledgements.**

I would like to thank the mature students who took part in this inquiry who told their stories with honesty and dignity.

Thank you to Dr Simon Warren who introduced me to the writings of Pierre Bourdieu and for his help and support during his supervision in the early part of this inquiry. I owe a debt of gratitude to Mr Nigel Wright who supervised this inquiry through to its conclusion. I thank him for his wisdom, kindness and patience. Thank you to my fellow students, for their support and friendship. Thank you to my employers who supported me throughout this process.





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## **Chapter 1. Introduction.**

This thesis presents a detailed inquiry into the experiences of mature students in relation to the field of Higher Education. This chapter indicates the purpose of the study, the research questions, methodology adopted and the implementing procedure. This inquiry has strong resonances with my own personal journey as a mature student being the first in my family to obtain academic qualifications and so my career trajectory is described. This chapter contextualises the research describing the study site and my professional relationship with the site.

The rationale for the study is discussed placing the topic within current policy and practice in Ireland and Europe and examines the challenges for the future within the field of Higher Education in relation to mature students.

The field of Higher Education within the Republic of Ireland is presently influenced by the current economic recession. Consequently there is a drive within Higher Education strategy to provide accessible, flexible academic programmes to meet the needs of people who are unemployed or who wish to up-skill to meet changing trends within the employment market. Nixon and Sikes (2003:4) suggest that;

There is an overriding need not only to define research method in technical terms but also to make explicit its educational rationale.

Educational research should not be without purpose therefore the principal aim of this research is to illuminate the experiences of mature students returning to the field of Higher Education. There is a relative paucity of knowledge in relation to mature student's experiences of Higher Education specifically engaging with their narratives within the Irish context.

This inquiry will address this by exploring the experiences of mature students in relation to the field of Higher Education using a narrative based approach. The theoretical lens of Bourdieu (1977) is employed focusing on his conceptual framework and the key concepts of habitus, capital and field.

This chapter is divided into five sections. Section one will discuss the background to the study. Section two examines the rationale for the study. Section three presents the aim of the study, the main research question and associated sub-questions which drive the inquiry. Section four describes my own personal journey as a mature student and professional person. Finally section five presents the structure of the thesis.

### **Section One: Background to the Study.**

It is important to reflect on the past in relation to Higher Education in order to understand the present (Skehill, 2007). Historically Higher Education was the privilege of a small sector of society. However in Ireland and throughout Europe there have been enormous changes in the accessibility of Higher Education.

The focus of Widening Participation has shifted from a small elite sector of society to expanded mass participation, now moving towards universal participation in Higher Education (Osborne, 2003). There has been unprecedented growth in participation in Higher Education and this has presented many challenges. However not all sections of society have benefitted from Widening Participation initiatives. There are sections of society that traditionally remain under-represented in their participation in Higher Education. Mature people, those who are over twenty three years of age when they commence their first year of study, are one of these groups. Nationally and internationally there are drives to provide equity of access to ensure that traditionally excluded groups are given the chance to avail of Higher Education. Targets set by the National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education (HEA, 2008) propose that mature students will comprise 27% of all (full-time and part-time) entrants by 2013 (18% in 2006). They suggest that flexible/part-time provision will increase to 17% by 2013 (7% in 2006) and non-standard entry routes to Higher Education will be developed so that they account for 30% all entrants by 2013 (estimated at 24% in 2006).



In Ireland approximately 14% of students in Higher Education are mature students and enrolments are increasing every year. To ensure that targets are reached it is necessary to examine the experiences of mature students in relation to Higher Education. This is so that challenges faced by mature students can be voiced and policy makers within the field of Higher Education can be aware of these issues when developing policy and practice.

## **Section Two: Rationale for the Study.**

Ireland has experienced enormous change economically. A period of prosperity followed by a bailout rescue package recently exited, led to a continuance of tough economic policies. Unemployment rates are currently 13.3% in September, 2013. The field of Higher Education can enable people to gain qualifications to re-enter the work place with expanded employment opportunities. Consequently there is an agenda for Higher Education Institutes to provide education appropriate to the market needs of a knowledge economy. Ireland has undergone a review of its Higher Education system with the implementation of The National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030 (HEA, 2011). At European level the Bologna Declaration (1999) has provided for flexible learning pathways for students who wish to avail of life-long learning. A position paper on flexible learning suggested there should be a national data base of modules to enable learners to identify those which best would meet their needs (HEA, 2010). Crozier et al (2008) suggest that Institutes are moving from a teacher driven system of Higher Education to one enabling students to become responsible for their own learning. Therefore it is important to investigate the experiences of mature students to ensure that their academic experience is positive and meets their needs. Mature students have many areas to their lives to balance and therefore their experiences of the field of Higher Education maybe complex and varied (Reay, 2002). Widening Participation is vital to ensure that all society is equally afforded the opportunity to access Higher Education and the ensuing rewards of increased earning power, status, financial independence and security and for the economy an educated workforce (Burke, 2002).

The origins of many research questions derive from practice issues. Merriam (1989:43) states;

We observe something that puzzles us, we wonder about it, we want to know why it is the way it is, we ask whether something can be done to change it and so on.

The Higher Education Authority of Ireland (HEA) in the National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education (2008-2013) states as a target that mature students will comprise at least 20% of the total of full time student entrants by the year 2013.

Consequently the rationale for this narrative inquiry is to examine the narratives of mature students, ensuring the centrality of the student voice. It is through listening to their narratives that recommendations can be made to ensure that targets are met nationally and that the field of Higher Education is equitable and all students are given the opportunity to reach their potential with appropriate supports.

### **Section Three: Research Questions.**

The overall aim of this research thesis within the Republic of Ireland is:

- To consider current perspectives on policy and practice in relation to the delivery of Higher Education to the mature student population and
- To explore the experiences of a sample of mature students engaged in the field of Higher Education.

Using a narrative approach and an analysis employing the theoretical lens of Bourdieu (1977) the main research question of the study is:

*What do the experiences of mature students who are undertaking an undergraduate degree programme in applied social studies reveal about the field of Higher Education in the Republic of Ireland?*

The subsidiary questions are:

1. What are the main debates about Widening Participation in relation to mature students?
2. In what ways do mature students' narratives illuminate any relationship between past and present educational experiences?
3. To what extent does mature student narratives reflect economic, social and cultural capital?
4. What do mature student narratives reveal about their learning experiences in Higher Education and other conflicting demands?

### **Methodological Approach.**

To address these research questions the narratives of six mature students were obtained who were undertaking an honours degree programme in applied social studies in a Higher Education Institute within the Republic of Ireland. A qualitative approach employing a narrative methodology enabled participants to share their stories relevant to their experiences of the field of Higher Education.

Data were collected via narrative interviews with participants and analysed using the theoretical lens of Bourdieu (1977) focusing on the concepts of habitus, capital and field.

The study has a number of core strengths. Firstly it assembles the narrative stories of a distinct student population i.e. mature students. Secondly the study allows the voices of the students to be heard through the telling of their stories in a meaningful way in a context that is applicable to each individual. Thirdly analysis of the narratives using the theoretical lens of Bourdieu (1977) provides an understanding of the way mature students experience Higher Education.

#### **Section Four: Researcher's Professional Trajectory.**

To position myself within the research I need to outline some of my personal experiences, that have contributed to my personal and professional identity. The decision to employ a narrative approach is for me philosophically and ontologically influenced. My interest in the issue under investigation has developed from my experiences of being a mature student. As a young woman I entered the field of nursing. Nursing at that time was delivered in nursing schools separate from Institutes of Higher Education. The qualification awarded after a 3 year period of study and clinical practice was at professional certificate level. As nursing emerged as a profession a Bachelor of Science Honours degree in Nursing was developed.

In light of this research I reflected on the personal motivational drivers that started my life-long learning. My parents did not complete second level education which would have been relatively common place in Ireland in the 1950's. They emigrated to England and worked in various forms of unskilled labour. However they placed a firm emphasis on the importance of education and our cultural heritage. My mother stressed the importance of a woman being independent and to her that was achievable through education.

As a staff nurse I realised that others within the inter-disciplinary team had been educated primarily to honours degree level. So there was a perception on my behalf of feeling unequal on a professional footing with my colleagues. Therefore when the Bachelor of Science Honours Degree in nursing became available at a University that was geographically accessible to me I decided to apply. It was an enormous step as I was unsure of my academic abilities and whether I would be successful in the field of Higher Education. At this time I was married and had three young children and this element of my life required careful consideration.

I continued with my academic career and engaged with the field of Higher Education through undertaking programmes that were delivered on a part-time basis that suited my employment and family commitments. I have experienced many of the issues, challenges and benefits of being a mature student within the field of Higher Education. I particularly see the benefits that engaging with

Higher Education had for me on a personal and professional level. These experiences were the genesis for this study. The issue of researcher positionality in the conduct of insider research will be addressed in chapter four.

### **Section Five: Structure of the Thesis.**

The remainder of the thesis is divided into six chapters. Chapter two provides a review of the literature across three principal areas and helps to address research sub-questions 1 and 4. Chapter three examines the literature in relation to Bourdieu and addresses the sub-questions 2 and 3. Chapter four outlines the methodology employed within this inquiry. It describes the use of narrative inquiry employed to address the main and subsidiary research questions. The philosophical underpinnings of the narrative approach and the research process is examined. This methodology chapter is divided into three sections. The first section reiterates the rationale for the study and states the main research and research sub-questions. The next section focuses on the research design including considerations on theoretical perspectives and the third section lays out issues and challenges in relation to the implementation of the study. Specifically it addresses sampling process and data collection and the method of data analysis employed. Limitations and ethical issues are discussed within this section.

The findings of the study and a portrait of the participants are presented in Chapter five, along with an outline of the sub-field within which the mature students were studying. The empirical data presented in this chapter and discussed in chapter six address research sub-questions 1, 2, 3 and 4. Chapter seven provides a concise conclusion to the thesis and makes recommendations for policy, practice and further research within the field of Higher Education specifically in relation to mature students.

## **Chapter Summary.**

This chapter introduced the field of Higher Education and the Widening Participation debate particularly in relation to mature students within the Republic of Ireland. It provides a background for the inquiry and touches on current policy strategy documents and their relevance to the mature student population. The chapter outlined the rationale for the study highlighted against a background of current challenges in the provision of Higher Education within a changing economic environment. The main research question and the research sub-questions were presented.

Chapter two will examine the literature in relation to Widening Participation and the motivations and experiences of mature students of the field of Higher Education .Chapter three will examine the literature in relation to Bourdieu specifically focusing on the conceptual tools of habitus, capital and field.

## Chapter Two: Literature Review: Widening Participation.

### Introduction.

A literature search followed by a critical review is a primary component of the research process (Cormack, 2000). The intention of the literature review is to determine what is already known about the subject and provide a tautological context into which the research will fit, detect inconsistency in knowledge, avoid unintentional duplication and reveal how the study will add new knowledge in the area of interest (Polit et al, 2001).

Contemporary Irish society recognizes the importance of Higher Education in the creation of a vibrant economy. Higher Education is taking place within a rapidly changing economy and faces many challenges. In 2009, the number of new entrants to Irish Higher Education was 42,500, however the Department of Education and Skills projections for the next 20 years highlight that demand will rise to approximately 65,000 in 2025. On examination of this projection it can be seen that the bulk of the demand will come from mature students, international students and a greater demand for post-graduate study. This is demonstrated in the following table:

**Table 1: Source of new entrants to Higher Education, current and projected demands (HEA, 2011).**

	2009		2015		2025		2030	
	Number	% of total	Number	% of total	Number	% of total	Number	% of total
Direct	29,982	70	30,621	61.8	34,277	52.8	33,558	52.3
Late	3,855	9	4,459	9	5,843	9	5,775	9
Mature	5,568	13	8,919	18	16,229	25	16,041	25
International	3,426	8	5,500	14.2	8,569	13.2	8,790	13.7
Total	42,831	100	49,549	100	64,918	100	64,164	100

There are two categories of mature students. One category describes a mature student as someone in their early twenties receiving support from their

employment and attending a course that is specific to their work situation. This mature student tends to be male with few other commitments. The other category tends to be female with family commitments in their late twenties or thirties (Barnett, 1987). Johnston & Bailey (1984) noted that there are meaningful divides between the two distinct groups. This should be considered strategically in the delivery of Higher Education to the mature student population. To achieve policy objectives for a diverse student population it is necessary to investigate the experiences of mature students in relation to the field of Higher Education. This literature review is divided into two chapters. The first chapter examines the discourse in relation to Widening Participation and investigates the motivations and experiences of mature students engaging with the field of Higher Education. Chapter three explores Bourdieu's Theory of Practice concentrating on the conceptual tools of field, habitus and capital and their usefulness to this study.

### **Widening Participation: Mature Students; Current Policy Documents and Legislation.**

This section of the literature review focuses on current policy documents and legislation in relation to the Higher Education system within the Republic of Ireland concentrating on the mature student population. A mature student is defined as a student who was twenty-three or over on the 1st of January of the year of entry to the Higher Education Institution. This definition is consistent with the criteria for student maintenance grants.

International comparisons suggest that for the adult population (25-64) the rate of tertiary achievement in Ireland is above the OECD average (38% compared to 32%). However on examination the percentage of adults without a Leaving Certificate or higher was 27%, slightly more than the OECD average at 25%. Consequently there is a discrepancy in educational attainment with a better educated youth cohort.

Higher Education within Ireland is at a point of transition with the number of people entering the system expanding and a change in student profile (HEA,



2011). Institutes of Higher Education serve a diverse and growing student population. The National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ) in Ireland along with an outcome oriented approach to learning enables opportunities for creating diverse student pathways into the Higher Education system (HEA 2010). It is important to discuss policy and practice that have addressed this growth pattern and examine where the mature student fits within the overall scheme of Higher Education.

Higher Education is concerned with the advancement and pursuit of knowledge and is viewed as a valuable resource having benefits for the individual and society. Trow (1974) describes the evolution of Higher Education as having three distinct phases. Firstly the elite phase whereby less than 15% of the age group participates in Higher Education. Secondly mass participation rates which exceed 15% but remain lower than 50%. Finally the universal stage whereby participation reaches more than 50 % of the age group. The Irish Higher Education system has increased its student population by approximately 2% yearly since the mid 1960's and currently has an age participation rate of 57% and is within the universal stage (OECD 2006). Trow (1972) proposed the development of non-elitist institutes of Higher Education suitable for educating the increasing student population. Brennan and Osbourne (2008) suggest that Trow (1974) was proposing a model of system differentiation whereby different institutes of Higher Education were created to meet the ever increasing student population. The concept of access equated with the citizenship right of certain social groups to participate in Higher Education was the genesis for the Widening Participation discourses and debates.

The considerable expansion in Higher Education opportunities has centred round the provision of full-time Higher Education. The focus has been on entrants from upper second level education. Across OECD countries, Higher Education students within the Republic of Ireland, have the narrowest age range (OECD, 2009). A report commissioned for the OECD to examine the Higher Education system in Ireland in 2004 highlighted that mature students represented 2% of the student population in 1998 and drew attention to the Clancy Report (2001) which emphasised the social disparity of the student

population intake. Almost 100% of the children of higher professionals and over 80% of the children of employers and managers entered the Higher Education system. Recent figures from the HEA (2011) demonstrate that the largest socio-economic group of full-time new entrants to the University and Institute of Technology sector is the employers and managers group. This compares poorly with only 20% of the children of unskilled and semi-skilled manual workers entering Higher Education (Clancy, 2001). The largest proportion of full-time mature entrant respondents come from a manual skilled background, this contrasts with the non-mature respondents whose largest socio-economic group is employers and managers (HEA, 2011).

The thread running through the Widening Participation debate is equality ensuring access to Higher Education for under-represented groups. While there have been many political debates related to the field of Higher Education these have focused on the structure of the sector while the predominant sociological perspectives have influenced the empirical and theoretical concerns of Widening Participation research (Kettley, 2007). This has led to diminished accounts concerning the barriers to Higher Education, as the relationship between students' social characteristics, their learning experiences and academic careers are not examined (Kettley, 2007). The research is unified in its decision that;

...current policies and practices have undermined the commitment to combat the social inequalities that are institutionalized and reproduced within the academic world (Burke, 2002:1).

Burke (2002) suggests that Widening Participation research concerns the relationship between Higher Education and social injustice. Kettley (2007) argues that the future lies in challenging the application of the sociological enterprise to the issue of Widening Participation and that a holistic approach needs to be taken. Archer (2003:14) suggests that contemporary policy is problematic in that it;

...raises aspirations without challenging biased institutional structures.

The agenda of Widening Participation research within Ireland is concerned with social inequality, an economic competitive market and financial constraints. Towards a Future the Higher Education Landscape document (HEA, 2012a) acknowledges that there are two significant drivers for change these being quality and participation. It states;

There is a significant tension between these two objectives which needs to be managed in a sustainable way (HEA 2012a:4).

It suggests that policy and practice should support access to those who wish to participate in Higher Education. Globally there has been a shift to a universal Higher Educational sector which has been driven by specific policy changes and the growing focus (and this is true of Ireland currently) on the under-representation of specific groups, particularly mature students (Kettley, 2007; OECD, 2009). Blanden and Machin (2004) argue that there is inequality within Higher Education with expansion only benefitting those children from relatively rich families. The reproductive rule of thumb is that a person's family background, e.g. educational background of one's parents is useful in predicting achievements and career prospects (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1990; Bourdieu, 1988a, Bowles and Gintis, 2002). It is proposed that current policies and practices have diluted the commitment to oppose social inequalities that are institutionalized and replicated within the educational world (Burke 2002).

In Ireland there has been an increase in initiatives to facilitate participation for traditionally marginalized groups (Shevlin et al, 2004). Current Higher Educational policy strives towards an inclusive educational system encouraging a diverse student population and setting out as its objectives a more flexible student centred approach (HEA, 2010). A report by the OECD (2006) into Higher Education in Ireland focused on the issue of Widening Participation. It highlighted that mature students represented 2% of the overall student population in 1998. It pointed out that social equity and economic

arguments indicate the need for improved efforts to broaden participation in Higher Education. The report recommended an increase in part-time flexible courses to meet the needs of a diverse student population. The literature concurs suggesting that part-time flexible courses are generally undertaken by mature students and there is evidence to suggest that this form of Higher Education has particular benefit in the form of human capital particularly if the course is vocational in nature (Broomfield, 1993). Investments in human capital are defined by Becker (1964:21) as;

... activities that influence future monetary and psychic income by increasing the resources in people.

Consequently human capital theory demonstrates how individuals make decisions to invest in themselves and enhance their amount of human capital (Broomfield, 1993). Education and training are the most significant investments in human capital. Human capital theory proposes that alterations in wages arise due to differences in human capital. The level of education that a person attains is linked to their occupational status and their overall personal income. The greater the level of education generally the greater the salary for that person (Becker, 2009 ). Human capital is accumulated in two ways; education and experience. The literature suggests that there is a positive relationship between salaries and experience and also between salaries and education (Becker, 2009). Education does not necessarily increase human capital however it functions as a signalling tool suggesting that students with high cognitive ability reach higher levels of education (Spence, 1973). Bourdieu (1986a) questions the concept of human capital as it does not move beyond economism. He suggests it disregards that scholastic achievement is contingent on cultural capital previously invested by the family. Furthermore the financial and social return of the educational qualification rests on the social capital, again inherited, which can be used to back it up.

The National Plan for Equity to Higher Education 2008-2013 (HEA, 2008)

recommends that approaches are mainstreamed to ensure equity and improved access. Proposed targets outlined that mature students will comprise at least 20% of total full-time entrants by 2013. Also mature students will comprise 27 % of all full-time and part-time entrants. Finally flexible and part-time provision will increase to 17 % by 2013. These targets have not been met. Key facts and figures (HEA 2012b) demonstrate that 14 % of full-time new entrants are mature students, this equates to 5,500 mature students. Consequently almost one in every 6 students on campus is a mature student and it is suggested that the numbers will increase each year (HEA, 2010).

The Higher Education Authority of Ireland (HEA) acknowledges as a policy issue that participation by mature students has been low. The National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030 (HEA, 2011) draws our attention to persistent inequalities in Irish Higher Education. It goes on to state that there is a need;

...for provision of educational opportunities that differ significantly from the traditional model, in which a student enters higher education directly after finishing secondary school, stays there for three or four years, enters employment and never again engages with the education system

(HEA, 2011:35).

Ireland needs to ensure that there is growth of 25 % in the Higher Educational system to meet economic growth and technological change within the economy (HEA, 2011). Presently there are 14 Institutes of Technology in Ireland and 7 Universities. The Government has reviewed the Higher Education system in light of demands for growth and meeting imminent challenges. To this end the HEA (2012a) published the document Towards a Future Higher Education Landscape. to aid the implementation of the National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030 (HEA, 2011). This recommends that Universities and Institutes of Technology reorganize into regional clusters to ensure better student pathways between Institutions, to minimize duplication and improve quality of programmes.

Those entering Higher Education will have varied learning needs and many of those will be mature students. Therefore flexible opportunities for an increasing and diverse student population are key. This has to be achieved within a competitive globalised environment ensuring that programmes are of high quality and connected with the broader needs of society (HEA, 2011). Public investment in the field of Higher Education must support national policy priorities which include increased access and improved flexibility. Specifically noted is widening access to the field of Higher Education for people from lower socio-economic backgrounds and other under-represented groups which includes mature students (HEA, 2011). Behan and Shelly (2010) report in the current manpower forecasting study that economic growth over the medium term will be the greatest in those occupations that require third level qualifications and or high skill levels. Projection forecasts for low skilled occupations are predicted to reduce or experience only minor growth. The conclusions of this forecast focus on the significance of a robust life-long learning strategy which will enable people in the labour market to make their skills more appropriate to a changing employment market and to offer flexible programmes to individuals to enable them to achieve gainful employment. The literature proposes that the economic market is central to government policy with the crucial role of Higher Education constructed as augmenting employability, entrepreneurialism, economic competitiveness and flexibility (Morley, 1999; Thompson, 2000; Burke, 2002; Archer 2003; Bowl, 2001).

Institutes of Higher Education within the Republic of Ireland have focused their attention on the recruitment and retention of mature students. This has been driven by the Widening Participation debate whereby students from non-traditional backgrounds are afforded an opportunity to re-engage with education through access courses. This is applauded within a democracy that values all citizens equally and believes in a just society. Access to Higher Education has become defined in terms of equity and the understanding that proactive policies and practices are needed to enable participation of those who have been under represented (Skillbeck and Connell, 2000). The National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030 (HEA 2011) highlights Ireland's inadequate attempts at achieving life-long learning. Currently 7% of adults

aged between 25 and 64 in Ireland are participating in education and training. It is vital for Ireland to generate and augment human capital by expanding Higher Education in order to sufficiently recover and develop within an innovation driven economy. The OECD (2013:261) suggest;

...Skills have become the global currency of 21 st Century economies.

Without adequate investment in skills people will remain on the fringes of society, technological progress will not convert into productivity and countries will no longer be able to compete in a knowledge based global economy (OECD,2013). Part-time and flexible learning opportunities are essential to increasing access to Higher Education for adults who need to combine study with work or caring responsibilities (Fleming et al 2010a). A target has been set by the HEA (2012) to expand flexible and part-time provision to 17% of undergraduate entrants by 2013. The mid-term review of The National Access Plan demonstrated that participation in part-time Higher Education did increase from 2008. However the emphasis in Higher Education policy and practice in Ireland remains on full-time provision specifically focusing on the school leaver

Of equal importance to policy documents is relevant legislation. The legislative framework in the Republic of Ireland in relation to adult education and life-long learning is notable and central to its focus are issues of relevance to mature students. Primarily the legislation promotes equality and access and highlights the importance of life-long learning. The Higher Education Authority Act (1971) had as its ethos the value of promoting equality of opportunity and an appreciation of the value of Higher Education and Research. The Universities Act (1997) highlights the role Universities have in the promotion of life-long learning encompassing adult and continuing education. The Institute of Technology Act (2006) emphasises the importance of equality of access for all students and thereby encourages life-long learning and adult education. The Qualification (Education and Training) Act was passed in 1999, followed by the National Training Fund Act (1999) and the Learning for Life White Paper was

issued in 2000. All of these significantly promote equality of access and life-long learning.

Therefore policy documents and legislative framework have a common thread throughout. The areas relevant to mature students are equality of access, flexible, relevant programmes that will benefit the economy and the individual. This is suggested in the discourses of Widening Participation research at national and international level. The challenge for the future of Widening Participation research entails providing a determined foundation in empirical evidence concerning the everyday experiences of the student as opposed to attitudinal data that is far removed from factual conditions within specific contexts (Kettleby, 2007). This inquiry endeavours to address this.

The following section examines the literature relating to the motivations of mature students seeking to engage with Higher Education.

### **Mature Students' motivation for engaging with Higher Education.**

It is important to examine the literature relating to the motivations of mature students when deciding to enter Higher Education to deepen our understanding of them and their decision making processes. The literature demonstrates that there are differing motivations for mature students who decide to enter Higher Education and exploring their motivations is complex. Osborne et al, (2004) suggest there is a scarcity of knowledge about how potential mature students weigh the personal advantages of studying and the attainment of a qualification and how they manage to surmount perceived barriers to commence the transition process to become students.

Key threads throughout the literature relating to motivations are intrinsic personal development and a love of learning. However economic rationalism, altruism and human capital theory are also common motivational reasons given by mature students (Reay 2002; Osborne et al, 2004; Fleming and Finnegan, 2011). The decision to enter Higher Education is complex with influencing factors classified into 4 categories. Firstly national policies related to recruitment, for example widening access and student finance. Secondly



economic and labour market conditions which may vary from region to region. Thirdly policy and practice of Institutes of Higher Education and finally personal background and circumstances of individual students affect the overall decision making process (Osborne et al, 2004). For many mature students the decision takes place over an extended period of time and is a complex process (Williams 1997).

The motivation to enter Higher Education can be linked between educational and occupational attainment and the relationship between these two concepts. Flexibility in delivery of educational programmes is an important factor for mature students particularly so if the programme is vocational in nature (Reay et al, 2002). The concept of human capital can be employed by the mature student when considering the motivations for entering Higher Education. The mature student analyses the benefits of education with the benefits of this investment, such as future occupational prospects (Broomfield, 1993).

Bourner, et al, (1988) agrees indicating that a significant number of students undertaking part-time education in their thirties give as their main reason enhanced career prospects. Osborne et al, (2004) reports that mature students performed an informal cost benefit analysis of the prospects of engaging with Higher Education to help them make the complex decision. A rational process is undertaken in that the student considers the educational attainment in line with future occupational progress. The link between education and future enhanced career prospects are identified as one of the main drivers for mature students. Woodley and Brennan (2000) and Woodley (2001) concur suggesting that personal advancement is a crucial motivator when deciding to enter Higher Education.

Consequently the reason to enter Higher Education is in keeping with the rational decision making model which indicates that decisions are made to realise certain ambitions that are directly related to areas of employment or occupation (Davies et al, 2002). Osborne et al, (2004) agree suggesting that mature students enter Higher Education to progress their careers or change occupation. They reported that they would be financially more stable and enjoy rewarding areas of employment. Cree et al, (2009) proposed that mature

students identified developing knowledge and enhanced personal development as a common motivation for entering Higher Education.

The literature suggests the decision to enter the field of Higher Education for the mature student is multifaceted and “fragile” (Davies and Williams, 2001) and a great deal of consideration is undertaken by the potential mature student within the process. Osborne et al, (2004:295) proposes that it entails;

...a complete reorientation of lifestyle.

This is because the mature student has to consider other commitments such as caring and domestic duties while engaging with Higher Education.

Throughout the literature reasons for returning to Higher Education are varied and may be interrelated and change at any given point in time depending on the individual students' circumstances (Cree et al, 2009; Reay et al, 2002; Osborne et al, 2004; Kettley, 2007).

When reviewing the literature in relation to gender and motivation for entering Higher Education it is suggested that women tend to engage with Higher Education for reasons of personal development and express an interest in education simply for education itself (Wright, 2011; Reay et al, 2002). Osborne et al, (2004) propose the primary motivator for the women they interviewed was the desire to learn. The only barrier identified was the issue of self-confidence and the belief in their ability. However their general enthusiasm was enough to enable them to overcome the barriers they faced in relation to their self- confidence. However these particular mature women did not have constraints such as child care provision issues or financial concerns which are challenges for some mature students.

In a study of six mature women students by Cochrane (1991) the women revealed that they had undergone a significant change in their lives which contributed to their decision to enter Higher Education. They revealed that they were at University to prove something to themselves highlighting the significance of personal development. This distinguished them from their

younger colleagues who appeared not to be as interested in the process but more so the outcome. Reay et al, (2002) unearthed the meaning of Higher Education within a cohort of mature students to be about the love of learning. The mature students identified their success above their younger peers as due to their increased motivation and this was also identified by the lecturers. An emerging theme in the earlier literature highlights for adult women the transformative function of education identifying a moving away from the old life to a new way of life (Edwards, 1993; Merrill, 1999). This is supported by Parr (2000) who proposed that for some mature women the reason to enter Higher Education is to make a fresh start and in some cases they were overcoming a traumatic event. Scott et al, (1998) indicates that mature women students allied themselves with the values of altruism and had increasing life satisfaction as a result of entering Higher Education.

Men give more practical reasons for enrolling in Higher Education (Osborne et al, 2004; Woodley et al, 1987). In a questionnaire survey of male first year mature students the reasons given to enter Higher Education were an interest in the area of study and a chance to enhance their career prospects (Davies and Williams, 2001). A desire to improve upon their existing qualifications was also demonstrated as was the desire to change the direction of their lives. Finally identified was the ambition that they always wanted to engage with Higher Education but the opportunities were not there. Therefore the literature proposes that male mature students are more likely to engage with the field of Higher Education to advance their social standing through the attainment of relevant qualifications to progress their careers thus employing economic rationalization as a motivator for their return to education (Osborne et al, 2004; Woodley et al, 1987; Davies et al, 2002, Fleming et al, 2010b).

Reay et al, (2002:8) demonstrated in a study of 23 mature students using a narrative methodology across gender that this particular cohort of students appeared to be interested in the;

...doing of the degree that was important rather than instrumental goal orientation.

It was this attitude that defined the mature student, the love of learning and personal development as opposed to the more practical realities of enhanced career prospects. Reay and Mirza (1998) draw attention to the mature student wishing to contribute to the social world. This is a key narrative of the mature students investigated by Reay et al, (2002) where they spoke about wishing to give something back and make a difference by drawing on their own rich and sometimes difficult backgrounds to benefit others in society. Cree et al, (2009) found that three quarters of their mature student cohort rated as important the concept of helping people. Therefore the values of altruism were identified as the motivators for entering Higher Education. Edwards (1993) reported that mature students who were parents viewed entering Higher Education as demonstrating a positive role model for their children and passing on their education to their children. Reay et al, (2002) connects Higher Education with parents' desires for their children. Similar findings were presented by Osborne et al, (2004) in that mature students believed they would be serving as a positive role model for their children and in some cases their grandchildren.

While the motivators to enter Higher Education are significant so too is the decision making process. The literature suggests that the processes involved in deciding to enter Higher Education differ between the traditional student and those students from a non-traditional background such as mature students (Davies and Williams 2001, Reay et al, 2002). Mathers and Parry (2010:1085) suggest that the decision-making process to enter Higher Education is;

... qualitatively different for prospective traditional (e.g. middle class school leavers ) and non-traditional (e.g. working-class or mature) students.

The decision-making process and the transition to Higher Education for the mature student is complicated. Reay et al, (2005) discuss the implications of social class, ethnicity and gender that impinge on mature students and their importance when choosing a Higher Educational Institute. Osborne et al, (2004) report how the mature student weighs up their options before they become a "decider". After making the decision to enter Higher Education they

organise finances and domestic responsibilities and then become an “applicant”. At this stage they apply to enter the field of Higher Education.

Currently there is a global recession and high levels of unemployment. This is recognised as a driving influence for mature students in the decision-making process. The National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030 (HEA, 2011) acknowledges the increasing demands from adults to engage with Higher Educational opportunities that is appropriate to their needs. It highlights that this demand will increase coinciding with higher unemployment and the vulnerability of current employment opportunities. Consequently it accepts that adults who are unemployed will need to have appropriate educational and training opportunities to update their existing knowledge and skills. Those who remain in employment will need the opportunity to retrain and advance their knowledge. The generation of flexible programmes is recognised as crucial by the Higher Education Authority (HEA, 2010). It highlights that the flexibility of programmes should be viewed as a key indicator to responding to the needs of Irish society and should benefit from equitable funding supports.

Inherent within choices available to mature students in relation to Higher Education is the financial supports that are available. Currently in Ireland there are no fees attached to mature students who wish to engage in Higher Education. However students must pay a yearly registration fee that has significantly increased since its introduction. In 2008 the registration fee was 850 euro annually and for this academic year (2013) it is 2,500 euro. There have been suggestions by the academic hierarchy to re-introduce fees as Higher Education Institutes are finding it increasingly difficult to deliver a service that is so poorly resourced.

The individual circumstances of each mature student influences the entire decision-making process. Studies reveal that geographical location is a key indicator for mature students when choosing a Higher Education Institute (Reay, 1998, Ball et al, 2000, Wright, 2011). Time is a valuable resource and cannot be wasted travelling to the Higher Education Institute. Reay et al, (2001) suggest that mature students are time poor and therefore have to be pragmatic. Primary considerations identified by the mature student population

were financial and material constraints, including the cost of travel (Reay et al, 2002). Time implications ensured that students carefully considered the geographical location of the Higher Institute. In a study of mature students applying to study medicine Mathers and Parry (2010) identified that of the 15 older interviewees, 13 of those suggested the geographical location of the University was a key factor. Family commitments were a primary consideration which links with the geographical location of the University. The cost of child care can be prohibitive and geographical location in terms of direct transport lines has to be considered (Wright, 2011).

A concept pertinent to the decision making process was the notion of fit and identity within the Higher Educational Institute. Mathers and Parry (2010) report that mature students applying to study medicine talk about their perceptions of fit between themselves and their college. They deemed it significant that they would feel comfortable and that meant that they were part of a population of mature students. Students identified the need to hold on to their identity explicitly stating that they could be themselves and not pretend to be something else. The literature highlights the difficulties in transitions that mature students encounter in relation to identity and fit as they negotiate between a new beginning and an improved identity. They are trying to remain true to themselves and their original backgrounds ( Bowl, 2001;2005; Reay 2001).

For many mature students Higher Education comes as a part-time experience. Externally generated differences play a determining role in the life style choices and obligatory decisions of contemporary students. Due to domestic and financial obligations the mature student makes the practical decision to study part-time to meet their obligations. Reay (2002) suggests that for many mature students, life style choices in Higher Education are dictated via external responsibilities in the form of domestic and employment responsibilities.

The National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030 (HEA 2011) reports that the needs of mature students can only be addressed through the delivery of flexible learning opportunities, by way of part-time courses, flexibility within the

delivery, work based learning and the introduction of short intensive skills programmes

To conclude the literature highlights that there are many motivational and influencing factors that mature students consider and the decision to return to Higher Education is a complex process. Motivational factors are varied, comprising of personal development, altruism, human capital theory and economic rationalism. Many mature students are faced with multiple constraints in terms of finances and domestic responsibilities when deciding to enter Higher Education. Consequently these constraints and motivational influencing factors need to be considered in terms of policy at national and Institute level in terms of supporting mature students in a constructive way to ensure that the process of entering the field of Higher Education is truly equitable. Osborne et al, (2004) suggest that the challenge in meeting the diverse needs of the mature student population is the provision of rational sound advice within an integrated inclusive service.

### **The literature in relation to the experiences of mature students within Higher Education.**

Contemporary literature suggests embarking on study at a mature age is of value to the individual student their family and to wider society (Scott et al, 1998). This section focuses on literature that examines the experiences of mature students in relation to the field of Higher Education.

Mature students who attend Higher Education come from a wide and varied educational background (West & Holliday, 2010). A challenge identified by the National Plan for Access to Higher Education 2008-2013 (HEA, 2008) as a concern is the low levels of initial educational achievements of some mature students that may be perceived as barriers to returning to Higher Education. This may impact on their overall experiences of Higher Education in terms of academic achievement, retention and progression. The literature suggests that past educational experiences of mature students may be relevant to their current experiences of the field of Higher Education in that they may carry with

them a sense of past educational failures (Woodley et al, 1987; O'Toole, 2000; Reay et al, 2001; Wright, 2011). This is noted in the HEA progression document (HEA, 2010) which identifies a comprehensible link between previous educational attainment and successful progression throughout Higher Education. It suggests that educational attainment is a robust factor influencing whether or not a new entrant progresses beyond the first year of their course. Wright (2011) through the narratives of mature women identified the importance of their earlier educational experience in terms of their ability to achieve, how they were or were not motivated to engage with further study, and how this affected their confidence in light of returning to education as an adult. Those students who had unpleasant experiences of the compulsory sector were especially nervous. Their expectations of Higher Education were that they expected to be treated in line with their past educational experiences. Reay (2002:407) identifies this as;

...troubled educational history

This is a common thread that occurred regardless of gender, class and ethnicity within the mature student cohort that she engaged with. These students discuss interrupted schooling due to family circumstances and therefore the compulsory sector was difficult for them and this impacted upon their experiences of the field of Higher Education. It is reported that the teaching staff generally disengaged from these students and this is identified as a means of symbolic violence perpetrated by the compulsory educational system (Reay, 2002, Bourdieu and Passeron, 1990). A key thread is that failed educational experiences at an earlier stage in the student's lives gave rise to feelings of difficulties in fit and identify. Reay (2002) supports this suggesting that the mature students' experiences of education were that they did not fit easily into the role of student and this is linked to their past troubled educational experiences. Mature students from a working class background experienced a struggle in relation to authenticity within the field of Higher Education. However for some mature students engaging with the field of



Higher Education marked the conclusion of educational exclusion and this was equated with overcoming the struggles of structural inequality (Fleming and Finnegan 2011).

The first year of Higher Education is key to the student's socialisation which is critical to their success in Higher Education (McInnes et al, 2000, McInnes, 2001; Ramsey et al 2007; Pitkethley and Prosser, 2001). Therefore University policies should reflect this time of student adjustment. Tinto (1993) suggests that resources need to be carefully channelled as it is this year that may yield considerable future benefits in both learning and perseverance. Fleming and Finnegan (2011) report that the experience of getting through college for the mature student encourages a learner identity that is oriented to life-long learning. This is beneficial to the mature student at individual level and to the broader society. There is a need to be cognisant of progression amongst mature students as this can be linked to their overall experiences of the field of Higher Education. Mature students demonstrate higher levels of progression at level 6 and level 7 programmes in the Institute of Technology sector as opposed to level 8 programmes (HEA, 2010).

The literature highlights that the benefits to mature students of Higher Education go beyond academic and career success (Wright, 2011; Reay et al, 2002; Cochrane 1991). Other considerations in terms of success are that mature students recount an increase in life satisfaction and ally themselves to the notions of altruism as a determining result of their studies (Scott, et al, 1998). This is supported by Reay et al, (2002) who identifies that mature students express a love of learning and view education for education's sake not as a means to an end. While these are positive experiences Cree et al, (2009) reported that mature students experienced a feeling of being overwhelmed by the transition to the field of Higher Education. The challenge of the size of the campus itself and the enormity of the library left the mature students feeling stressed and consequently expressed an experience which has been identified in the literature as learning shock (Gallacher et al, 2002; Griffiths et al, 2005). This is noted in a study by Scott et al, (1998) who highlight that mature students experience high levels of stress and over-load, which can be linked to trying to integrate all aspects of their lives. West (1995)

suggests that the challenge to the mature student is not fitting into University but trying to fit University in due to the higher life loads they experience. Blaxter et al, (1996) proposes that mature students who are also mothers may suspend their study due to the responsibilities of child-care and domestic obligations. Reay et al, (2002) report that while children can be a mobilizing factor they can also be a source of competing demands. A narrative study by Wright (2011) highlights the struggles that mature women have trying to balance the commitments to family, work and study. Wright (2011) discusses her theory of integrated lives whereby the student integrates family, education, study and work commitments. She identifies the struggles that women have when trying to balance all aspects of their lives reminding us that the real world is sometimes messy. Consequently if there is a change in domestic circumstances their experiences of Higher Education can change. The challenge is to integrate study life into their family and domestic life.

The mature student has to support their families, financially, emotionally and physically. Wright (2011) identifies the need expressed by mature students to minimize disturbances and avoid conflicts that may arise within their families due to the extra pressure of study commitments. This struggle to maintain a balance in their lives affected their overall experience of Higher Education in a negative way as they were always short of time and feeling under pressure.

Biesta and Tedder (1997) point out that the issue of maintaining a level of stability in family life in modern society demands enormous commitment and energy as life moves rapidly and time is a valuable resource. The extra pressure of study commitments make this all the more challenging and detract from the overall experience of Higher Education. Osborne et al, (2004) report that mature students in part-time education were not so concerned about the financial aspect of engaging with Higher Education but more so the time. Students highlighted that studying ate into time with their families and was viewed as a cause of tension in family life. Consequently there was an element of sacrifice associated with Higher Education.

Reay et al, (2002) suggest that time for self-care is sacrificed due to time restrictions. Some mature students identified that they were aware of the

balancing act they were performing on a daily basis and that any small change in their personal circumstances could have an enormous impact on their lives as a student. The mature students reported they were trying to manage their multiple roles and did not know whether they would be able to cope with studying and their various commitments until they actually embarked upon their study. Consequently the literature highlights the balancing act that mature students have to endure while engaging with the field of Higher Education. Student life is precarious and something that at times is dependent upon their personal and domestic situations. Themes of balance, time management, and tensions between their student and home lives are repeated throughout the literature and influence their experiences of Higher Education (Wright 2011; Cree et al, 2009; Osborne et al, 2004; Blaxter et al, 1996).

Wright (2011) identifies a gender based finding in relation to the balancing of student and home life in that mature woman students were grateful for any support that they received from their partners or families and did not view this support as a right. A theme emerged that the mature woman student had to ensure that every need was met within the domestic situation before educational needs could be addressed. Therefore study was not prioritized but something that was fitted in after all other domestic duties were attended too. This leads to increasing stress levels for the mature student trying to balance all aspects of life (Wright, 2011). An earlier study by Osborne et al, (2004) supports this thread in the literature as mature students expressed that they had chosen part-time study to fit in with their existing family and financial commitments.

Ramsay et al, (2007) report that mature students enjoyed studying but expressed feelings of guilt due to time spent away from home. Mature students have also expressed concerns in relation to child-minding and spousal relationships and the effect that engaging with Higher Education has on their personal lives (Bradley et al, 1990). This is supported by Reay et al, (2002:10) who identified that mature students were;

...caught up in a constant balancing act between wanting to study, meeting domestic responsibilities and needing to earn money.

Cree et al, (2009) identified the difficulty mature students experienced with competing demands on their time, balancing home life, study and in some cases paid employment.

Consequently time is a valuable commodity and pressure on time impacts on their overall experiences of the field of Higher Education. The challenge is to be able to balance domestic responsibilities with study commitments. Edwards (1993) highlighted this issue as mature students viewed the decision to make time for study difficult as it was viewed as taking time away from families and consequently there was conflict surrounding the decision. Study time was treated as a marginal activity with domestic responsibilities taking precedence. Wright (2011) describes the blurring of boundaries between the commitments of family, work and education with mature students identifying that study tended to fill in the gaps left between these conflicting demands. Reay et al, (2005) identifies that it was impossible for mature students to engage fully with their study commitments unless all the domestic and family responsibilities had been met. However Wright (2011:41) proposes that stories about education cannot be viewed in isolation from the other varying elements of their lives and that mature student women were;

... positively motivated to integrate their lives.

Therefore the notion of integration can be seen as a constructive motivator and a positive choice to enrich their educational experiences.

An interesting aspect of the experiences of mature students in the field of Higher Education is the students' relationship with academic staff. Wilcox et al, (2005) identify the importance of the relationship with academic staff and in particular with personal tutors as being crucial to the concept of social support that can facilitate or in some cases impede students in their pursuit of

friendship networks. McGivney (1996) and Tinto, (2002) emphasise the significance of the students' relationship with academic staff as a means to enable the student to assimilate into student life. Lamothe et al, (1995) support this view focusing on the significance of social support to the student in adjusting to University life.

There are many variables when examining the experiences of mature students in relation to Higher Education. It is essential that their experiences are examined to understand the needs of mature students within Higher Education. Key themes throughout the literature suggest that mature student's experiences of Higher Education are linked to past educational experiences and that they need to continually balance their domestic commitments with their study commitments.

### **Chapter Summary.**

The literature reveals that Widening Participation discourses highlight key themes such as equality, participation and accessibility for the mature student population. Common threads throughout the literature relating to the motivations driving the mature student to enter Higher Education are complex and varied encompassing personal development, career progression and a love of learning. The literature suggests that the experiences of mature students of the field of Higher Education are influenced by their busy lives and commitments and their previous experiences of education. The work of Bourdieu helps to add meaning and understand the experiences of mature students in the field of Higher Education. In the following chapter I will discuss the relevant works of Bourdieu in relation to this inquiry.

## **Chapter Three. Bourdieu.**

### **Introduction.**

This chapter examines the writings of Bourdieu and provides a rationale for their employability within this study. Bourdieu was dedicated to the analysis of education throughout his academic career. Therefore utilising the theoretical approach employed by Bourdieu (1977) could be beneficial while researching the field of Higher Education (Maton, 2005). Tapper and Salter, (2004:14) suggest that the existing literature on Higher Education is;

...notable for its theoretical parsimony.

I have chosen Bourdieu's conceptual framework for the analysis of the narratives of the mature students as it enables me to look beyond the surface to examine;

...whose interests are being served and how (Tripp,1998:37).

The theoretical work of Bourdieu attempts to explore below the surface to how social systems work (Mills and Gale, 2007). Bourdieu dedicated substantial time to the analysis of education. He proposed that education as a field of study was one which reproduced itself more than others and noted that social agents who were in dominant positions within the field tended to be entrenched with its practices and discourses (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1990). Grenfell and James (1998) agree suggesting that education may be viewed as a system that consists of power hierarchies that have resultant effects on individuals who are produced by and also reproduce them. The focus of much of Bourdieu's research is social struggle examining how those who are marginalised manage within this (Bourdieu, 1990). He investigates social differentiation, class reproduction and hierarchies of power within the educational system (Grenfell, 2004). The employability of a Bourdieusian

focus for the theoretical underpinnings for this inquiry stems from the understanding that Bourdieu as a critical social theorist is interested in social struggle and illuminating social inequalities thereby leading to change. Critical researchers are dedicated to transforming the world, combating discrimination and oppression (Figueroa, 2000). Therefore they;

...go beyond describing “what is going on” and explaining “why”...For them, unmasking oppressive structures and contributing to social and political change is integral to research (Troyna, 1995:398).

Bourdieu proposes that those involved in the educational system reproduce the social order often not realising that they are part of this process. Bourdieu’s theory of practice employing the key concepts of habitus, field and capital are utilised within this research inquiry. These concepts are not independent of each other but interrelated. Grenfell (2008:2) explains;

It is important to stress that these should not be seen as independent entities; rather they are all interconnected, making up the structure and conditions of the social contexts Bourdieu studied.

For the purposes of this literature review I will discuss each concept separately and their relevance to this inquiry.

### **Habitus.**

The concept of habitus is essential to Bourdieu’s distinct sociological approach and central to his involvement in the academic field of social science (Maton, 2008). Although habitus has been employed and cited in various studies through a wide range of disciplines Maton (2008:49) suggests it remains;

...one of the most misunderstood, misused and hotly contested of Bourdieu’s ideas. It can be both revelatory and mystifying, instantly

recognisable and difficult to define, straightforward and slippery. In short, despite its popularity, habitus remains anything but clear.

Habitus is a method of analysing the workings of the social world through empirical investigation and is a significant component of this inquiry. It is an attempt by Bourdieu to incorporate cultural and traditional aspects of life into his theory of practice (Webb et al, 2002). Nash (1999) argues that habitus permits individual trajectories to be examined as it has a history and reveals the outline of its source in practice which ensures its employability within this inquiry. Bourdieu (1985) proposes that through the conceptual tool of habitus, agency or practice is linked with capital and field. Bourdieu suggested that he developed the concept of habitus to surmount the impasse of objectivism and subjectivism. Bourdieu (1998a:782) writes;

These two movements the subjectivist and objectivist stand in dialectical relation. It is this dialectic of objectivity and subjectivity that the concept of habitus is designed to capture and encapsulate.

Bourdieu (1994) suggests that habitus is an internalized structure and therefore it is the objective made subjective. Grenfell (2008:53) explains that habitus is;

...how the personal comes to play a role in the social - its dispositions underlie our actions that in turn contribute to social structures. Habitus thereby brings together both objective social structure and subjective personal experiences.

Habitus is inherent as it is used to elucidate qualities of social life that cannot be described merely by the combined actions of individuals, but instead are influenced by tradition, customs, history, and principles that is not explicit (Rhynas, 2005). This is supported by Lane (2000) who suggests that habitus is advanced through the process of imitation as individuals unconsciously integrate behaviours into their lives, imitating others through the practice of



iterative learning. Social life tends to be governed by a range of commonalities. Mills and Gale (2007:436) suggested that Bourdieu used the term habitus to mean;

...recurring patterns of class outlook - the beliefs, values conduct, speech, dress and manners – which are inculcated by habitus in terms of everyday experiences within the family, the peer group and the school.

Therefore the extent to which a person's habitus fits with the educational institute determines their performance within it (Brooks 2008). Habitus is a useful analytical tool relevant to this inquiry as it enables the examination of the mature student's habitus and the effect that this may have on their experiences of the field of Higher Education. Willis (1997) proposed that working class kids tended to get working class jobs however within contemporary society there are no rules which suggest that this should be so. Habitus is intended to resolve this challenge. Bourdieu (1994:65) states;

All of my thinking started from this point: how can behaviour be regulated without being the product of obedience to rules?

It is because of its inherent nature that habitus often goes unrecognised as being significant in peoples' realities. It is a perception that occurs below the individual's level of consciousness, and so there may be a certain unthinking attached to the actions of individuals. Bourdieu (1994) suggests that habitus is structured by situations relating to both the individual's past and present, such as educational experiences or family circumstance. The term structuring is what enables the shaping and formation of the individual's present and future practices. Habitus is a structure that is ordered, not haphazard in its construction. An important element within habitus is the notion of dispositions which Bourdieu (1977:214) viewed as crucial. He explains;

It expresses first the result of an organizing action, with a meaning close to that of words such as structure; it also designates a way of being, a habitual state (especially of the body) and, in particular, a predisposition, tendency, propensity or inclination.

Dispositions are exchangeable and proficient in becoming active within an assortment of theatres of social action. Habitus does not act alone but is part of an insentient relationship interlinked with the concepts of capital and field (Bourdieu, 1993a). Habitus, capital and field are interconnected working relationally in practice. Therefore practice is a result of the relations between habitus and the position of a person within a field which is their capital and the current state of play of that social arena which is field (Maton, 2008). Warren & Webb (2007) emphasise the simplicity of practice. It engages with the ordinary which they suggest is saturated then with social relations. They suggest that people both reproduce social structure and change it. Bourdieusian literature discusses habitus in terms of being both generative and structuring. Generative attends to perceptions and practice whereas structuring defines limits upon what is termed as perception and practice (Codd, 1990). Schiltz (1982:729) agrees stating;

Practice, therefore, must be explained by habitus (it's generative principle) on the one hand and by irreducible novelty of historical situations on the other. So whether we are dealing with phenomena described as migration, revolution or peasantisation, the practices associated with these phenomena are the product of the dialectical relationship between situations and habitus.

Habitus is the medium that encourages us to think relationally to transcend dichotomies to understand and explain the individual and society (Bourdieu, 1990). Maton (2008:53) indicates;

Habitus is the link not only between past present and future, but also between the social and the individual, the objective and subjective, and structure and agency

It is the relationship between habitus, capital and field that is examined when analysing the narratives of the mature students regarding their experiences of the field of Higher Education. Grenfell (2008) suggests that habitus engages with our histories that are then carried forward with us throughout our lives. It is this history they propose that persuades us to make choices and decisions. Therefore where we are at any point in time is the culmination of events from our past that has shaped our lives. Accordingly the choices that are presented to us depend primarily on their context and so the structures of habitus are evolving as well as the social landscape of our lives through which we have to navigate.

The analysis of the narratives of the mature student within this inquiry make it possible to explore the dynamic of habitus within their experiences in the field of Higher Education. The social and the individual are linked through habitus in that even though the experiences of each individual are inimitable, they are mutual in terms of their structure with others in the population who are from, for example, the same social class, ethnicity or gender. Habitus and field are developing, challenging and dynamic (Maton, 2008). The relationship between field and habitus is crucial to social reproduction and should be examined. Subsequently there may not always be a fit between habitus and field or alternatively there may be a perfect match. Examining the relationship between the two concepts enables a deeper understanding of the experiences of the mature students in relation to the field of Higher Education.

Therefore to conclude, habitus organises individuals to engage in certain ways. It guides their actions and tendencies without actually determining them. It is not a discrete entity but works relationally with field and capital. In the following section I will discuss the concept of field and its significance within this research inquiry.

### **Field.**

The concept of field enables Higher Education to be viewed as an object of study. The field within this inquiry represents Higher Education within the

Republic of Ireland. The meaning that Bourdieu attached to the term field is used to describe an area of land, a battlefield and a field of knowledge.

Jenkins (2002:84) states;

A field, in Bourdieu's sense, is a social arena within which struggles or manoeuvres take place over specific resources or stakes and access to them.

Bourdieu (2005) suggested that to appreciate social relations the space within which they occur must also be investigated. The social space is the field which can be fashioned depending upon what happens within it. Individual agents within the field have at their disposal different forms of capital which enable them to position themselves within the field. Therefore when thinking in terms of field it is essential to think relationally. Maton (2005:689) explains;

Briefly, a field is defined as a configuration of positions comprising agents (individuals, groups of actors or institutions) struggling to maximise their position. Conversely, agents are defined by their relational position within the field's distribution of capital (resources conferring power or status) and from which they derive properties irreducible to intrinsic characteristics of the agents themselves.

Bourdieu compared social life to a game. He used the analogy of a game to explain the concept of field. The game is competitive and people consider that it is worth playing. Those engaged in the game, known as social agents wish to win or improve their position and for that reason they use various strategies to maximise their position within the field (Thomson, 2008). Hence it is suggested that the field is;

...a structured system of social positions (Jenkins, 2002:84).

As a result the field is seen in terms of the social actor's habitus and the capital they have at their disposal. Thomson (2008:69) explains;

Bourdieu argued for a methodology that would bring together an inter-dependant and co-constructed trio -field, capital and habitus - with none of them primary, dominant or causal.

The concept of capital is vital to the position of the social agents within the field. It is the accumulation of relevant capitals that benefit those within the field and therefore field is not an equitable space for all. Some social agents have at their disposal more appropriate capital enabling them to be better positioned. Subsequently this advantage can allow these agents to be more successful than others. Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992:98) refer to social actors within the field having “trump cards” which equates to the quality and quantity of capital that they have to play with. Each field has its own shape, rules, history and therefore is different for each individual who enters it (Grenfell 2008).

While considering the concept of field as representing Higher Education, Bourdieu ( in Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992:104-107) has offered three steps to analyse a field directing the researcher to:

- 1: analyse the positions of the field vis-a-vis the field of power;
- 2: map out the objective structures of relations between the positions occupied by the social agents or institutions who compete for the legitimate forms of specific authority of which this field is a site; and
- 3: analyse the habitus of agents, the systems of dispositions they have acquired by internalizing a determinate type of social and economic condition.

These steps are useful when examining the social space that is the field. They help illuminate the significance of the interconnectedness of the three concepts of habitus, capital and field and highlight the necessity to think relationally.

Therefore in the following section I will discuss capital and the relationship between it and field and habitus.

## **Capital.**

The following quote strikes at the heart of this research inquiry;

The unfairness of allowing certain people to succeed, based not upon merit but upon the cultural experiences, the social ties and the economic resources they have access to, often remains unacknowledged in the broader society (Wacquant, 1998:216).

It is through the examination of the concept of capital that Bourdieu gives us a vehicle to expose the injustice of this situation. Bourdieu argues that it is the culture of the dominant group that ensures their success within the education system. Therefore educational differences are mistaken for academic giftedness rather than class based differences. (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1979). The concept of cultural capital demonstrates a knowledge of bourgeois culture which is unequally divided within society and therefore aids the preservation of social hierarchy under the guise of individual capacity and scholastic meritocracy (Wacquant, 1998). Therefore the inherent demands of the educational system, according to Bourdieu (1998b:20);

...maintain the pre-existing order, that is, the gap between pupils endowed with unequal amounts of cultural capital.

Education is a symbolic capital and can be employed to advantage or disadvantage social actors within the field (Grenfell, 2008). The concept of capital is only valuable in terms of a;

...socio-culturally defined arbitrary (Grenfell, 2004:28).

Consequently it needs to be understood as symbolic as opposed to having ultimate worth. Bourdieu (1985) suggests that symbolic capital has three principal forms; economic, social and cultural capital. This broadens the notion

of capital away from the commonly held assumption of it being entirely economic towards a wider system of exchanges where diverse assets are traded within various fields (Moore, 2008). Grenfell and James (2004a) propose that all capital whether economic, social or cultural is symbolic and shapes social practice. They suggest that all forms of capital are derived from economic power and subsequently lead to economic outcomes. Economic capital is often articulated through social and cultural capital and therefore the economic implications often go unnoticed in social and cultural phenomena. It is within this context that this inquiry aims to explore the experiences of mature students in relation to the three principal forms of symbolic capital linking them to the field of Higher Education and habitus.

Bourdieu (1986a) further classified capital into three sub-types: embodied, objectified and institutionalised. Embodied cultural capital comprises of the consciously acquired and inherited properties of the self. This is acquired over time and normally from the family through socialisation of culture and traditions. Objectified cultural capital entails the ownership of physical objects such as art, which can be transferred for monetary profit. Institutionalised cultural capital consists of institutional recognition mainly in the form of academic qualifications.

It is capital that social agents employ to better their position within the field. Bourdieu's theory in relation to capital argues that there are two ways in which symbolic capital should be understood. The first suggests that values and lifestyles of certain social groups are superior to those of others and as such then bestows social advantage. The second way capital can be appreciated is in terms of qualitative variations in forms of consciousness within different social groups. Consequently social membership does not automatically render a habitus that grants symbolic capital in a standardised homogenous way. These two distinctions are important because if the first explanation of capital is used alone then it becomes problematic to discriminate conceptually between Bourdieu's idea and those that are conventionally employed in social stratification theory (Moore, 2008).

Capital is essential to the strategies that players have when entering the field to play the game. It can enhance their opportunities and maximise their positions or can reduce their capacity to enter the field or to be successful. For example it is documented within the discourses of Widening Participation that there is an association between parental education and the progression of children to Higher Education (Brooks, 2008). There are many species of capital at play when entering the field of Higher Education. There is the cultural capital that students possess due to their parents' appreciating the value of Higher Education and also the impact of economic capital. Social capital encompasses the resources that are available to them through social networks and socially negotiated relationships that may in themselves prove beneficial. Families are often considered as a source of social capital (Edwards, 2004). The concept of social capital arises through social processes between the family and wider society and is composed of many social networks that can be seen as advantageous for those students participating in Higher Education (Reay, 2000). All forms of capital are interdependent on each other and ultimately rooted in economic capital. Bourdieu (1986a:54) acknowledges that;

It has to be posited simultaneously that economic capital is at the root of all other types of capital and that these transformed, disguised forms of economic capital, never entirely reducible to that definition, produce their most specific effects only to the extent that they conceal (not least from their possessors) that economic capital is at their root.

When Bourdieu was developing his concept of cultural capital he engaged with the educational system at compulsory and post-compulsory levels. He argued that those students from middle-class backgrounds were more familiar with the language employed by educational institutes. Consequently he suggested that they had an advantage over their working-class peers (Wacquant, 1998). This is an example of cultural capital at work to the detriment of the students from a working-class background as it maximises the strategic positioning of those more privileged students within the field of education. He debated that educational institutes reinforce social inequalities and argued that this impacts



on the way that children envisage their educational future. Therefore there is a cumulative effect of educational disadvantage carried through with the individual (Bourdieu, 1976). Bourdieu (1998b) draws our attention to the inherent requirements of the educational system which he opines upholds the disparity between students gifted with inequitable quantities of cultural capital.

Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital describes familiarity with bourgeois culture and the unequal distribution of this which enables the conservation of social hierarchy (Wacquant 1998). For marginalised groups, such as mature students, their inherent cultural capital and the way in which they experience the world has not been valued in the educational system (Mills & Gale, 2007). It is recognised that exposure to the educative effects of the cultural capital of dominant groups are necessary for educational success (Bourdieu, 1997).

Therefore Bourdieu determines that symbolic capital has three principal forms; economic, social and cultural capital. Capital is subdivided into embodied, objectified and institutional forms. The concept of capital works relationally with the concepts of field and habitus within Bourdieu's Theory of Practice. It is through these concepts that I will be examining the experiences of the mature students who participated within this inquiry. The work of Bourdieu has been challenged within the literature and this will now be discussed within the context of employing his theory of practice for this research inquiry.

### **Challenges to Bourdieu's Theory of Practice.**

There are challenges concerning Bourdieu's Theory of Practice. I will endeavour to discuss those that are relevant to this study and explain why in the face of these challenges I employ Bourdieu's Theory of Practice within this study. At the most fundamental level the challenge of interpreting the translated texts and reading the complex wide range of work is difficult (Rhynas, 2005). Bourdieu was disinclined to simplify his work due to trepidation of undermining the complex meanings of his writings and therefore his Theory of Practice may not be easily accessible to those who wish to engage with it. Socially critical researchers such as Bourdieu aim to highlight

injustices and empower individuals to change oppressive conditions. Bourdieu's critics propose that his work over emphasises the notion of reproduction to the detriment of transformation. The notion of resistance is not primary within Bourdieu's theory of practice (Grenfell and James, 2004a). The concept of habitus may be viewed as overly deterministic and fatalistic in its outlook. Reay, (2004:433) disputes these criticisms stating;

Bourdieu viewed habitus as a more dynamic concept than simply replicating one's social environment. He perceived the concept as a way of providing individuals with a range of actions based on their social experience.

I agree habitus does not determine the pathway of people it is dependent on social experience and therefore there are choices at their disposal. Mills and Gale (2007) concur suggesting that habitus may orientate actions of individuals but does not strictly determine them. In relation to the accusation of determinism Bourdieu (1990) contends that habitus becomes operational in relation to a field and the identical habitus can engage with different practices and positions depending on the state of the field. Therefore I believe that it is a dynamic concept.

Tooley and Darby(1998) are critical of the approach that Bourdieu takes to educational research and especially the use of habitus. They suggest that Bourdieu has little if anything to offer to educational research. They challenged the study by Reay (1995) in relation to habitus in the classroom. They proposed that this study was an example of a case of studies that were flawed due to the uncritical admiration of the work of Bourdieu. Nash (1999) argues that their critique was unsubstantiated and goes on to propose that the work of Bourdieu is relevant to educational research as even the struggle to understand Bourdieu's concepts are in itself worthwhile because it forces one to think. Nash (1999) suggests that without concepts which are the tools of thought researchers will not make progress.

Jenkins (2002) proposes that habitus is an unyielding concept so structured that it generates practices and is deterministic. LiPuma (1993) challenges the

notion that habitus is a bridge between the social and the psychological, the system and the agents and argues that this is not so as the relationship of individual agency to social classification has not been sufficiently cultivated. LiPuma (1993) debates that Bourdieu does not offer an explanation of why the internalisation of the habitus is absolute, significantly suggesting that it is obvious to everyone that not all of those brought up in the same family or of the same socio-economic class adopt the same practices. Also LiPuma (1993) challenges the interconnectedness between culture and capital proposing that those with the same financial resources may not behave in exactly the same way and Bourdieu's Theory of Practice offers no explanation for this. Bourdieu would suggest that it is the work of the researcher to analyse social practices sufficiently and comprehensively to disclose the principles of the generative habitus.

There are those who propose that Bourdieu does not give recognition to agency and the potential for change that may be created. Jenkins (2002:91) debates that Bourdieu is inclined to consign so much power to the social context that his universe;

...ultimately remains one in which things happen to people, rather than a world in which they can intervene in their individual and collective destinies.

Critics of Bourdieu view his thinking as being much more reproductive as opposed to offering transformation (Jenkins, 2002). Nash (1990:445) suggests that Bourdieu's Theory of Practice;

...negates the theory of action, blurs the concept of choice, and introduces confusion, circularity and pseudo-determinism.

Jenkins (2002) supports this statement arguing that it is difficult to locate instances of resistance within his work that highlight its efficacy or significance. However Mills and Gale (2007) acknowledge that the formation of agency is

reserved but they suggest that this should be viewed as an asset that replicates the relationship with a similarly restrained conception of structure. Wacquant (1998) proposes that the conceptual framework that is employed in the examination of reproduction may also be employed to elucidate circumstances of rupture and transformation. Calhoun et al, (1993) agrees suggesting that highlighting reproduction does not exclude opposing action such as revolutionary struggle. I agree and think it is essential within this inquiry to illuminate structures of oppression and reproduction in order to lead to change and transformation.

Other notable criticisms of the concept of field are that it is deterministic and focuses on the reproductive characteristics of the field and not their changeability. However Bourdieu portrayed the field as a site of struggle and this would imply the potential for change and consequently over-ride this deterministic view (Thomson, 2008). Bourdieu argues that social agents can experience change in fields where there is a mismatch between their habitus and the existing circumstances within the field. The field is itself a site of struggle and has the potential for change at any given time thus disputing the critic's deterministic viewpoint (Thomson, 2008).

The notion of explicitly drawn boundaries within the field can prove problematic when employing Bourdieu's Theory of Practice. Bourdieu argued that borders are often contested and fuzzy. The problem then is to realise where to draw the line in relation to field borders, effectively to highlight where the field ends. There may be too many fields at play. Bourdieu suggests reducing the number of fields in play and in this way clarifying the boundaries (Thomson,2008).

Bourdieu advises that the opposition between objectivity and subjectivity is divisive in the social sciences and he proposes to reach beyond their divisiveness to fully comprehend the social world as both only offer one side of an epistemology. However Jenkins (2002:90) contends that despite his endeavours to surpass the divide between these two concepts;

...he remains caught in an unresolved contradiction between determinism and voluntarism, with the balance of his argument favouring the former.

Bourdieu developed the concept of habitus to surmount the impasse of objectivism and subjectivism. Many critics who have concentrated specifically on the concept of habitus have debated that it is this very concept that reverts back into the sort of objectivism that Bourdieu refutes (Schatzki, 1987, 1997; Lamont and Lareau, 1988; de Certeau, 1988). There are those within the literature who refute this viewpoint and believe that the work of Bourdieu has gone a long way to surmount the dualism of structure and agency and as such has offered legitimate advances within the field of social theory (Wacquant, 1987; Harker, 1984; Taylor, 1993).

I have examined the challenges to Bourdieu and I have presented reasonable counter-arguments. I employ the work of Bourdieu in this study as ultimately he is interested in social struggle and how those who are marginalised in society manage within this. The concept of field allows for the examination of Higher Education as an entity within itself. It is important to examine the social space that interactions occur within and the social structures and power mechanisms at work within those spaces. It is through the concept of field that I am able to examine the social space that is Higher Education and how that space impacts on the experiences of mature students. Habitus allows for the examination of the individual trajectories of the mature students within this study. It demonstrates that people's experiences are a culmination of events from their pasts. Habitus is a significant tool within this inquiry as it allows for the examination of the link between past, present and future, structure and agency and the social and the individual (Maton, 2008). I do not concur with the argument that it is deterministic rather I see it as dynamic becoming operational within a given field allowing for different practices and positions and social experiences (Bourdieu, 1993a)

The concept of capital helps to illuminate social injustices and highlights the position of the dominant group within the educational system. It allows through the exploration of the narratives rationale for the circumstances and the

experiences of the mature students within the field of education. Capital demonstrates the positions of social agents within the field and highlights its use as a capacity generating strategy for varying degrees of success. Throughout the narratives the concepts of habitus, field and capital are employed relationally to highlight and allow deep meaning to the experiences of the mature students within this inquiry.

### **Chapter Summary.**

This chapter reviewed the literature in relation to the theoretical concepts of Bourdieu specifically concentrating on the conceptual tools of field, habitus and capital and their employability within this inquiry. The rationale for the use of a Bourdieusian approach to this inquiry was presented. It enables an examination of how social systems and structures work within the field of Higher Education and demonstrates how ideology or history mask the processes that oppress and control people in order to expose the nature of oppressive mechanisms (Harvey, 1990).

## **Chapter Four: Methodological Approach.**

### **Introduction.**

Chapter two examined the literature in relation to the discourses of Widening Participation, mature student experience and chapter three explored the work of Bourdieu, in relation to the concepts of habitus, capital and field. This chapter outlines the methodology employed to address the research questions. This investigation explores the experiences of mature students currently living in Ireland undertaking an undergraduate degree programme in the area of applied social studies. It is an attempt to understand the meaning of mature students' experiences as they engage with the field of Higher Education. The question asked is: *What do the experiences of mature students undertaking an undergraduate degree programme in applied social studies reveal about the field of Higher Education in the Republic of Ireland?*

The research question will be addressed employing the guiding methodological framework of Bourdieu (1977) focusing on the principles of habitus, capital and field to enable a more in-depth understanding of the experiences of mature students within the field of Higher Education.

A qualitative narrative based inquiry will enable the participants to recount their experiences through the medium of story-telling allowing for a rich encounter as they share their individual stories. Clandinin and Connelly (2000:18) focus on the key concept of experience stating;

...narrative is the best way of representing and understanding experience.

Bruner (1991) concurs suggesting that narrative knowledge is more than emotive expression but rather it is a legitimate form of reasoned knowledge.

The chapter is divided into three sections. The first section of this chapter focuses on the rationale for the investigation addressing the main research and subsidiary research questions. In section two of this chapter the research

design will be discussed including considerations on theoretical perspectives. In section three, I will discuss the process of implementing the study in some detail, including sampling process, ethical issues, data collection and analysis employed. I will highlight the study limitations and provide suggestions to address them. This section concludes with a reflection of my own personal positionality within the field of this inquiry.

## **Section One.**

### **Rationale, Purpose and Line of Inquiry.**

The purpose of this inquiry is to examine the experiences of mature students in relation to the field of Higher Education. The methodology employed is qualitative in nature. Through employing a narrative approach I can gain rich in-depth data whereby participants can express their experiences without the restrictions of closed questions or structured interview techniques.

Consequently I will argue in favour of the use of the qualitative approach undertaken and specifically the use of narrative inquiry.

In order to place my research inquiry within the current body of knowledge available, I undertook a literature review focusing on methods that were previously employed to study areas that were of interest to my line of inquiry. My search involved reviewing the literature in relation to Widening Participation discourses, experiences and motivations of mature students and the use of a Bourdieusian approach to analysis for the purposes of undertaking a research investigation (Grenfell and James, 2004a, Mills and Gale, 2007, Reay, 2002, Warren and Webb, 2007). The literature review afforded me the opportunity to apply relevant academic work to this inquiry and supported the chosen methodology. Goodson (1995) contends that when using life stories as a tool in educational research we need to be aware of the cultural and political context for the chosen area of inquiry. This inquiry takes place within a time of Widening Participation discourses in relation to mature students in the Republic of Ireland against a backdrop of economic recession. It is acknowledged that our younger workforce is among the most educated in the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD)



however the educational attainment of mature workers is deemed to be meagre in comparison (HEA, 2012b). The Higher Education field within the Republic of Ireland has been under scrutiny to meet the changing needs of a diverse student body. Although there has been significant increases in investment in Higher Education throughout the period of growth the expenditure per capita has remained modest and has significantly decreased since 2009 (HEA, 2012a). The National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030 (HEA, 2011:4) recognises this by observing the relationship that binds Higher Education to the wider society stating;

...higher education needs to change to meet new economic, social and cultural challenges.

This has to take place within the background of financial and budgetary restrictions. The two significant drivers identified as crucial within the field of Irish Higher Education is quality and participation both of which are noteworthy particularly in relation to mature student experience. The National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030 (HEA, 2011) highlights that expansion in Higher Education will double over the next two decades identifying that most of the growth will come from non-traditional areas such as mature students. Consequently the rationale for this inquiry is to explore the experiences of those mature students who are already within the field of Higher Education with a view to making recommendations as to how best to meet their needs and achieve the ambitious targets set out within the changing landscape of Higher Education.

### **The Main Research Question and Subsidiary Questions.**

This inquiry explores the experiences of mature students engaged in Higher Education. The investigation engages with mature students to understand their experiences through the medium of story-telling and using the guiding

principles of Bourdieu's conceptual framework of habitus, capital and field. The main research question posed is:

**What do the experiences of mature students who are undertaking an under graduate degree programme in applied social studies reveal about the field of Higher Education in the Republic of Ireland?**

The subsidiary questions are:

1. What are the main debates about Widening Participation in relation to mature students?
2. In what ways do mature students' narratives illuminate any relationship between past and present educational experiences?
3. To what extent does mature student narratives reflect economic, social and cultural capital?
4. What do mature student narratives reveal about their learning experiences in Higher Education and other conflicting demands?

To address the research questions it is essential that a robust methodology is chosen and this will be discussed throughout this chapter. In the following section I will discuss the theoretical perspectives and the research design.

## **Section Two: Theoretical Perspectives and the Research Design.**

In approaching the inquiry I acknowledged in chapter one my own world view because I believed that it could influence the research design and therefore was worthy of attention and consideration. These concerns held particular significance for this study considering my own experiences of Higher Education as a mature student. Creswell (2007) defines a paradigm as a set of assumptions or beliefs that guide the researcher's enquiries and that the influence of personal experiences, culture and history shapes the paradigm held by each researcher. Guba and Lincoln (1994:116) concur suggesting;

...paradigm issues are crucial; no inquirer ought to go about the business of inquiry without being clear about just what paradigm informs and guides his or her approach.

Therefore it is essential to consider my beliefs on the nature of the reality being studied (ontology) and how knowledge is acquired (epistemology) as they inform my choices in relation to methodology and also the interpretations offered. The fundamental beliefs are categorised as ontology, epistemology and methodology. I will address each of these beliefs in turn.

Ontology addresses the nature of the reality being studied and the knowledge gained from this (epistemology) influences the chosen methodology and also the interpretations presented (Creswell, 2007). Two key points of orientation within ontological considerations are whether social entities should be regarded as objective entities that have a reality external to social actors or alternatively should they be considered social constructions that are generated from the perceptions and actions of social actors (Bryman, 2008). These positions are referred to as objectivism and constructivism. Objectivism is;

...an ontological position that implies that social phenomena confront us as external factors that are beyond our reach or influence (Bryman, 2008:18)

Alternatively constructivism;

...asserts that social phenomena and their meanings are continually being accomplished by social actors (Bryman, 2008:19).

Hughes and Sharrock (1997) suggest there is no single reality; rather, a series of social constructions. Charmaz (2000:510) proposes;

Constructivism assumes the relativism of multiple social realities, recognises the mutual creation of knowledge by the viewer and the viewed, and aims towards interpretative understanding of subjects' meanings.

For this inquiry the most appropriate position is a constructivist interpretivist position as throughout the narratives realities are constructed and knowledge is created through the telling of and the interpretation of the individual narratives.

Epistemological considerations in relation to this inquiry concern the issue of what is an acceptable form of knowledge within a particular discipline. Central to this concern is whether the social world can be studied according to the same principles, procedures and ethos as the natural sciences (Bryman, 2008). The epistemological position that is associated with and corroborates the significance of imitating the natural sciences is positivism.

Positivists accept as true a social reality that exists independently of our perceptions of it (Curtis and Curtis, 2011:12).

Positivists emphasise the techniques of observation and measurement using quantitative data enabling scientists to form objective and unbiased understandings of the social world. This approach has been criticised for its reductionist approach and ignoring the characteristics and perspectives of the researcher (Denzin and Lincoln, 2011, Franklin 2012). The development of post-positivism accepted that the values of the researcher are significant and can influence what is being researched. However there remains a commitment to objectivity encompassing the likely effects of these biases. Post-positivists are committed to the belief that there is one reality and it is the duty of the researcher to discover this (Reichardt and Rallis, 1994; Robson, 2011).

Interpretivism is a contrasting, epistemology to positivism. It is employed by those who are critical of the application of the scientific model to the study of the social world. Their view is that the study of the social world requires a

different logic to that in the natural sciences where the subjective meaning of social action is considered. Bryman, (2008) and Von Wright (1971) describe the epistemological debate between positivism and interpretivism as a division between the positivist approach emphasising the explanation of human behaviour while interpretivism emphasises the understanding of human behaviour. Interpretivism advocates that humans generate knowledge from their experiences. Guba and Lincoln (1994) propose that a philosophical principle of interpretivism enables opportunities to examine human experience as people live and interact within their social worlds. It is the philosophical belief that interpretivism allows the creation of knowledge from human experiences and using this approach the participants' experiences and views are employed to build themes and generate knowledge. It is the role of the researcher to understand the multiple social constructions of knowledge and meaning gained from this opportunity. It follows then that the researcher and the object of investigation are connected and consequently the findings are created rather than proven or falsified (Bryman,2008).

Therefore I have chosen a constructivist interpretivist position to underpin this research inquiry because the findings are created through the analysis of the narratives as told by the mature students. I will now discuss the rationale for the chosen methodology.

### **Rationale for chosen Methodology.**

There have been considerable changes over time in educational research and the methodologies employed therein. Consideration must be given to quantitative or qualitative methodologies appropriate to the research investigation. This inquiry is situated in the real world setting with the aim of acquiring an in-depth understanding of the experiences of mature students in relation to the field of Higher Education. There has been a deliberate move away from the positivist approach to a more qualitative, naturalistic paradigm (Grenfell and James, 2004a). Extensive debates in relation to the use of ethnographic and naturalistic methodologies have seen some literature questioning these methodologies and their rigorousness in terms of data

collection and claims of biased outcomes (Hillage et al, 1998; Tooley and Darby, 1998). The qualitative turn in educational research was due to a search for meanings that could not be explored through quantitative methods. Qualitative inquiry enables a comprehensive search for more than categorical and structural explanations rather it gives voice to rich meaningful data that focuses on identity and agency that cannot be gained through quantitative methodologies. A qualitative methodology maintains the principle supported by the interpretivist approach to research which enables the creation of knowledge through a shared process. My decision to employ a narrative approach is ontologically and philosophically influenced in that it places at the heart of the inquiry the person and signifies the importance of their stories paying particular attention to individual experience. Polkinghorne (1995:8) suggests;

Stories express a kind of knowledge that uniquely describes human experiences in which actions and happenings contribute positively and negatively to attaining goals and fulfilling purposes.

Accordingly it gives a platform to people to talk freely about the things that matter to them. Story-telling is about the specific which gives credence to individual experience Therefore it is particular as opposed to general and abstract (Clandinin and Connolly, 2000). Polkinghorne (1995:7) succinctly defines narrative explaining;

A storied narrative is the linguistic form that preserves the complexity of human action with its interrelationship of temporal sequence, human motivation, chance happenings and changing interpersonal and environmental contexts.

The use of a narrative approach allows the mature student to tell their story in relation to their educational experiences in their own words emphasising for them what is important. The telling of the story links events through the unilinear passage of time from past to present to the future and identifies the

effects of choices linking a prior choice or happening to a later effect. In narrative story it is suggested that the causal linkage of events is sometimes only discovered retrospectively (Freeman 1984). Certain events that have happened may have appeared insignificant at the time however they may have been a crucial occurrence affecting the overall outcome (Polkinghorne, 1995). The use of narrative inquiry offers a space in which stories can be told. Employing Bourdieu's conceptual framework will enable a deeper understanding of the experiences as expressed by the mature students.

### **Methodology.**

Due consideration must be given to the most suitable methodological approach to facilitate the collection of appropriate data to effectively answer the research question. The approach must meet the needs of the field of study and deliver the most appropriate data in order to answer the research question posed.

Therefore, the method of inquiry ensures practical, reliable data collection, but more critically a process to lead one to the answers framed by the research questions (Merriam 1989:161).

Subsequently a narrative based approach is the chosen methodology employed for this inquiry. Goodson and Silke (2001: 91) suggest that;

The fundamental reason why researchers choose to use a life history approach is because they believe that detailed, personal information about how people have perceived and experienced things that have happened in their lives will enable them to better understand whatever it is they are studying.

Narrative research is becoming increasingly popular within the field of educational practice and experience (Clandinin and Connelly 2000). It is an appropriate method in which to engage with the mature student experiencing

the field of Higher Education. Narrative is used to recreate experiences, feelings and places. While the concept of experience is key to this investigation it is essential that experience is captured in such a way that is unrestricted for the participant allowing their stories to be told in full without the limits of closed questions or the restrictiveness of questionnaires. I believe that narrative inquiry allows for this process as it is about the centrality of the person and their story. It is through the employment of narrative that the participant is given the opportunity to tell their story about their lived experiences. Inherent in this approach is the relationship between the interviewer and the participant. The process of interview and the positionality of the researcher are crucial to the overall process and therefore my own positionality within the research process will be examined at the end of this chapter.

The field of education is experienced differently by all and this is mediated by people's own individual biographies and circumstances. The narrative approach is situated within the qualitative or interpretive research method (Gudmundsdottir, 1997; 2001). As an inquiry method, narrative focuses on describing an experience and determining its essence. Employing this approach ensures that I will investigate the phenomena in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of and interpret phenomena in terms of the meaning that people bring to them.

Taylor and Bogdan (1998:76) explain that qualitative methods are designed to;

...ensure a close fit between the data and what people actually say and do. By observing people in their everyday lives, listening to them talk about what is on their minds and looking at the documents that they produce, the qualitative researcher obtains first-hand knowledge of social life unfiltered through operational definitions or rating scales.

There are advantages to adopting a narrative approach that are relevant to this particular study and these are described by Greenhalgh et al, (2005). They highlight that the information provided is embedded within a broad context and therefore is practicable, has meaning and takes into consideration



the other factors that may have been in play at that time. Life history tends to be action oriented depicting the experiences and actions of participants and is linked with and shapes future action. Greenhalgh et al, (2005) suggest that narrative bridges the gaps between the formal codified space that is an organisation and the informal uncodified space which addresses such concepts of relationships, feelings, unwritten rules. Narrative allows us to observe the “what might have been” and embraces the tension between standard routines and procedures that an organisation follows and the unexpected which is inextricably linked to past and future experiences encompassing new ways of working and thinking.

The process of gathering information within a narrative inquiry is through the medium of story-telling and Clandinin and Connelly (1990:38) note;

Humans are storytelling organisms who, individually and collectively, lead storied lives. Thus, the study of narrative is the study of the ways humans experience the world.

A narrative approach thus reflects the constructivist interpretivist position employed within this inquiry. Narrative or story-telling can be a tool to explain the social world that we live in. It enables a deeper understanding and provides a context for the experiences and stories told. Employing a narrative approach affords me the opportunity to explore these complex concepts through the narratives of the mature students.

The literature on narrative identifies three fundamental philosophical underpinnings (Clandinin and Connolly 2000; Polkinghorne 1988). Firstly through the employment of narrative story-telling people organise, recount and reflect on their experiences of their social world, creating their own narratives. Secondly narratives are always told within the context of the individual’s past and present experiences and therefore are not told in isolation. There are many issues to consider within the context of the narrative such as the person’s views, values, and culture identity, when and where the narrative is being told. This is supported by Bruner (1990) who suggests that narratives

must be interpreted within their cultural context and not simply as isolated abstract structures. They should be viewed within the context of the individual's cultural society and settings. Bloomer and Hodkinson (1999) concur through their interest in the relationship developed between learning and identity and the complexities of personal and structural relations which are context based. This can be explored thoroughly through the employment of a narrative methodology and engaging with the conceptual work of Bourdieu as a guiding framework. It is crucial to this inquiry that these complex structural relations are explored to ensure the experiences of mature students are understood.

Thirdly the concept of multivoicedness is identified and occurs within the narrative. It is recognised that there are voices as opposed to just the one voice. This is due to the recognition that although narratives are personal stories they are fashioned by the values, knowledge and experiences of the persons who are recounting them. Also they are in essence collective stories formed by the cultural, historical and institutional settings in which they take place (Elbaz-Luwisch, 1997).

Clandinin and Connelly (2000) when engaging in narrative research use as a foundation the terms, personal and social to demonstrate interaction between past, present and future to demonstrate continuity and combine these with the notion of space which represents situation. These terms represent a three dimensional narrative inquiry space which I will employ as the foundation for this narrative based inquiry. This is significant in that narrative descriptions can act as a medium through which existence and experiences of social inequality can be explored. Narrative descriptions can be employed to structure our life experiences and also narratives can be developed in order to explain the behaviours of others (Zellermayer 1997).

Polkinghorne (1988) opined that people without narratives do not exist and therefore narrative is essential to explain our experiences. We experience our own unique narrative and also we are aware of narratives from the social world that we live in. Recounting experiences in narrative form cannot be carried out in isolation. Narrative descriptions can be employed to structure

our life experiences and also can be developed to explain the behaviours of others. The concept of experience is key to this inquiry and I have discussed the potential tension between the ontological view-points of Clandinin and Connelly (1990; 2000) and Bourdieu within the literature review. However it is worthwhile to address this issue in relation to the methodological approach taken within this research inquiry.

The concept of experience that is so central to narrative inquiry and the writings of Clandinin and Connelly (1990; 2000) is contentious in that Bourdieu (1997) questions the consistency and stability of the notion of experience. This is an interesting concept which I will address. The very notion of experience is its individuality and how it impacts on each individual is given life through the medium of narrative. These tensions are recognised and acknowledgement is given to the notion that the concept of experience in itself is complex and not unproblematic and this becomes clear in the narratives told by the mature students. Bourdieu (1997) would recognise it as being the product of the interaction between the habitus and field reincorporated within habitus and this is something that is very much to the forefront of my mind during the interview process and throughout the analysis of the narrative. Experience itself is culturally and socially constructed and reconstructed. Habitus is characterised as the recurring patterns of class outlook incorporating such concepts as beliefs, values, speech dress and manners. These concepts are very much experiences encountered every-day in the social world and particularly in families (Mills and Gale 2007). Recounting experiences in narrative form cannot be carried out in isolation. In narrative research the researcher is cognisant of the social context of individuals. Employing the theoretical lens of Bourdieu informed through socially critical views of the world the researcher looks beyond the surface to examine underlying structures and systems and who they benefit. Consequently the individual narratives expressed by the mature students give voice to their experiences which can be analysed employing the conceptual tools of habitus, capital and field lending a deeper comprehension of their experiences. Therefore a Bourdieusian focus is relevant in the context of this narrative inquiry as there is an interest in social

struggle and particularly how marginalised and traditionally under-represented groups in Higher Education are affected by this.

### **Section Three.**

#### **Research Setting.**

I am aware that the perfect research setting is one in which the observer acquires easy access, creates immediate rapport with participants and collects data directly related to the research interests (Taylor and Bogdan, 1998). Consequently I chose to conduct this inquiry in a Higher Education Institute that delivers an applied social studies undergraduate programme, and has mature students registered within that programme. The institute where the research took place is my place of employment. I work there as a full-time lecturer in a permanent capacity. I have been employed there for the past nine years. I consider myself in the context of this inquiry to be an insider researcher. The implications of this will be discussed in greater detail in the section on ethical considerations.

#### **Access.**

It was essential that entrance to the field where the narrative inquiry took place was carefully negotiated. Clandinin and Connelly (2000:73) propose;

One of the things narrative inquirers do is continually negotiate their relationships. Research lore would have it that negotiation of entry is a step completed at the beginning of an inquiry and over with once the researcher is ensconced in the field. This is not the way it is for narrative inquirers.

Throughout the inquiry I was mindful that negotiating relationships was an on-going process and therefore I was open for discussion at any time with the main stakeholders should they request. I informed the main stakeholders of this and furnished them with my e-mail address and mobile telephone number

should they at any time wish to talk about any aspect of the inquiry. I was aware that my research involved mature students within the Institute and so was careful to consult other significant people as required and also considered timetabling and examination timetables in relation to my accessing the participants ensuring that the timing of interviews was suitable for them and did not impinge on their studies. As in any Higher Education Institute I was aware that timetables may change as necessary and therefore I was prepared to renegotiate access and interview times as necessary. Written permission to conduct the study was requested from the ethics committee of the University of Sheffield (Appendix 1). This was duly granted (Appendix 2).

It is normal practice for researchers to negotiate access to organisations for research purposes through requesting permission from those who are in positions of authority. These persons of authority are normally referred to as gatekeepers (Burgess,1991).

In order to gain access to the site, the researcher contacted the Head of Department with a detailed outline of what the study entailed and the purpose and focus of the study was fully explained. Written permission was requested (Appendix 3) to undertake the study and a copy of the research proposal given to the Head of Department along with a copy of ethical approval from the University of Sheffield. I also made contact with the Head of Campus of the Institute and requested written permission (Appendix 4) to conduct the study. A copy of the research proposal was given to the Head of Campus along with a copy of ethical approval from the University of Sheffield. Permission to conduct the study was granted from the Head of Campus and the Head of Department.

### **Ethical issues.**

It is vital that researchers consider carefully the ethical issues that may arise within the course of their study. It has been suggested by Neuman (2000) that the area of social research may cause harm to participants professionally, legally, physically and psychologically. Studies of a qualitative nature may give

rise to complex ethical issues, as one cannot predict beforehand what may surface during the course of the interview (Parahoo, 2000; Simons and Usher, 2000). Polit et al. 2001 remind us that ethics should be regarded as contingent on particular situations as opposed to ethical codes and guidelines. Diener and Crandall (1978) identified 4 main areas within social research that are of significant importance when considering the ethical implications of social research. These are:

1: Is there harm to participants?

2: Is there a lack of informed consent?

3: Is there an invasion of privacy?

4: Is deception involved?

It was from this vantage point that I considered the ethical implications of my research Inquiry. The Inquiry was governed by the four main ethical principles put forward by Beauchamp and Childress (2001) of respect for autonomy, non-maleficence, beneficence and justice. In order to apply these principles and to lend support and guidance to the approach employed within the field work, I employed Patton's (2002:48) ethical issues check list to this research inquiry.

These entailed;

1: Explaining purpose: How is the study explained, what language makes sense, what details are essential to share, and what can be omitted?

2: Risk assessment: Is there any way in which conducting the interview will put the person at risk?

3: Confidentiality: will names or locations be required, do the participants have the option of being identified if they so wish, what information will be anonymous, where and for how long will the data be stored and who will have access to it?

4: Informed consent: what kind of informed consent is necessary, what needs to be addressed and discussed in order to ensure adequate information is imparted.

5: Advice: Who will act as an advisor to the researcher in the event of a difficulty?

6: Ethical /value base: What ethical stance and value base informs your work, what code of conduct will guide you as a researcher?

I was mindful that the site for this study was the Higher Education Institute in which I am employed as a lecturer in a full time capacity. I was conscious that the participants in this study were also students that I had taught. I had a dual role both as researcher and lecturer and therefore I was engaged in insider research and so I was aware there was a potential for increased tension in relation to the concepts of confidentiality, anonymity and critically the concept of my position in relation to the participants. I was cognisant of the fact that this position could be viewed as privileged in some sense. I was also aware that students may feel obliged to participate in this study because of my role as lecturer and therefore to address this, meetings were arranged with potential participants explaining that participation was voluntary and there would be no repercussions for those who chose not to participate.

Interviews by their very nature have an inequality about them (Clandinin and Connelly 2000). The researcher is in charge and conducts the interview with a focused intention which is that of gathering data to answer the research question. I was conscious of these issues and in an endeavour to address potential tensions, power relations and my role as insider researcher I took the following course of action. I met with the programme lecturer for the applied social studies programme to request that I would not be study advisor for any of the mature students on the programme over the course of the research inquiry. The rationale for my request was explained and discussed. I teach an elective module to the students of applied social studies in year two of the programme and therefore only those mature students who did not take the elective module participated in the inquiry. Consequently at the time of the

research investigation I was not teaching any of the students that participated in the inquiry.

It was explained to all potential participants that my role as researcher would not impinge on my role as lecturer and would not have any implications in relation to teaching and assessment. In order to separate my dual roles as 'researcher' with that of 'lecturer', interviews with participants were conducted in a different building or rooms than that which classes are normally taken by students thereby geographically making a distinction between my role as lecturer and researcher.

I met with those students who put their names forward to participate and who met the selection criteria to discuss and clarify any questions they had prior to commencement of the study. Each participant was given an information sheet explaining in a question and answer format everything about the research study (Appendix 5). Participants were also given an information leaflet in relation to confidentiality and anonymity (Appendix 6).

The participant was given a consent form to read and then sign (Appendix 7) if they wished to take part in the study. Signing the consent form at that stage indicated that they were consenting to be interviewed and to have the interview tape recorded and this was made explicit in written format on the consent form and also their attention drawn to this fact verbally. The reasons for tape recording the interview were explained and also the participant was made aware that at any time they could discontinue the tape recording of the interview themselves or ask me to stop the recording. The participant was then given a copy of the consent form and again it was explained to them that at any time if they so wished and without obligation they could leave the study. I also directed my attention to the ethical issues and power relationships within the interview setting. The power within the interview generally lies with the interviewer who directs the conversation and also has the power to decide which quotes if any to use when publishing the report. This could lead to the participants feeling misrepresented (Sandelowski 1994). Bourdieu (1996b:17) suggests that there are;



...various effects that the interviewer can produce without knowing it.

He goes on further to discuss the asymmetry within the relationship between the interviewer and the interviewee explaining;

This asymmetry is underlined by a social asymmetry which occurs every time the investigator occupies a higher place in the social hierarchy of different types of capital, especially cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1996b:19).

Therefore in an effort to address this asymmetry and to lend balance to the interview relationship I have only used quotes from interviews with the prior permission of the participants and they were asked to review the quote to ensure that I adequately presented their experiences as told to me. The nature of in-depth interviews is to elicit and uncover information that generally would not be disclosed with the use of a questionnaire. Many in-depth interviews may touch upon sensitive issues that may potentially be harmful to the participants. Participants therefore were advised of the counselling service that is available throughout the college. It was suggested in the literature that there is no single trustworthy ethical formula that can be applied to a qualitative research interview; ethical guidelines are co-constructed as the interview progresses (Rosenblatt 1995). This is supported by Cohn and Lyons (2003) who advise that in the case of emergent ethical issues the researcher should engage in on-going reflexivity while responding sensitively to the needs of the participants. Clandinin and Connelly (2000:170) agree in terms of narrative research stating;

Ethical matters need to be narrated over the entire narrative inquiry process. They are not dealt with once and for all. Ethical matters shift and change as we move through an inquiry

Kvale and Brinkman (2009:62) describe the interview process as a “moral enterprise” and I was conscious of the notion that ethical issues prevail from

the start of the research inquiry right through to the final report. Therefore throughout this research investigation I was aware that it could be necessary to revisit the ethical guidelines as required.

With regard to informed consent the literature argues the case for process consent throughout (Sinding and Aronson,2003, Armitage, 2005).This included informing the participants of the purpose and the scope of the study and examples of the type of questions that would be posed in the process of the interview. Written as well as oral informed consent was obtained from all participants pre and post interview (Appendix 6 and 7).

Privacy and confidentiality were assured to all participants. All data collected was stored within a locked cupboard within a locked office. I was the only person who had the key to the locked cupboard. There was no identifying marks on or within the data that could identify any of the participants and all participants were informed of this. Pseudonyms were used in place of names for each participant. All data collected was coded to protect participants' confidentiality and anonymity. The participants were assured that all tape recordings and transcripts would be destroyed following the completion of this study.

### **Sample Method and Sample Selection.**

Purposive sampling is employed when the researcher handpicks the subjects to be included in the sample with the rationale that they possess the particular characteristics being sought in order to address the research question (Cohen et al, 2007). It fits well with narrative inquiry in that the choice of participants is driven by that aim. Creswell (2007:112) describes this approach as;

...intentionally selecting participants who have experience with the central phenomenon or key concept involved.

Consequently for the purpose of this research inquiry non probability sampling was employed using both convenience and volunteer sampling methods.

Convenience sampling entails the use of the most conveniently available people as participants in the study and I believe that it is the most appropriate method of sampling for this inquiry. I considered that asking participants to volunteer to participate could lead to the development of rich, storied data as they may be willing to talk more openly about their experiences. The fact that participants had volunteered I felt would show a willingness to become involved and also that they wished to share their experiences with somebody who would listen, appreciate and understand. This would then lead to rich and meaningful data which would enable me to address the research question and allow for the understanding of the complex issues that are the experiences of mature students. The literature supports the choice of sample method in that it has been used successfully in similar narrative based inquiries .Non probability sampling is employed successfully in Britton and Baxters' (1999) narrative based inquiry into mature students' narrative accounts of becoming students based on their gendered nature. One of the aims of this qualitative inquiry was to understand more deeply the complex issues of experiences of mature students and this was the key focus when selecting a sampling method as apart from the generalisability of the findings. The criteria used to select the sample was very important in order to reflect the diversity of the overall sample population.

The two main principal criteria for selecting participants for this narrative based inquiry are:

1. An individual having experienced the phenomenon and
2. An individual who is willing to talk about that experience.

The participants had to meet the following inclusion criteria;

- Be registered with the Higher Education Institute;
- Undertaking a degree programme in applied social studies;
- A mature student, that is a person who is 23 years of age or older.

I made an appointment to meet with all students as a group who complied with the inclusion criteria. At this initial meeting the focus, purpose and detail of the investigation was comprehensively explained and this I felt was useful as it gave the students an opportunity to ask questions about the investigation. The use of in-depth interviews as a method of data collection was discussed particularly the style of interview was elaborated on at this point in time. Potential participants were told that essentially the interview would be about them telling their stories in relation to their particular experiences of Higher Education and that the interviews would be unstructured and of a conversational nature mainly led by the participants. At this stage they were clearly informed that participation was voluntary and they were under no obligation to participate. Further to that it was made clear that at any time if they so wished they were free, without question or penalty to leave the study. Issues of informed consent, privacy, confidentiality and ethical issues were explained at this point.

At this meeting I distributed an information leaflet (Appendix 5) which fully explained the purpose of the study. It is suggested that rather than selecting a large amount of participants in terms of numbers, for qualitative research such as this study a small number of people were selected that provided in-depth information.

Therefore participants who wished to take part in the study and met with the inclusion criteria were asked to leave their contact details for me in a specially provided letter box. Each of these students were subsequently contacted and agreed to take part in the study. Some students immediately came forward to show their interest in participating however I advised these students to take some time to consider fully their participation. The students who were interested posted their names and telephone numbers in a designated post box. Consequently a sample size of 6 participants who met with the inclusion criteria was selected.

### **Data Collection Method.**

Narrative inquiry consists of the collection of diachronic data, which essentially includes temporal information concerning the sequential relationship of events.

This form of data often contains descriptions of how events occurred and the subsequent happenings (Polkinghorne, 1995). Therefore the method of data collection most suitable for this narrative based research inquiry was through the process of unstructured in-depth interviews. Fontana and Frey (2000) suggest that through unstructured interviews a greater depth of data can be gained as opposed to other more structured interviews. I decided that my style of interviewing would be characterised by “minimal interview intervention” applying the key skills required “to listen” (Wengraf, 2006:112).

Bourdieu (1996a:18) suggests that the interview should be a relationship of;

...active and methodical listening.

It should not emulate the laissez-faire attitude of the non-directive interview or the interventionism of the questionnaire but should be;

...a total availability to the person being questioned, submission to the singularity of a particular life history.

I was conscious of the notion throughout the interviewing process that assuming the participant will provide all the necessary information without some encouragement is unrealistic (Gilham, 2005). This is supported by Taylor and Bogdan (1998:204) who state;

Unstructured interviews take the form of conversations whereby the main aim is to reveal the respondent’s perception and experiences of their world without imposing any of the researcher’s views on them.

The qualitative interviewer has to find ways of getting people to start to talk about their perspectives and experiences without overly structuring the conversation and defining what the interviewee should say. Within the field of narrative inquiry this is a delicate balancing act as the lead for the interview

must come from the participant and the way and manner in which they wish to tell their story must be respected and valued. Narrative inquiry is concerned with a collaborative relationship between the participant and the researcher (Clandinin and Connelly 2000). Therefore it was crucial to be aware of the notion of time, situation and place whereby a relationship could be developed between the researcher and the participant that was safe and comfortable, unrushed, non-judgemental and supportive. This is supported by Fetterman (1998) who would recommend the concept of equality between the researcher and the participant who engage in dialogue and collaborate in a non-judgemental environment. Bourdieu (1996b) draws our attention to the social asymmetry of the interview situation whereby the researcher occupies a higher place in the social hierarchy of different types of capital and throughout the interview process I was sensitive to this concept.

Oral history interviews are the most common of interviews employed within narrative inquiry. In this method a range of strategies are available for the researcher to employ ranging from using structured questions which reflect the intention of the researcher or asking participants to engage with telling their own stories in their own particular way. In this method it is suggested that the participants' intentions are the uppermost concern in the interview. The focus of this particular strategy is on the process of the interview. I decided that in order to accurately answer the research questions it was important to ask the participants to recount their own stories in relation to their experiences of the field of Higher Education. Questions would be prepared but the flow of the interview would be directed by the participant and questions asked would stem from the literature and from cues throughout the interview originating from the participants. The interviews were conducted following the characteristics of Wengraf's (2006) approach to narrative style interviewing. Therefore I would ask a single question which implied that I was asking for a narrative. I then encouraged the participant to continue with their narrative until they have exhausted the subject and have nothing else to say. I would ask for more information on the subject areas that were pertinent to the research questions. I was mindful throughout to ensure that I only used the language and words of the participants in relation to the relevant subject areas. I continued on in this

particular vein until I felt that all the relevant information available in relation to the subject matter was exhausted. In this way the essence of the participant's story can be told in its purest form and this also goes some way to address the power structure of the interview situation in that the participant is leading the interview telling the story that they wish to be heard.

There are advantages to adopting a narrative approach to interviewing that are identified by Greenhalgh et al, (2005) which I felt were of relevance to this inquiry and I will identify now.

Within narrative interviewing it is suggested that the stories told present:

- Embeddedness in a broad context;
- An element of action orientation in that there is a depiction of what people did and what shapes future action;
- A demonstration of the concept of what might have been, therefore allowing for change;
- An ethical dimension which describes both the acts and the omissions;
- A depiction of the tension between the canonical which is the organisations' standard procedures and the unexpected which depicts new ways of working and being;
- An acknowledgement of the roles and job descriptions of an organisation bridging the gap between this and relationships and unwritten rules.

Prior to the commencement of the interview any questions the participants had in relation to the study were clarified and the participant was given a consent form (Appendix 6) to read and then sign if agreeing to participate in the study. Signing the form at this stage only indicated that they were consenting to be interviewed and to have the interview tape-recorded. One copy was given to the participant and the other copy was safely stored in a locked filing cabinet to ensure confidentiality and anonymity. Interviews took place at a time and location to suit the participant. All participants were advised in relation to the approximate duration of the interview to ensure that their time was respected.

If the interview appeared to go on for an unprecedented amount of time and the participant appeared tired or needed to leave for any reason, then it was necessary to reschedule the interview to another date and time suitable for the participant. This was negotiated between myself and the participant and fully explained prior to commencement of the interview.

Particular attention was paid to the interview environment ensuring that the area was comfortable and free from disturbances. The interview room was pre-booked specifically for this purpose and to minimise interruptions a sign was placed on the door stating that interviews were in progress and not to disturb. To ensure the accuracy of the data collected I would ask permission of the participant to tape record the interviews. The tape recording of interviews ensured that I gathered much more data than purely relying on memory alone. It also enabled me to give full attention to the participant and to actively listen. At times throughout the interview process I took some short accompanying notes in a research journal. This was explained to the participant prior to commencement of the interview and if they so wished they may view the notes. All notes written were coded to correspond with the interview and were confidential and anonymity of the participant was protected with no identifying material being written in the journal.

I recognised that the participant may be uncomfortable in relation to the taping of the interview therefore I explained verbally and in the information leaflet that they may terminate the interview and the recording of same without obligation at any time throughout. Data was collected through the use of unstructured interviews commencing by asking what is referred to as a grand tour question, for example "Tell me about your experiences of education to date?" The interview was unstructured and questions evolved throughout by responding to cues from the participant and also through having read the literature. Non-directional, neutral probes were used to elicit more useful material.

The purpose of a probe is to elicit more useful information from a respondent than was volunteered during the first reply (Polit and Hungler, 1999:333).



I was cognisant of the notion that probes were used carefully so as not to dissuade any participant from discussing an issue that potentially could lead to the loss of valuable information.

### **Pilot Study.**

Pilot studies refer to scaled down versions of a full scale study (Polit et al, 2001). They allow for the testing of the research instrument in this case the interview process. Frankland and Bloor (1999:154) suggest that they provide the researcher with a;

...clear definition of the focus of the study

Also while conducting a pilot study does not guarantee success in the main study according to Patton (2002) it does increase the likelihood of success. Therefore a pilot study was performed with one participant prior to commencement of the overall study. The data collected during the pilot study included valuable data in relation to the mature students' experiences of the field of Higher Education which was useful to the overall study and therefore is included in the study with the informed consent of the participant. This is supported by Teijlingen et al, (2001) who suggest including pilot qualitative interview data in the main study. The interview was transcribed with the full permission of the participant and also notes were taken throughout. The purpose of the pilot study was to examine the interview schedule for suitability and to ensure that all equipment was in working order and that the interview environment was suitable.

The pilot study was in itself a very useful exercise. It allowed me to gain experience in the art of interviewing and it tested the suitability of the questions posed. It also sensitised me to the whole experience of interviewing. The experience of sitting with a person and listening to their story afforded me

considerable insight into the process of interviewing. It also demonstrated to me that interviewing is a difficult process and requires patience, time and above all the skill and capacity for continuous or active listening. It also allowed for the introduction of further questions that had not been identified through the literature or from the researcher's own personal experience. These questions mainly were derived from the lived experience of the person being interviewed and therefore the interview process was to become an organic process enabling me to listen carefully for cues and adapt the line of inquiry to enable the participant to reveal their full story.

The pilot study enabled me to gain valuable experience in this area. It is known that interviews are somewhat unequal in their format. Mainly the interview is led by the focus of the inquiry and the research question. Within narrative research it is important to establish a participatory relationship within the research inquiry. Therefore the researcher when conducting the interview finds that as the relationship develops between the researcher and the participant the interview develops into "a form of conversation" (Clandinin, and Connelly 1990:110). The pilot study enabled me to gain experience of this interview style. A crucial purpose of the unstructured interview is understanding. It is key that an affinity is established between the researcher and the interviewee (Fontana and Frey, 2000). My own experiences as a mature student allowed me an understanding and enabled an affinity with the mature students throughout the inquiry. However I was conscious of being vigilant about reflexivity and my own positionality and mindful about my role and actions to remain as detached as possible throughout.

From the experience of conducting the pilot study I was able to reflect upon the questions posed and the suitability of the surroundings and the overall experience of the interview process.

### **Data Analysis.**

The analysis of the data concerns the results of the qualitative unstructured interviews. Qualitative analysis transforms data into findings and poses a

challenge to the researcher in that the researcher then has to make sense of large amounts of data collected (Patton, 2002). Qualitative data analysis is an on-going activity and primarily the emphasis is on inductive rather than deductive information processing (Silverman, 2007). Inductive analysis refers to unearthing patterns, themes and categories in the data. The main purpose of data analysis is to elicit meaning from the research data to answer the research question posed and this is achieved through the researcher's interaction with the data. Reissman (2008:3) states;

Events perceived by the speaker as important are selected, organized, connected and evaluated as meaningful for a particular audience.

It is a pursuit of patterns of meaning, themes, similarities within the data so that general statements about the phenomena under investigation can be made. This is supported by Polkinghorne (1995) who suggests employing paradigmatic reasoning in the analysis of narrative. Using paradigmatic analysis themes are described as those that are common across the stories and characters within the stories or settings. In approaching a data analysis strategy for this study I was mindful of Silverman's (2007:61) advice;

...collecting data is not even half the battle. (Data analysis is always the name of the game).

The tape recordings of all interviews undertaken were transcribed verbatim by myself. I found this a very useful process as I was becoming more familiar with the data as I transcribed it. Reissman (2008:50) states;

Transcribing discourse like photography is an interpretive practice.

Following transcription it was necessary to read and re read the transcripts in order to narratively code the field texts (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000).

Narrative coding includes coding actions, events and story lines that interweave and interconnect. This process took a considerable length of time as narrative based inquiry tends to produce a significant amount of data and this was true of this inquiry. Patton (2002:442) acknowledges this by stating;

The analysis of qualitative data involves creativity, intellectual discipline, analytical rigor and a great deal of hard work.

Throughout the data analysis I was aware of the significance of the concept of reflexivity and my own positionality within the research process. This will be discussed in detail at the end of this chapter. Therefore I was as far as is possible at all times aware of my own position, internalised structures and the effect that these may have had on my own objectivity. While conducting the data analysis and throughout the research study I reflected on my own habitus and dispositions learned and acquired through long social and institutional training. This vigilance to reflexive data analysis helped to limit bias in the research and ensure that the voices of the participants were heard.

### **Limitations of the Study.**

No study is without its limitations and potential for bias and it is essential to acknowledge the challenges surrounding the use of narrative research. There are many concerns that narrative researchers need to be aware of throughout the process of inquiry (Clandinin and Connolly 2000). I have focused on the limitations of this study by separating the actual methodological approach that is narrative and the challenges to me that narrative brings. Throughout narrative research much emphasis is given to the lived experiences through the narration of stories. Narrative research is a tool that lends meaning to the stories and consequently this can lead to a sense of comprehensiveness and totality to the experience. This sense of holism can also be seen as a weakness implicit within the narrative approach. Therefore I would argue that it is essential that the research needs to be regarded in terms of the specific context. This is crucial as meaning is created at a given point in time and so

context is everything. As an individual researcher I need to be aware of the fact that the narrative inquiry is a work in progress and Clandinin and Connelly (2000:166) use the appropriate terminology of “back and forth”, constantly negotiating within the inquiry looking for a sense of wholeness and completeness. The notion that as narrative researchers we are enabling people to tell their stories but acknowledging that stories are also told about us. It became important to me throughout the inquiry to be aware that as (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000:172) suggest;

Stories of us are with us as we move from field to field text to research text.

Finally I was aware that narrative research is a fluid inquiry and consequently demanded that I engage in on-going reflection throughout the process. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) talk about reflection in terms of wakefulness and therefore I was attentive that a sense of thoughtfulness and wakefulness was required throughout the research process. I used a reflective journal throughout the inquiry which I believe was a useful tool to encourage me to actively reflect on the process and my own positionality and also to enable me to remain wakeful to the process.

I employed convenience and volunteer sampling methods which I am conscious can lead to sampling bias which refers to the systematic over or under representation of the population. This sample of six mature students is generally appropriate for narrative research and again I draw on the notion that giving meaning to lived experience must also take account of the context of the situation of the individual. I was aware of the notion of researcher bias and I feel through using reflection and wakefulness throughout the process this aided in lessening this concept. I will discuss this in greater detail within this following section.

## **Reflexivity and the Positionality of the Researcher.**

The process of reflexivity is a methodological tool that helps to identify the role and the involvement of the researcher to the research. The concept of reflexivity emphasises the significance of self-awareness, cultural awareness and ownership of one's perspective (Crotty 1998; Ahern, 1999; Patton, 2002; Robson, 2011). Guba and Lincoln (1994:183) explain;

Reflexivity is the process of reflecting critically on the self as researcher; the human as instrument.

Therefore the researcher must engage in a continuous cycle of self-critique and self-appraisal to demonstrate that the experiences of the researcher have or have not influenced the research process (Koch and Harrington, 1998). Patton (2002) agrees identifying the challenge as having absolute clarity in relation to our own views and to be self-reflective constantly mindful of biases and limitations and to respect multiple perspectives. Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992:69) propose;

...one of the chief sources of error in the social sciences resides in an uncontrolled relation to the object which results in the projection of this relation onto the object.

Therefore it is important to examine the concept of neutrality in research strategies. Patton (2002:14 ) explains neutrality in terms of;

...the investigator does not set out to prove a particular perspective or manipulate the data to arrive at predisposed truths ...[but] enters the research arena with no axe to grind, no theory to prove (to test but not to prove) and no predetermined results to support.

The concept of this level of neutrality is not easy to obtain and to achieve this the researcher should be mindful of their role and actions and ensure that

these are as rigorously scrutinised as the data that they collect (Mason, 2002). The contention is that the researcher cannot be totally objective or detached from the knowledge that they are generating and therefore should aim to and understand their role in the overall process. Ahern (1999) while advocating the use of a reflexive journal throughout the research process also proposes the following guidelines:

- Identify some interest that you may have as a researcher that you may take for granted in undertaking the research.
- Clarify personal value systems and acknowledge areas in which you are subjective.
- Describe areas of potential conflict.
- Recognise areas that could indicate a lack of neutrality.
- Is there anything new or surprising in your data collection or analysis? If not is this a cause for concern?
- When blocks occur in the research process reframe the issues that are challenging and look at other methods in which this problem may be addressed.

I employed these guidelines to aid my personal reflexivity within this inquiry. During the process of this inquiry I was conscious of the importance of reflecting upon my own narrative and how this would impact on the research itself. Clandinin and Connolly (1990:122) speak of;

...personal and social justification.

and the importance of addressing both concepts. Therefore I became aware of the justification of this inquiry in relation to my own sense of interest and marrying that with a social sense of significance and the benefits of this inquiry to the mature student population of which I felt that I had a particular relevant and personal insight. It is here again that I pause to return to the opening

quote from Bourdieu, which draws my attention to the fact that I need to be personally reflective throughout the process in order to be able to;

...objectivise myself (1991:69).

I needed to reflect upon my own position as a researcher throughout this inquiry in an area that I have personal experience in, mindful of the notion stated by Halpin (1994:198);

...the ideas people think and act with.

Halpin (1994) goes on to highlight the naivety of the researcher undertaking qualitative inquiry who believes that they can report their findings without their own ideas or notions to become part of it. Indeed it is interesting to note that Bridges (2001) suggests that researchers should come from within the community that they are researching. Pendlebury and Elsen (2002) also argue that the positionality of the researcher is key to good qualitative research in education. They argue that the critically reflexive researcher introduces herself at length and the rationale for this is as follows;

She does so less for the purposes of confession or to bring into the open the idiosyncrasies of personality and temperament than to acknowledge her autobiography as one marked by gender, sexuality, class, ethnicity, and so on, and to acknowledge the possible effects that her position may have on the form and outcomes of the research (Pendlebury and Elsen, 2002:365).

Mason (2002) suggests that the posing of difficult questions to oneself is an integral part of reflexivity and I found this a useful suggestion both verbally and through writing and answering questions in my reflective journal. Hertz (1997).



viii) concurs proposing that being reflexive involves self-questioning and self-understanding describing the process of reflexivity as having an;

...on-going conversation about experience.

Throughout this research inquiry I was aware of the concept of symbolic violence defined by Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992:167) as;

...the violence which is exercised upon a social agent with his or her complicity.

Consequently throughout the research process and particularly throughout the process of listening to the life stories of the participants I was attentive to the significance of this concept and the underlying power structures that it implies.

The accumulation then of these experiences were the driving forces and motivation to take on a wider positionality and orientation exploring through the form of narrative the experiences of mature students of the field of Higher Education. I choose to acknowledge within this qualitative narrative based inquiry the position that I bring with me of similar experiences and narrative co-constructed with the participants of this inquiry. It belongs or is comfortably positioned within the experiences of other mature students who may also be first generation students attending Higher Education and the sense of achievement, pride, anxiety and conflict that that position brings with it. Reflecting on my position as insider researcher was the very motivation, basis and driving force that allowed and encouraged me to undertake this inquiry.

### **Chapter Summary.**

The aim of this chapter was to explain the research design methodology implemented in order to comprehensively answer the principal research

question and associated sub questions. The research paradigm was examined and discussed and the narrative approach was outlined in relation to this study. The implementation of the research process data collection, sampling and access, pilot study, data analysis, limitations of the study and ethical considerations were presented and discussed. Finally my own position and self-reflections were presented as being integral to the overall study process. The following chapter presents a portrait of the participants and the findings derived from the narrative data.

## **Chapter Five. Findings.**

### **Approaching the Data.**

The preceding chapters focused on the background and rationale for this study in terms of context and taking a position. At the beginning of this chapter I provide an outline of the sub-field within which the mature students were learning. I then introduce the mature student participants. Following on from this I present the findings arising from the data. The data is presented thematically with the use of quotations from the narratives of the mature student participants.

The field within this inquiry is the field of Higher Education within the Republic of Ireland. Bourdieu (1993a) explained the concept of field to mean a place of struggle an independent space of social play. Within this arena social actors are positioned according to their specific resources or stakes (Jenkins, 2002). Social actors engage with a specific field because of the resulting benefits and rewards (Bourdieu, 1993a).

Fields can independent and self-governing but also interlinked and related to other relevant fields and therefore there may be sub-fields within fields. It is imperative to identify different fields that are at play and to effectively ascertain the boundaries of each field. The mature student participants within this inquiry are engaged within the sub-field of social studies education which is linked and situated within the field of Higher Education in the Republic of Ireland. The field of Higher Education in relation to social care practice in Ireland particularly focuses on delivering educational programmes to specifically meet the needs of those who will be working with vulnerable people within society. This situates social care work in Ireland in the tradition of social pedagogy (Hallstedt and Hogstrom, 2009).

The mature students who participated in this inquiry are undertaking an undergraduate degree programme in applied social studies delivered in an Institute of Technology in the West of Ireland. The programme is a three year ordinary degree programme with the option of undertaking an additional honours degree level year. The programme and curriculum was developed in partnership with relevant stakeholders from the field of social care practice

within Ireland. The programme has a philosophy of justice, equality and fairness and fosters an approach to learning that facilitates and encourages self-development with a student centred approach to learning.

### **Introducing the Participants.**

A brief pen portrait of the six mature student participants who graciously gave of their time and generously shared their stories will now be presented. I will introduce each participant outlining their background and individual life experiences. Each participant is presented in the order in which they were first interviewed. The names of all the participants have been changed to protect their identity.

#### **1. Delia.**

Delia is a 48 year old woman who has a diverse and interesting career pathway. Delia was born in England to Irish parents and her family returned to Ireland when she was 14. She is the third of four children three girls and a boy. On return to Ireland Delia was enrolled in a Vocational school in a rural location in the West of Ireland. Delia completed her education to Leaving Certificate standard and was accepted to a Regional Technical College to study Art. Delia did not complete her studies due to financial reasons and emigrated to London where she was employed in various jobs such as waitressing. After a number of years Delia returned to her home town and married a farmer. They have three children, two girls and a boy. Two of her children are in secondary school and the oldest daughter is in college studying applied social sciences. Delia has worked with marginalized, vulnerable groups such as asylum seekers employing her skills as an African drummer and artist to engage with people in a positive way. It was this involvement with vulnerable groups and a strong sense of social justice that provided the impetus for Delia to return to education. She felt that a degree in applied social studies would provide her with the knowledge and skills necessary to help vulnerable individuals, families and communities.

## 2.Noreen.

Noreen is a 47 year old married woman. She has five children and is a foster mother to three children. She provides emergency placement for children within the Health Services Executive. Noreen completed her Leaving Certificate but performed poorly. She moved to London with her boyfriend and became pregnant with her first child and married at nineteen. In London she worked part-time as a waitress. She returned to Ireland and became involved in the provision of child care. She engaged with educational programmes at certificate level in relation to child care. She progressed then to enrol in an undergraduate programme in applied social studies.

## 3.Joseph.

Joseph is a 33 year old man. He is in a relationship with a fellow student and expecting their first child together. Joseph left school prior to completing his Leaving Certificate and worked in unskilled jobs in Ireland and abroad. Throughout the telling of his story Joseph revealed that he had an alcohol addiction but is sober now for a number of years. Joseph was interested in working with vulnerable and marginalised people and therefore decided to undertake the degree programme in applied social studies.

## 4.Geraldine.

Geraldine is a 33 year old separated woman, with a son who is 3 years old. She is in a relationship and expecting a child. She was in foster care for most of her childhood and at one time was homeless. She did not complete her second level education and therefore has no formal educational qualifications. Her childhood was difficult and because of frequent moving from foster home to residential care school life proved complicated.

#### 5. Kenneth.

Kenneth is a 45 year old single man who lives with his elderly father who has a disability. Kenneth is his father's primary carer. Kenneth is one of 14 children and helped his father work on their farm from a young age. The emphasis in the household was hard work and little attention paid to school work. Kenneth attended school until he was 14 and then left to work on the farm. He also worked in casual employment in unskilled jobs. His reason for entering education is that he felt he had missed out and that he was able to achieve more academically given the right opportunity.

#### 6. Ivan.

Ivan is a 36 year old man who lives with his partner Terence. Ivan was one of six children and lived on a farm in rural Ireland. He worked on the farm sometimes to the detriment of his school work. He found school difficult partly because he had dyslexia which was not diagnosed until he was 34. Ivan expressed that he was encouraged by his teachers to leave school and to work. Ivan left school at 15 with no formal qualifications and was engaged in unskilled work for a number of years both in Ireland and abroad. He returned to Ireland and was keen to enter Higher Education to gain a qualification to develop a challenging and rewarding career.

### **Summary.**

The preceding section affords the reader a brief snap shot of the lives of the six mature participants. They shared their individual narratives for this inquiry. Their stories had narrative threads throughout which have been categorised into main themes and sub-themes which help to highlight their experiences of the field of Higher Education. In the following section I will present these findings which are derived from the narrative data.

## **Findings.**

Our struggle is to discover new methods, to help us find our way through the tangle of human thought to the “drivers” that govern our actions (Hart, 1996:63).

### **Introduction to Findings.**

In this section the study results from the data analysis of the six mature students are presented thematically. Polkinghorne (1995:13) identifies the use of paradigmatic reasoning in the analysis of narratives which results in the description of themes that spread across all the stories. He proposes;

The paradigmatic analysis of narrative seeks to locate common themes or conceptual manifestations among the stories collected as data. Most often this approach requires a database consisting of several stories (rather than a single story.)

To address the research questions I have engaged with the narrative accounts looking within and across each individual narrative for themes and narrative threads while asking questions concerning meaning and significance (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000). The data is presented employing direct quotations from the student narratives to keep in the foreground the student experiences acknowledging the importance of their voices. The question that guided the interviews was purposefully broad. It did not focus on the field of Higher Education specifically to allow the participants to express the totality of their educational experiences and not inhibit their narratives. Consequently the initial question asked was “Can you tell me about your experiences of education?”

Six mature students endeavoured to answer this question recounting their stories in relation to their experiences of the field of education at primary, secondary and tertiary level. The participants chose to start with their earliest experiences of education which was at primary level. The findings that follow

are the themes that have threaded throughout their individual stories. The themes are discussed presenting each main theme and then employing sub-themes to further explain and give meaning to the overall theme.

### **Thematic Findings.**

In this section the findings from an examination of the transcripts and tape recordings of six individual mature students' narratives are presented and organised into relevant themes. Six main themes and nineteen sub-themes were identified. The themes are data driven, derived from the transcripts and the voices of the students throughout their narratives. Although the origins of the themes and sub-themes are data driven the findings are connected to the literature and will be related back to the research questions within the discussion chapter.

The themes were constructed manually through the process of careful reading and re-reading of the transcripts identifying commonalities across the six narratives which related to the original research questions.

The commonalities were constructed into themes that were significant within the overall context of the six narratives. There is no sense of hierarchy attached to the order of presenting the main themes and sub-themes they are simply presented in the order that they arose within the narrative (Table 2).

The main themes that emerged are: *(1) Experiences of first and second level education; (2) Family support; (3) Going to college; (4) Balancing study, work and family commitments; (5) Supportive networks; (6) Pleasant surprise.*

The themes and sub-themes will be presented employing supporting quotations from the narratives demonstrating evidence for their genesis and development.



**Table 2. Main themes and Sub-themes.**

<b>Main themes.</b>	<b>Sub-themes.</b>
1: Experiences of first and second level education.	Negative experiences at primary, secondary level. Streaming on entry to secondary school. Relationships with teachers. Home background. Impact of support classes. Struggle.
2: Family support.	The culture of education within the family. Farming community: work on the farm was prioritised.
3: Going to college.	Reasons and motivations for returning to education. Sense of fear. Selection of college
4: Balancing study and work and family commitments.	Prioritising all the time. Attendance.
5: Supportive networks.	Support at home. Support staff within the college. Importance of friends.
6: Pleasant surprise.	Enjoyment of Higher Education. Increased self-worth. Lecturer style and influence.

### **Main-Theme: 1.Experiences of first and second level education.**

This main theme was expressed in all of their narratives and articulated through sub- themes directly related to experiences of education. Each mature student began by discussing their experiences of education beginning with their earliest experiences of primary school moving forward to their experiences of second level school. As the mature students told their stories it became clear that it was a cognitive process of considering experiences that had occurred and then trying to make sense of and discern meaning in relation to that experience.

This main theme was expressed succinctly by the mature students which indicated that there were some common appreciations in relation to their collective experiences. These were more appropriately articulated in sub-themes which were directly related to their experiences of education. The associated sub-themes were: (1) *Negative experiences at primary and secondary school*; (2) *Streaming on entry to secondary school*; (3) *Relationships with teachers*; (4) *Impact of support classes*; (5) *Struggle*. These sub-themes are discussed as follows.

#### **Sub-theme 1: Negative experiences of primary and secondary school.**

This sub-theme was expressed by each mature student within their individual narratives. It was overwhelmingly present throughout their narratives as a powerful indicator of their experiences, thoughts and feelings in relation to the field of education. As each person told their story it became apparent by the tone of their voices, the sincerity of their narrative and the expressions on their faces and their body language that recounting these memories made each one of them sad, frustrated and at times angry. They all expressed a sense of injustice throughout their narratives. Some of the mature students referred to national school within their narratives which is primary school.

Kenneth stated;

*National school, I didn't really apply myself or there wasn't really a big emphasis on learning really in national school, you know, you just went*

*in, it was somewhere you had to go, well I had to go, well because I had no choice and I found it extremely boring you know?*

Geraldine recalled;

*Well, oh I knew I was stupid, that's the way I looked at it.*

Delia expressed similar experiences she said;

*What I was really good at was never ever nurtured, so in my years of secondary school I would have felt that I was not smart, that I was not intelligent*

Kevin remembered;

*You know the one thing that has stayed with me to this day my reading, not so much my reading but my writing and spelling skills. I had an awful thing in my head about being fit to spell and if when I know something, if you ask me to write it I, I, I can't write it.*

Delia felt that she and others were treated unjustly within the educational system, she stated;

*I remember at the time feeling a sense of injustice and I really do and I remember clearly you know feeling that sense of injustice back in the convent.*

She went on to state;

*Amm coming to Ireland emm let me think, the difference in the educational system here in Ireland, emm I didn't get educated here at all actually.*

Kevin talked about his experience of secondary school;

*You know when I went to secondary school I'd say I fell a little behind at that stage.*

However this issue was not addressed by the teachers even though Kevin recounted that he did not work at school and rarely completed his homework. He recalled;

*I don't think I ever did any homework in the school.*

Noreen remembered her experiences of school not being pleasant;

*Having been in school previously it had not been a pleasurable experience shall we say or a successful experience.*

Early experiences of education were expressed through the narratives of the mature students as being overwhelmingly negative, with no positive experience recalled at all.

## **Sub-theme 2: Relationships with teachers.**

Four of the narratives expressed by the mature students demonstrated how their relationships with their teachers added to the overall negative

experiences of their early education. Ivan talked about how he felt he was bullied by the principal of the primary school;

*Myself and the principal would have had a major clash over sport, where he was big into hurling and I had absolutely no interest. And I honestly think that ended up clouding my whole experience of education even because for me anyway I would have put him down as a bully, just different things that he said like "a small lad like you". I ended up having height issues for a long time after and it was stupid things like that that turned me off.*

He also talked about how the principal behaved towards him when he handed up his homework. He recalled;

*Like that principal always had issues about how badly you did it like and he would kinda make sure that everyone in the class knew definitely like and I was talking to a friend of mine recently and she said that he definitely had a thing against me and that it wasn't in my head like.*

Geraldine stated in relation to her experiences of secondary school;

*Well in secondary school I got such negativity from certain teachers especially one teacher who pulled me aside and said "you will amount to nothing, you're one of those kids that hangs around street corners and that's what you will be for your life" and that stuck with me.*

Ivan suggested that he was encouraged to leave school by one of his teachers. He said;

*I was doing fourth year and a job came up which was more or less a summer job but it started a month early and my mother decided I should talk to the Careers Guidance teacher, who told me ahh yeh go for it and whatever. It was with horses and had nothing to do with education or anything, and she said why wouldn't you and a month off*

*school sure it wouldn't do you any harm, ahh and sure you never know it might develop into a job and you might be as well of not to come back. And that was it. I just went. That really stuck in my head and I thought well he doesn't want me to come back.*

Joseph felt that because he lived on a council estate the teachers did not expect very much academically from him. He recounted;

*Because you were from a council estate by association you were going to be in trouble. And it meant that you were not going to succeed in school. I felt that from the teachers.*

Kenneth talked about being bored in school and not being challenged, he said;

*We all ended up in C, you know, so when you look back on it what are the chances? I didn't mind the class but the way I would look at it is the best way to keep a child's interest is to keep them sorta challenged. If they find it too easy you've lost it.*

Of the four students who mentioned the relationship with teachers at school all of these relationships were expressed in a negative way and as can be seen in subsequent themes this had an impact later on in life when they were considering entering Higher Education.

### **Sub-theme: 3 Home background.**

Two of the mature students remarked that their home life seemed to influence the way that the teachers treated them. Geraldine who was in residential care from an early age explained;

*That was the way life was. I done my junior cert' and it was quite funny, well not funny that my principal at the time because I had been in care, that negativity from being in care went with me into secondary school, because the social worker had to get me into secondary school and once they arrived in it was like oh you're a troublesome child because social workers were involved and emm I was stigmatised because of that by the teachers as well. I had an awful lot of trouble I suppose with the teachers because of it. It was anytime that there was something wrong it was my fault I was there, because I was the one that didn't have the parent and you're a troublesome child and that's the end of it and nobody wants you.*

She suggested that not having parents to stand up for her enabled the teachers to treat her in a negative way.

Joseph also felt that he was treated differently by the teachers because of his home background. He recounted;

*Primary school definitely didn't go well with me, emm, my mother was a single mother when we first went in, and the school was run by nuns so she was blacklisted really they didn't talk to her.*

Joseph felt that the fact that he lived on a council estate influenced the teachers' views and expectations of him, he explained;

*Well you were teached differently. Well if you were in primary school and secondary school because you were from a council estate by association you were going to be in trouble and it meant that you were not going to succeed in school. I felt that from the teachers.*

Consequently for two of the mature students their home life had an impact on the way they were treated by teachers within the school and this had a negative impact.

#### **Sub-theme 4: Impact of support classes.**

Three mature students were offered what they termed as remedial classes. Remedial classes are now currently known as learning support classes. The learning support teacher works with children who have an academic challenge but no special educational need. They provide educational support for some children with special needs especially those with dyslexia or border-line mild general disability (Flood, 2010). For these classes they were taken out of the main-stream class and either taught for a short period individually or in groups. The mature students all found these classes unhelpful and added to their overall negative experiences of both primary and secondary school. The findings are interesting as these classes are seen to be necessary to enable children to remain in main-stream education. The following quotations reflect the mature students experiences' in relation to these classes.

Joseph stated,

*When I first went to primary school I was diagnosed, well the teachers told me that I was dyslexic. But that was when I was about five, but the other teacher told my mother that I was just lazy and that went on until I was twelve.*

Ivan also had a similar experience in relation to learning supports within the primary school, he remembered;

*Emm I had a remedial teacher at one stage when I was in national school because my mother reckoned I wasn't performing to the best of my abilities and she basically told her that I was just lazy.*

Ivan was diagnosed aged thirty-four with dyslexia when he entered the field of Higher Education.

Geraldine explained about her experiences of remedial support classes;



*You felt funny being the only one there was two or three picked out of each class that would take turns going down as groups and then as individuals as well just to do reading. And coming back with your special books and everyone knew which was kinda, you'd get slagged a bit because, it was a form of bullying. Some people latched on to it.*

Geraldine further stated;

*I just continued to struggle in silence rather than being taken out to special classes. Like that having the stigma that goes with it.*

Joseph also talked about the stigma attached to having to attend these classes and opted out of these classes due to the stigma attached.

*I wasn't diagnosed until sixth class, so there was supports after that but I did not want them. I didn't want to be different. I was different enough before that so I just didn't want to be different.*

He went on to specifically talk about the stigma attached to attending these classes, he said;

*There was definitely a stigma attached, yeh a stigma and my mates they didn't slag me about it but they couldn't understand how someone so smart had to go into the and I am not being nasty about it, into the thick people's class.*

He explained how he felt when he availed of learning support when he went to secondary school.

*Emm I was out to remedial classes and how do you put it emm they were too easy. I was there with a high reading level and there was a lot of reading and there were other children in there who had difficulty*

*reading. I had difficulty with reproducing things onto paper but they didn't have the supports well they weren't there for that, and so I found that difficult so I said no thank you I am going into a regular class and I survived within the regular class.*

This demonstrated that there did not appear to be personal learning plans for each student and therefore the classes did not meet Joseph's needs. Joseph talks about the behaviour of the children who attended these classes and the consequences for misbehaving within the class. The class was not meeting his needs and the stigma attached to attending these classes accumulated as reasons for him to leave the remedial class.

*And the trouble with being in there was that there was a lot of trouble within in that class. There was people in there getting in more trouble because they didn't like school, they never had a good experience of school, I don't know which but emm, if you got into trouble in school then you couldn't play sport, so the quicker I got out of that the better.*

All of the students who attended remedial classes found them unhelpful. There did not seem to be individual learning plans for each student and therefore their specific learning needs were not being met within this environment. This combined with the stigma attached to attending the classes and how this was translated into bullying for one particular student made the classes unpleasant and ultimately a waste of resources. Two of the mature students Ivan and Joseph presently avail of learning supports within Higher Education. One of the students Geraldine refuses to avail of learning supports and she feels this is connected to her earlier negative experiences of these supports.

#### **Sub-theme 5: Streaming academically on entering secondary school.**

Four of the mature students spoke about their experiences of being academically streamed on entering secondary school. This was an unhelpful experience for those students and was given as part of the reason that they

did not achieve their full potential. The negative experience was expressed by the mature students as a sense of not being nurtured academically and having their potential missed. The following quotations from their narratives highlight this issue.

Kenneth explained his experiences of the process which he believed commenced in the final year of primary school. He remembered the principal of the secondary school visiting the primary school and talking about the students and they were speaking to each other in the Irish language.

Kenneth remembered;

*Yeh they were speaking to one another in Irish and I knew what was being said, even though I had very little Irish at the time (Laughing). There were five boys in my class in national school and I know what was being said even though I couldn't say what was being said (Laughing), that it wasn't great. We were not going to be getting an A rating going into secondary school.*

Kenneth talked about the class that he found himself in on entering secondary school and the effect that this had on him.

*Well we were sorta in the class of dunces, and you'd sorta well we would have picked up on that, on that energy like in the place so I didn't apply myself at all. I don't think I ever did any homework for the school.*

Delia was in secondary school in England until she was fourteen and then her family moved to Ireland where she completed her secondary schooling. She talked about her experiences of being academically streamed.

*I remember as an adult looking back that the potential that I had was not even tapped into, because there was so much focus on other stuff. Like I wouldn't have been really good at maths but what I was really good at was never ever nurtured. So in my years of secondary*

*schooling in England I would have felt that I was not smart, that I was not intelligent and I really and truly did not have any sense of my own potential. And emm almost in a sense I had already been boxed and categorized as level C do you know what I am saying? I can't remember the words that they use to categorise, I think A,B and C, when you are at that level I think it is in your psyche, and you believe that's where you are at and it took me years, and it was actually only as an adult to break that pattern that I was an average student.*

Delia went on to say;

*You know to actually realize my own potential, I really do feel that the educational system did not do anything to explore my potential.*

Ivan talked about the effects of academic streaming;

*Well I knew that it was gonna be a struggle you know. We would have had three grades in school, you would have had 1:1 and 1:2 and 1:3 and I would have been in the third one. You just kinda go with the attitude that I am thick you know and we are all thick together kinda unified, kinda thing like.*

As a concept Ivan suggests that streaming academically does not work, he said;

*It definitely holds the bottom rung to the bottom rung.*

Therefore he suggests that the children within the lower academic classes are not challenged or exposed to those children who are academically brighter and he wonders about the effect of that on him and others like him.

*You find a comfort in it but there's nothing to say that do you know if you were with people who were brighter than you or more cleverer than you in the first place that you wouldn't strive or that if you were friends with them it might rub off on you a bit more, I don't know to be honest.*

Ivan talked about his late diagnosis of his learning difficulty. He describes himself as being so poor at reading and writing that he felt that he was illiterate. He recalled;

*And to be honest I would have got to the point where I thought that I was illiterate like.*

He went on to say how this made him feel;

*To be honest well at that stage you kinda, well you have accepted the fact that you were thick.*

Ivan could not have his potential developed as his learning difficulty was not diagnosed until he was thirty-four which left him believing that he wasn't able to learn how to read and write.

Geraldine stated that the teachers had no belief in her ability or potential to achieve academically. She said;

*They only seen my past and where I was, social workers, residential care and all that adds up to being trouble. When I received my junior cert' results they called everyone in to the library where you get your results and the principal actually had to go down and get the hard copy and check to see if the results were right because I had passed.*

The thread within the narrative expressed by these students is that streaming academically on entering second level school did not allow them to reach their potential or provide a nurturing educational environment to appreciate their strengths.

### **Sub-theme 6: Struggle.**

The mature students used or implied the concept of struggle when expressing their experiences of education. The word struggle when used as a verb means to battle, compete, fight (Oxford English Dictionary 2012). As they recounted their stories it became apparent that they struggled academically, financially and socially within the field of education.

Ivan stated;

*But emm I suppose I always struggled going through school and as it turned out years later I found out that I was dyslexic but not until I got to what thirty-four.*

He also said of his struggle in Higher Education;

*I struggle if someone is just reading something or just handing out notes then and then kinda goes off the subject like, I have kinda no clue.*

Geraldine talked about her struggles;

*I struggled a lot with reading and writing and had remedial.*

Geraldine did not like the stigma attached to attending remedial classes and this added to her struggle. She recalled;

*I pretended that I didn't struggle so that I wouldn't be sent again. And an awful lot I would remember the pictures. I'd read the story at home and I would be able to spout it back because I'd look at the pictures and I would have a fair idea.*

Geraldine remains reluctant to avail of learning supports within Higher Education and continues to have times when she struggles. She said of her friends;

*They are always telling me I need to be tested, you know and I am like, I say I'm not special like you, but they can see things in my work, like you need to go and you need support. But I won't.*

She talks about a sense of solidarity in Higher Education on finding friends who also struggle.

*Well those who have support from the disability officer, they give me their notes, to get tips on how to memorise stuff. Because I have to build stories to remember anything. I have to build stories but emm they sorta sit down and teach me one sort of a way to remember it. There are a few of us that do that together, that kinda struggle with things and it works so far. I think it's more when you find friends and they struggle with the same things, we help each other.*

Noreen told about the financial struggles that her parents had in relation to her education especially because her father was an alcoholic. She recalled;

*And again my mother was kept on a shoe string because again it was like the little woman at home. And I suppose she had to ask for every single penny, but I suppose the bit I did resent was there was always money there for drink because even for books for money I struggled, you know I had to beg, borrow, you know and second hand which you know wasn't a problem you know, but at the start of the year I would be accommodated in that but as the year went on you know, forget it you got your books in September what are you looking for now?*

Delia talks about financial struggles in Higher Education;

*A lot of people who are in the class are struggling to pay you know. There was a couple of years that we struggled, and there are a couple of people that are still struggling financially.*

Noreen talks about her struggle with academia;

*My brain doesn't retain information for long periods of time, and I find that is the thing that I struggle with, that is the thing that I panic about.*

Kevin spoke of his struggles in school;

*Wait 'till I tell you, my spelling was so bad that sometimes I'd write a word and when I would be reading back over it ,I didn't know what the word was that I had written.*

Joseph recalled how he had difficulty throughout school because of undiagnosed dyslexia;

*I had a difficulty with reproducing things on to paper.*

He went on to say;

*I never liked school, never have not until I came here.*

The struggles spoken about were multi-faceted. Some of the mature students were working on the family farm and this element of struggle is highlighted in the next sub-theme as it is linked to the families overall view of education.



Again the theme of struggle is addressed in a later sub-theme of balancing work, family and study commitments.

### **Thematic Summary.**

Experiences of first and second level education emerged as a main theme when examining the narratives of the mature students. The six sub-themes identified help to articulate and deepen our understanding of their experiences. The majority of the emotions and experiences expressed through their narratives were negative involving struggle, disappointment and frustration. The sub-theme of struggle is implicit and explicit through all the narratives of the mature students and is related to all of the main themes. Each mature student's experience of primary and second level education was unique however their stories were interrelated with common themes arising out of the data.

### **Main Theme 2: Family support.**

The mature students spoke about the level of family support they received at home when they were children and how that was significant in relation to how they experienced primary and secondary level school. The two sub-themes identified are: *(1) no culture of education within the family; (2) farming community; work on the farm was prioritised.*

### **Sub-theme 1: The culture of education within the family.**

Throughout the narratives of the mature students it became apparent that there was little evidence of a culture of valuing education within their respective families. Their parents had had left school at an early age and therefore the mature students did not have a sense within their family environment of valuing education in their formative years. They had no first-

hand experience of seeing members of their families succeeding academically or attending Higher Education.

Geraldine talked about the level of support that she received at home.

Geraldine was in residential care from the age of seven and at fifteen she was homeless and living on the streets. The supports for education were not there for her in residential care. She said;

*My parents are both, they both left school when they were very young so there was no support. I had no support there, homework, reading, spelling wise. With me it was kinda different because I only had parents or like the first 7 years and then I went into care and when I was in care it wasn't something that was a priority in the care home, no they wouldn't go to parent teacher meetings so I didn't have anyone coming to support me from the care homes.*

As she told her story she explained;

*It was up to the older children in the care home to make sure that the younger children had done their homework. So a lot of the time they just done it for us. Where they wouldn't just sit down and teach us they did it. And they done their own and they struggled in their own way because they didn't have the support either children rearing children.*

At fifteen Geraldine was living in a hostel and she thinking about going back to education but there were no supports and education was not prioritised for her within that environment. She explained;

*I wanted to go back and do something so I asked to go back. But the hostel that I was in at that time, you were only allowed to stay there for six months so just as I started back they moved me in to the Salvation Army home in Dublin. When you went in there it was like semi-independent living. You had twenty-five pounds a week and it wouldn't pay for my train pass and to go to school. So I had to leave school as it came down to a choice between food and school.*

Noreen talked about how education was viewed in her home as opposed to her friend's homes;

*Education was valued in their houses big time emm and also I suppose you can call them townies I suppose for want of a better word, they didn't have the farm to worry about and the ones that lived in the country it was emm different I suppose. Well I also had a father who was an alcoholic and he was never there and I suppose an awful lot of the responsibility fell to me. He expected it and my mother expected it because it kept him off her back, and also she expected me to help with the younger ones. So it was the home environment and it's no fault there, it's just how it was, you know? Whereas emm I look at other students or friends and they didn't have that you know what I mean. Their role was to be a child, a teenager at school and getting on with their school work. So they didn't have the same responsibilities, it was just different.*

Geraldine identified similar experiences;

*Even going to friends' houses after school and you'd see the parents go now home work time, and you would actually see the mother and father sitting down, taking the time and this is the way we do it. It was interesting even as a kid looking at how they were and it was interaction with their kids time for some one on one.*

They both acknowledge that other parents behaved differently in relation to their children's school work. Delia recounted that education was valued in her home but only for the son in the family. She said;

*We had one boy in the family and the focus was around his education, definitely not on the girls, so it was never a priority in any shape, way or form.*

She went on to say;

*Oh yeh he was sent to college, the money was all put into my brother going to college. Yeh he was a priority.*

Noreen talked about her mother's inability to help with school work;

*Again my mother wasn't very good at school either, and you know looking back now I would probably say that my mother had dyslexia and it wasn't picked up on then. She wasn't able to help with school work at all. If anything if it came to letter writing we were writing her letters for her. And again she came from a background that as soon as you were old enough you got a job. So that was the sort of expectation in my house growing up.*

She spoke about her father's influence and his opinion of education;

*I suppose my father had always told me "I was working at thirteen and sending money home to my parents." So that was the expectation.*

Kenneth told a similar story;

*Well then at home there would be no emphasis on education, at home, you know and that's being honest about it, they'd be absolutely no emphasis at all like. When I left school my father didn't bat an eyelid.*

During her narrative Noreen questioned;

*I often thought now that I am back in education, I have thought what if I had more support what would have happened? It might have been different.*

Joseph's narrative was different. He thought that education was valued in his home, he stated;

*Emm my mother's family were all into education, everyone of them bar one got their Leaving Certificate in Ireland in the 60's and there was 8 of them.*

Joseph went on to talk about the culture of education in his home;

*When I was diagnosed with dyslexia one of the strange things was that I had a high reading level, high reading age because there were so much books within in the house. And so from an early age it was said that you have to get your leaving certificate or you wouldn't get anywhere you would be stuck, in a council estate like.*

Ivan felt that there was some encouragement in his home for education but he was also responsible for farm work which took precedent, he recalled;

*Amm I suppose we were encouraged to a degree but then at the same time there was a small farm there that had to be kept going.*

The lack of a culture of valuing education in their homes ran through the narratives of five of the mature students. Education was not seen as significant and therefore the family supports were not available for them to reach their potential academically.

## **Sub-theme 2: Farming community work on the farm was prioritized.**

Three of the mature students were from a farming background and they were expected to work on the farm before and after school to the detriment of their studies.

Noreen recalled;

*Even stuff like I would talk to other students and they would say that they studied for three hours last night and I would look at them and I would think where did they get three hours? How did they get three hours and what were they studying because at that point I got my homework done and that was it and you know that was great.*

Noreen said she was expected to work on the farm and her educational needs were secondary to that expectation. She said;

*There was a serious amount of work to get through in the morning before I got to school, so by the time that I got to school I was ready to chat and have the craic and that part was good the social aspect was good. Emm and I enjoyed the teachers and I enjoyed the classes, however what happened in the evening was the farm work took over so there wasn't the time to apply myself to the books and the homework and forget the studies they didn't even exist and I suppose there wasn't the support at home to do the study and if I had more time it might have been different, but my time you know it just wasn't there.*

Kenneth was also was from a farming background and one of fourteen children. He says of the support that he received at home in relation to education;

*It was more important at home in my case, 'twas more important to milk cows and go to the bog, yeh, yeh you know because you know there was fourteen in the family, do you know what I mean my father and mother had come from a different generation you know?*

Ivan talked about the issue of having to work on the family farm.

*There was a small farm there and that had to be kept going and ahh jobs there had to be done and I was the eldest lad, so I ended up doing a lot of it I suppose.*

This sub-theme is significant in that we have to be cognisant of the background of the mature students. The West of Ireland is a rural area with many people coming from farming communities. Noreen, Ivan and Kenneth did not appear to be resentful that they had to work on the farm. However what seems to be apparent is that farming work was to the detriment of their academic schooling. They were working so hard before and after school that they did not have time to study. This sub-theme ties in with the theme of the family not valuing education for their children. It appears from the narratives that their families deemed farm work more important than school work. Consequently because of the hours spent working on the farm they struggled academically.

### **Thematic Summary.**

The second main theme identified within the narrative data was the theme of Family support. The associated sub-themes that were identified were: (1) *The culture of education within the family*; (2) *farming community; work on the farm was prioritised*. These sub-themes illustrate the difficulties expressed by the mature students in relation to their early educational experiences because of the lack of support from their families. It is evident from their narratives that there was no value placed upon education for these students as children and there was no support there to enable the students to reach their full potential.

### **Main theme 3: Going to college.**

Following on chronologically the mature student's told of their experiences and decision to enter Higher Education and choose a college. The three sub-themes identified within the data analysis are: (1) *Reasons and motivation for*

*returning to education; (2) Sense of fear; (3) Selection of college.* These sub-themes will now be presented.

### **Sub-theme 1: Reasons and motivations for returning to education.**

As the mature students began to tell their story about entering Higher Education they explained the various reasons and motivations behind this. It became apparent that their earlier experiences of education had an impact on their decision-making in relation to entering Higher Education.

Noreen spoke about how her earlier negative experiences of secondary school made her doubt her ability to engage successfully with Higher Education.

*I thought about it for a few years going back and genuinely I didn't think I had the ability to do it. That was number one, and I was constantly questioning. I didn't do well in secondary school, what makes me think that I can now go on and do this?*

The motivation to enter Higher Education was voiced as a necessity to progress her career. She explained;

*A lot of places required that you have qualifications. So that was what started me and I thought well I'll just start on simple little things So I went back and I started doing courses and I got a job.*

She talked about how she explored the notion of gaining a third level qualification;

*So I needed a qualification that was going to allow me to go out and do further things , bigger things if you like, different things for want of a better word and not I suppose restrict myself to child care.*



Delia is similar in that the motivator for her decision seemed to be gaining a qualification, she said;

*Because I was doing the work I had done training as an advocate and in the work they do in the music there was an awful lot of social issues that arise and I was beginning to work with groups with a lot of social issues and I very quickly realized that in the day and age that we live in unless you have a qualification, no matter what your life experience is that you will not be taken seriously. And so I remember making a conscious decision, because I wanted to be able to tackle social issues and I realized that because if I wanted to do it I had to do it from the inside out and not the outside in and then I made a conscious decision to go and get a degree.*

Kenneth spoke about his motivation for returning to education;

*One of my motivators and it may seem odd was it was just sorta something that I would like to do and then I was kinda talking to people and I was thinking if they can do it (laughing) I can do it you know what I mean? And emm another motivator would be emm the fear of coming back (Laughing) The fear of coming back and just emm the way that I look at fear is emm there's only one way to find out about something if you are really afraid of something then just do it. So I did (Laughing) and I did two interviews and I got the two interviews and I was sorta surprised in a way.*

Ivan talked about the reason that he chose to come to college, he said;

*I think, honestly that it was about reading and writing and that I would be back and kinda get that right. I kinda came to the point that I thought that I can't keep struggling on the way that I am to be honest about it.*

He spoke about employment opportunities and proving to the principal in his primary school that he could achieve it. He said;

*I suppose I will get a better job, but when I get my degree I would like to meet that principal and just stick it under his nose.*

Joseph talked about making the decision to return to college eight years previously. He identified two reasons for his decision. He said;

*Oh yeh well it was eight years ago that I decided that I was coming back and was going to do something like nursing or social care, or something like that, but it had to be in something helping people. And the other thing was that this course was going full time instead of having to travel elsewhere, it was near.*

He explained;

*I was in rehab' for a drink problem and I done out a list of what I wanted to do and that was the last thing on the list that I wanted to do and emm so I turned around and done it and emm eventually it took me a while but emm I don't think that I was actually ready to do it until I went back.*

He talked about being able to get a good job as a motivator for returning to education.

*To be honest the motivation is I don't want to sound fickle I would like to get offered jobs that instead of having to use my body I'd have to use my mind. I would prefer not to have to scrape together 600 euro so I can go and see my sister with my girlfriend and have to go and kip in my aunt's house. I don't want anything like that. I want to be able to say 'Oh yeh there's a concert' I want to be able to afford that this week instead of having to wait a month and then say 'Can I afford the ticket?' and that's one of the biggest motivations and that's always at the back of my head.*

Geraldine talked about her motivation for going to college which came to her when she was homeless and living on the streets. She recalled a powerful memory;

*I used to go and sit down by the four courts all day as it was somewhere that was dry. I used to even at that age, I used to listen to so many people coming up before a judge and the solicitors representing them used to say 'He left school at an early age' and it seemed to be a repeat thing for so many people who were up in front of a judge. It was the one big thing, the defence that they all seemed to have in common, and I thought that was odd even at the age of 15. I thought I don't want to turn out like this.*

She explained that it was about proving to herself that she could do it she said;

*I think that it's more, it's not even really to prove them wrong it is one point of it it's to prove that I could, that I can do it.*

Noreen said she valued education for her own children and that encouraged her she said;

*I suppose having had my own children and putting them through the education system and I very much valued education for them, so I went on and I gave it a go.*

The reasons and motivations for returning to education were varied .Common threads were gaining a qualification and the love of learning and to prove to themselves that they were able to achieve when they felt that they had failed in their earlier experiences of education.

### **Sub-theme 2: Sense of fear.**

This sub-theme identifies the fear that the mature students felt in relation to entering the field of Higher Education. This sense of fear seems to be

explained in their narratives as being linked to their earlier negative experiences of primary and secondary school and the fear that they may encounter similar experiences. They were fearful in relation to their level of literacy skills and how they would cope. Yet they chose to challenge their fears, and enter the field of Higher Education.

Geraldine expressed her fear in terms of her past educational experiences. She explained;

*The fear of I suppose a lecturer coming back and going 'What the hell is this crap you've just handed me'. Because I've always had that.*

Ivan talked about his fear of going back to education and identified a connection with his earlier experiences. He said;

*The fact that I couldn't do it when I was there the first time and now I was so much older and to be honest I would have got to the point where I thought that I was illiterate like.*

He said the feeling that he would have got if asked to read in class was;

*Absolute bloody fear.*

He also said;

*Well I still don't like handing up stuff to be corrected and getting it back because like I still have this thing, but like at the same time you just have to hand it up and you just do it like and get on with it.*

Ivan links this experience with his past experience of handing up work to his primary school principal. He said of that experience;

*Because like that principal always had issues about how badly you did it. He would kinda make sure that everyone in the class knew.*

Ivan talks about the sense of relief that came with being diagnosed as dyslexic and how this helped him overcome his fear. He said;

*Actually the biggest thing was being diagnosed dyslexic that definitely helped. When she told me I nearly cried. It was like I am not completely stupid.*

Noreen talked about her fear of examinations;

*But again there was this whole fear around written exams and there still is this fear around written exams.*

She told me that this fear had stemmed from her past experiences of examinations in secondary school, she said;

*I know when we did exams in secondary school, emm the expectation was that you were going to study, retain the information and pass. Now I didn't study for the leaving cert' emm again as I said there wasn't the support and there wasn't the interest.*

Kenneth expressed his feelings around the fear that he felt in his narrative he said,

*The big fear was for me was the writing. The writing and the spelling. Yeh Yeh. Everything used to come back to that. And I am not dyslexic*

*you know emm that has been established you know, but I always knew that anyway. It was just that I never paid attention, you know?*

The feeling of fear was expressed by four mature students. Their main fear was the fear of not being able to cope academically and they related this back to their earlier negative experiences of education.

### **Sub-theme: 3: Selection of college.**

The mature students spoke about how they chose the college that they were attending. The overwhelming reason given was that they are practical people with other responsibilities and so they chose the college that was nearest to their homes which saved on travel and time. The college also had small class sizes with an average yearly intake of forty students for the applied social studies undergraduate programme.

Noreen said;

*Well I could have travelled to Dublin before to do a course and I have travelled to Tyrone before to do a course but the fact that this course was run here was amazing, it was almost like it was like a ribbon it was wrapped up for me. Now it's on your doorstep and if you don't take it you're foolish do you know what I mean?*

Ivan also spoke pragmatically about his choice of college he said;

*This college was first on the list. I think it was because it was convenient and that it was a bit closer. Financially I wouldn't have been able to manage if it were far away.*

Geraldine also had practical reasons;

*I chose this college because I couldn't travel with the kids in school. If I was single I would have probably done it in Dublin.*

Kenneth spoke about his reasons;

*It would have been extremely awkward for me because number one I would have had to give up my job, Number two I just wouldn't have been fit to work at all. You see I can nip home here sometimes during the day you know, if I have time and a few free hours.*

Delia talked about the small class sizes being beneficial, she said;

*The growth element is really strong in education and to work in such a small group, if we were in a lecture theatre with 400 people I don't think that would be there. But because we work in such small numbers there's a lot of emm getting to know things about yourself, the way we interact with somebody. I find there's a lot of personal growth in it.*

Joseph explains that the programme coordinator taking the time to talk to him about the course influenced his choice he said;

*When I came over initially to find out what it was about, he (the programme coordinator) came down to talk to me about it in the corridor, and that was like this is the head fellow, and I didn't know him from Adam. But since then I kinda knew that he is like that with everyone and if people are genuinely interested he will come down and talk to you. I also knew that Maggie (The disability officer) was working here too and I've known Maggie since I was a kid, and she was very helpful too.*

Joseph also talked about the financial implications for him, he explained;

*The course going full time meant that I would not have to pay for it.*

The reasons for choice of college were mainly based on practical considerations and the size of the classes. The fact that a lecturer made a good first impression giving freely of his time to meet a student influenced the student to choose this particular college.

### **Thematic Summary.**

This third main theme; *Going to College* emerged from the narratives of mature students as they moved from their earliest educational experiences to their present day experiences of Higher Education and how they decided to return to education. The three related sub- themes describe the various experiences of the students and how they reached the decision to return to education. These sub themes were: *Reasons and motivation for returning to college; Sense of fear and Selection of college*

### **Main Theme 4: Balancing study and work and family commitments.**

Balancing study and work and family commitments, emerged as a main theme through the careful examination of the transcripts of the narratives. The two sub-themes associated with this main theme included: *Prioritising all the time and Attendance*. These will now be presented alongside quotations from the narratives of the mature students.

#### **Sub-theme 1: Prioritising all the time.**

This sub-theme was evident in the narrative of all the mature students. They all associated this as a challenge that was peculiar to being a mature student. They stated that if they were a traditional student they would not have the commitments that are so challenging and require such careful balancing within their college life. Noreen explained the challenges for her as a mother with a part-time job to fit everything in she said;



*I suppose that when you are a mature student you have so much going on, that you have to also run the house and do your jobs, there's the kids, there's the football, there's the activities there's the whole thing.*

However coming up to examinations Noreen feels she must prioritise her studies, she explained;

*The month before exams I say this month is mine. Yeh, because I have to, I couldn't do that for the whole year that just wouldn't be fair on the children.*

Geraldine talked about how she had to prioritise as a mother with small children;

*The kids have to come first because their needs have to be met before anything else. Yeh you do the cooking and the cleaning and you try and just juggle in between classes. If you have to run home, stick the washing on you know because I live nearer now, it's handy to do that. Whereas the year before it was a lot harder. You get to juggle in the evening, the thing that I find hardest is after a day in college, you have a long day it's very draining mentally and you're doing the cooking, the housework and then you have to try and fit in the study. If I have a C.A. (continuous assignment) to do, you just prioritise and the washing can be left till next week. It's very busy and very, very tiring and very busy.*

Kenneth is the primary carer for his elderly father and works part-time. He talked about balancing the different areas of his life with his college studies, he said;

*Well for me personally there's a three way split. There's the college study part of it and then I work and then I live with my father, you know so all of them, there's times there might be times you know when, there would be times when study might be a priority, work is sort of all of the time it's sorta fairly even, because I know what I have to do and then my father it depends, because he is 87 and that can be difficult.*

Delia is a mother to three children and she prioritises her studies over domestic duties. She said,

*I just walk off and do my study, but you know what it is because the older that I get emm I am just changing, I'm just turning into a complete slob and I live it, because my priorities have completely changed. You know once upon a time the house would have to be cleaned, everything had to be you know, whereas now I don't care in the slightest. I do what I love doing best.*

She went on to talk about her role as a mother and wife and how she does not allow that to disrupt her need and enjoyment of study, she explained;

*You know what it is the link as a woman and this is really clear for me as a woman. I am not tied to the role of washer up, cook, cleaner, mother, wife, that my role is emm I am educating myself and that's my role, or I am drumming, or I am doing my singing. So in other words I am choosing what I want to do with my time as a woman and that I am not, it's not a protest, but I am consciously not falling into that role of doing all the domestic stuff and all of the womanly roles. I just well I choose not to do it.*

Ivan talked about how he prioritised his study over his work with horses, he said;

*The first thing that I do at the beginning of the year when I come into college is open the stable doors and throw every horse out and close them behind them and that's where they stay until I finish college and I am just completely and utterly think that I have done with that part of my life and I don't sit on a horse until I am finished.*

Noreen told me about the sacrifices that she and her family have made, she said;

*Well something had to give and yeh I find that it was family. It was that kinda family time. Whereas I would never have missed a football game now I was choosing between football games and emm you know TV went out the window, friends went out the window.*

Joseph talked about how his partner encourages him to put his studies first he said;

*She will batter me if I don't put my studies first.*

There was a common thread throughout the narratives of the mature students highlighting a sense of sacrifice through prioritising between family, study and work and having a social life. There was a sense of balancing expressed throughout the narrative with at times study being a priority and then other commitments taking precedence. This challenge was ever present in their lives and appeared to take away from their overall enjoyment of college life.

### **Sub-theme 2: Attendance.**

This sub-theme represents the significance that mature students lend to the notion of complete attendance at college and was demonstrated in the narratives of the students. They all spoke about how important it was for them to attend lectures. They expressed a sense of reluctance to miss any college time and a fear of missing something important that they would not be able to catch up on. They spoke about how they enjoyed attending college and the whole social aspect of it and a sense of it being their time. They also expressed a sense of duty to attend college. Ivan said;

*I won't take a day off college to work no matter what. I won't miss a day anyway because if I miss a lecture I just can't catch up. I just feel as if I am lost.*

Kenneth also finds it important not to miss college, he said;

*I think part of it is sorta that's the way that I operate. I ahh if I tell somebody that I will be there I would like to be there but also for me like, even if you're there and your tired and you're not paying attention, you're going to learn something. Yeh you won't be in in ship shape, but you could be half asleep, but the next thing you will hear something, and it and yeh you will switch on. But if you are not there you don't know what's been on like.*

Noreen expressed how important it was for her to attend college;

*I thought it was important to be there because I thought I might just miss that little nugget that is gonna help me later on, so you know that was the point.*

She said how she takes the responsibility of attending college very seriously;

*I felt that anything I do, anything I do in my life I like to do well and I suppose I've applied that and I think there's no point in going unless you are going to do well.*

Geraldine stresses through her narrative the importance of attending college, she said;

*If I didn't get in everyday I would be in a heap, I'd be afraid that I would miss out on a chunk that I might need. The younger ones don't seem to need, ahh I'd be terrified.*

Joseph talks about the significance of attendance in relation to the way that he learns, he said;

*I know myself that I have to be in the room when the people are doing the lectures. I can't be just handed a note because I learn more from watching people and what they are saying, because I know I can hear there may be an emphasis on this is what you need to know and I learn better if I hear it.*

There is also the sense expressed through their narratives of enjoying college and not wishing to miss out on that time for themselves. The following quotations support this. Delia said;

*I absolutely love it because to me it's my time and we really enjoy it. We meet for lunch and I find it's pure and utter me time.*

Noreen also expressed her enjoyment at attending college;

*I really actually enjoy going to college, I enjoy meeting my friends, I enjoy the learning and I enjoy the lectures.*

The significance of attendance was a strong thread running throughout their narratives for many varied reasons. Some expressed a fear of missing out on knowledge that may be of benefit to them in the future. Actually attending lectures and the interaction with lecturers and others face to face suited their learning styles. They also enjoyed the experience of attending college even though they had busy life styles and had to juggle many other commitments to be there.

### **Thematic summary.**

This fourth main theme of balancing study work and family commitments was a strong thread identified through the narrative of the mature students. The two associated sub-themes were: *Prioritizing all the time and Attendance*. A general sense expressed throughout was that mature students are busy, and

balance many priorities making sacrifices within their family lives and their social lives to attend Higher Education.

### **Main theme 5: Supportive networks.**

This main theme was identified by the mature students through their narratives as they discussed the significance of the various supports that were available to them. The sub-themes related to this main theme are: *Supports at home; Importance of friends and Support staff within the college.*

#### **Sub-theme 1: Supports at home.**

The significance of having positive supports at home was identified by all the mature students. They all were overwhelmingly grateful for these supports and overall their families were supportive in a positive way. Joseph talked about the support that he received from his partner, he said;

*She will batter me if I don't put my studies first, (Laughs). Oh yeh I would be very lazy and also my sister is great she would say 'You got more the last time, how come you didn't get the marks this time?'*

Noreen talks about the support that she gets from her husband, she said;

*He has taken up an awful lot of the slack. I often used to wonder what would have happened if he had been working full time. I probably would have struggled a lot more. So he has been hugely supportive.*

Delia found that the support of her husband of benefit, she said;

*Emm on the practical level, brilliant husband that has to be said, kids are older and all in school. There are a couple of people who support me and I have a supportive family.*

Geraldine talked about how her partner who is also attending college helps her with notes;

*He gives me his notes he has dyslexia and he is always telling me I need to be tested.*

Four of the mature students specifically mentioned the positive supports that they are now receiving at home while attending Higher Education in direct contrast to the lack of supports they had while attending primary and secondary school. The supports that they have now are in the form of their partners and husbands.

### **Sub-theme 2: Support staff within the college.**

This sub-theme was identified within two of the narratives as being beneficial to the mature students for their contentment and success within college life. Two of the mature students had been diagnosed with a learning difficulty and the name of the disability officer (Maggie) came up through their narratives. They spoke of her with gratitude and admiration. One of the students did not wish to avail of supports and she explains why through her narrative. Joseph spoke about the supports that he received in relation to his dyslexia;

*They show you different ways of doing things and this computer can do this and do that. It's like I think it's like a bit like going back to care, not necessarily doing something for someone, it's opening up a chance for them to do something.*

He explained further;

*It's not just within the class like within the whole campus itself Yeh the student union and the lecturers and the admin staff and even the girls in the canteen, and having the craic with them, there was nothing, emm everyone seemed to be on the one level.*

Geraldine expressed her reluctance to look for supports within the college due to her past negative experiences of these supports within the compulsory system. This is what she said;

*I haven't looked for supports in the college, but I am the type of person that I have always battled on my own. And I've always kinda been on my own throughout my life. I've done an awful lot just on my own back and I've any time I've looked for supports they're not given to me. So I don't know whether that's just a personal habit that I don't like looking for supports.*

She also said;

*I don't like people going through my work. I'm afraid that they will make a mockery out of it.*

Ivan talked about how he found the Disability Officer an enormous support he said;

*Ahh well the fact that you have Maggie makes a huge difference, oh yeh she's a great support and she is brilliant at her job.*

Ivan had been offered the use of a scribe when entering Higher Education and he found this very unhelpful he said;

*I got the scribe and to actually have to tell somebody stuff to write down was the hardest thing in the world because not only did you feel thick but you felt really thick at that stage.*



The students expressed differences in attitude to availing of learning supports within the Higher Education environment as opposed to the overall negative experience these supports brought to them in the compulsory sector.

### **Sub-theme: 3 Importance of Friends.**

Throughout the narratives the importance of friends was identified as being significant. Geraldine said;

*I think I have been lucky enough to find a click in a group and it helps an awful lot, because you support each other and not just through studies but personally as well. I find there's an awful lot of that in our course.*

She talked about how learning goes on outside of the college setting and how she found that to be useful she explained;

*It continues even in the evening, our home is like a hub, loads of us live on the same road, they would be down, they come to my house because I have kids and I can't move. The discussions often go on into the wee hours of the morning about we could do this or do that and how you tie different things in. That's what is helping a lot of us that's struggling with the reading, writing the academic side of things. We all kinda club our ideas and we get through that way.*

Joseph demonstrated the importance of friends when he said;

*Since coming in here my first impression has grown like you get very good friendships like and you develop them and you get very good supports like from the friendships as well. Not a hope in hell would you get through without the friendships and supports.*

Noreen also valued her friends as supports she said;

*We have a core group and we have friends. Yes I would call them friends and we go to each other's houses and we do coffee and we do stuff like that which I never thought would happen. But it has and it is lovely now because they believe, because each person knows what people can achieve do you know? And it's like they would encourage you.*

Within this sub-theme the concept of reciprocity within friendships was seen as important to them. Joseph talked about the notion of friendship being a two way process;

*What I like is if you scratch my back I will scratch yours. If you do something for someone then like they will turn around and do something for you and I think that that is good and I think that everyone needs a bit of that. But if they keep asking you and not returning the favour like there's got to be give and take like.*

Delia also talked about this concept within the friendships of her group, she said;

*You learn a lot about yourself through education as well. Emm there was a point where I was giving, giving, giving and I realised that I was giving so much that in actual fact that somebody else was riding up the back of my giving. And then I realised you know there has to be another way of doing it. So you know it was kinda a conscious effort of stepping back. So you can support someone but there's a fine line between supporting somebody and helping somebody and actually doing their work for them yeh, yeh and again that was wisdom, learning and maturity.*

Geraldine also alluded to this saying;

*When you find friends and they struggle with the same things. Because some of them would come up and say 'I'm thick at stats and you're good, could you show me how to do this?*

Delia talked about the supports of friend within the class, she said;

*Yeh we support each other incredibly. There are only two people who have isolated themselves but the rest of us continually support each other, in contact through exams through study. We meet have dinner, we go to social things.*

Delia talked about how as a group they made a conscious decision to support each other she said;

*I remember we sat down one day and said I'm in the same emm just let's go on this journey together because we are here to get our degree. We are here to get our Honours degree, you know and it doesn't matter as long as everyone gets through and so you know I'm saying to them well let's all support each other so you know if you are struggling in one area and I am good in one area , then I will help you.*

Ivan spoke about his friendships within the college, he said;

*They mean a lot and we support each other.*

He also finds support from a friend in his group who is also dyslexic, he said;

*Oh yeh, well the fact that myself and Joseph are fairly close friends and emm the fact that we are both dyslexic does definitely help in that there's yeh a whole lot of us together. Even as a class I was told by them very quickly that I was the dyslexic in the middle of them all and at any time that you asked for anything, they were really quick and just helped me and got the notes out. They just handed them out like not a bother.*

Kenneth said of his friendships within the college;

*I would have a few people in our class that I would rely on. It would be hard without them and I find the well both the older mature students and the younger ones are great.*

### **Thematic Summary.**

The main theme of Supportive Networks was a strong thread running through the narratives of all the mature students. This was in direct contrast to the lack of supports that they received in their earlier education both from the Institutions and from their immediate families at home. Supports that were significant to the mature students were identified as; *supports at home; friends and support staff within the college.*

### **Main theme: 6 Pleasant surprise.**

This main theme was evident throughout the narrative of all the mature students. They had talked in an overwhelmingly negative way about their earlier educational experiences and then they voiced their surprise about how enjoyable their experiences of Higher Education were. This seemed to be a pleasant surprise to all of them. Within this main theme the following sub-themes were identified that help to deepen our understanding of their experiences: *(1) Enjoyment of Higher Education; (2) Increased self worth and (3) Lecturer style and influence.*

### **Sub-theme 1: Enjoyment of Higher Education.**

Throughout their narratives the students spoke about how they were enjoying their experience of Higher Education. This sub-theme was evident within the narrative of all the mature students.

Noreen said;

*I'm very confident now, very relaxed and also relaxed in the sense that I can say what I want to them, the lecturers. I think first of all there was the fear of the unknown. It has been very beneficial and it has been very enjoyable.*

Ivan talked about his experience of Higher Education in a positive way he said;

*It's been great and you know I would have probably cracked up if I hadn't come here. But ahh no, yeh it has been good definitely.*

Kenneth said simply,

*It's been good.*

Joseph said;

*Overall it's gone beyond my expectations, but I think that the course is there but you kinda step to the left of the course as well and do your own little thing as well and there's supports there to do that.*

Delia said of her experiences of Higher Education;

*It has been all that I thought it would be and more and more.*

Geraldine spoke positively about her experiences, she said;

*It has really lived up to my expectations in a good way because I thought that it would be bad for me as I struggle to retain stuff and then trying to get what's in my head on paper doesn't work. But it's been great.*

While talking about their enjoyment of Higher Education the students mentioned their experiences within the first year of college. Noreen said;

*And I think first of all there was the fear of the unknown, I think it was getting to know and fear of my ability especially first year, I never really believed that I could ever do this.*

She explained;

*I have to say the first year was a bit of a shock, not knowing what, well I suppose not having done well in the leaving cert', not having done well in school and not having any other formal qualifications that going into college was kinda mind boggling and quite overwhelming.*

Ivan said of his experiences of first year;

*I suppose really that it took time it took a while really. I'd say up until Christmas of the first year, well it wasn't tough but it was kinda difficult.*

Kenneth said of the first year;

*But like the whole experience of coming into like third level for a good while of it I would have been sort of like a deer in the headlights, do you know what I mean like? Really when I look back on it especially the first, up until Christmas, but maybe a bit after it all of that is sort of a blur (Laughing).*

Noreen talked about her experiences of the first year in relation to making friends and gaining supports, she said;

*Even in the first year just hooking up some people may have needed some extra help you know. Everybody just bandying ideas and throwing out suggestions, you know and you knew that if you were struggling you knew that you could just go and say 'You know what I just can't get my head around this. And there was always somebody there to say 'Hang on there a second have you looked at it from this, have you looked at it from this angle?' and they were just brilliant in that respect.*

This narrative thread illuminated that the essence of the first year in Higher Education was overwhelming, exciting and a time of adjustment.

### **Sub-theme 2: Sense of self-worth.**

The sub-theme of self-worth articulates the feelings and beliefs that the mature students developed over the period of being in Higher Education and relates to the main theme of enjoying education. It seems that their self-worth had been damaged through their negative experiences of the compulsory educational sector however they spoke about how they have grown as people since coming into Higher Education. Delia talked about;

*A sense of growth.*

She went on to explain;

*I am not the same person that started all those years ago. I know that my mind has expanded and my sense of tolerance has really increased, my awareness of justice, maybe it's because of the subjects that I am doing. This Delia that's come to these years of education was always there you know but it just took like that moulding of the education to bring it out if you know what I am saying?*

Joseph talked about how he had developed as a person and credits coming into Higher Education with allowing him to do that he said;

*That's the other thing that this course has taught me, if you don't start with yourself you are not going to get anywhere with anyone else like. You have to look at yourself number one like self-care first.*

Kenneth talked about the opportunities that coming to college might open up for him as a person, he said;

*I said at interview If coming to college here is about coming in and getting a degree and then getting a job emm well I said to them I am the wrong person for it, because I said it is about opening up opportunities, not about narrowing it down to one little job.*

Noreen spoke enthusiastically about her growth and development during her time as a mature student, she said;

*I thought wow, ok and then the lecturers were just it was different, it was just so different, in the sense that you know, you weren't the little person sitting down the back of the room. You were very much more an equal. Everybody had their experiences to bring which was phenomenal. It was so good to have such a mix of people. We were actually learning from each other and that for me was really interesting and then also realising that you had something to contribute.*

Geraldine said;

*I was expecting to run. It was more because that I didn't have, I didn't think that I would be intelligent enough to string a conversation together with some of the people who would be going to college.*



Geraldine went on to explain in her narrative that that had changed for her completely and she said;

*I suppose it will mean that I have amounted to something. It's not for other people it's for myself.*

Ivan mentioned that his confidence has grown throughout his time on Higher Education;

*I suppose to a degree kinda my confidence in myself has grown as well do you know? I don't have a problem with coming and asking somebody something, if they think that you are stupid, who cares really?*

Throughout their narratives they all speak about growth, increased self-confidence and enjoyment of their experiences of Higher Education which directly contrasts with their earlier experiences of education.

### **Sub-theme3: Lecturer style and influence.**

This sub-theme emerged as significant throughout the narratives as the students spoke about the importance of developing equal relationships with lecturers and enjoying a sense of shared learning. Also they expressed the importance of lecturers valuing the life experiences of mature students.

Kenneth talked about a particular lecturer;

*You see well he's very well how would I describe him? He's a very good listener and you can say an awful lot of things to him without him showing a reaction.*

He also said;

*I think education works better as a two way street.*

Delia also identified with this within her narrative she said;

*If you have someone up there (a lecturer) and someone down here, (a student) then all you are doing is feeding into the same kind of repression that our education system is absolutely famous for. I think the key that unlocked a lot of my potential was the ability to sit down in a circle and almost be on a level with the lecturers so that there was a real exchange, you know?*

She also said,

*The lecturers were learning as much from us the first time around and it was a lovely exchange of knowledge, really I mean it has been such a lovely experience. You know the whole thing and the experience of being listened too and the whole thing of the feedback all got taken on board. You can see the difference this year, the huge difference in the college that they had taken our feedback on board.*

Noreen talked about lecturers being an inspiration to her, she said;

*I think he was an inspiration to me. I just loved his approach now I loved his approach don't get me wrong, I was also quite critical. I said to him I need handouts to revise which I never got which was quite exasperating. I just really loved the way he just reached out and supported so much and his belief that we would succeed. He really did and that was so important.*

Geraldine also talked about the style of a lecturer she said;

*Well he puts students at ease from day one and he is like "Don't be stressing, don't be worrying." He's so kinda laid back. You don't have to panic with him it's just very much laid back. I think that when you are relaxed you take in an awful lot more.*

Geraldine said how she needed handouts from the lecturers to aid her learning and to enable her to fully engage with the class, she said;

*Anything other than writing notes, that's the main thing with me, if you could get the notes the handouts. You'd be lost without the handouts. You're trying like, you're trying to write down as the same time as listening. You are missing out on a very big chunk of the lecture, because you are busy writing and trying to keep up with everything to make sure that you have it all down, but with the handouts I find I would be lost without them.*

The lecturer's enthusiasm for their subject was also important to the mature Student. Noreen said;

*He brings an enthusiasm when he talks on the subject, he brings an enthusiasm. It's like when you pick a topic for an assignment and you tell him and he goes 'oh how are you going to do that?' and straight away he's getting in there and he is interested. He's peeling away the layers.*

Delia talked about feeling a sense of equality and shared learning;

*A lot of it boils down to respect. There's a sense of when I say equality that there is a sense of equality you know even if the lecturer may have all the information, the degree and the PhD, but they're still a human being.*

She also said;

*He provided a sense of dialogue. There was a dialogue, dialogue around the whole course. It was how do you want this to work? How do you want this to go? There was a flexibility and it felt dynamic. He wasn't static, there was a fluidness around things so he was prepared to you know to mould things. He was listening to what the students were saying, to what their needs were and he was ready kinda to mould things to meet their needs.*

Kenneth talked about what qualities he thought were necessary in a lecturer, he said;

*I've found all the lecturers good. Well for me what makes a lecturer good is if you go to a lecturer , especially with an assignment and you've got a mark and you think that maybe you should have done better, that the lecturer will just sit down nice and calmly and say now this is the mark and this is why you got it. So feedback and fair feedback is important.*

Delia said about a lecturer's style;

*There was absolutely no judgment, well his level of acceptance and non-judgment is pretty astounding really, that you could say anything, just anything and he would listen and take it on board. He didn't dismiss anything, nothing got dismissed.*

Joseph spoke about shared learning and non-judgmental approaches;

*Each lecturer has their own style and sometimes you are going to fit into it and sometimes you are not. But I think that it is a bit like life sometimes, you are going to have to do stuff and you might not like it and the majority of them I can't say a bad word about them. The majority of them they don't put themselves on a pedestal. Emm they don't think that they are better than you they're not just there to lecture they're there to learn as well.*

Noreen compared her experience now with secondary school, she said;

*I found that the lecturers were very interested in what you have to say too which again is a new thing because when you are in secondary school, you are taught to be quiet and to just get on with it.*

Throughout the narratives the students spoke about the significance of the influence and style of the lecturer. Shared learning and a non-judgmental approach was deemed important as was the concept of mutual respect and taking on board their feedback.

### **Thematic Summary.**

The main theme of Pleasant Surprise refers to the sense of enjoyment and surprise that the mature students expressed through their narratives on entering the field of Higher Education. It contrasts sharply with the sense of sadness, anger and frustration that they expressed in relation to their earlier educational experiences of primary and secondary education. The sub-themes that were identified best summarise their experiences of Higher Education and these were identified as: (1) *Enjoyment of Higher Education*; (2) *Increased self-worth* and (3) *Lecturer style and influence*.

### **Chapter Summary.**

This chapter presented the findings from the data analysis of the interview transcripts of six mature students who participated in this study. The main themes constructed were data driven and presented in the order that they arose within the student narrative. The main themes revealed were: *Experiences of first and second level education*; *Family support*; *Going to College*; *Balancing study, work and family commitments*; *Supportive networks and Pleasant surprise*. Related sub-themes were also employed to enable a deeper more comprehensive understating of the mature student experiences.

The themes and their related sub-themes were presented employing the use of quotations from the mature student narratives thereby keeping to the foreground the voices of the students as it is their experiences that are at the heart of this investigation. Student quotations supporting the main theme and sub-themes ensured that there was a sense of reality to the analysis providing context. They enabled a rich, meaningful description of their experiences of Higher Education and the journey that they went on to arrive there. Employing a narrative approach allows the participants to become the focal point of the research. Each narrative was specific to each mature student however there were many commonalities in relation to their experiences of education throughout their lives. Overall they expressed a sense of how difficult their early experiences of education were in sharp contrast to their experience of Higher Education.

The following chapter is the Discussion Chapter. The key findings will be discussed employing the theoretical framework of Bourdieu focusing on the key concepts of habitus, capital and field. The conclusions of the study discuss the contribution of the study to the field of Higher Education in relation to mature students.

## **Chapter Six. Discussion**

### **Introduction.**

The purpose of this chapter is to examine the experiences of mature students in relation to the field of Higher Education through the medium of narrative inquiry and to interpret and integrate the findings within relevant literature. Despite the on-going discourse in relation to Widening Participation there is little research available employing the narrative approach to examine the experiences of mature students in relation to the field of Higher Education within the Republic of Ireland. The use of a narrative approach allows for the centrality of the student voice in the overall research process. This enables the focus to be on contemporary concerns from their perspective in relation to the field of Higher Education. Therefore to understand the totality of the experiences of the mature students it is essential to listen to their stories in relation to their present experiences and to examine their past experiences within the compulsory education sector. This multi-layered view of educational experiences across their life-span facilitates a deeper understanding and provides context for their stories. Merrill and West, (2009) suggest that the narratives of mature students highlight the effect that past lives in early education, family and work have in constructing present and future identities of Higher Education students.

I have interpreted the findings of this inquiry employing the theoretical lens of Bourdieu. He suggested that the role of social science was to comprehend how the objective structures of society such as social roles, norms and institutions influence subjective behaviour and then how the entirety of social behaviour enables the reproduction of the reality which is society (Fries, 2009). To achieve a comprehensive understanding of the mature student experiences I employ Bourdieu's conceptual thinking tools: habitus, capital and field. These concepts have been utilised as analytical tools within the field of educational research as a means to comprehend the social and cultural processes that have a propensity to ensure the reproduction of social inequalities (Fleming and Finnegan 2011). The concept of habitus deployed alongside capital and the manner in which they function in particular fields

present tools for comprehending the continuing impact of social inequality on mature students' lives (Fleming and Finnegan, 2011).

Bourdieu suggests that that these concepts are interdependent with none of them primary. The participants within this study were mature students and were the first generation of their families to enter the field of Higher Education. The research question was addressed through the method of in-depth biographical narrative interviews with six mature students. Biographical narrative as suggested by West et al, (2007:280);

Offers many examples of the wealth of biographical and life history research, and its unique potential to illuminate people's lives and their interaction with the social world and the interplay of history and micro worlds, in struggles for agency and illuminate their interplay of different experiences and forms of learning – from the most intimate to the most formal.

This study primarily examined the question: *What do the experiences of mature students who are undertaking an under graduate degree programme in applied social studies reveal about the field of Higher Education in the Republic of Ireland?*

The narratives were analysed thematically considering and highlighting what the mature students saw as key issues in relation to their experiences of the field of Higher Education. Polkinghorne (1995) proposes that the paradigmatic analysis of narratives searches for common themes throughout the stories. To achieve this it is essential that there is a database of several stories. Consequently I am examining all of the narratives of the six mature students who participated in this inquiry. Within the interpretation of the narratives I do not simply select events from the narratives and place them in a comprehensible order rather as Bruner (1990:8) suggests;

The events themselves need to be constituted in the light of the overall narrative.



Within this interpretive chapter I attempt to achieve this by examining the narratives focusing on the context of the mature students overall experiences of education as voiced through their stories. During the analysis of the data there were at times some “ah-ha moments” developments of comprehension for myself and for the mature students who at times would say, “I never thought about this before.” This comment was made in relation to their experiences of education throughout their lives. Pesut (2005, p:x) suggests that these moments are “sense making” moments and there was throughout the telling of the narratives and the ensuing analysis a sense of awakening and understanding as the themes were developed. The students were asked this initial question to commence the narrative; “Would you like to tell me about your experiences of education to date?” They began chronologically from their earliest experiences of compulsory education through to present day experiences of Higher Education.

This chapter imparts an amalgamation of the study findings which commenced from this initial question. It discusses relevant seminal and contemporary research and expands the discourse in light of the findings through the theoretical lens of Bourdieu. The discussion will be presented focusing on the three analytical concepts of habitus, field and capital with key exemplars from each theme which elucidate the concepts. Throughout the following section I will propose some thoughts on the implications of the findings to education specifically for mature students who enter the field of Higher Education.

### **Habitus.**

The concept of habitus is employed in relation to the analysis of the themes and sub-themes to enable a deeper comprehension of data that arose from the narrative. Habitus refers to values, expectations and life-styles of social groups that are gained through the experiences of their everyday lives and become their dispositions. ‘*Experiences of first and second level education*’ was a core theme discussed by all the mature students. They voiced through their individual narratives many negative experiences of compulsory education at primary and secondary level and emotions such as despair, frustration,

disappointment were evident verbally and through their body language and tone of voice. The findings indicate that the habitus of the mature students had an influence on their experiences of education at all levels. Bourdieu (1994:70) defines habitus as being of a;

...structured and structuring structure.

He proposes that structures relate to the individual's past and present whereas structuring enables the individual to shape and form the present and future practices of the person. Therefore it encompasses ways of behaving and socially learned dispositions that are at times taken for granted and which are attained throughout the course of everyday life. These behaviours are lasting and generally learned throughout childhood and as such generally reflect the social context through which they were obtained (Fleming and Finnegan 2011).

The concept of habitus allows an understanding of the narratives of the mature students in relation to their overall experiences of education. It helps to understand the '*Relationships with teachers*' identified as a sub-theme and lecturers and allows for an appreciation of the structures and cultures of the schools and institutes that the mature students engaged with. Habitus enables an understanding of the context for behaviours and actions experienced by the mature students which led to the negative experiences voiced through their narrative.

Their habitus did not fit comfortably within the field of education and the findings from this inquiry suggest that this led to the students being uncomfortable and feeling that they did not belong. Wright (2011) highlighted a rigid adherence to procedures and a lack of imagination demonstrated by teachers who failed to explore the reasons as to why students behaved in a certain way. Habitus enables us to understand this as it persuades us to consider in relational terms rather than in opposites. Therefore the relationship between the teachers and the structures of the organisation and the

outstanding effects that these had on the mature students are significant. The mature students' habitus was structured through their past and present experiences and this shaped their practices and behaviours. Habitus works relationally with one's present circumstances. The teachers within the compulsory educational sector were not aware of the personal habitus of the mature students. This lack of understanding of the personal habitus of the mature student led to certain behaviours that reproduced social inequality within the educational system and created poor relationships with teachers. This in turn impacted negatively on the experiences of the mature student. Grenfell (2004) reasons that the presence of poor relationships with teachers is due to students being put in their place by things that happen in the classroom. This he suggests is due to a lack of connection for the students with the educational system and a disconnection with their personal habitus. This may happen by stealth in many thousands of tiny interactions. Consequently the student is excluded or they exclude themselves, because they have no choice. The mature students in this study recounted many interactions with teachers implying that they did not fit within the educational system and it was suggested to them that they would not succeed within it. Some of the mature students had undiagnosed learning difficulties and the teachers mistook this for laziness and therefore they were not aware of the mature students' cognitive habitus and this made for difficult relationships with teachers and negative experiences of the compulsory educational sector.

The findings suggest that three of the mature students were treated poorly by some of their teachers and by today's standards the behaviour would constitute bullying. This is supported by Wright (2011) who suggests that some of the behaviours of the teachers recounted by the women adult learners in her study would today result in disciplinary proceedings.

Wright (2011) proposed that negative experiences of schooling have a lasting effect. The mature students in this inquiry had no difficulty recounting their negative experiences of the compulsory educational sector even though they would have been from a considerable number of years ago. They proposed that these negative experiences had an effect right through to their adult lives especially in relation to their decision making process to enter Higher

Education and impacted upon their experiences of Higher Education. This can be understood through the concept of habitus as habitus is robust, long lasting and transposable becoming active in a diverse array of theatres of social action (Bourdieu, 1993a).

Bourdieu (1971) emphasises the collective nature of educational disadvantage and the critical significance of a child's early experiences of school. Reay (2002) examined the transition of mature students to Higher Education and found that they had "troubled educational histories" but highlights narratives of educational survival and recovery. This is evident throughout the narrative of the participants in this inquiry. Certainly the findings demonstrate the tenacity and resilience of the mature students and their ambition to succeed in Higher Education in spite of their earlier troubled experiences. Case et al, (2010) found that students from a disadvantaged social background may have developed coping strategies that are useful to them in order to succeed in Higher Education. Habitus enables us to understand this as its influence is progressed largely through imitation (Lane, 2000). People unconsciously copy and integrate behaviours that they have seen in their social world into their own lives. This explains the experiences of the mature students in this inquiry who survived their past negative experiences of education and on entering Higher Education were adaptable enough at times to observe the behaviours of the prevailing group and integrate those behaviours into their own lives.

One of the main motivations reported in this inquiry for entering Higher Education was the necessity to acquire a qualification to achieve better employment or to progress through their chosen field of expertise. Willis (1997) proposed in his ethnographic study that working class kids tended to get working class jobs. He asked why middle class children get middle class jobs and why the others let them. He also questioned how working class kids get working class jobs and why they let themselves. The majority of the mature students in this inquiry had spent their lives in unskilled occupations due to their lack of formal educational qualifications. The analytical tool of habitus helps to resolve this complex issue as it centres on the way people act, think and feel. It encompasses our histories and demonstrates how we bring our history into our current circumstances and how we then make

choices to behave in a certain manner. Our past experiences shape the vision of our future as some choices may not seem possible to us because of our past (Maton, 2008).

The relationship between habitus and the person's social world can be mismatched as habitus can generate practices long after the original conditions that shaped it have disappeared. It was suggested through the narratives of the mature students that this was troublesome for them on entering the field of Higher Education as they brought with them behaviours and subsequent actions arising out of their earlier educational experiences. Grenfell (2004) would suggest that many students are excluded from education because the way that education is presented to them does not fit their cognitive habitus. Therefore there is talk of the person feeling like a fish out of water. Maton (2008:59) explains;

As 'fish in water', social agents are typically unaware of the supporting, life affirming water, the match between their habituses and the fields in which they flourish or feel ill at ease, and how they come to be in these contexts

The mature students within this inquiry found the first year of Higher Education especially difficult. There was a disconnection between their personal cognitive habitus and the institutional habitus which influenced their experiences. Their narratives expressed their unease and fear within the first year of their undergraduate programme where they found it to be a difficult time of adjustment. They expressed feelings of confusion and being overwhelmed by the whole experience. This is explained by the mismatch between their personal and cognitive habitus and the institutional habitus of the field of Higher Education.

The sub-theme of a '*Sense of fear*' on entering Higher Education was expressed by the mature students. They linked this fear to their past negative educational experiences and were frightened that history would repeat itself. It is suggested that feelings of shame and fear are very much part of the working

class relationship with education (Skeggs 1997; Plummer 2000). Reay (2002) highlights the tensions that working class students feel around the transition to Higher Education in terms of authenticity, shame and belonging. The sense of fear expressed by the mature students is linked to the concept of habitus and their personal dispositions, how they have learned to behave and react in certain situations and their inherited knowledge and values which did not assist them throughout their earlier educational experiences. This history is carried through to their current circumstances within the field of Higher Education. Habitus engages with our histories that we then carry forward with us throughout our lives. It is this history that persuades us to make choices and decisions. This is a continuous and on-going process whereby where we are at any point in time is the culmination of events from our past that has shaped our lives( Grenfell 2008).

Bourdieu (2000) argues that we foresee the future based, because of habitus on experience of past outcomes. The mature students were entering unfamiliar terrain on entering Higher Education. They had only their past experiences of education to base their expectations upon. Consequently identified as a main theme was '*Pleasant surprise*' which encompassed the feeling the mature student's had on entering Higher Education and how much they enjoyed the process and how it differed from what they had expected. Findings from this inquiry suggest that entering Higher Education enabled an increased sense of self-worth with students casting aside negative experiences once they realised that they could achieve academic success. Case et al, (2010) also found in their narrative analysis that Higher Educational studies were connected to personal growth and that education was more than academic studies but also encompassed self-development and personal growth. This demonstrates how adaptable mature students are to the habitus of the institution in that although initially their decision to return to education drew feelings of fear for the mature students they talked about the significant changes within their lives that led to increased confidence and self-worth. Habitus then is not deterministic as the mature students availed of the choice to enter Higher Education and this choice influenced their understanding of themselves.

Linked to this is the sub-theme identified within the narratives as '*Lecturer style and influence.*' The findings are overwhelmingly positive in relation to the influence and style of the lecturers. The mature students found most helpful the sense of equality between the lecturing staff and the student body. They expressed satisfaction at feeling that they were engaging in an equal process of shared learning and that their experiences and opinions were valued. This contrasts with their earlier experiences where they felt an inequality in the relationship with their teachers due to teachers not understanding their cognitive habitus. The findings from this inquiry suggest that the space that the lecturers occupied was one of mutual learning and understanding with the mature students.

The students spoke about the non-judgemental values of the lecturing staff and this was in contrast to their earlier experiences where they felt judged and that academically very little was expected of them. The findings indicate that the lecturers were aware of social inequality within the educational system and were adapting styles of teaching and learning that removed obstacles for the mature students and focused on respect, equality and shared learning. It highlights that the lecturers through their style of teaching and appreciation of shared learning were aware of the cognitive habitus of the mature students and engaged with them in such a way as to ensure the institutional habitus met their needs. Therefore the significance of institutional habitus cannot be underestimated in relation to this phenomenon. It is essential in creating the environment of learning. It influences the experiences of students and also has a significant effect on those who teach. This may also be because of the nature of the undergraduate programme that the mature students were engaging with. The philosophy of the programme is based around social justice and equality and therefore the lecturing staff would have an awareness of these concepts which appear to have filtered through to their relationship with the mature students.

Therefore the concept of habitus enabled an analysis of the mature student's narrative which allowed a deep understanding of their experience of Higher Education. Habitus as an analytical tool highlighted the significance of a

person's educational history and context in relation to their present day experiences of the field of Higher Education.

### **Capital.**

The concept of capital was also employed to analyse the themes derived from the narratives of the mature students. Bourdieu suggested that there were four main forms of capital; economic which related to finances and assets and cultural which incorporates knowledge taste, language and voice. Social capital which encompasses networks, family, religious and cultural heritage and symbolic capital which involves all other forms of capital that can be exchanged within other fields. Bourdieu suggests that the most powerful form of capital is economic capital (Moore, 2008). The amount of relevant capital that an individual can bring to a field will endow that person with an advantage to allow them to be more competitive and succeed within that arena.

Broadly, the concept of capital comprises of the resources that people have access to which can advantage or disadvantage them within a given field. The lack of cultural capital in relation to the field of compulsory education is suggested implicitly through the narratives of the mature students as a reason for their unease and fear regarding the field of Higher Education. Mills and Gale, (2007) suggest that the cultural capital of marginalised groups is not valued in an equitable way by the educational system and this was expressed through the narrative of the mature students when they spoke about how they were poorly treated and discriminated against due to their 'Home background' when they attended school at primary and secondary level.

The findings point to poor '*Relationships with teachers*' due to the teachers' opinions of their family background and also because of undiagnosed learning difficulties which teachers mistook for laziness. Fleming and Finnegan (2010) suggest that mature students linked the manner in which they were treated with disrespect and the low expectations of their academic ability to the fact that they did not come from a privileged background. Many of the mature students felt they were treated differently because of their social standing or



family background, identified as the sub-theme '*The culture of education within the family*'. The concept of capital helps to explain this as the mature students did not have the relevant capital to succeed within the compulsory educational environment and this was expressed through their narratives in a consistent fashion. Henry et al, (1998:142) states;

The school assumes middle-class culture, attitudes and values in all its pupils. Any other background however rich in experiences, often turns out to be a liability.

This was true for the experiences of the mature students within this inquiry. Their family background culture and values were not recognised as being of value within the compulsory educational sector and in fact disadvantaged this cohort of students.

Bourdieu (1997) argued that in order to succeed within education children need to be furnished with a range of cultural behaviours. Privileged children and their teachers have learned these behaviours, however unprivileged children have not. This is identified as a lack of cultural capital. The mature students within this inquiry did not have the necessary cultural capital at their disposal to succeed within the compulsory educational sector and this helps to explain the behaviour of the teachers towards them and how the mature students found their experiences of the compulsory sector difficult.

Bourdieu (1997) proposed that educational institutes reinforced social inequalities through not understanding the various and different amounts of cultural capital that the students possess. The mature students within this inquiry were not afforded the opportunity to amass the necessary cultural capital to advantage them within the compulsory sector due to the practice of academic streaming on entry to second level. Consequently for the mature students within this inquiry their struggle with school was exacerbated through the practice of academic '*Streaming on entry to secondary school*' which ensured that they were not exposed to the cultural capital of the dominant

group which may have helped them acquire cultural capital and achieve their potential (Lane, 2000).

*'Family support'* during their time at compulsory education was a main theme identified as common to all the mature students. The cultural capital within the family network of the mature students was especially significant in their experiences. The mature students expressed how education was not prioritised. As they were from a *'Farming community work on the farm was prioritised'*. The mature students said that their parents or older siblings did not enter Higher Education and therefore this was not something their families were familiar with and was not part of the cultural capital of their families. Therefore the impact of relevant cultural capital cannot be underestimated in relation to their experiences of education.

There is a long standing connection between parental education and children's progression to Higher Education (OECD, 2007). The mature students who participated in this study were the first in their families to enter Higher Education. The literature suggests that for those people from a working class background progression to Higher Education is still uncommon (Brooks, 2003). When speaking about family support in relation to their early educational experiences the mature students were talking about their parents, siblings and specifically for one mature student her foster parents and staff at a residential home for children. Mature students' narratives indicated that family support was a deeply personal and individual experience which was unique to them and influenced their overall early experiences of education. The conceptual tool of capital allows for the analysis of the significance of support for the mature students. There was a lack of cultural capital in relation to education within their families. Therefore the families were not supportive of their children within the compulsory educational sector and this was identified throughout the narratives of the mature students. Mills and Gale (2007) suggested that time in school was an extravagance and is irrelevant for many poor students.

Wright (2011) reported that there is a working class expectation that on reaching the minimum school leaving age it is expected that one should

become economically independent and to have more than the minimum required basic education was seen as a luxury. The mature students' experiences within this inquiry suggested in their narratives that their families did not expect them to continue their education after the minimum basic requirement and this is explained through the lack of cultural capital within the family environment.

Wright (2011) identifies this as embodied family values reporting a lower class disinclination to invest in their children's future. In stark contrast she found that there was a middle class value and belief that education was vital to a successful future. Linked to this and identified by the mature students within this inquiry is the concept of economic capital. Their families were poor and for some their income was derived through their farms and school was viewed as a luxury that was expensive. Conversely Devine (2004) argues that it is no longer so straightforward that those children from middle class backgrounds will fare better in schools because they have the support and help of educated parents. However Devine (2004) proposes that middle class parents marshal an array of resources in a concerted effort to secure educational and ensuing occupational success for their children. For this to happen there has to be a strong family culture of valuing education. Parents have to know how to enable their children to succeed within the field of education. They need to be cognisant of the resources they need to employ that will benefit their children. To achieve this they need to have knowledge and adequate financial resources at their disposal. More importantly they need to recognise the value of education for their children. This encompasses having cultural, economic and social capital. Within the cohort of the six participating mature students within this study this was not the case.

Cultural Capital has been broadly employed through Bourdieu's work as a means to illuminate the relationship between scholastic achievement to the irregular allocation of dispositions, understandings and abilities that were typically conveyed through families. Bourdieu (1986a) suggests that families could advance these qualities by transmitting their cultural capital in three ways. Through an embodied state encompassing cultural tastes, in an objectified state in the shape of cultural goods such as books, or in an

institutionalised structure as in educational qualifications. For the mature participants within this study their families did not have access to these forms of cultural capital and therefore at that time were not able to develop the qualities that would have enabled them to achieve academic success (Fleming and Finnegan, 2011).

Bourdieu and Passeron (1979) suggest that children from wealthier backgrounds inherit from their families forms of capital that make it easier for them to progress within the academic field. They propose that children who have inherited appropriate cultural capital speak the same language as their teachers and therefore are seen to be brighter than children who do not have these advantages. It is suggested that the cultural knowledge that is valued is acquired in the homes (Crossley, 2008).

This was not the case for the mature students participating in this inquiry. Their home environment did not value education. Three of the mature student participants in this inquiry came from farming backgrounds and work on the farm was prioritised to the detriment of their academic work. This was due to a lack of economic and cultural capital. Success at school was not valued as being important and because of economic circumstances the children had to work on the farm. Consequently the findings from this inquiry suggest a tacit link between education, economic capital and cultural capital. Therefore the lack of cultural and economic capital of the families had an impact on the lives of the mature students. Education was not valued, and their family background was not conducive to academic success. The children did not have the tools to succeed within the compulsory educational sector; they did not speak the same language as their peers and their teachers. Significantly they did not experience or acquire cultural capital within their family environment. Their families also lacked economic capital.

Findings from this inquiry identified as significant the decision making process that the mature students underwent regarding entering Higher Education which they identified through their narratives as the main theme of *'Going to College'*. The mature students described their decision making process through the sub-themes of; *'Reasons and motivation for returning to*

*education; Sense of fear and Selection of college.*' The mature students expressed through their narratives that their past educational experiences played a significant part in their decision to enter Higher Education. Wright (2011) suggested that mature students made connections across time examining their past educational experiences and finding that these significantly affected their expectations for adult education. The mature students within this inquiry highlighted that they were dubious initially about entering Higher Education because of the sense of failure that they experienced within the compulsory sector. Their motivations and reasons were set against a back drop of educational failure and therefore this makes their decision to enter Higher Education all the more courageous. While in the process of considering entering Higher Education they had moments of self-doubt and uncertainty regarding their academic abilities and what would be expected of them once they engaged with their academic programme. This is linked to a lack of cultural capital. Bourdieu (1990) describes this as a feeling of "not knowing the rules of the game", whereas those students from wealthier middle class backgrounds with relevant cultural capital were more assured in the field of Higher Education. Their lack of cultural capital makes their transition to Higher Education difficult as they are not aware of the "rules of the game" and consequently are playing a game of catch up with those of their peers who have relevant cultural capital at their disposal.

The mature students within this inquiry expressed that they had very little knowledge of the expectations and the organisational structure of the field of Higher Education and this led to a sense of fear. Consequently they could only relate to their past educational experiences which were all negative. It is their lack of cultural capital which enables us to understand the origins of their fears and uncertainties. Fleming and Finnegan (2011) reported that mature students remained uncertain in relation to their ability to cope with the academic demands of a degree course and that that this lack of confidence is wholly due to the legacy of negative experiences in the compulsory educational sector. The lack of cultural capital left the mature students at a disadvantage when entering the field of Higher Education. They did not bring to the field the necessary knowledge that others from a privileged background inherited from

their families. This is especially so of this cohort of mature students in that they were the first generation of their families to enter the field of Higher Education.

Bourdieu and Passeron (1979) suggest that the upper and also to some extent the middle classes are able to place their cultural capital in the most favourable educational settings and their investments prove to be profitable in terms of generating social profits. This was not the case for this cohort of mature students as their families did not have the knowledge or the economic capital to do this. Therefore due to a lack of cultural, economic and social capital the students reported a sense of fear which they related to their past negative experiences of the compulsory educational sector.

The mature students expressed they had little opportunity to avail of extra curricula activities that took place on campus as they were constrained by other commitments and had limited time at their disposal. Therefore opportunities to socialise with students from different backgrounds were limited and in most cases did not happen. Therefore the mature students did not get the opportunity to amass relevant cultural and social capital and learn from the prevailing group. They could not cultivate their social capital, make new friends, link into important social networks that may be of benefit to them at some stage.

Threaded throughout the narrative of the mature students are reasons for '*Selection of college*'. These are significant and can be better understood employing the concept of capital. All of the mature students who participated in this inquiry made the choice of college based on the grounds of practicalities as they had other commitments in their lives that they had to be aware of and time spent travelling to and from college was not an option for them due to these commitments and financial constraints. Therefore the lack of economic capital was an influencing factor in the decision making process for these mature students. Ball (2003) proposes that mature students are not only constrained by lack of personal finances but also are time poor due to a myriad of other commitments and therefore time is seen as a valuable commodity. Reay (2002) suggests that the cost of travel and the time considerations were all primary elements in the decision making process for

mature students when they were selecting a college. The findings of this inquiry illuminate the challenges that mature students face on a daily basis identified as a main theme of *'Balancing study, work and family commitments'*. Consequently the college had to be in close proximity to eliminate time spent travelling. Reay et al, (2002) agree explaining that for mature students the choices regarding choosing where to study are extremely limited and really come down to looking at what they know they cannot have and then considering the few options that are left open to them. The mature students within this inquiry were extremely limited when it came to choosing a college. It had to be the nearest college geographically that offered the undergraduate programme that they were interested in. One of the participants clearly stated that she had to attend that particular college due to the commitments that she had to her children. She did state that she would have rather have studied elsewhere. The other five mature students were delighted to discover that the undergraduate programme that they were interested in was being offered in a college that was close to them and this was definitely a major influencing factor for their entering Higher Education. Therefore the mature students within this narrative inquiry were limited in their choice of college due to a lack of economic capital.

While many of the discourses surrounding Widening Participation address complex issues it is seldom recognised how significant the material stresses are in the lives of people who are poor. The mature students within this study would have all identified themselves as being financially under stress to commence and continue with their education. They all had employment considerations to attend too outside of their study commitments. Therefore a lack of economic capital played a significant role in the decision making process of the mature students in their entering Higher Education.

Conversely the majority of the contemporary literature regarding transition to Higher Education and decision making made by sixteen to nineteen year olds found that young people actually had a robust sense of having a variety of choices when deciding on entering the field of Higher Education (Chisholm

1995; Brynner et al, 1997; Furlong and Cartmel 1997; Du Bois-Reymond 1998; Ball et al, 2000). The findings in this study illuminate that the mature students did not have any real choice at all while considering a place in Higher Education. The college that they chose was the only college that suited their needs in terms of finances and time. This is reflected through their narratives as they speak about the various challenges and commitments that they are responsible for outside of their academic obligations. Decision making was essentially pragmatic and this is supported by Reay(1998) who argued that geography determines the choices of mature students in relation to Higher Education. However it is the lack of economic capital that truly impacts on the choices of mature students.

Reay, (2002) suggests that within educational choices there is always an element of social class involved and social class is related to economic capital. All of the mature students within this inquiry identified themselves as being from working class backgrounds and inherent throughout their narratives was a lack of economic capital.

Bourdieu (1996b) proposes that economic capital is of great significance in the lives of students and he suggests that economic capital is the most powerful form of capital as all forms of capital are intrinsically linked to economic capital. A lack of economic capital also lends itself to diminished forms of social and cultural capital. This is because a lack of finances impacts on student life preventing them availing of extra curricula activities and social networking. The mature students described their lives using words such as busy, balance, juggling, prioritising and sacrifice. Findings within this study highlight that the mature students felt that they had more commitments outside of their academic life than the traditional student. The reality of this situation ensured that they found themselves 'Prioritising all the time' and sacrificing other elements of their lives. Reay et al, (2002:10) reports that mature students sacrifice any social life and time for "care of self". Although the mature students within this inquiry do not talk about not having time for self-care it is implicit within their narratives and the busy schedules that they have to manage. This suggests that they are not given the opportunity to maximise their social capital as they do not have the time to develop beneficial



friendships and cultivate social networks within the academic setting. The mature students talked about the necessity to work around the time that they were in college to support themselves and four out of the six mature students had dependent children. One of the mature students had an elderly dependent father for whom he was the primary carer. The findings highlighted that the students were prioritising and juggling their academic commitments with employment and caring responsibilities. The influence of a lack of economic capital is significant as the necessity of having to work or not being able to afford childcare or help with a dependent adult consequently impacts on their experiences of Higher Education.

They all spoke about the sacrifices that had to be made especially around the time of examinations or submitting assignments. These sacrifices and their busy schedules placed huge demands on the mature students and the levels of stress experienced on a daily basis are difficult to overstate. Fleming et al, (2010a) suggest that mature students have to curtail family activities to get through their academic course. The findings from this inquiry concur with contemporary research in that the mature students prioritise their study at important times such as examinations or when an assignment is due for submission, however this is ultimately linked to the lack of economic capital at their disposal (Reay et al, 2002, Crozier et al, 2008, Fleming and Finnegan 2011, Wright 2011) They spoke about their sense of sacrifice, in terms of their families and social life and that time with their friends outside of college was sacrificed for the commitment of academic work. All of the mature students struggled financially and therefore they did not have the necessary economic capital to spend on child care or care for their families or elderly parents. They also all had to work outside of their college lives because of their precarious financial situations.

Therefore it is clear from the narratives that economic capital is a very powerful influencing factor in the experiences of mature students within the field of Higher Education.

The sub-theme of '*Attendance*' was voiced throughout the narratives as being

significant to the experience of the mature student within Higher Education. The students spoke about feeling fearful if they missed a lecture or could not attend college because they felt that they would not be able to “catch up.” The concept of cultural capital enables an understanding of this fear highlighting their lack of assurance in their academic abilities which may be linked to their earlier educational experiences. Their lack of cultural capital leaves them with a lack of confidence and poorly equipped to navigate the field of Higher Education.

The implications of attendance are further impacted against a backdrop of limited economic capital which puts a strain on their lives and influences the experiences of the mature student of the field Higher Education. Fleming and Finnegan (2011) report that mature students have to surmount grave social, personal and financial impediments to attend college.

The findings in this inquiry illuminated that life experience was a positive force for the mature students as it enabled them to cope with the challenges within the field of Higher Education. The analysis of the narratives suggest that the lack of cultural capital combined with an ambition to achieve within the field of education motivated the mature students to enter the field of Higher Education. Therefore life experience can be viewed as a form of capital that the mature students within this inquiry used to their advantage. Case et al, (2010) suggest that experiences of disadvantage and early educational failure were factors that mobilised people to academic success.

The main theme of *‘Supportive networks’* was identified throughout the narratives of the mature students and this is analysed through the concept of social capital. Bourdieu (1985) proposes that social capital is particularly significant within the field of Higher Education. Social Capital as a concept demonstrates the sum of resources that a person may have at their disposal that in some way ingratiate them within the field and provides them with an advantage. Consequently for those who lack the relevant social capital they are at a disadvantage and therefore social inequality is reproduced. Social capital was seen as an instrument to ensure that the elite were protected and the wrong type or person did not enter their circles (Bourdieu, 1986b; Bourdieu

and Wacquant,1992). Therefore it is important to note that the concept of social capital can be used to exclude, divide and to reproduce social inequality. Throughout the narratives of the mature students it was evident that this form of networking and amassing social capital was not afforded to them.

However the social capital that they did amass was helpful to them and was identified through the narrative as the sub-themes; '*Support at home, Importance of friends and Support staff within the college*'. The significance of social capital became apparent through the narratives as enabling the mature students to succeed and have positive experiences of Higher Education. Supports at home were given to the mature students by their now immediate families, spouses and partners. The findings highlight that these supports were of great consequence to them while in the field of Higher Education. This is in direct contrast to their earlier experiences surrounding the lack of support they received from their home environment when they were attending primary and secondary school. Therefore at that time in their lives their lack of social capital left them at a distinct disadvantage within the compulsory educational sector which impacted negatively on their experiences. Fleming and Finnegan (2011) suggested that family bestowing emotional and financial support was one of the key indicators to success for mature students. Wright (2011) reported the support of partners as essential and also distinguishes between practical and emotional support. In this inquiry the mature students talk about social capital in terms of emotional and practical support and suggest that both are of equal importance .The mention the emotional support that they receive from friends, and family and practical supports that enable them to study at ease. Informal supports are also identified such as peer group support from their fellow students which helped the mature students to have positive experiences of the field of Higher Education.

Bourdieu (2000) acknowledges the significance of friends as a form of social capital, highlighting that they not only ease loneliness but add to the self-worth of the person. This is reflected in the findings of this inquiry whereby the mature students expressed the '*Importance of friends*' so much so that they felt that they would not have been able to complete the course without them. Fleming and Finnegan (2011) suggest that peer support for mature students

both academically, emotionally and socially is a significant factor in student success. Wright (2011:91) suggests that friendships are formed but also talks about supportive pairs or “study buddy”. The findings from this inquiry highlight this as a form of social capital that the mature student’s used to their advantage as they identified how they share notes and resources and study together not only within the college but also in their respective homes.

Bourdieu (1990) views social capital as a concept that is conveyed and amassed in ways that produce and reinforce social inequality. The supportive networks identified as their groups or friendships had positive effects on all the mature students. However the mature students started out with a limited amount of social capital and were restricted in the amount of social capital that they could amass. Consequently the notion of amassing social capital for these particular students did produce and reinforce social inequality.

Bourdieu (1986a) advocates that economic capital is the most important form of power and all other forms of capital are linked to this. In terms of amassing social capital the mature students were restricted throughout their educational experiences both in the compulsory and Higher Education field as they were financially constrained and had to take on employment and so could not fully engage with the field of Higher Education. Their lack of economic capital ensured the mature students could only be in college for the absolute essential time necessary as they had employment commitments as well as domestic obligations that they were responsible for outside of their college life. All of the students had to overcome serious financial obstacles in order to engage with Higher Education.

Support staff was viewed positively by all the mature students. They were appreciative of the work of the disability officer and specifically mentioned how they found her an enormous support through her guidance and care throughout their undergraduate programme. These support networks and structures are identified through the analysis of the narratives as social capital. One of the mature students who refused to access the help of the disability officer due to the influence of her earlier negative experiences of support classes in the compulsory educational sector, was able to access the supports

and resources in Higher Education through her friends that used the services. This was identified as a means of amassing social capital for herself in that her friends were able to help her through the sharing of resources. Therefore the mature students displayed inventive and created means of amassing and conveying social capital within the field of Higher Education. It is salient to note that none of the mature students had any suggestions in relation to improving supports for them. They did not fully identify the supports in terms of social capital and engaging with the totality of college life that they were not part of because of their other commitments.

Therefore to summarise, the theoretical concept of capital was employed in the analysis of the narratives of the mature students in this inquiry. Cultural, social and economic capital all played a significant part in the experiences of the mature students of the field of education at compulsory level and this impacted on their experiences in the field of Higher Education. In the following section I will discuss the use of the concept of field and its significance in the analysis of the narratives of the mature students.

### **Field.**

Education is a place of multifaceted processes. Bourdieu (2005) suggests that to comprehend interactions between people or to understand an event or a social phenomenon it is essential to examine the social space in which these events occur. The social space he refers to is the field. Employing the conceptual tool of field allows for the analysis of the field of Higher Education within this inquiry. Bourdieu (1998a:40) suggests that a field is a;

...a structured social space, a field of forces, a force field.

Therefore the field is a place of struggle, competition and a place of power (Grenfell and James, 2004b). According to Bourdieu and Passeron (1990) the field of education reproduces itself more than other fields and those that

benefit from it are already possessed of social and economic advantages. Consequently it is of great significance to examine the experiences of the mature students of the field of Higher Education.

Within the field are people who are dominated and people who dominate. Agents within the field employ various strategies to succeed within the field as they struggle to maintain their position. Therefore the concept of capital is significant when examining the position of people within a given field as it places them in a position of advantage or disadvantage. This was evident in the narratives of the mature students when they spoke about entering the field of Higher Education and especially their experiences of the first year. They recounted that they had limited knowledge of what it would entail, and what was expected of them academically. The field therefore was alien to them. They had no previous knowledge to relate it to only their experiences of the compulsory educational sector which were in the main negative. They were also at a disadvantage as to their standing within the field as it was identified through the narratives their lack of relevant cultural, social and economic capital. Therefore their position within the field was not equal to the traditional student and therefore there is a sense of inequality reproduced within the field.

The organisational structures of the field of Higher Education did not consider the specific needs of the mature student and as such complex multi-factorial issues and challenges such as balancing domestic obligations and a lack of economic capital are not addressed within the field. The field of Higher Education does not take into account the busy lives of the mature student. It does not make allowances or concessions in any way to ensure that their lives could be more manageable. The pressure of academic work, attendance at lectures and the lack of childcare for mature students makes life for the mature student much more stressful. Consultation around submission deadlines and timetabling of examinations generally does not happen and the student voice is rarely heard in relation to the timetabling of lectures. Extra curricula activities are mainly after the end of the college day making it virtually impossible for mature students to attend. The narratives of the mature students identify these challenges and how they impacted upon their experiences of the field of Higher Education.

Organisational structures are not in place to consider the needs of mature students when constructing timetables which play an important role in the lives of all students. The mature students spoke about the challenges of balancing their busy lives. The sub-theme of 'Attendance' was crucial to the overall experience of the mature student however this was not recognised and organisationally there were issues with timetables that could have been addressed to enable the mature students to balance their academic life with their domestic obligations.

The findings of this inquiry would suggest that the organisational structures of the field of Higher Education disadvantage mature students and limit their capabilities to amass the necessary social and cultural capital. This is demonstrated through the narratives of the mature students as they explained how they were not able to take part in any extra curricula activities within the college and therefore were unable to amass social capital as they had too many outside obligations to attend to. The field of Higher Education further diminished their economic capital as the mature students explained that about the prohibitive cost of attendance on a daily basis. Although there are no fees for attendance at Higher Education there is a registration fee. This fee has steadily increased since its introduction and it is a significant amount of money and the mature students find difficult to pay given the financial constraints that they are operating under.

The link between field and the relational structures of capital and habitus is significant in the findings of this inquiry and inherent in the themes identified within the narratives. The mature students often expressed that they did not like school and that they did not belong there. This can be understood through the relationship between field, capital and habitus as through careful analysis of the narratives it was demonstrated that there was a;

...field-habitus match or clash (Maton, 2008:59).

The field–habitus clash was identified particularly in relation to their experiences of the compulsory educational sector. Bourdieu (1998b) intimates that those who maintain the pre-existing order may do so without actually realising that they are complicit. Therefore teachers were not aware of the disconnection for mature students due to their personal cognitive habitus and the institutional habitus and consequently the cycle of disadvantage continued. However in the theme identified as *'Pleasant surprise'* the mature students did not voice issues in relation to a clash between their habitus and the field of Higher Education. This was identified through the sub-theme of *'Lecturer style and influence'* whereby the lecturers were aware of the cognitive habitus of the mature students and through their work within the field managed to overcome this clash. The lecturers worked with the mature students in a spirit of shared learning and self-determination appreciating the personal and cognitive habitus of the mature student within the field of Higher Education.

The field of education is used as a strategy by families to enhance their social position. The findings within this inquiry illuminate that this was not the case for the mature students within the compulsory educational sector as their immediate families then did not see the value and benefits of education.

The narratives highlight that the mature students value the field of Higher Education for the advancement of their careers and their personal development. However within the field of Higher Education the mature student is not offered the same opportunities as the traditional student in relation to choice of study. They voiced that they had limited choices as to where they could study, choosing colleges that were geographically in proximity to their homes because of their domestic obligations. It is suggested that the field of education sorts and sifts people into various educational trajectories and different Institutes of Higher Education which Bourdieu (1996b) suggested enabled the production of elite Institutes and therefore also enabled reproduction and social inequality within the field of Higher Education.

The findings from this inquiry illuminate this particular concept as the mature students voiced that they had no real choice offered to them. Their economic, domestic and social obligations dictated their educational trajectory and choice



of Institute. The field of Higher Education therefore did not offer equity to all students and is part of the reproduction of social inequality. Some of the mature students entered the field of Higher Education to improve their literacy skills. Four of the mature students had left compulsory education with limited literacy skills and this was a disadvantage to them from a personal level and employment perspective. Therefore engaging with Higher Education enabled them to escape the shame and uncertainty that they felt due to their poor literacy levels. However all of the students expressed the notion that the process of education, learning for the learning itself was of primary importance.

The findings in this inquiry illuminate that the students expressed through their narrative that the field of Higher Education provided a safe place for learning where they were able to enjoy learning and this was in direct contrast to their earlier experiences whereby they did not enjoy school and did not succeed within the compulsory educational system. Wright (2011) suggests there are poor educational practices and a failure to address power issues between teachers and students. This is true of the mature student's earlier educational experiences. It is the organisational structures within the field of education and the rigid enforcement of these such as academic streaming that contributed to the negative experiences of the mature students.

The field of Higher Education offers support classes and services to those students who have a diagnosed identified learning need. The three mature students who were offered support classes to help them academically within the educational compulsory sector found the impact of these classes to be entirely negative. They did not appear to encompass individual learning plans for students and therefore did not meet their academic needs. All three students explained that they felt stigmatised due to their attendance at these classes and were bullied by other class mates because of their attendance. The students found the classes so unhelpful and damaging to their self-esteem that they voluntarily excluded themselves from these classes. Consequently without the appropriate learning supports the mature students would have said that this added to their overall struggle within school at primary and secondary level. Bourdieu and Passeron (1979) express this as

the numerous acts of symbolic violence perpetrated by the field of education on those students that it had no interest in helping to achieve their potential.

In contrast the findings from this inquiry demonstrated that those within the field of Higher Education were satisfied with the supports that they received and there was no stigma attached to availing of these supports. However it is interesting to note that one of the students because of earlier negative experiences still excluded herself from these specific supports. The supports were offered and structured in such a way as to be individualised and meet the diverse needs of the mature students. The staff that offered the services was respectful and delivered the service within the organisational structures of the field of Higher Education in a supportive and appropriate manner.

Therefore to summarise the findings from this study as spoken through the narratives of the mature students would suggest that the organisational structures within the Institute were at times student centred and focused however they did not always meet the needs specifically of the mature student.

### **Chapter Summary.**

The theoretical framework of habitus, capital and field (Bourdieu, 1986; 1990) provides us with the analytical tools to understand the narratives of the mature students within this inquiry. They illuminate and explain the impact of social inequality on the lives of mature students within the field of Higher education. When describing their experiences the mature students were inclined to mention many commonalities that threaded significantly throughout their narratives. They recounted experiences of early education and secondary education, home and background characteristics, family support, relationships with teachers and struggling to balance the many challenges in their busy lives. The negative experiences of the mature students in the compulsory educational system influenced their decision making and how they experienced Higher Education at a later stage in their lives. It remains clear from their narratives that the lack of cultural, social and economic capital and

the mismatch between habitus and the field of education provided the mature students with very negative early educational experiences.

In contrast the experiences of all the mature students within the field of Higher Education were mainly positive. This appears to be due to the supportive networks that the mature students had at that time in their lives and the social capital that they managed to amass. Of equal importance is the impact of the lecturers, their teaching styles and their non-judgmental approach which ensured that the mature students felt that their habituses and the field of Higher Education actually did match and therefore they did not feel like fish out of water. The mature students gave simple examples of how they were made to feel valued by the lecturing staff, and the support staff within the field of Higher Education, however it is these simple things that made the difference to the students. The analytical tools of habitus, capital and field have enabled a deeper more comprehensive understanding of the experiences of the mature students of the field of Higher Education. They have enabled an understanding of the impact of context and history in relation to present day experiences of the field of Higher Education.

## **Chapter Seven: Conclusion and Recommendations.**

### **Introduction.**

The focus of this inquiry was to explore the experiences of mature students in relation to the field of Higher Education within the Republic of Ireland. My intention was to capture their experiences through the medium of narrative inquiry whereby the mature student voice was at the centre of the research process. The stories that I was privileged to hear were courageous, moving and insightful. In this chapter the main conclusions are presented and the implications for Policy Development; Irish Institutes of Higher Education and Future Research are discussed.

### **Conclusions from the inquiry:**

I will present the main conclusions from this inquiry using Bourdieu's concepts of habitus, capital and field to elucidate the main conclusions relating to the experiences of the mature students. The analytical tools of capital, habitus and field were useful in identifying key concerns and Bourdieu's position of thinking relationally in terms of people, organisations, time and place was a useful strategy within this inquiry.

### **Habitus.**

The habitus of the mature students had an impact on their experiences of education at compulsory level and within the Higher Education sector. The concept of habitus enabled an insight of the context for behaviours and actions experienced by the mature students which led to their negative experiences and in turn reproduced social inequality within the educational system. Family background culture and values were not appreciated within the compulsory educational sector and disadvantaged this cohort of students.

The narratives identified a mismatch between the personal cognitive habitus of the mature students relevant to the field of education. This impacted negatively upon their overall experiences of the compulsory sector and influenced their experiences when entering the field of Higher Education. Habitus can generate practices long after the original conditions that shaped it

have disappeared and the mature students experienced difficulties throughout their first year in Higher Education due to the incongruity between their personal habitus and that of the Higher Educational Institute.

Mature students on entering the field of Higher Education brought with them behaviours and subsequent actions arising out of their earlier educational experiences. This was identified through the analytical tool of habitus. The narratives identified struggles that the mature students endured due to disparities between their personal cognitive habitus and the habitus of the educational sector and the teaching and lecturing staff.

### **Capital.**

To succeed within the education sector students need to be equipped with a range of cultural behaviours (Bourdieu 1997). These behaviours have been learned by privileged children and their teachers through their families and the cultural capital they inherit. The narratives demonstrated that the mature students within this inquiry had not inherited adequate cultural capital from their families. Their past educational experiences impacted upon their experiences of the field of Higher Education which was linked to a lack of economic, cultural and social capital. The dearth of economic capital was identified as most significant as it was inherently linked to their lack of social and cultural capital.

Mature students can apply for grant aid but this is restricted to full-time courses. This disadvantages those mature students who may wish to avail of a part-time course due to their domestic responsibilities. Those mature students in this inquiry in receipt of a grant still had to work to meet their needs financially mainly because of their other obligations. A significant concern for mature students is that if they fail and have to repeat a year then they lose their grant aid for that particular year. This may then be a disincentive for mature students to complete their course due to this added financial burden.

The lack of cultural capital impacted upon their decision to enter the field of Higher Education as they were uncertain in relation to their academic

capabilities. The analytical tool of capital illuminated a relationship between past and present educational experiences whereby a lack of appropriate cultural capital impacted negatively upon their experiences of the educational sector which also influenced their experience of the field of Higher Education. This was especially evident when they were considering entering Higher Education and within the first year of their undergraduate programme.

### **Field.**

The mature students had limited knowledge of the field of Higher Education and what it would necessitate. The field was unknown to them. The narratives illuminated that their position within the field disadvantaged them due to their lack of relevant capital. The organisational structures of the field did not consider the requirements of the mature student in relation to their domestic and employment obligations and thus did not help them to make their academic lives more manageable.

Consultation around timing of extra curricula activities did not happen and therefore did not enable the mature students to fully partake in college life and amass essential social capital. Mature students valued the field of Higher Education for personal development and to advance their careers, however they were limited by geographical location in relation to choice of study. The field of Higher Education strives to limit duplication of courses throughout Ireland however in doing so limits choices for mature students who due to commitments are unable to travel to study.

### **Implications of this research Inquiry.**

The implications for this research inquiry will be discussed in relation to Policy Development; Irish Higher Education Institutes and Future Research.

### **Policy Development.**

Widening Participation discourses and current Higher Educational policy within the Republic of Ireland endeavour to deliver a more inclusive educational system. The findings from this inquiry would recommend that to ensure the educational system is equitable and inclusive then the voices of the mature

student should be central to policy making. Educational policy should focus on how best to address the lack of social cultural and economic capital to provide a more inclusive educational sector. Policy in relation to lack of economic capital may be progressed through means assessment whereby grant aid is given to those mature students who have dependents thus encouraging mature students to enter the field of Higher Education and to encourage retention. Removal of grant aid for those students who fail and have to repeat a year is punitive and disadvantages those mature students who already have a lack of economic capital. Policy development must not disadvantage mature students economically. Fostering development of social capital for mature students' needs to be addressed through the provision of an identified arena to develop social networks and peer support. Policy should focus on the need to allow mature students to amass the necessary social and cultural capital and this may be addressed through revisiting areas of concern highlighted within this inquiry particularly in relation to academic streaming at second level and careful consideration of programme delivery within Higher Education.

Policy development needs to focus on the delivery of a comprehensive suite of flexible and part time programmes that aid skill development to offer real choice that is academically based and not geographically influenced. This will help to ensure participation and equality for mature students.

### **Irish Higher Education Institutes.**

The key debates in Widening Participation surround issues such as equality of access through the provision of quality, flexible programmes to meet the needs of an increasing mature student body. Highlighting the challenges faced by the mature students through a Bourdieusian analysis of the narratives provides information to the field of Higher Education in Ireland to meet their needs. Irish Institutes need to be proactive in developing innovative part-time programmes centred round the needs of mature students. Their experiences of the field of Higher Education were affected negatively due to the conflicting demands of their domestic obligations. The field of Higher Education is uncompromising in terms of curricula delivery whereby the structures of the programme demand time commitments which are inflexible and unyielding.

Therefore mature students' requirements need to be considered in the formatting of programme delivery. This has to be flexible enough to meet their needs with a student centred approach to the formatting of timetables considering the various obligations that mature students have outside of their academic lives. Parallel to this academic supports in relation to flexible assessment deadlines need to be explored and practical supports in relation to affordable childcare facilities on campus need to be provided. Higher Education Institutes need to be supportive of mature students through the provision of comprehensive feedback coupled with direct guidelines in relation to assessment and examination criteria and an inclusive pedagogy.

Development of relevant programmes provided locally specific to the educational needs of mature students and providing affordable supports in terms of child care should be considered within the remit of strategic development of the Institutes. Recommendations from this inquiry would suggest that it is essential Institutions of Education are aware of the differing habitus of the mature student and promote policy, procedure and practice that ensures that their habitus is valued and understood. The first year within Higher Education was identified by the mature students as being particularly challenging for them and therefore strategic management of resources is essential so that mature students experiences are positive and manageable especially within the first year .It is recommended that a form of mentoring or support service is put in place so that mature students are supported especially throughout their first year in college. It is also recommended that lecturers are advised of the challenges that are particular to mature students and that these are considered in any interactions that they may have with them. This understanding and recognition of the needs of mature students' needs to translate into style, lecturing and curricula development.

### **Recommendations and Implications for Future Educational Research.**

This inquiry identified the negative experiences of the mature students within the compulsory educational sector and this has far reaching implications. Therefore this inquiry could be the foundation for further exploration of the compulsory educational sector specifically in relation to students who do not



have the relevant social economic and cultural capital to manage within that sector. The narratives expressed within this inquiry are significant because they add to the theory base for designing future studies by highlighting multi-factorial complex issues and challenges faced by mature students from their past educational experiences through to their present experiences of Higher Education. Future research should focus on the challenges that the mature student faces within the field of Higher Education and how this may impact upon their overall experiences and issues of retention for this particular cohort of students.

Educational research should examine targets set for equality of participation for mature students and examine ways to offer choice for true equity of participation. The pedagogical practices of shared learning and equality with the academic staff, is an area that could benefit from further research in order to enable academic staff adapt teaching styles to meet the needs of the mature student and to understand the importance of shared learning and life experience that mature students bring to the field of Higher Education.

This inquiry stands apart from the majority of educational studies because it focused entirely on the voice of the mature student through the medium of narrative, specifically employing the key concepts of habitus, field and capital to analyse their experiences. This particular form of analysis highlighted the significance of the mature student's history, their family background and their level of support systems and their experiences of the compulsory educational sector that impacted upon their overall experiences of the field of Higher Education. It enabled an understanding of the experiences of the mature students through the relational facets of habitus, capital and field highlighting mismatches between personal and cognitive habitus and the field of Education as a whole. Therefore this methodological approach focused on the relations between objective social relations and social structure and the stories and practices of social actors (Warren and Webb, 2007). Consequently though encapsulating the voices of the mature students through their narratives it was possible to highlight the influence of the relations between habitus, capital and field that impacted so significantly on their experiences of the field of Higher Education (Warren and Webb, 2009).

## Chapter Summary.

This concluding chapter highlighted the key findings of this study as analysed through the theoretical lens of Bourdieu. The key concepts of habitus, capital and field were employed to analyse the findings enabling a greater understanding of the experiences of the mature student. The key considerations identified through the narrative were that time spent in Higher Education came at a cost for the mature student both financially and personally. The findings informed the recommendations that were relevant to policy development, Irish Higher Education Institutes and future research.

This small scale but productive inquiry has highlighted many issues in relation to mature students and their experiences of Higher Education. The issues surrounding mature students entering Higher Education are multi-causal and complex and deserve responses in relation to development of policy and pedagogical practice that are innovative and creative. The mature students within this inquiry found that their experiences of Higher Education were a *pleasant surprise*. Significantly for many it marked the end of educational exclusion and provided a safe place for learning and personal growth. This was due to the pedagogical practices of shared learning and equality with the academic staff. Throughout this inquiry I have championed the significance of the voices of the mature student.

Therefore I will conclude with recommending that the mature student voice needs to be listened to in order to encourage access, participation and retention within the field of Higher Education. The voices of the mature students deserve to be better heard if the policy towards Widening Participation and the increase in mature student numbers in Higher Education are to be fully realised.

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## Appendix:1. Research Ethics Application Form.

### University of Sheffield School of Education

### RESEARCH ETHICS APPLICATION FORM

**Complete this form if** you are planning to carry out research in the School of Education which will not involve the NHS but which will involve people participating in research either directly (e.g. interviews, questionnaires) and/or indirectly (e.g. people permitting access to data).

#### **Documents to enclose with this form, where appropriate:**

This form should be accompanied, where appropriate, by an Information Sheet/Covering Letter/Written Script which informs the prospective participants about the a proposed research, and/or by a Consent Form.

Guidance on how to complete this form is at:

<http://www.sheffield.ac.uk/content/1/c6/07/21/24/appguide.doc>

**Once you have completed this research ethics application form in full, and other documents where appropriate email it to the:**

#### **Either**

Ethics Administrator if you are a member of staff.

#### **Or**

Secretary for your programme/course if you are a student.

#### **NOTE**

- Staff and Post Graduate Research (EdDII/PhD) requires 3 reviewers

- Undergraduate and Taught Post Graduate requires 1 reviewer – **low risk**
- Undergraduate and Taught Post Graduate requires 2 reviewers – **high risk**

I am a member of staff and consider this research to be (according to University definitions)

: **low risk**

**high risk**

I am a student and consider this research to be (according to University definitions):

**low risk**

**high risk**

\*Note: For the purposes of Ethical Review the University Research Ethics Committee considers all research with 'vulnerable people' to be 'high risk' (eg children under 18 years of age).

**RESEARCH ETHICS APPLICATION FORM**

**COVER SHEET**

<p>I confirm that in my judgment, due to the project's nature, the use of a method to inform prospective participants about the project (eg 'Information Sheet'/'Covering Letter'/'Pre-Written Script'?:</p>	
<p><b>Is relevant</b></p>	<p><b>Is <u>not</u> relevant</b></p>
<p><b>Enclosed is an information leaflet for participants.</b> (if relevant then this should be enclosed)<b>YES.</b></p>	

<p>I confirm that in my judgment, due to the project's nature, the use of a 'Consent Form':</p>	
<p><b>Is relevant</b></p>	<p><b>Is <u>not</u> relevant</b></p>
<p><b>Copy of consent form is attached. YES.</b></p> <p>(if relevant then this should be enclosed)</p>	

<p><b>Is this a 'generic "en bloc" application</b> <b>(ie does it cover more than one project that is sufficiently similar)</b></p>	
<p><b>Yes</b></p>	<p><b>No</b></p>
	<p><b>X</b></p>

I am a member of staff

I am a PhD/EdD student

I am a Master's student

I am an Undergraduate student

I am a PGCE student

The submission of this ethics application has been agreed  
by my supervisor

I have enclosed a signed copy of Part B: yes.

**University of Sheffield School of Education**

**RESEARCH ETHICS APPLICATION FORM**

**PART A**

**A1. Title of Research Project:**Through the eyes of mature students; Listening to the stories of mature students engaged in higher education.

**A2. Applicant (normally the Principal Investigator, in the case of staff-led research projects, or the student in the case of supervised research projects):**

Title: Ms

First Name/Initials:Teresa.T.B.

Last Name: Bruen

Post:Student

Department: School of Education

Email: teresa.bruen@gmit.ie

Telephone:086 163 2855.

**A.2.1. Is this a student project?**

If yes, please provide the Supervisor's contact details:

YES. Dr Simon Warren. E.mail: s.a.warren@shef.ac.uk

**A2.2. Other key investigators/co-applicants (within/outside University), where applicable: N/A.**

Please list all (add more rows if necessary)

Title	Full Name	Post	Responsibility in project	Organisation	Department



**A3. Proposed Project Duration:**

Start date: January, 2012.

End date: January 2013.

**A4. Mark 'X' in one or more of the following boxes if your research:**

	Involves children or young people aged under 18 years
	Involves only identifiable personal data with no direct contact with participants
X	Involves only anonymised or aggregated data
	Involves prisoners or others in custodial care (eg young offenders)
	Involves adults with mental incapacity or mental illness
X	Has the primary aim of being educational (eg student research, a project necessary for a postgraduate degree or diploma, MA, PhD or EdD)

**A5. Briefly summarise the project's aims, objectives and methodology?**

(this must be in language comprehensible to a lay person)

The purpose of this narrative based inquiry is to gain an insight into the experiences of mature students engaged in Higher Education. The question asked is : What do the experiences of mature students undertaking a degree programme in applied social studies reveal about the field of Higher Education in the Republic of Ireland?

The focus of the study will be to explore the mature student's experiences in relation to : balancing work, family and study commitments , their experiences of the cultural and social environment of higher education and how they fit into this environment.

The research is a narrative based inquiry and data collection method will be through in-depth unstructured interviews. Participation is voluntary and students will be met with initially to explain the purpose of the study and given an information leaflet (Enclosed) to read in relation to the study. All participants will be assured that all information and participation will be treated confidentially and their anonymity protected. An information leaflet in relation to confidentiality and anonymity will also be given to students to read. (Enclosed)

**A6. What is the potential for physical and/or psychological harm / distress to participants?**

None is anticipated. Participation in the study will be entirely on a voluntary basis and the participants may at any time choose to leave the study without obligation if they so wish. Participants will be mature students (over the age of 23) and engaged with a full time undergraduate programme in applied social studies.

**A7. Does your research raise any issues of personal safety for you or other researchers involved in the project and, if yes, explain how these issues will be managed?**

(Especially if taking place outside working hours or off University premises.)

None is anticipated.

**A8. How will the potential participants in the project be (i) identified, (ii) approached and (iii) recruited?**

**1. Identification of participants.**

The collection of meaningful data is vitally important in order to describe and analyse the meaning of the participants who have experienced the phenomena, in this case the experiences of higher education. The sampling method that will be employed in this narrative based inquiry is a purposeful sample. Therefore much consideration is given to the criterion as it is essential that all participants experience the phenomenon.

The selection criteria is as follows:

Mature students aged over 23 years of age.

Registered and engaged on a full time applied social studies undergraduate programme.

Currently have progressed onto year 2 of the programme.

**2. Approaching Participants.**

I will meet with the programme lecturer for the applied social studies programme to discuss with him the main purpose and focus of the study. I will discuss with him the most convenient time for the students (who meet the selection criteria) to meet with me to inform them about the purpose and focus of the study.

Initially a group meeting with the students will be arranged at a convenient time for them whereby information in relation to the purpose, aims, objectives and focus of the study will be explained. The students will be made aware of this meeting through the Institutes' moodle website and also through posters which will be posted throughout the campus. It will be stressed at this stage that attendance at the meeting is voluntary and that the meeting is an information session and commitment to participate in the study will not be requested at this stage. At this meeting the students will be given an information leaflet to read (Enclosed). The students will be free to ask any questions they wish at this stage in relation to the study. It will be stressed at this stage that all participants engage in the study in a voluntary capacity and at any time if they so wish without obligation they may leave the study. The students will be made aware also that their participation in the study is confidential and anonymity is assured.

**3. Recruitment of Participants.**

A follow on meeting will be arranged for all those students who are interested in participating in the study. The meeting will be held at a time that is convenient to the

students and allows for the least disruption to their college day. At this meeting the purpose of the study will be discussed and any questions they may have addressed and clarified. Students then who are interested in participating in the study will be asked to place their names and contact details in a locked box situated in the college campus. The students will be given the location of the box and I will explain to the students that they have 5 days to decide whether they would like to participate in the study and place their details in the box. After the closing date those students who have agreed to participate in the study will be contacted and a time and date convenient to them arranged to discuss consent to participate in the study.

**A9. Will informed consent be obtained from the participants?**

Yes

No

**If informed consent is not to be obtained please explain why.** Further guidance is at [http://www.shef.ac.uk/content/1/c6/07/21/15/Ethics\\_Consent.doc](http://www.shef.ac.uk/content/1/c6/07/21/15/Ethics_Consent.doc)

Only under exceptional circumstances are studies without informed consent permitted. Students should consult their tutors.

**A.9.1 How do you plan to obtain informed consent? (i.e. the proposed process?):**

I am cognisant of the complexities that are involved in making judgments about the ethics of particular research strategies, as regards to the implications for other people in the case of this particular study, the student, and for the researcher as a person. It is however the important responsibility of the researcher to pursue worthwhile inquiry as effectively as possible and I as the researcher will be mindful throughout of the governing ethical principles of harm, autonomy, privacy, reciprocity and equity.

I am mindful that the site for this study is the Higher Education Institute in which I am employed in a full time capacity. I am also cognisant of the fact that the participants in this study are also students that I may be teaching. Therefore I will have a dual role both as researcher and lecturer, and consequently I am aware there is a potential for increased tension in relation to the concepts of confidentiality, anonymity and critically my position in relation to the participants. Therefore in an endeavour to address these potential tensions I will:

Meet with the programme lecturer for the applied social studies programme to request that I am not a study advisor for any of the mature students in year two of that programme over the course of the research.

I teach an elective module to the students of applied social studies in year two of the programme and as far as possible I will only select those students who will not be taking my elective.

It will be explained to all students that my role as researcher will not impinge on my role as lecturer and will not have any implications in relation to teaching and assessment.

In order to separate my dual roles as 'researcher' with that of 'lecturer', interviews with participants will be conducted in a different building or rooms than that which classes are normally taken by students.

I will meet with those students who have put their names forward and meet the selection criteria to discuss and clarify any questions they may have prior to commencement of the study.

Each participant will have been given an information sheet explaining in a question and answer format everything about the research study (Enclosed). Participants will also be given an information leaflet in relation to confidentiality and anonymity (Enclosed). Participants will be given a consent form to read and then sign (Enclosed) if they wish to take part in the study. Signing the consent form at this stage will indicate that they are consenting to be interviewed and to have the interview tape recorded and this will be made explicit in written format on the consent form and also their attention drawn to this fact verbally. The reasons for tape recording the interview will be explained and also the participants will be made aware that at any time they may discontinue the tape recording of the interview themselves or ask for the researcher to stop the recording. The participants will then be given a copy of the consent form and again it will be explained to them that at any time if they so wish and without obligation they may leave the study.

**A.10 How will you ensure appropriate protection and well-being of participants?**

Following the guidance given by the university at :

[http://www.shef.ac.uk/content/1/c6/07/21/515/Ethics\\_SafetyWellbeing.doc](http://www.shef.ac.uk/content/1/c6/07/21/515/Ethics_SafetyWellbeing.doc)

**A.11 What measures will be put in place to ensure confidentiality of personal data, where appropriate?**

An information sheet detailing the issues in relation to confidentiality and anonymity will be given to each potential participant prior to agreeing to participate (Enclosed).

Participants will be assured that there will be nothing added to the data that will identify them to the data. All data will be numerically coded e.g Interview no: 1 thereby ensuring anonymity. All data will be stored within a locked filing cabinet within a locked office and the researcher will be the only person who will have the key to the filing cabinet. Nobody will be informed of the participant's involvement in the study. Interviews will be conducted at a location and time that suits the participant. All information stored on personal computers, USB keys and memory sticks and other portable media will be password protected. All interviews will be tape recorded and there will be no identifying details included on the tape recording. All interviews will also be transcribed and there will be no identifying material on the transcripts they will be categorised numerically.

**A.12 Will financial / in kind payments (other than reasonable expenses and compensation for time) be offered to participants?** (Indicate how much and on what basis this has been decided.)

Yes	<input type="checkbox"/>
No	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>

**A.13 Will the research involve the production of recorded or photographic media such as audio and/or video recordings or photographs?**

Yes	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
No	<input type="checkbox"/>

**A.13.1** This question is only applicable if you are planning to produce recorded or visual media:

**How will you ensure that there is a clear agreement with participants as to how these recorded media or photographs may be stored, used and (if appropriate) destroyed?**

It will be explained that there will be no identifiable markings on the tape recordings that will identify the participants to the data collected. The recordings will be stored in a locked filing cabinet within a locked office that the researcher is the only person has the key. All recordings will be destroyed following completion of the research study. All interviews will be transcribed with no identifying material included. All transcripts will be coded and stored numerically and destroyed on completion of the study. This will be stated on the consent form which the researcher will sign and date.

**PART B - THE SIGNED DECLARATION**

**Title of Research Project: Through the eyes of mature students; Listening to the stories of mature students engaged in higher education.**

**Name of Applicant: Ms Teresa Bruen.**

I confirm my responsibility to deliver the research project in accordance with the University of Sheffield's policies and procedures, which include the University's *'Financial Regulations'*, *'Good research Practice Standards'* and the *'Ethics Policy for Research Involving Human Participants, Data and Tissue'* (Ethics Policy) and, where externally funded, with the terms and conditions of the research funder.

**In signing this research ethics application I am confirming that:**

1. The above-named project will abide by the University's Ethics Policy for Research Involving Human Participants, Data and Tissue':  
<http://www.shef.ac.uk/content/1/c6/07/21/15/Tissue.doc>
2. The above-named project will abide by the University's 'Good Research Practice Standards': [www.shef.ac.uk/content/1/c6/03/25/82/collatedGRP.pdf](http://www.shef.ac.uk/content/1/c6/03/25/82/collatedGRP.pdf)
3. The research ethics application form for the above-named project is accurate to the best of my knowledge and belief.
4. There is no potential material interest that may, or may appear to, impair the independence and objectivity of researchers conducting this project.



5. Subject to the research being approved, I undertake to adhere to the project protocol without unagreed deviation and to comply with any conditions set out in the letter from the University ethics reviewers notifying me of this.
6. I undertake to inform the ethics reviewers of significant changes to the protocol (by contacting my supervisor or the Ethics Administrator as appropriate
7. I am aware of my responsibility to be up to date and comply with the requirements of the law and relevant guidelines relating to security and confidentiality of personal data, including the need to register when necessary with the appropriate Data Protection Officer (within the University the Data Protection Officer is based in CICS).
8. I understand that the project, including research records and data, may be subject to inspection for audit purposes, if required in future.
9. I understand that personal data about me as a researcher in this form will be held by those involved in the ethics review procedure (eg the Ethics Administrator and/or ethics reviewers/supervisors) and that this will be managed according to Data Protection Act principles.
10. If this is an application for a 'generic'/'en block' project all the individual projects that fit under the generic project are compatible with this application.
11. I will inform the Chair of Ethics Review Panel if prospective participants make a complaint about the above-named project.

**Name of the Principal Investigator (or the name of the Supervisor if this is a student project):**

**Dr Simon Warren.**

**If this is a student project insert the student's name here:**

**Ms Teresa Bruen.**

**Signature of Principal Investigator (or the Supervisor):**

**Signature of student: Teresa Bruen**

**Date: 30<sup>TH</sup> November, 2010.**

**Email the completed application form and provide a signed, hard copy of 'Part B' to the course/programme secretary**

**For staff projects contact the Ethics Secretary, Colleen Woodward**

**Email: [c.woodward@sheffield.ac.uk](mailto:c.woodward@sheffield.ac.uk) for details of how to submit**

## Appendix 2: Letter of approval.

Head of School  
Professor Jackie Marsh

Department of Educational Studies  
The Education Building  
388 Glossop Road  
Sheffield S10 2JA

**Telephone:** +44 (0114) 222 8096  
**Fax:** +44 (0114) 2228105  
**Email:** [jacquie.gillott@sheffield.ac.uk](mailto:jacquie.gillott@sheffield.ac.uk)

Dear Teresa

**Re: Through the eyes of mature students; Listening to the stories of mature students engaged in higher education**


Thank you for your application for ethical review for the above project. The reviewers have now considered this and have agreed that your application be approved with the following optional amendments.

(Please see below reviewers' comments)

**7. Approved with the following suggested, optional amendments (i.e. it is left to the discretion of the applicant whether or not to accept the amendments and, if accepted, the ethics reviewers do not need to see the amendments):**

Add researcher contact details and information saying that this is a study leading to a Doctoral degree at the University of Sheffield.

Yours sincerely



**Mrs Jackie Gillott**

**Programme Secretary**

**Appendix Three:** Written request to Institute Head of Department to undertake the research investigation.

Dear Ms [REDACTED]

I am requesting permission to conduct a research inquiry in to the experiences of matures students engaging with the field of Higher Education. This is in part fulfillment for my Doctorate in Education. The title of the study is:


'Mature Students' narratives of Irish Higher Education: a critical Bourdieusian analysis.'

The research question asked is: ***What do the experiences of mature students who are undertaking an under graduate degree programme in applied social studies reveal about the field of Higher Education in the Republic of Ireland?***

I have been granted ethical approval from the University of Sheffield and I enclose for your information the completed application form for ethical approval and the letter granting approval.

I also include for your information a copy of the Research Proposal. I would be glad to answer any questions that you may have in relation to this study. I wish to assure you that all information gathered will be confidential and the anonymity of the mature student participants will be protected at all times.

Yours sincerely,



Teresa Bruen .

Enc: Research Proposal. Ethical request, Ethical Approval.

**Appendix Four** Written request to Institute Head of Campus to undertake the research investigation.

[Redacted]  
[Redacted]  
[Redacted]

Dear Dr [Redacted]

I am requesting permission to conduct a research inquiry in to the experiences of matures students engaging with the field of Higher Education. This is in part fulfillment for my Doctorate in Education. The title of the study is: 'Mature Students, narratives of Irish Higher Education: a critical Bourdieusian analysis.'

The research question asked is ***What do the experiences of mature students who are undertaking an under graduate degree programme in applied social studies reveal about the field of Higher Education in the Republic of Ireland?***

I have been granted ethical approval from the University of Sheffield and I enclose for your information the completed application form for ethical approval and the letter granting approval.

I also include for your information a copy of the Research Proposal. I would be glad to answer any questions that you may have in relation to this study. I wish to assure you that all information gathered will be confidential and the anonymity of the mature student participants will be protected at all times.

Yours Sincerely,



Teresa Bruen .

Enc: Research Proposal. Ethical request, Ethical Approval.

## **Appendix 5 :Information leaflet for participants.**

Title of Study: ‘Mature Students’ narratives of Irish Higher Education: a critical Bourdieusian analysis’

What is the purpose of the study?

The focus of the study is on exploring the experiences of mature students who have entered the field of Higher Education. The study will involve interviewing mature students to enable a deeper understanding of their experiences as a student in Higher Education.

What will your participation involve?

If you are selected as one of the participants you will be asked to participate in an interview. The interview will consist of you telling me your experiences as a mature student entering the field of Higher Education. During the interview my role is to listen to your story. I will ask some open-ended questions, which you are free to answer in whatever way you choose. There are no right or wrong answers. I am there to hear your story.

How long will the interview be?

The interview may last up to 60 minutes and will be held at a time and location convenient to you and of your choosing. I will with your permission tape record the interview as it will enable me to accurately record your experiences as it would not be possible for me to write the entire interview. However at times I may take some notes during the interview and you are free to look at these notes. It is my intention to interview you once, but I should be grateful if you would give me permission to return for a second discussion if it is necessary

What happens to the information when it is collected?

When the interview is completed I will transcribe your interview onto paper exactly word for word. I then will carefully read your story and begin the process of looking at the information for themes and meanings. The tape recording and any subsequent printed transcripts of the interviews will be stored in a locked filing cabinet within a locked office. I will be the only person who has access to the filing cabinet. Any information transferred to a computer will be password protected. Your name will not appear on the interview tape or the transcript. Each tape recording and printed transcript will be given a number for identification purposes. I am the only person who will know who the number corresponds to and I will not divulge this to anyone.

Are there any consequences if I choose to be part of the study or if I want to opt out partway through the study?

There is no obligation on you to participate in the study. If you choose to participate you are free to withdraw your consent at any time without obligation to anyone. This means you can opt out before, during or after the interview. It is also important to be aware that you can refuse to answer any question, turn the tape off, or request to stop the interview at any time. If you wish to drop out of the study you can tell me in person at any time during the interview, or let me know by letter, email or phone. I will give you my email and phone number at the time of the interview.

Who will know that I participated in the study?

I will not inform anyone that you participated in the study. Your anonymity and confidentiality throughout the research study will be maintained at all times. If you wish to talk to people about the study you are free to do so.

Confidentiality and anonymity.

Everything that you tell me within the context of the interview will be treated as confidential. All interviews will be transcribed and given a code that will not identify the participants name or identify them in anyway.

Is the study being funded?

The study is not being funded. I am undertaking the study as part of a Doctorate in Education and Life Long Learning. Thank you for taking time to read this leaflet, and for considering taking part in this study.

Yours sincerely,

---

Teresa Bruen.

## **Appendix Six: Information on Confidentiality and Anonymity.**

Thank you for considering participating in the study: 'Mature Students' narratives of Irish Higher Education: a critical Bourdieusian analysis.' This explanation sheet provides you with details in relation to participating in the study specifically in relation to confidentiality and anonymity. Please read this information before agreeing to continue with your participation in the research.

### **Confidentiality.**

Participation in this study is voluntary and confidential in that the only person who need know that you are participating in this study is the researcher, however if you wish to tell people that you are participating in this study you may do so.

This study specifically focuses on your personal experiences of engaging with Higher Education. Therefore I will be asking you to tell your story in relation to your experiences of the field of Higher Education. Therefore I wish to assure you that all personal information collected will be kept confidential. All information stored on my personal computer is password protected and also any information stored on memory sticks / usb keys and other portable media will also be password protected. All transcripts and tape recordings will be stored within a locked cabinet within a locked office to which I am the only key holder. All information will be destroyed following completion of the study. Information gathered will only be used for the purposes of this investigative study.

### **Anonymity.**

Participants will not be named within this study, but will be identified through a number. A pseudonym will be used for each participant protecting their anonymity. The Institute of Higher Education in which the research is taking place will not be named and an address for the Institute will not be given. All interviews will be tape recorded and as such I can assure participants that no names will be used or recorded to protect anonymity. Interviews that have been recorded will also be transcribed and these transcriptions will have no identifying names but will be coded numerically.

The study itself will be written and submitted as part of my Doctoral thesis in Education and Life Long Learning .Therefore it may be possible to identify the Institute where the research was carried out and so there may be a link between the information gathered and the Institutional source and therefore institutional anonymity is not guaranteed.



## Appendix Seven: Consent Form.

Title of Study: 'Mature Students' narratives of Irish Higher Education: a critical Bourdieusian analysis.'

Research Question: What do the experiences of mature students who are undertaking an under graduate degree programme in applied social studies reveal about the field of Higher Education in the Republic of Ireland?

Principal Researcher: Ms Teresa Bruen.

Date..... Time:.....

This is to certify that I ....., give my consent to be included in the above study. I confirm that I have read the information leaflet and received an explanation on the purpose and focus of the study.

I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw from the study at any stage if I so wish, without giving an explanation. I give permission to be interviewed and the interview to be tape-recorded. I understand that:

- I may decline to answer any question during the interview.
- at the end of the interview I may request that a section of the interview be erased or not used.
- at the end of the interview I may request that the total interview not be used in the study.
- I understand that at the completion of the interviews the contents of the tapes will be transcribed and safely stored to protect confidentiality and my anonymity.
- I understand that on completion of the study the tape recordings and transcripts of same will be destroyed.
- I understand that the information may be published but my name will not appear on any part of the study, nor will any information that may identify me be used in the study

Signature of Participant .....

Signature of the Researcher .....

Date:

**Consent Form Post Interview.**

I.....give my consent to have the contents of the interview used in the study.

I understand that quotes from my interview may appear as part of the research study.

Signature of Participant .....

Signature of the Researcher .....

Date:.....

