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Acorn School Completion Programme

SCP Operational Framework from practice-based research

Authors: Tom Crean, Dr. Mags Crean and Professor Áine Hyland

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Chapter 1

Introduction

The following chapter provides an overview of the purpose for developing and proposing an operational framework for Acorn SCP, as well as outlining the local and national context that the SCP operates within. The methodology for developing the framework is also detailed before concluding with an outline of the framework.

1.1 Purpose of operational framework

Acorn SCP is one of 121 School Completion Programmes in Ireland. The School Completion Programme (SCP) is a programme of support for children and young people at risk of educational disadvantage. A key aim of SCP is improvement of school retention and attendance rates. The OECD Review of *Resourcing Schools to Address Educational Disadvantage in Ireland (2024)* refers to the fact that the SCP is widely appreciated within the Irish educational system. Using a case study of one primary school, Fenwick and Kinsella (2020) also found SCP to be perceived as a valuable and effective service for the students and teachers in the school. However, notwithstanding research that captures the effectiveness of SCP and the shared aims and aspects of provision and principles for SCPs, it is important to note that there is no agreed operational framework model for the School Completion Programme that explains how it works. Smyth (2025: xi) refers to the need to 'build and maintain a shared vision of SCP'. Lacking a shared vision and agreed operational framework, leaves a gap in terms of understanding why SCP is effective.

The **operational framework** put forward in this document has been developed by a School Completion Programme Coordinator in collaboration with two researchers – Dr. Mags Crean and

Professor Áine Hyland. The inclusion of an SCP Coordinator on the research team enabled data analysis to be informed by practice-based research from the knowledge they already gained through their own SCP. This was complemented by a mixed methods approach to data collection and analysis. The quantitative data presented in this document is taken from the Acorn SCP annual data for 2023/ 2024 school year and qualitative data collected in 2023 and 2024 through an interview with the Acorn SCP Coordinator and focus group with Acorn SCP staff. The aim of collating and analysing this data and reflecting on practice, is to generate an **operational framework** that captures how SCP works; how the pillars, principles and provision operate together within the Acorn SCP to improve school retention and attendance.

The Economic, Social and Research Institute (ESRI) published an in-depth examination of the operation of the School Completion Programme in 2015 (Smyth et al., 2015) and a follow-up piece of research in 2025 (Smyth et al., 2025). The 2025 research aimed to examine the operation of SCP in the context of changes to the programme and wider societal changes since the initial research was conducted. Both research reports present an excellent overview of the aims, structures and operation of the SCP.

A key point made by Smyth et al (2015: 176) in the initial SCP review is the lack of consensus in research on what specific interventions help to improve educational outcomes for young people experiencing educational inequality despite the large body of research on 'what works' in education. One of the core recommendations in the 2015 review of SCP is the role of continuous professional development and creating a 'community of practice' to allow for the exchange of ideas and experiences between schools. This recommendation is reiterated in the 2025 research report (Smyth et al, 2025).

The OECD Review (2024) also recommends the need to further promote available tools and share good practices in the system and among schools on supporting students at risk of educational disadvantage.

In the context of the need for sharing best practice and building a shared vision of SCP, this research document **proposes an operational framework** to capture, not just the provision of supports but the ethos and culture of Acorn SCP. In this regard, a case study of one SCP allows for an exchange of information, whilst offering greater insight into how the pillars, principles and provision intersect.

1.2 National policy context for SCP

The main Irish policy initiative to address educational inequality is the Delivering Equality of Opportunity In Schools (DEIS) scheme. The School Completion Programme (SCP) was initiated as a pilot project in 2002, which was later incorporated into the DEIS scheme in 2005 (Fenwick and Kinsella, 2020). In 2011, SCP was positioned within the policy remit of the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs and transferred to Tusla, the Child and Family Agency, on its establishment in January 2014. However, in 2020, SCP was returned to the Department of Education, along with the Home School Community Liaison Scheme and the Educational Welfare Service whilst Tusla maintained operational responsibility.

1.3 The local context and intersectional inequality

The geographic area includes a number of urban estates in Area A and Area B. The majority of the students attending the 5 cluster schools live in these estates (~90%).

The geographic area is designated as very disadvantaged with some specific areas designated as extremely disadvantaged on the Pobal HP Deprivation Index. In addition, students are impacted by the housing crisis and homelessness and the rising cost of living.

Area A

(2016–2022 Census compared)

Unemployment dropped from

59% to 21%

(41% due to disability)
– still 2.5 times the national average

Single Parent Households stable at

56%

Over 3 times the national average

21%

of people educated to primary level only

47%

to lower post primary level

Both figures twice the national average

Area B

(2016–2022 Census compared)

Unemployment dropped from

47.6% to 23%

(44% due to disability)
– nearly 3 times the national average

Single Parent Households stable at

52%

3 times the national average

24%

of people educated to primary level only

53%

to lower post primary level

Both figures over twice the national average

In addition to socio-economic inequality, the SCP school cluster also has a high number of students presenting with Special Educational Needs (SEN). For example, in one school, 43% of the students access SEN resources.

SCP also includes students from the Travelling community and Roma community as part of the core work to support retention and attendance.

The intersection of social class, disability and ethnicity generates complex needs in the SCP cluster but also nurtures a culture of diversity and inclusion.

1.4 Methodology to capture 'What works'

The use of co-production in education research for policy and practice is identified by the OECD as an important research approach in terms of facilitating the use of research findings (OECD, 2022:139). This research was co-produced between an SCP Coordinator and two academic researchers.

The practice-based research was underpinned by the fact that one of the researchers has experience of practice within an SCP similar to the SCP in the research study. The quantitative data produced by the SCP included annual data for 2023/ 2024 school year for the Acorn SCP (Acorn is a pseudonym for the SCP in the study).

Using a mixed method approach to data collection and analysis, the numerical data was combined with a focus group with Acorn SCP staff and a focus group with a wider range of SCP Coordinators.

1.5 The framework

This document has an introduction and conclusion chapter, but the body of the framework is outlined in chapters 2 and 3, which reflects the operation and culture of SCP. Chapter 2 will propose four over-arching equality-based principles that underpin SCP. Chapter 3 will explore how the Acorn SCP is set up to deliver on its main outcomes; namely Participation, Attendance & Retention (PAR).

A foundational component of the Acorn framework presented here is the fundamental role of the **core principles** that underpin the practice and provision in SCP. The case made is that exploring the ethos and culture of the SCP in Acorn is a critical part of understanding 'what works'. For this reason, the framework presented in this document has refined the original eight SCP principles into four over-arching principles. These four over-arching principles were generated and conceptualised using an equality framework (Baker et al , 2009) as part of the research analysis to understand how SCP 'works'. The four over-arching principles include equality in relationality, resources, respect and representation.

Figure 1 illustrates the operational framework. The central significance of culture, embodied by staff and a clear educational mission and vision for the SCP, is complemented by core practices. The framework is premised on the centrality of understanding the culture of SCP and what principles define this culture and the importance of culture for the effective operation of SCP.

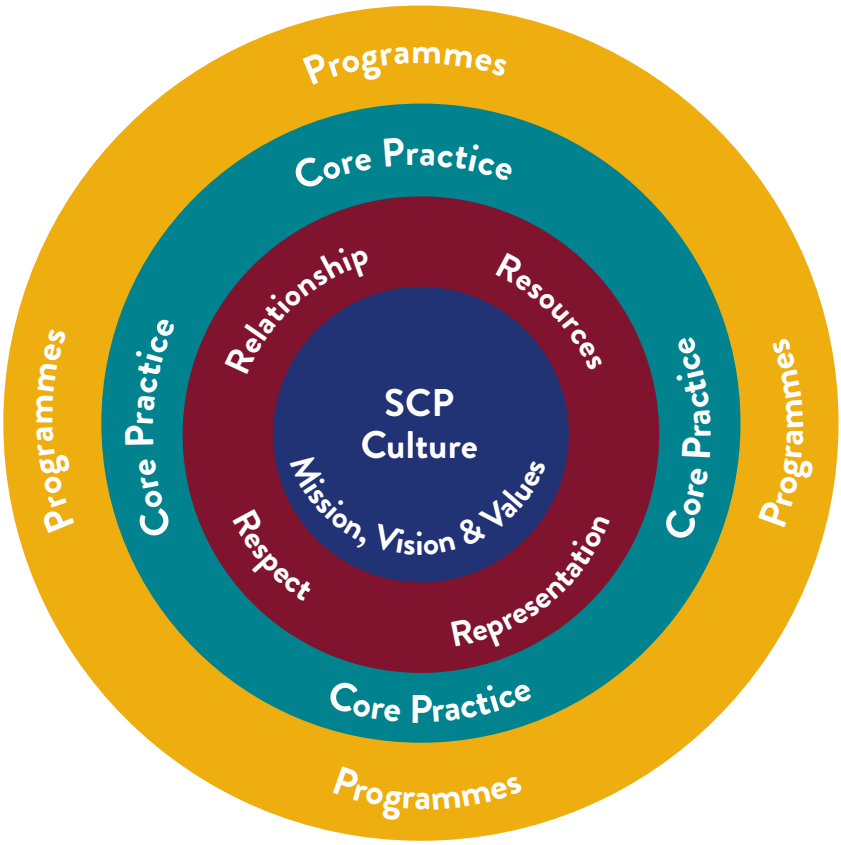


Figure 1: Acorn SCP operational framework

Chapter 2

Refining SCP Principles: Understanding Why

Smyth et al., (2015) refers to the eight guiding principles for SCP, i.e. partnership, child and young person centred, preventative, bottom-up approach, agreed criteria, a 'whole school' approach, continuous support and breaking patterns of early school leaving. Notably, there is no mention of the SCP guiding principles in the 2025 research report (Smyth et al, 2025). The framework being presented in this document revisits the original SCP guiding principles.

In developing the framework, the original eight principles are refined further and placed within four broader principles that are underpinned by an egalitarian framework (Baker et al., 2009). The premise being that the SCP model is built around four broad equality principles that address educational inequality in young people's lives.

These include **relational equality** through the relationship of trust between SCP staff and students; **representative equality** through advocacy work of SCP staff for students; **recognition equality** through the respect that each young person is given on their SCP journey; and **resource equality** through participation, attendance and retention in education, which is the primary aim of SCP. The equality-based culture of SCP is the foundation of the SCP operational framework being proposed in this research. The acknowledgement of **education as a positional good, a resource for equalising opportunities in employment and education, is at the core of SCP practice and addresses the complex interaction between social class inequality in education and reproduction of class inequality in communities and wider society**.

2.1 Equality of relations

Nel Noddings' work on ethics of care has been explored extensively in relation to education (2002, 2012, 1013). The concept of ethics of care is that action is not just about reason but also needs and responsibility to others. The relationship with and the needs of the other are the motives for actions, not rules or virtues (Noddings, 2012).

Relationships are key in order for SCP staff to successfully put themselves in a position to address students' individual needs and be that 'One Good Adult' when required. A focus group (2023) conducted as part of this research with 11 SCP Coordinators identified building positive social interactions with students as fundamental to their work. This focus on building and maintaining relationships was also a key discussion point in a focus group with project workers in Acorn SCP (2024).

Drawing on annual data collected by the Acorn SCP in the 2023/2024 school year, less than 12% of students report 'liking school', but, this number rises significantly (50%+) when asked if they have positive school experiences, which is a significant platform to work from. Up to 88% of the referral cohort to the SCP present with social skills deficits and ¾ can be described as lacking in self-esteem with anxiety being of noticeable concern for a similarly high proportion (80%+).

The SCP team work to offer a varied skillset and suite of programmes across the schools cluster to address the social, emotional and behavioural barriers that prevent young people from participating to their fullest in their educational journeys. A fundamental aspect of this education journey is the educational relationship developed between SCP staff and students. There is a vast amount of literature on the importance of teacher-student relationships in schools (see Dempsey and McCoy, 2025) and the importance of the 'one good adult' in youth literature (Dooley and Fitzgerald, 2012) and this can be extended to ancillary staff roles in young people's lives.

The role of relationships also extends to the SCP interactions with school staff and the wider community. SCP staff engagement with school staff, with school Care Teams & DEIS teams and with external agencies is very beneficial in positioning staff to access vital information to identify students at risk of early school leaving (ESL). Developing that 'one good adult' relationship with students is hugely important to the staff of Acorn SCP. Early engagement can only be achieved where procedures for early identification are working.

This includes outreach work, which allows the SCP staff to become familiar and known in the local community. The outreach work not only allows SCP staff to build relationships with schools and families, but also with school staff and management and other agencies that may become involved. During school closures, outreach work enables SCP staff to continue their work with students and develop relationships even further within the wider community. The focus group with SCP Coordinators emphasised the significance of outreach work noting that schools embedded in communities by utilising community supports work more effectively for students at risk of early school leaving. They spoke about the concept of a 'collaborative, open school' and for connection to be a core value for schools to support retention. Connection, compassion and care are fundamental values for the ethics of care that underpins the educational relationships needed at school level to support young people (Noddings, ibid).

2.2 Equality of respect

As stated earlier, social, emotional & behavioural issues are by far the biggest driver of ESL among young people. The factors that contribute to these issues are wide and varied. The SCP is a student centred service and the core work of the small staff team in Acorn is to put in place practices and programmes, to establish relationships that allow staff to impact positively upon students and their participation in the education system, and to remove to the greatest extent possible those social, emotional and behavioural barriers. Provision is based on student needs and this is central to a student-centred approach as the provision of supports is not predefined.

But this is also linked to an important principle of equality of respect for the young people engaged or being engaged in SCP. In the *Tomorrow Starts with Us* report, the majority of students feel their opinions are not being considered when decisions are being made about children, with 83% believing there should be more involvement by students in making decisions about their school (Ombudsman for Children, 2024).

> ***Equality of respect and recognition can be more complex for children from families or communities that have had negative experiences of the education system such as working class or Traveller communities.***
>
> *(Baker et al., 2009)*

Equality of respect and recognition can be more complex for children from families or communities that have had negative experiences of the education system such as working class or Traveller communities (Baker et al., 2009). This is captured in the focus group with Coordinators who discussed how the middle-class background of the majority of school staff in DEIS schools compared to working class demographic of students can impact on lack of shared experiences or understanding of children's lives and communities. Yet acknowledging this difference and building the principle of equal respect into the SCP can help to mitigate this issue for SCP staff.

For example, there are a range of supports in SCP that empower the young people engaging in the programme. These includes provisions such as Check & Connect/Walk & Talk; One-to-One Supports; Pen Pal Initiative; Mentoring/Advocacy; Peer Support. The key-working aspect of SCP is crucial to realise equality of respect as the one-to-one work allows the SCP staff to gain a greater understanding of where the young person is coming from - socially, emotionally and practically. Techniques such as Motivational Interviewing, NVR and Youth Participatory Skills are utilised by staff.

In the focus group with SCP Coordinators, the importance of equal respect for parents and students from school staff was also raised. The SCP Coordinators spoke about the need for a professional, sensitive approach 'to meet students where they are at' – importance of confidentiality and privacy for students – in this way the SCP effectiveness is 'under the radar' but present nonetheless to support student retention. They discussed the need to extend this approach to wider school relations between teachers and students.

Notably, in the focus group with SCP Coordinators and with project staff in Acorn SCP, there was a consensus on the need for schools to value the wisdom and knowledge that accumulates from years working with specific families or in specific schools and communities.

2.3 Equality of representation

The *My World Survey 2* (Dooley et al, 2019) found that students in Youthreach Centres were more likely than their peers to feel angry, bullied, report higher cannabis use, have higher rates of anxiety and self-harm. As noted many times above, the relationships between SCP staff and these vulnerable students are of paramount importance when they are still within the formal school system, in order to be able to negotiate a path for students to return to education with their strongest sense of self intact. Making representations and advocating on behalf of students within the school system is crucial to deter early school leaving and support equality of opportunity within the formal school system for all students.

In the focus group with SCP Coordinators, they all spoke about the need for schools to revisit restorative practices to build positive social interactions with young people. At present, the SCP plays an advocacy role for young people based on familiarity and long-term relationships. This has a direct impact on retention and happens on a weekly basis. It builds on the principles of having a relationship of equal care and respect for the young people and it is about equality of representation.

2.4 Equality of resources

Given that education is a positional good; retention in education matters so that young people can have equal opportunities to employment and further education. Acknowledging the link between educational equality and wider social inclusion was one of three strategic goals for achieving equality in education recommended in the 2005 report by the Educational Disadvantage Committee:

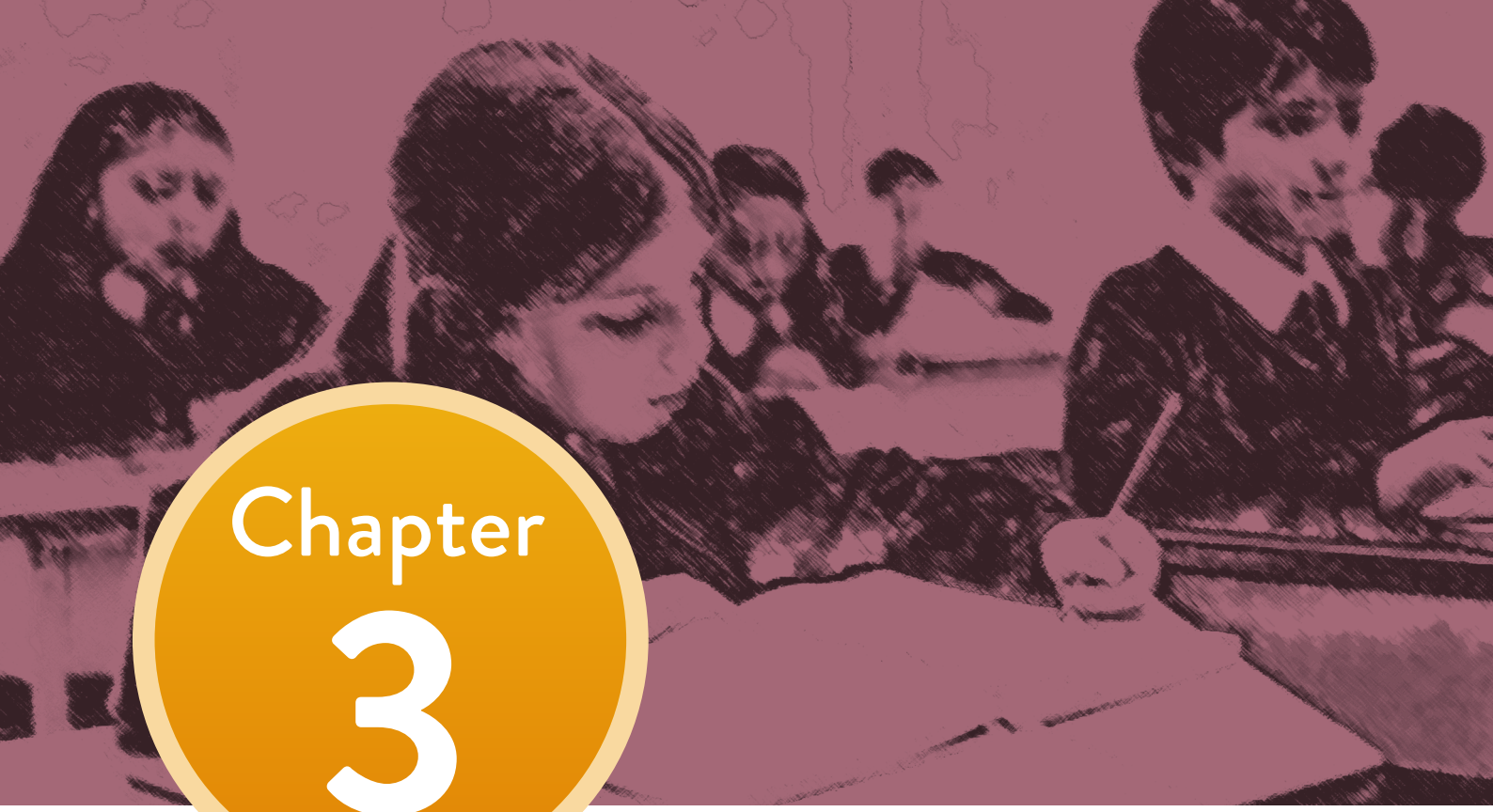
> *Everyone gains when educational inclusion is achieved as part of a bigger social and economic change agenda (Hyland, 2005: iv, Educational Disadvantage Committee).*

Research points to the role of educational qualifications in securing employment and the signal they serve to potential employers (McCoy et al, 2014). Research by Byrne and Smyth (2010) concludes that early school leavers had very poor labour market outcomes and were unlikely to return to further education and training. Education is also fundamental to attaining other 'goods' in life such as adequate housing and health. The OECD (2017) identify the key role of equitable educational opportunities to promote long-lasting, inclusive economic growth and social cohesion. SCP plays a crucial role in mitigating the inequality of resources in young people's school lives.

This is why the educational principle is central to the success of SCP in Acorn. Provision of supports is not just a therapeutic intervention or a youth intervention – it is an educational intervention with the primary purpose of equalising educational opportunities and outcomes. The capacity to impact on education as a direct aim of SCP is strengthened by the positioning of SCP within the school and within a model that has equality in resources through education as a core principle.

2.5 Conclusion

The equality principles presented above capture the centrality of equality to the SCP student's educational journey. At the centre of this journey is the aim of equality in education, with education acknowledged as a resource in a young person's life. Complementing the primary aim of equality in education, the other principles include equality in access to the trusting relationships, respect, and advocacy/ representation needed to succeed in an educational space.



Chapter 3

Defining SCP Practice: Understanding How

Early School Leaving is not a phenomenon that suddenly occurs, but rather a process of events that occur over time resulting in Early School Leaving (ESL). Engagement with SCP is part of a young person's educational journey. The longitudinal component of the SCP model is critical to the framework for understanding how SCP works in practice. There is a multitude of factors that influence ESL and in many cases one factor alone may be sufficient, but in the majority of cases ESLs present a combination of factors. There is no quick-fix solution, no perfect intervention or 'magic wand' when it comes to preventing ESL but there are consistent values and principles that underpin provision and there are core activities for provision.

The main focus of the Acorn SCP is the young person; their wellbeing & personal growth, with the understanding that this is best served through their engagement with the education system. In a 2021 ESRI paper Smyth et al. found that schools matter more for teenagers behaviour than where they live, this underpins the importance of the school experience.

The main outcomes that the programme seeks to achieve are increased student Participation, Attendance & Retention – the PAR approach. Acorn SCP see 'PAR' not as average, but rather, as 'equality in value or standing' and believe therefore that giving all students equal opportunity

is a crucially ambitious task. These outcomes are not mutually exclusive. Every core activity and intervention that is pursued by the SCP gives great consideration to these 3 outcomes.

Guided by the core equality principles outlined in chapter 2, Acorn SCP can be defined as a relational based educational service that takes a student-centred approach, with staff central to building and sustaining positive relationships based on connection, care, compassion and respect throughout the educational journey.

> ***What I needed was someone to listen so I could find my own way. I didn't have walls to break down, I needed walls built up to support me.***
>
> ***I needed encouragement to build my life and the tools to give it structure and strength. I needed tools to understand the world and how to think.***
>
> ***I needed education.***
>
> *Katriona O'Sullivan (2023)*

> ***For learning, we must trust the person and be secure in their intents towards us. We need to feel they are interested in us not self serving.***
>
> ***An educator can not prevent a child from experiencing a chaotic home life, but they can reframe that child's view of self and the world they live in.***
>
> *Benjamin Perks (2024)*

To understand the 'how' of SCP, this chapter will explore:

- Staff set-up
- The Referral Process
- Pillars of Operation
- Provision – Core Practices (in line with culture & principles) & Programmes (more specialised layer of service to complement the core practices).

3.1 Staffing

The Acorn SCP consists of 5 FT staff; 1 Coordinator & 4 Project Workers. Previous posts included a Finance Support Worker and an Office Administrator (these administrative roles were discontinued with a focus now on staff that work directly with students).

The Coordinator works across the 5 schools in the cluster. They oversee overall provision on a daily basis and is on site liaising with school principals, project staff, parents, students, other relevant stakeholders on a daily basis to ensure the smooth running of the programme. The Coordinator is also responsible for budget management, staff management, retention planning, referral management, maintaining the culture of the practice, directing and developing the programme

(both within schools and within the wider community), reviewing the programme with all relevant stakeholders on a regular basis, and supporting students where necessary.

The 4 Project Workers are also on site every day. The Project Workers are responsible for the direct delivery of practice and programmes to young people. All Project Workers regularly plan, review and evaluate their programmes and practices at appropriate stages to ensure that they are meeting the desired outcomes. Project Workers compile Termly Timetables in order to facilitate their consistent engagement with young people. Project Workers also liaise with students, parents, school staff and other relevant stakeholders as is necessary in the course of their work.

Each Project Worker is predominantly assigned to 3 schools; 1 Junior National School (JNS), 1 Senior National School (SNS) and the Post-Primary school. The purpose of this model is to ensure that staff get to work with students across the full spectrum of their education.

Each primary school campus (Junior National School and Senior National School) has 2 Project Workers assigned that are onsite 3 days per week; this ensures that the 5 days are covered and that Project Staff have an overlap day where they co-facilitate programmes and share practice and updates from the campus.

All 4 Project Workers are based in the post primary school for 2 full days per week.

As can be seen from above, there is always at least 1 Project Worker available to each school on a daily basis. The Coordinator is available to each school on a daily basis also and travels around the school campus.

The diagram (Figure 2) below gives a pictorial representation of the movement of staff.

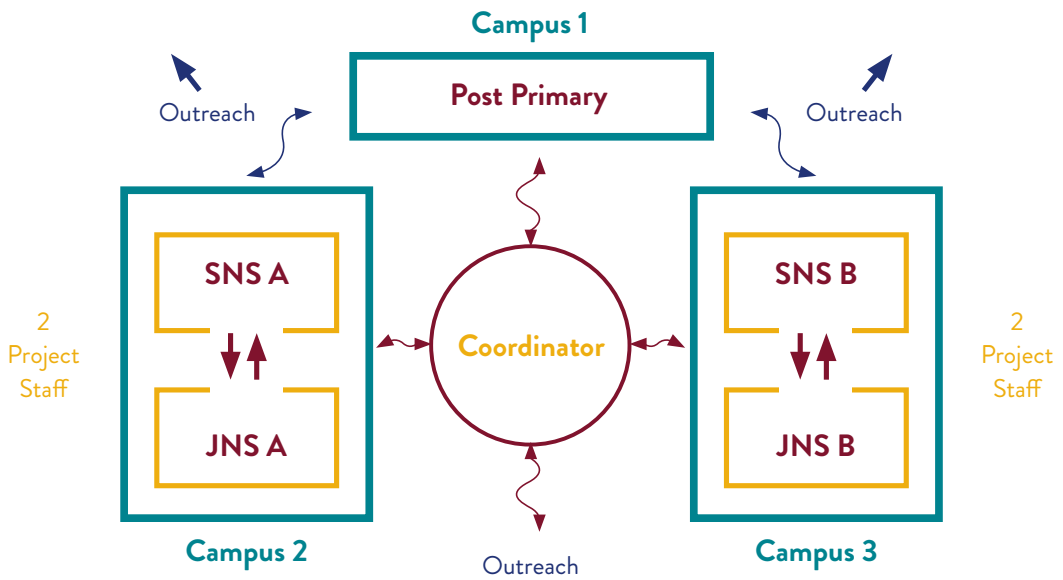


Figure 2: Diagram showing where staff work on a weekly basis. 2 project workers move between Campus 1 & 2, and 2 project workers move between Campus 1 & 3. The Coordinator moves around all 3 campus, and links with other local & national voluntary, community and statutory organisations.

3.2 Referrals

When students are referred to the programme their case is opened and they are provided with the service or services that will be most beneficial for them.

All referrals to the SCP currently come through the Intake Framework process. This process involves the SCP Team, along with the Educational Welfare Officer(EWO), reviewing referrals made to the programme by way of a research informed referral form(See Appendix 2 for a more detailed process diagram). SCP staff work closely with schools and their communities to ensure that open cases are reflective of those students most in need of support at that time. Referrals are reviewed on a regular basis and existing cases are opened and closed as need dictates. A strong line of communications with school staff and families is essential for the smooth running of the system. New referrals are opened once or twice per term.

All SCP referrals are reviewed by the staff team upon opening and each one is assigned a grading of 1,2, 3 or A (this grading is regularly monitored and reviewed).

1

Reflects students currently most at risk – these students are offered multiple interventions or intensive interventions.

2

Reflects students with high or ongoing risk – these students are engaged in regular interventions.

3

Reflects students whose circumstances are such that their case is nearing closure. These students will receive minimal interventions and be tracked for a period of time before closing.

A

Reflects students whose attendance is chronic and of major concern.

145 **There were 145 students referred to the programme in 2023/2024. All 145 students received the core SCP interventions with 133 of the referrals receiving interventions in excess of those core offerings.**

154 **An additional 154 Non-Referrals took part in SCP targeted activities which were run over the course of the year.**

3.3 Pillars

Smyth (2015) refers to the four pillars of SCP provision; **in-school, after-school, holiday provision and out-of-school supports**. The OECD Review (2024) also refers to the four pillars as a mechanism for the SCP to provide supports in different settings to support young people at different stages of their learning and describes the aim as follows:

> *Interventions in all settings aim to address the educational welfare needs of children and young people and to promote regular school attendance, engagement with the curriculum and the school community, and retention within the education setting (2024: 218).*

Pillars of Delivery	
In School	**Afterschool**
1-1 Support	Lunchtime & Breakfast Clubs
Small Group Work	Afterschool Interest Groups
Larger Group Work	Afterschool Support Programmes
Holiday Support	**Out of School Support**
Mid-Term Activities, Xmas Play	Outreach
Easter Camp, Summer Programme	1-1 Support
Induction Week	Referral

Figure 3: Lists main types of support delivered under each pillar.

An understanding of the intersection and social construction of time, place and space, often used in educational literature maps onto the pillar approach taken by SCP. The supports provided through each pillar are interconnected and mutually reinforcing. This is further complemented by the longitudinal and comprehensive aspect of space, place and time throughout the young person's educational journey.

The focus group with SCP Coordinators discussed the complex interaction of time, space and place in young people's lives. This was particularly evident when they spoke about school transition points, during or at the end of a school year. For example, they noted the importance of having flexibility to work in and out of school to support students with respect to aspects of school life that impact on school completion. This could involve a home visit with families or links with community supports such as sports clubs. In addition, Coordinators listed various work practices and programmes with a focus on evidence-based project work and the importance of established effective practices across projects such as breakfast clubs and summer programmes. However, where and when this provision took place was fundamental to the support being successfully implemented.

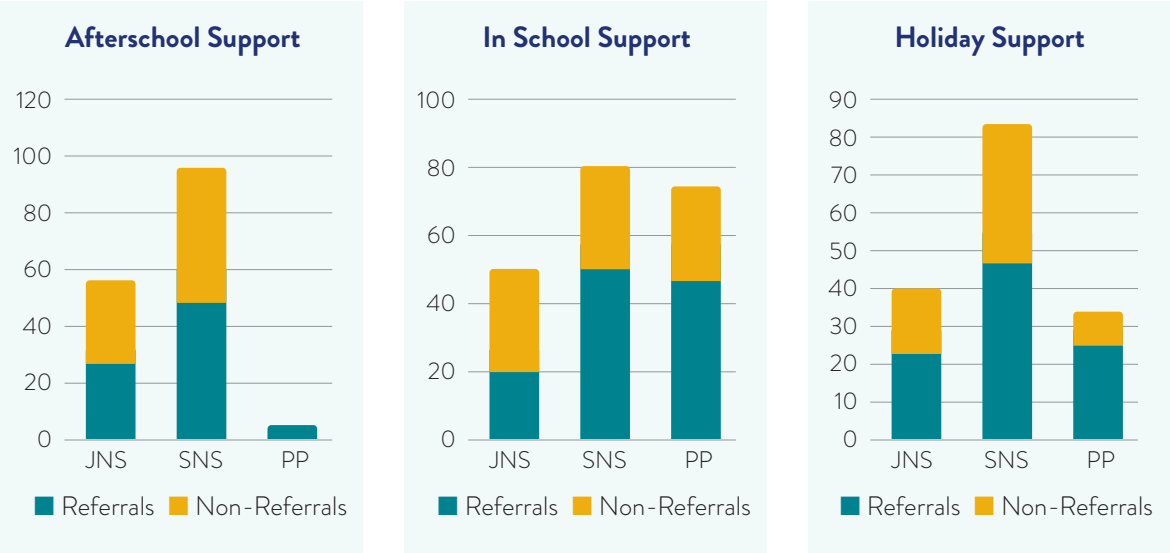


Figure 4: The charts above show how many students participated in supports in Acorn SCP in 2023/2024 under the 3 pillars noted.

In addition to the data in Figure 4 above, 11 Out-of-School students were engaged with during 2023/2024. In addition to this a number of school going students were engaged (20+) in an out of school capacity when they displayed signs of school refusal. See Appendix 3 for details of interventions offered across the 4 pillars.

3.4 Provision

Provision within Acorn SCP combines core practices (in line with culture & principles) with programme delivery. The Acorn SCP puts practice first, and that practice is then enhanced through programme delivery.

Provision is not solely about practices and programmes but rather students are engaged across the life course of their school journey according to the pillars and principles. This educational journey needs to be recognised as a critical aspect of the SCP design as it allows the relational aspect of SCP to be developed over a long period of time in a student's educational journey. Case studies to explore this educational journey illustrate the intersection of SCP principles, pillars, practices and provision in the student journey.

The diagram below represents the 3 core elements of provision.

Acorn SCP: Provision			
The Journey	Practice & Programmes		
Primary ↑ Post Primary ↑ Out of School Students are linked in with the programme at that different stage in their educational journey where intervention is deemed appropriate. This differs for every student.	**Core Practices**		
	Attendance Monitoring	1-1 Support	Small Group Work
	Relationship Building	Keyworking	Large Group Work
	Outreach	Planning	Check & Connect
	Tracking	Review	Universal Support
	Advocacy	Networking	Record Keeping
	Practice Techniques & Methodology		
	Walk n Talk	Pen Pal Initiative	Solution Focused Discussion
	Encouragement	Advocacy	Motivational Interviewing
	Problem Solving	Restorative Practice	Unconditional Positive Regard
	NVR	Active Listening	CBT
	Nuture		
	Programmes		
	Manualised	**Locally Developed**	**Interest Led**
	Think Good Feel Good	Anger Management	Debating
	Cool Kids	Behaviour Support	Special Interest Project
	Keep Cool	Self-Esteem	Expert Project
	NVR	Bullying Awareness	Rock Climbing
	Nuture Room	Friendship	Gardening
	Alert	Social Media Awareness	Board Games
	Working Things Out	Internet Safety	Discipline for Learning
	Real U	Health Hygiene	Attendance Initiatives
	A Life of Choices	Social Skills	Sports
	Gaisce	Wellbeing	Cookery
	Lifeskills	Kind Practices	Arts/Cultural
		Mindfulness	Drama
		Morals/Virtues	Thinking Project
		Citizenship	Parent/Student Activities
		Stewardship	
		Body Language	
		Lifeskills	
		Self Care	

3.4.1 The Journey

Most referrals will remain with the SCP for most of their school lives. They may go through phases within the SCP where they are at times 'Open' referrals and at other times 'Closed' referrals, but the support that they require is predominantly long-term. The job of the staff of the Acorn SCP is to accompany and guide those students along their 'Journey' through the education system, a system that unfortunately presents consistent challenges to certain student demographics.

Below are 3 case studies from the perspective of a student, parent and staff member.

Case Study 1:

The role of an SCP Project Worker, as described by a Acorn SCP Project Worker, who has been with the programme for over 2 years

"What makes a student's journey special within SCP is the relationship between the SCP worker and the student. This is not similar to the teaching role where you may have the same teacher for the academic year, but an on-going journey. As an SCP worker we learn about the students' lives, interests and challenges they may face. A lot of the time, we support them when needed and encourage where necessary. We build relationships with families and guardians of the students and communicate with the necessary stakeholders in the students' lives. We take interest in their hobbies and successes & always follow up with how they are doing in something (their weekend football games are often the topic of conversation in our Monday breakfast clubs). We attend special events such as their communion and confirmation and show our genuine interest in all they do and all they achieve. We are role models throughout their school journeys and our SCP space is always an open door arena. Students come to us with all their stories and know we will always listen and support them in a non-judgemental capacity. We celebrate birthdays and achievements, and nobody's success ever goes unnoticed. We acknowledge that every student is different and we always strive to meet each student where they are at."

Case Study 2:

This is a parents' description of her experience with the SCP. The parent detailed how she had known the SCP Coordinator and a number of the SCP Project Workers over a 10 year period. It is very relevant that the parent associated the Coordinator and the Project Workers as part of the same organisation, but was unaware that that organisation was the SCP. The parent noted that all staff offered her a support that was unique and although she was aware that staff were based in the school she knew that all of the staff were part of an organisation separate to the school.

"Myself, and my family have been working side by side with the project workers for the last few years now. The group are an amazing, caring and very understanding set of people. For me, I'm grateful for a lot of things they do as they have been very sensitive and easy to talk to both for me and my [refers to children], when we have had some very challenging issues to deal with. Thanks to all."

Case Study 3:

This is a students' description of her experience with the SCP. The student has been linked with the programme for 8 years. The student is now in Senior Cycle at post primary school and like the parent above has known the Coordinator and the Project Workers over this time, whilst not knowing that they all worked for the SCP. Again the student was aware that the staff all represented the same organisation, an organisation that was separate to the school, but as she explained, a central part of her school life.

"The SCP staff have seriously been there for me throughout my whole journey from primary school to now in secondary. They've always had my back, whether I was struggling or just needed some guidance. They've helped me push through tough times, and honestly, they're the main reason I've stayed in school. They've encouraged me to take part in activities and trips I never thought I'd be able to do, and those experiences have meant so much. Without them, I'm not sure I'd even still be here in school, but they've helped me every step of the way."

The philosophy of the SCP is that no student goes through the education system alone. This is captured in the case studies above. SCP is a targeted service that journeys through the system alongside those students that are most vulnerable to ESL.

The 2023/2024 data for Acorn SCP also conveys this ongoing journey as the SCP worked with 34 referrals at junior school level, 55 referrals at senior school level and 56 Referrals at post primary school level. Of the 56 referrals engaged at post primary school 48 of those students had already taken part in SCP activities at Primary School Level at either junior or senior level.

3.4.2 Core Practices

As already noted Acorn SCP is staff based and student centred so relationships are paramount to success. The relationship itself is possibly the most important intervention and central to all aspects of the work. This relationship along with the culture and principles of Acorn SCP are reinforced through the core practices of staff. The main practices used to support students are described below. It is these core practices that differentiate the SCP staff from other staff within the school system.

Staff are afforded training in relationship building, practice sharing, restorative practices, solution focused work, motivational interviewing on top of their third level qualifications to enhance their skillset.

1. Keyworking:

All students once referred to the programme are assigned a keyworker, usually a project worker. This keyworker then assumes the role of responsibility for ensuring that students receive an appropriate level of intervention. The keyworker regularly checks in on their assigned student and reviews active interventions by regular liaising with the Coordinator, school staff and fellow project staff.

All 145 referrals received a Keyworker in 2023/2024, with over 90% of those referrals then working with more than 1 SCP staff member.

2. Relationship Building

Developing positive relationships with children and young people is the single most important core skill and practice of all SCP staff. Jeffers and Lillis (2021) identify a number of relationship categories in schools and conclude that relationships is the unifying thread across practices that address educational inequality.

Early identification and engagement is essential when addressing educational inequality and the time, space and place pillar design of SCP allows SCP staff to be a consistent part of a young person's school journey. Most early school leavers (ESL) display signs and patterns of disengagement before they ultimately leave school. It is important to notice these signs of ESL through SCP staff engagement with young people whilst they are still attending school and participating in activities/programmes.

For example, 'Getting to Know You' is a relationship building support offered when a student is being accepted as an SCP referral following the referral process. Project Staff will engage the student on a 1-1 level for a sufficient time to decide what supports are best to put in place to meet the needs of the young person. Staff will also involve other relevant stakeholders.

Provision and core practices in SCP allow for the development and nurturing of relationships.

Where referred students are not directly working with an SCP staff member they will still be checked in with on a regular basis unless/until the referral is closed.

3. One-to-one Support & Mentoring

SCP project staff act as key workers for all targeted students. 1-1 work is an essential element of the SCP toolkit and is usually the first stage of relationship building with referred students. Techniques such as Motivational Interviewing, NVR and Youth Participatory Skills will be utilised by staff.

Examples of 1-1 work include Mentoring, Check 'n' Connect, The Pen Pal Initiative & Walk 'n' Talk. One-to-one support is part of the relational principle that informs the SCP.

The graph below(Figure 5) illustrates the number of students that received 1-1 support in 2023/2024. It is clear from the diagram that 1-1 support is predominantly provided to referred students.

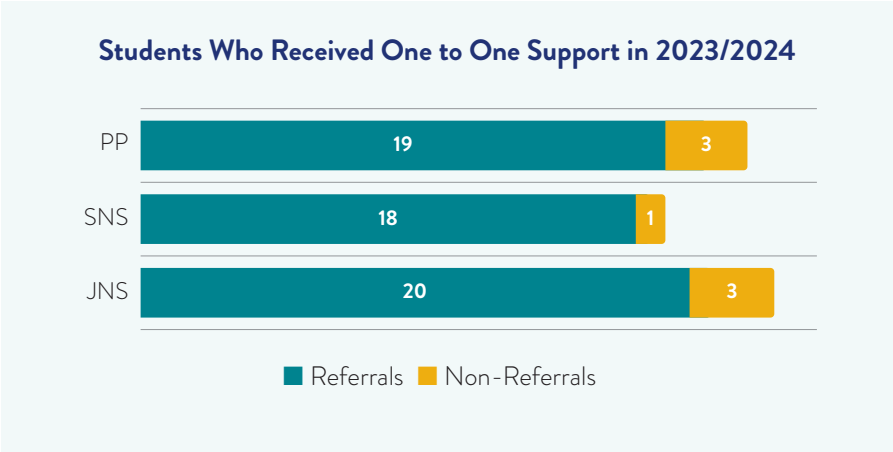


Figure 5: Students who received support at junior primary level, senior primary level and post primary level. Included are both referred and non-referred students

4. Small Group Work

Small group work is usually a progress stage of engagement for referred students. It usually follows once staff have an understanding of the main interests and needs of the students. Small group work is essential for enabling students to interact with their peers and develop socially. Small groups offer an ideal space for Peer Support and Role Modelling. Techniques such as Motivational Interviewing, NVR and Youth Participatory Skills will be utilised by staff during small groups as well, with a further emphasis on group facilitation skills and group dynamics.

Overall, 144 small groups were established in 2023/2024. 18 of those small groups were at JNS, 66 at SNS and 60 at Post Primary level. Figs 6 and 7 below illustrate how many small groups were run (at primary & post primary respectively) under each programme theme and how many students took part in those particular clubs.

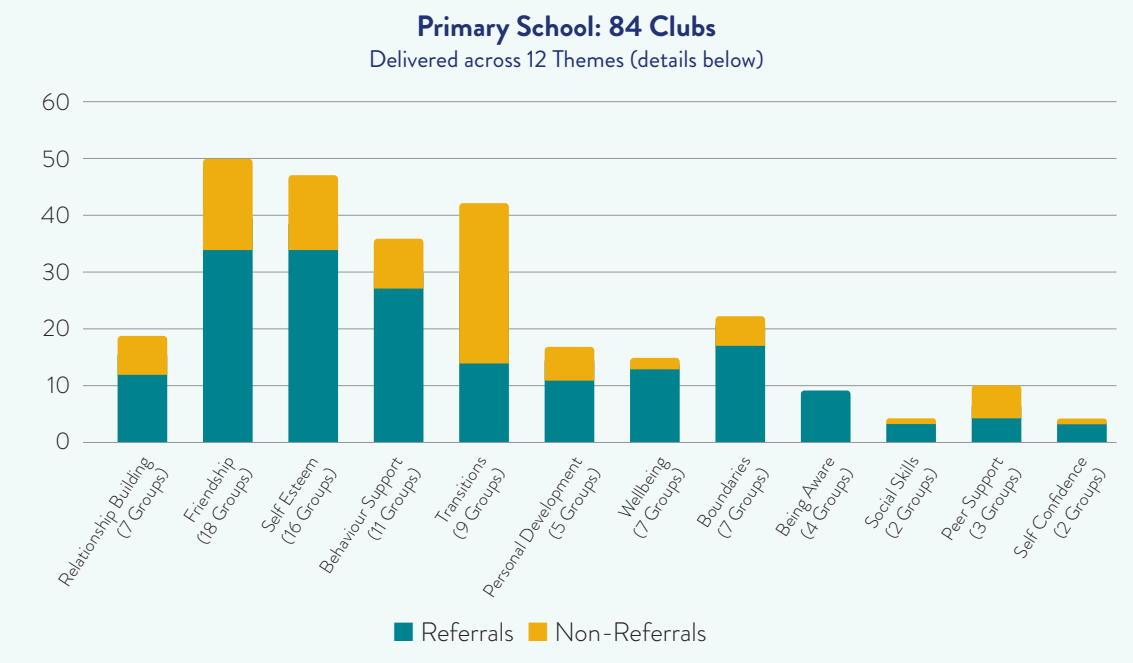


Figure 6: Depicted is the number of clubs and participants under each theme.

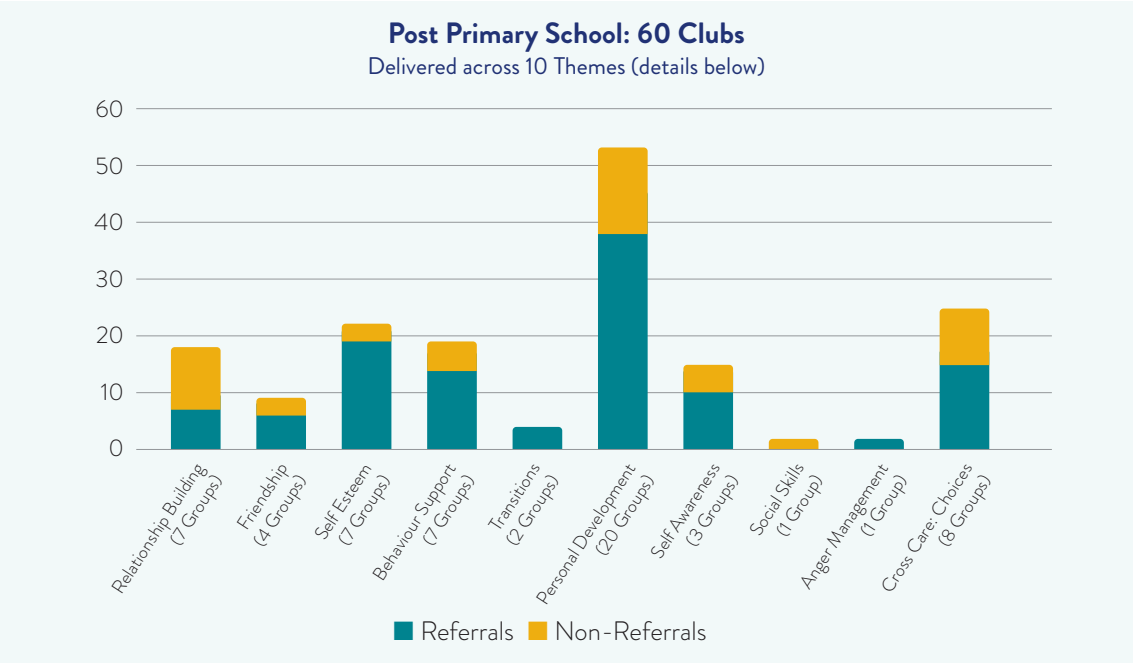


Figure 7: Depicted is the number of clubs and participants under each theme.

5. Universal/Larger Groups

There is an element of universal work offered by staff. In 2023/2024 this work was predominantly in the area of transfer/transition (First Year Induction Programme). In previous years this work has included universal programme delivery (e.g. Roots of Empathy), talks/programmes on internet safety, retention, attendance etc. This practice is rare enough in the Acorn SCP cluster and when used is most likely around transitions or at primary level where introducing SCP to the school and study body is mutually beneficial.

Universal supports came mainly under the themes of ***'Transition'*** *and* ***'Attendance'****.*

Attendance: As well as monitoring the attendance of referred students across the cluster schools, SCP staff would also link with attendance teams within the schools to observe concerning attendance patterns across the school populations

Transitions: A 1st year Summer Induction Week was offered to all 68 incoming 1st years during the summer of 2024(36 attended). All three 1st year classes will then take part in a 6-8 week induction programme in Term1 2024, as last year's three 1st year classes did in 2023.

6. Check & Connect

All open referrals and recently closed referrals are afforded the Check & Connect service where staff make a point of linking in with students formally or informally at least once per week. Keyworkers and all other SCP staff greet and connect with students on a daily basis and offer open spaces at different times during the schools day/week where students can meet with staff. Breakfast Clubs and Nurture Groups are examples of Drop In events. This service is also extended to the brief referrals where the need is identified. Check and Connect provides a lite version of 1-1 support for a greater student cohort.

7. Attendance Monitoring

SCP staff operate a traffic light system and all referred students will be given a red, amber or green code. Students will be rewarded for improvements in attendance relative to their respective baselines. This system operates for targeted and brief referrals. SCP staff also monitor whole school attendance in order to allow for the early identification of problematic attendance patterns and hence early intervention, be that through referral or a one-off engagement.

SCP staff offer incentive programmes and consistently view attendance figures as an outcome measurement. Along with retention and participation, attendance is central to the educational journey of children and young people.

> *In 2023/2024 the referred students attending junior primary school lagged behind the main student cohort in attendance by 13%. This improved to an 8% lag at the year end. The referred students attending senior primary school lagged behind the main student cohort in attendance by 12%, this too reduced to 8% by the year end. At post primary school the referred students lagged behind the main student cohort by 15%. This lag saw a 10% improvement at the end of term 1. This improvement was not maintained and dropped by 4% in Term 2. Overall the attendance of the referred students dropped by nearly 10% at year end (this was due to school avoidance numbers within the referred cohort), if these numbers were not included there would have been an overall improvement similar to term 1 across the referred cohort.*

Attendance is monitored in every core activity and intervention, when attendance is not improving, the practice or intervention is amended.

8. Outreach

It is important that the SCP is in a position to deal with non-attendance patterns and school refusals as early as possible. It is also important that the SCP staff can follow up on students when they are not regularly attending school, are preparing to leave school or are presenting with issues that may not be easily dealt with in school. The outreach work not only allows SCP staff to build relationships with schools and families, but also with school staff and management and other agencies that may become involved.

During school closures & holiday periods, outreach work enables SCP staff to continue their work with students and develop relationships even further with families and the wider community

Disadvantage and disengagement with school is bigger than school itself and outreach offers SCP a unique arena to engage with students. This offers service flexibility. SCP staff link to a students' wider influences of family, friends and community.

9. Advocacy

The formal education system and formal systems in general can sometimes prove challenging for many of the families associated with the SCP. Many parents and members of the wider families may have had negative experiences with school or authority and may be wary of the institution. For others, the formal system may just be intimidating and hard to navigate. This is especially so when people themselves may find challenges with literacy, numeracy or formal social settings. SCP uses its placement in the schools to offer support to families and young people in these times. SCP staff can provide valuable insight and guidance to families and young people whilst also avoiding any misunderstanding that may otherwise arise, in the course of students/parents interaction with the formal education system.

10. Tracking

Once a referral is closed, SCP staff will continue to link in with the young person for a short time after, when they are back settled in school. If a young person leaves school, whether they are an open referral or a previous referral, SCP staff will (re)engage the young person at the appropriate time, space and place and endeavor to assist the young person to continue their educational journey in some form. For all open referrals staff keep records of progress.

11. Planning, Record Keeping & Review

All SCP staff are responsible for planning, developing and maintaining their practice & programmes. An essential part of the work of all SCP staff is to ensure that their work is being monitored and evaluated on an individual basis and through a community of practice (being discussed and evaluated as part of a wider stakeholder engagement). This engagement occurs initially within the SCP Team and then with the relevant wider school personnel, and other stakeholders

All student progress is tracked through this process also. Students who do leave school continue to be engaged until they have succeeded in securing a new educational direction, or they return to school.

12. Transfer Supports

Transitions are times of extreme concern in relation to student retention. Smooth transitions are essential to reduce the risks associated with early school leaving. These interventions are an opportunity for SCP staff to make transitions a positive experience as opposed to a negative experience, by correctly and skilfully scaffolding the process. Research consistently finds that school transitions affect student self-efficacy and academic performance negatively. Through a combination of outreach work around important transition times during the school year and set programmes during the school year SCP staff aim to ensure that all student referrals are guided through transitions. The transitions that are supported include: moving to a new school; reengaging after absence; 2nd - 3rd class; primary – second level; Junior Cycle – Senior Cycle.

3.4.3 Programmes

School Completion programme staff offer a wide range of programmes to young people in a 1-1, small group or universal setting. These interventions may be manualized, evidence based, evidence informed or locally developed based on need and informed by best practice.

The programmes offered enhance the staff toolkit and are usually need specific or purpose delivered. Programmes are a pointed add-on to the core practices. For example, appendix 1 contains a sample programme builder that has been developed by staff in order to be flexible and meet the presenting needs of the young people.

Programmes offered by the SCP in previous years under the above headings are listed below.

Evidence Based, Evidence Informed & Manualised Programmes	Evidence Based & Evidence Informed Programmes (adapted to fit Local Needs)	Locally Developed SCP Interventions (designed based on Local Needs and informed by Best Practice)
Think Good Feel Good	Anger Management Programmes	Debating
Cool Kids	Breakfast Clubs	Special Interest Project
Keep Cool	Self-Esteem Programmes	Expert Project
Roots of Empathy	Bullying Awareness Programme	Rock Climbing
Non-Violent Resistance (NVR)	Friendship Programme	Gardening/ Cookery/Art/ Games Clubs
Nurture Room (Adapted for SCP)	Internet Safety	Board Games Club
Alert Programme	Social Media Awareness	Discipline for Learning
Working Things Out Programme	Health/Hygiene Programme	Attendance Initiatives
Real U	Social Skills/Body Language Programme	Sporting Interventions
A Life of Choices	(Talkabout)	Arts/Cultural Interventions
	Wellbeing	Drama/Music/Art Clubs
	Kind Practices	Thinking Project
	Mindfulness/Yoga/ Relaxation	Lifeskills programme
	Morals/ Virtues/ Citizenship Programme	Activity Clubs
	Stewardship	Parent/Student Art Programme
	Social Skills/Body language	Gaisce (The President's Award)

Groups are set up as far as possible to avoid stigmatization and to advance role modelling. They are always planned to be outcome specific. These outcomes being relevant to each of the above named programmes, all with the long term expected outcome of improved Participation, Attendance & Retention.

Figures 8 and 9 below show the number of programme sessions that ran in 2023/2024 under the themes already introduced in the 'small groups' section of core practices above.

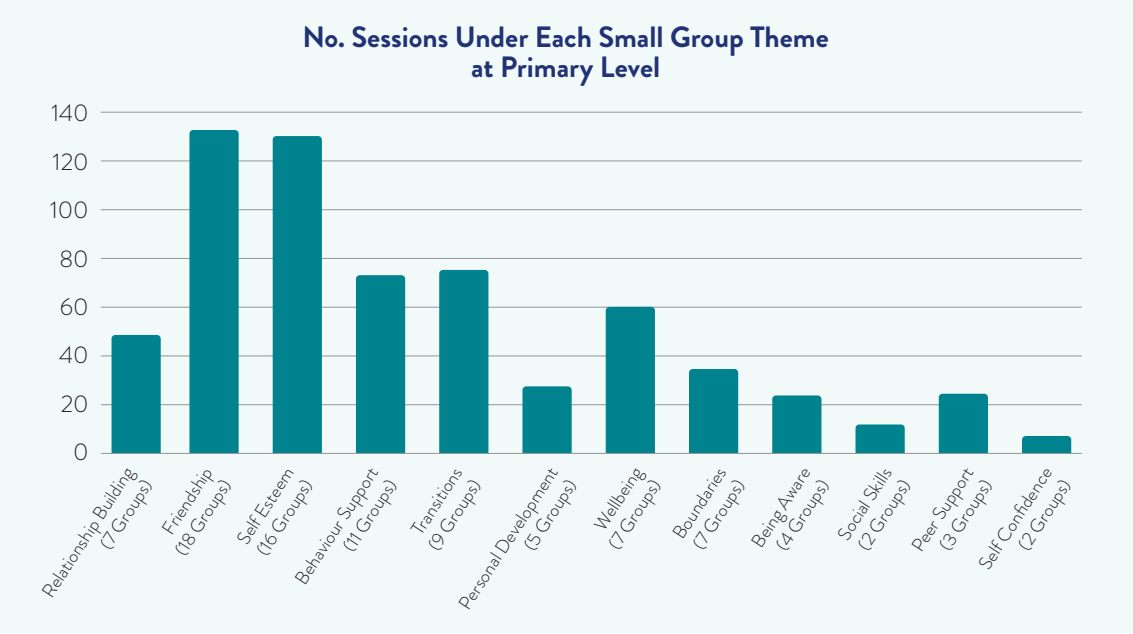


Figure 8: This chart shows the number of programme sessions that SCP staff ran under each theme.

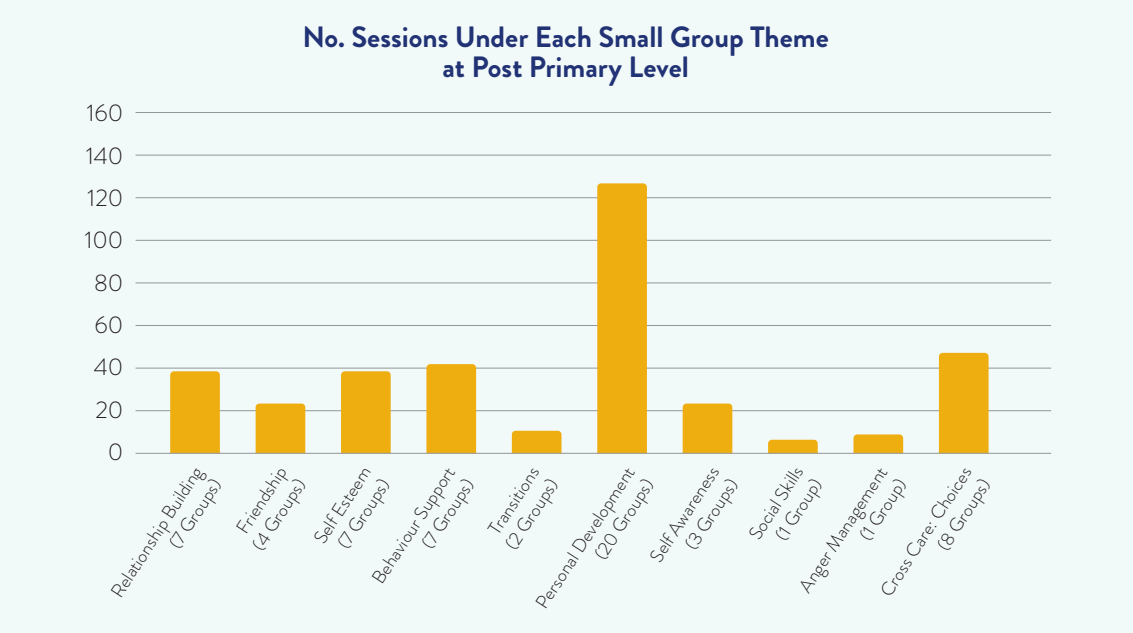


Figure 9: This chart shows the number of programme sessions that SCP staff ran under each theme.

Conclusion: Understanding Why and How SCP Operates

The complex interplay of individual, family, institutional (schools) and community issues that present in young people's lives demands a SCP framework that not only meets their needs but 'sees' their conditions socially, culturally, economically and affectively. By exploring the principles and practice of one SCP, drawing on egalitarian informed analysis, this document proposes an *operational framework* for SCP.

To understand the 'Why' of SCP, the framework presented in this document refines the original eight principles into four over-arching principles that capture the uniqueness and effectiveness of SCP. These are conceptualised within an egalitarian framework that reflects the equality basis on which SCP operates – it is fundamentally about equality in **resources** through equalising educational opportunities. This intersects with equality in care for students through positive **relationship** building over their school journey; equality in **respect** for students through empowering them and building capacity to overcome other inequalities in social, cultural or economic capital; and equality of **representation** through advocacy.

The capacity of schools to manage the everyday reality of inequality for young people in their care, that is generated by wider relations of inequality, means that school-based programmes must always be cognisant of the unequal relations in which they operate. In practice, this means recognising that the aim of equalising educational opportunities is as much about egalitarian values as it is about

provision of supports. **These guiding principles of equality of resources, relationality, respect and representation are the hallmarks of the SCP programme in Acorn.** It is only through reflective practice that the fundamental role of the principles can be brought to the attention of researchers and policy-makers concerned with 'what works' in terms of effectively addressing educational inequality.

To understand the 'How' of SCP, chapter 3 explored staffing; the referral process, pillars of operation and provision (core practices and programmes). The case studies demonstrate the intersection between principles and practices for the student journey with SCP. The longitudinal design of SCP, and the presence of SCP staff for the duration of children's school lives when needed, allows for a richer understanding of the role of relationships for the success of SCP in children's lives.

The main outcomes that the programme seeks to achieve are increased student Participation, Attendance & Retention – the PAR approach. Every core activity and intervention that is pursued by the SCP gives great consideration to these 3 outcomes.

Guided by the core equality principles outlined in chapter 2, Acorn SCP can be defined as a relational based educational service that takes a student-centred approach, with staff central to building and sustaining positive relationships based on connection, care, compassion and respect throughout the educational journey. Defining SCP as a relational based educational service also captures the significance of social and emotional development for SCP core practices and provision; what are referred to as 'soft skills' in literature (Smyth et al, 2019).

Appendix 1: Mix and match guide to developing a Self Esteem Programme

Self Esteeem

(6 - 10 Sessions, 1-8 Students)

All of the information used to scaffold this programme is based on peer reviewed research

Introduction
1-3 Sessions

Relationship Building - Relationships are central to any and all good programmes. See SCP Guide to Relationship Building.
Before starting any programme a facilitator must evaluate
Their relationship with the participant(s), the group dynamics, the group mix, possible barriers, the sensitivity of the material, the age of the the participants
What is Self Esteem?
What impacts your Self Esteem?
What categories of Self Esteem exist?
Discuss Low Self Esteem, High Self Esteem, Healthy Self Esteem
Discuss the personal cost, societal cost of the different types of Self Esteem
Explore Objective Scenarios

Establishing the NOW
2-4 Sessions

Intro: Complete a Personal Profile -
Sample Exercise: List 10 strengths & 10 Weaknesses.
Take a Self Esteem Inventory -
Suggestions: Are you angry? are you sensitive to comment? are you hard on yourself? Do you compare yourself to others? Do you blame others when things go wrong?
Become aware of your Negative Thoughts -
Discuss objective scenarios where people might be self critical, negative. progress to self reflection exercise
Explore your Current Relationships -
Discuss the different types of personal relationships.

Challenge & Plan
2-4 Sessions

Intro: You are not your Circumstances...Discuss
Revisit Negative Thoughts from previous Section -
Challenge your negative thinking patterns, challenge when you are critical of yourself...use techniques such as Self Talk, stop comparing, discuss social media
Revisit Relationships from previous Section -
Introduce techniques to build positive relationships, equal relationships.
Discuss values and beliefs
Explore Assertiveness -
Discuss scenarios, role play saying 'NO'
Introduce the idea of Goal Setting -
Discuss the problems with perfection, learn to deny perfection, It's ok to make mistakes.

Practice & Grow
1-3 Sessions

Start Goal Setting-
Set small goals to start, achievable goals for small wins, be realistic.
Change your Story -
Remind participants that 'You are not your Circumstances'. Be willing to change your slef image, introduce ideas and opportunities for participants to explore themselves
Discuss the Path Forward - Change is not easy
Introduce Stress relief techniques, discuss the positive power of good health/being active/eating - well/volunteering etc....FAST technique
Challenge Yourself Progressively -
Explore how participants might gradually set more difficult goals, design a plan with 2/3 future goals to be pursued beyond the programme, check in with participants after the programme has concluded

Self Esteem for younger Children

Remember: Younger children develop their self esteem more through Others

- Make them Feel Special
- Be Attentive
- Praise them
- Be Kind
- Be a Positive Role Model
- Respect Differences
- Help them Learn from their Mistakes
- Be Understanding of Where they are Coming/Came from

Appendix 2: The Intake Framework Process

7 Steps: Designed by TESS

Step 1: SCP Referral Criteria: Identification of Children / Young People

- SCP staff provide information and guidance to all potential referrers regarding the School Completion Programme and its referral criteria.
- The Principal, other school personnel or alternative referral sources, identify children/ young people suitable for referral to the SCP.

SCP

Step 2: Referral Process: Consent to Refer and Share Information

- The Principal is responsible for all referrals made by their school, supported by the HSCL Coordinator.
- The HSCL Coordinator, or other designated school personnel, completes the SCP Referral Form with the parent/guardian.
- Parents/Guardians give consent for their child to be referred to the SCP and for information relating to their child being shared at the Referral Meeting.
- Referrals may also come from other sources such as parents, self-referrals, Social Workers, community organisations etc.

HSCL

Step 3: Referral Meeting

- SCP staff and the EWO(s) attend the Referral Meeing. Each HSCL Coordinator, or designated school personnel, individually attends the meeting to discuss the referrals to the SCP from their schools.
- Decision making responsibility sits with the SCP staff and the EWO.

EWO
HSCL
SCP

Step 4: Consent to Take Part

- SCP staff obtain parental/guardian consent for referred child/young person to engage in specified interventions.

Step 5: Initial Engagement

- SCP staff engage with the child/young person.

Step 6: Identification of Need

Step 7: On-going Support

SCP

Appendix 3:

Provision of supports in Acorn SCP across time, space and place. Under the 4 Pillar Headings.

The table below is taken from the OECD (2024) report and edited to reflect the provision within Acorn SCP according to the pillars.

In school	Out of school	After school	Holiday provision
Core Practices			
Transition programmes	Individualised supports	Homework groups	Summer programmes
Targeted attendance tracking	Motivational interviewing	Study groups	Mid-term programmes
Mentoring	Restorative practice	After-school clubs (i.e. art, sports etc.)	Easter programmes
Pro-social skills	Advocacy	Interest Groups	Christmas programmes
Decision making skills	Social and emotional resilience		Halloween programmes
Behaviour management	Suspension intervention		
Restorative practice	Family support		
Social and emotional resilience	Collaborative approaches with community and/or statutory agencies		
Communication skills			
Self-care (e.g. hygiene, sleep hygiene)			
Organisation skills			
Motivational interviewing			
Breakfast clubs			
Lunch time clubs			
One-to-one individualised supports			
Small-group targeted work			
Universal evidence-based/ informed preventative programmes			

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Acorn School Completion Programme

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