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A Desire to Succeed: Exploring Aspiration towards Higher Education Participation amongst Members of a Socio-economically Marginalised Community

By

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Declaration

I declare that this thesis, or part thereof, has not been submitted for a degree in University College Cork (UCC) or anywhere else. I declare that it is fully and comprehensively my own work.

Signed: _____

Stiofán Ó hUiginn

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Abstract

This thesis is a qualitative interview study that examines the barriers that exist in preventing students from a background of marginalisation from progressing to and through higher education, and how these barriers can be overcome. The study explores aspiration towards higher education participation amongst members of a socio-economically marginalised community, highlighting how having a desire to succeed can strongly contribute to the ability of marginalised students to overcome a multitude of barriers that have traditionally existed in limiting or preventing their participation and success in higher education.

Many recurring themes emerged from this study and are discussed throughout the thesis. Whilst research on the experience of socio-economically marginalised students in higher education has traditionally focused on negative outcomes such as – amongst others – drop-out, feelings of inferiority amongst more affluent classmates, failure to complete their degree programme, this study aims to highlight how coming from a socio-economically marginalised background can act as a motivating factor for educational success. Each of the findings sections draws on the aspiration of members of a socio-economically marginalised community to succeed educationally, in spite of challenges and barriers that exist in potentially undermining or preventing said success.

This study intends to serve the greater good of equality in education by highlighting the potential of all students, irrespective of their class background, to succeed educationally with the right mindset and supports.

Chapter 1: Introduction

"Within our dreams and aspirations, we find our opportunities" –

Sugar Ray Leonard

This is a qualitative interview study examining the barriers that exist in preventing students from a background of marginalisation from progressing to and through higher education, and how these barriers can be overcome. Previous research has explored the concept of inequality in terms of enrolment in and dropout from higher education for students coming from a background of disadvantage (Vignoles & Powdthavee, 2009; Contini, Cugnota & Scagni, 2018). The significance and originality of this study, however, lies in the exploration of how **aspiration** can allow these barriers to be overcome for participation and success in an environment of higher education.

In this thesis, I assume a socio-cultural position where the world is viewed as a dynamic social space. My focus is on educational progression from secondary school to higher education and how this process of progression is mediated by cultural and social contexts. The study focuses on participants from an urban area in the south of Ireland. This study was conducted in an area relevant to the lives of 14.3% of the population of Ireland who experience two or more types of enforced deprivation in their daily lives (CSO, 2020). As mentioned, this study is a qualitative interview inquiry and, therefore, the lifeworld of the participants is the primary source of data. Consideration is also taken, however, into the societal and cultural influences on the identity construction of participants – their own opinion of themselves and where they place themselves both in the day-to-day world and within education. The research questions listed below form the central focus of the research:

- What value do participants place on education as a foundation for social mobility? Where do participants place themselves and how do participants value themselves within the field of education?

- How do students of a DEIS secondary school experience the transition process from secondary school to higher education?

- What are the prevalent challenges as under-represented students transition through higher education? How can these challenges be overcome to allow for successful participation?

My interest in this area of research has emerged from my own personal and professional experience of education. I qualified as an Irish & Physical Education teacher in 2017. I completed my final year school placement in a DEIS [Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools] secondary school and have been lucky enough to work in the same school since graduating. It is also the secondary school that I attended for my own second-level education. As a teacher in a DEIS secondary school, I work daily with those who may often be considered to be on the margins of our educational landscape (Cahill, 2012). In recent years, I have noticed that many of our 6th Year students have successfully negotiated the pathway to higher education on completion of their Leaving Certificate examinations. On meeting students weeks, months or years down the road, however, and asking the question as to how they are finding their third level studies, I have often received the following reply: *"I dropped out"*. This is something that has bothered me a lot and has often left me wondering what causes students, particularly those coming from a marginalised background, to drop out of higher education at various points of their degree programme. I have often wondered if more can be done on the part of families, communities, individual teachers, schools, institutes of higher education [or perhaps all of the above] in order

to enable under-represented students to be better prepared for the world of higher education and its associated challenges.

As a qualitative study, this research project crosses public and private spaces with the aim of creating a picture of the education system that serves the people of the study and, more importantly, how it serves them. Different voices are heard throughout the research as current secondary school students, the parents of these students, as well as current higher education students are interviewed regarding their experiences of higher education through various different lenses. The commonality between each of the three groups of interview participants lies in the fact that they are all members of the same community and all have a connection with a specific secondary school in their local area – the secondary school students are in their final year of school, their parents connect with the school through their children, and the higher education students are all past-pupils of the same school. Whilst the focus of the study centres around the world of higher education from various participant perspectives, I believe that it is this link with this particular secondary school that ties the whole project together. In essence, this secondary school is the epicentre of the research project and acts as the glue that binds each of the interview participant groups together. The secondary school in question is located in a traditionally working-class area and serves the people of the community with great distinction. It was extremely interesting to compare the viewpoints of the three interview participant groups regarding their outlook towards higher education at the various stages of the transition process to and through higher education.

At the beginning of this process, my fascination lay in the plethora of research that exists in examining the barriers that prevent under-represented students from successfully participating in and completing higher education (Fuller & Paton, 2007). As I began my own research, however, my area of interest began to change somewhat when noticing that a slight dearth of research exists into the overcoming of these barriers in Irish higher education. So often research has focused on academic failure when exploring working-class students (Evans, 2016). While some research has often portrayed under-represented students as succeeding *despite* their family background (Gofen, 2009), the focus of this research is to highlight the importance of aspiration in working-class students and how this aspiration can allow under-represented students to progress to and through higher education and to achieve academically. An attempt is made to highlight how coming from a low-income area and a DEIS secondary school can act as a motivating factor for students themselves, and indeed for parents, as they strive to utilise education as a tool for upward social mobility, whilst not undermining the very real economic, social and cultural barriers that do also exist as they progress through the education system.

This thesis follows a relatively traditional format in terms of its structure and outline. The purpose of this introduction [Chapter 1] is to inform readers of the importance of the study and to briefly outline both a theoretical and motivational context for the study. Chapter 2 is comprised of a review of the relevant literature in the areas of higher education (non)participation and aspiration. The works and theories of Pierre Bourdieu feature strongly in this chapter in order to create a theoretical framework which serves as a sociological roadmap for points raised later in the research project. Chapter 3 is the methodology section of the project, and its main purpose is to summarise the data

collection and analysis procedures as conducted throughout the research. Chapter 4 outlines the findings of the research. This chapter is divided into different sub-sections based on the thematic analysis conducted as points were raised by interview participants. This aim of this chapter is to tell the story of the participants of the study and, whilst points raised are supported with relevant academic material, it is hoped that the voices and opinions of participants feature strongly throughout. Finally, Chapter 5 is the concluding chapter of this research project where I attempt to draw the various strands of the study together and to propose future steps for policy, practice and research.

As opposed to focusing on disengagement from higher education, an attempt is made throughout the study to highlight some of the strategies employed by the aforementioned interview groups in their attempts to successfully negotiate the transition to and through higher education. Notwithstanding the fact that, for those from the lower socio-economic groups, progression to higher education is part of a 'choice biography' which goes against what would be considered to be their 'normal' biography of entering directly into the labour market (Du Bois-Reymond, 1998), an effort is made throughout to highlight the positive ambitions of all participant groups around higher education participation and success.

The interview participants are significant contributors to this research project and, in truth, without their contribution this piece of work would not exist. My role in the project was to create a safe space for discussion, ensuring that each participant could voice their opinion as conversations were developed. This is their story of transition to higher

education. It is the story of the secondary school students who aspire to attend higher education. It is the story of the parents of these secondary school students who aspire for and with their children, who want to see and help their children to attain and benefit from opportunities they themselves may not have had in the past. It is the story of higher education students who have travelled the same path as their counterparts in secondary school, successfully negotiating the higher education setting despite the many challenges and/or barriers that exist for those coming from a marginalised socio-economic background. Whilst academic literature is used as a crucial support throughout the research project, it is my belief that the words of the interview participants carry the most weight. These people are the focal point of this research project and are the direct contributors to the study.

The recently published National Access Plan (2022-2028) now considers students attending DEIS secondary schools to be a "priority group" (Pg.68) as the Higher Education Authority aims to deliver equitable access, participation and success in higher education for all irrespective of background or previous educational experience. Between the academic years of 2015/2016 and 2020/2021, Student Record System data shows an average of 10%-12% of new higher education entrants to come from DEIS secondary schools. While the National Access Plan focuses on the number of students progressing from secondary school to higher education, this research project also explores the experience of these students as they progress through higher education. All told, this study is motivated by a will to contribute to our understanding of social class and higher education progression and success. Furthermore, it is hoped that working-class readers of this study can take pride in their working-classness on the reading of this thesis. Vygotsky (1991: 39) states that *"we become ourselves*

through others and that this rule applies not only to the personality as a whole, but also to the history of every individual function". We are all shaped by our families, our communities, our schools, our teachers. Unfortunately, a negative light is often shone on the 'shaping' of those from marginalised and disadvantaged communities. The participants of this study show that socio-cultural barriers can be overcome within the world of education. It is hoped that this study may act as a motivation for under-represented secondary school and higher education students, and for those who work with these students on a daily basis, to believe in their ability to achieve success in education despite the barriers that exist and may threaten to undermine their participation.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Inequality in participation in higher education is a topic that has been extensively explored and written about in the past. Participation in post-compulsory education has historically been markedly differentiated in terms of socio-economic groups (Bynner, 1992; Burrows & Marsh, 1992) and, unfortunately, this trend continues to be seen in more recent studies with regards to participation in higher education (Contini, Cugnata & Scagni, 2018; Quinn, 2013). There can often be a tendency to focus only on barriers when discussing (non)participation in higher education. International research, however, emphasises that having a better understanding of which students are more likely to withdraw is vital in order to maximise the use of resources in higher education and to support the development of retention strategies (Frawley, Pigott & Carroll, 2017). Thus, when investigating the topic of participation in higher education, it would be remiss of a researcher to overlook the enablers that promote participation in higher education.

This literature review is divided into three sub-sections. The first sub-section focuses on some of the common barriers that exist in preventing those from marginalised socio-economic backgrounds and communities from progressing to and through higher education. The second sub-section draws on the works of Pierre Bourdieu in an attempt to construct a theoretical framework for the study. In essence, this adds an extra sociological layer to the work by exploring the dynamics of power in society along with the perception of the social order not only existing but, indeed, being maintained within communities and across generations. Finally, the third sub-section centres around the topic of ‘aspiration’ and how this concept can be explored regarding

participation in higher education for those coming from a background not traditionally associated with higher education participation and success.

2.1 Barriers to Participation in Higher Education – A Focus on Marginalised Communities

Traditionally, the broad concept of 'barriers' has been widely used to investigate and explain uneven patterns of post-compulsory educational participation (Woodley et al., 1987). More recently, research has focused on long-term sociological explanations for the persistent under-representation of those from disadvantaged groups by identifying the persistent role of structural [race, gender, and class] and cultural influences [family, friends, schools, teachers, and so on] on higher education participation decisions (Ball et al., 2002; Archer, Hutchings & Ross 2003). All told, the truth of the matter exists in the fact that those from the poorer socio-economic groups have traditionally been marginalised in terms of participation in higher education. This statistic is highlighted in a recent Higher Education Authority report which outlines that, of the student body who entered higher education in the academic year of 2019/2020, only 10% came from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds (HEA, 2022). Furthermore, previous research asserts that academic achievement is the primary barrier to HE participation, with large disparities observed between the attainment of low socio-economic status students and their more affluent counterparts throughout their time spent in higher education (Chowdry et al., 2013; McKnight, 2015).

The role of education in reproducing class inequality has traditionally been perceived as one of structural inevitability (Bowles & Gintis, 1976; Lynch & O'Riordan, 1998). Some also claim that people are 'pushed' into certain educational positions (Gambetta,

1987). Reviews of empirical research on equality in education indicate that equality objectives are defined in different ways (Lynch & O'Riordan, 1998). One conception is where equality is defined in terms of equalising access to different levels of education for relatively disadvantaged groups within a stratified society and educational system (Lynch & O'Riordan, 1998). Equality of participation is often assessed, however, not so much in terms of the quality of educational experience available to students, but rather in terms of attained qualities such as ability and effort as opposed to social class or other ascribed attributes (Lynch & O'Riordan, 1998). Thought must be given to the fact that higher education is far from being a culturally neutral environment for students of low socio-economic status, notably because the system is built and organised according to taken for granted middle-class and upper-class cultural norms (Stephens et al., 2012). As a result, many students from a marginalised socio-economic background enter contexts of higher education and face the unknown workings of a new educational system that can lead to psychological barriers in: (1) Emotional Experiences, (2) Identity Management, (3) Self-Perception, (4) Motivation (Stephens et al., 2012).

Emotional Experiences: In the context of higher education, students of low socio-economic status are more likely to feel and express greater emotional distress than those of higher socio-economic status (Jury et al., 2015). In addition, under-represented students often report to having fewer opportunities to express their negative experiences as situations arise, as well as having a lack of support system for dealing with their emotional distress (Barry et al., 2009). In the context of academic work, research has shown that marginalised students are more likely to feel guilty about their academic under-achievement (Covarrubias & Fryberg, 2015).

Identity Management: Identity management is one of the toughest challenges that marginalised students face when entering into the cultural context of higher education (Jetten et al., 2008). Reay, Crozier & Clayton (2009: 110) refer to this as an "out of field experience" as non-traditional participants experience a feeling of disjointedness in navigating the higher education environment versus the environment they have grown up in. As these students are in the minority in higher education, their under-represented identity is likely to be quite noticeable to them and can regularly remind them of their differences to others (Hearn & Rosinger, 2014). As a consequence, these students are particularly prone to experience "imposter syndrome" as they often feel that they do not belong in the college context or do not deserve to be there (Gardner & Holley, 2012).

Self-Perception: Within higher education, marginalised students may have to deal with the negative views others may have of them (Jury et al., 2017). Research has shown that socio-economically marginalised students often suffer from negative stereotypes regarding their academic ability as they are considered to be less able in comparison to those not coming from a marginalised background (Stebleton & Soria, 2012). These negative stereotypes are an example of classism whereby negative attitudes, beliefs and behaviours are directed towards those with less power and/or those who are socially devalued (Lott, 2012). Such negative stereotypes and associated beliefs or practices have implications for students' psychological functioning (Jury et al., 2017). Notably, marginalised students report to having lower perceptions of their own intelligence in comparison to their more affluent peers (Hellman & Harbeck, 1997; John-Henderson et al., 2013). Whilst the stereotype may hold no truth, the fear of confirming the negative stereotype can increase the cognitive

and the emotional load of the student which may ultimately hinder their ability to perform up to their potential (Jury et al., 2017).

Motivation: Research on the social-class achievement gap in higher education has demonstrated that marginalised students often experience more deleterious forms of achievement motivation, i.e. avoidance-orientated goals, than those of the higher social classes (Jury et al., 2017). More specifically, marginalised students have been noticed to endorse performance-avoidance goals in higher education as they fear the risk of 'failure' when seen to be outperformed academically by others (Bui, 2002; Jury, et al., 2015). Such motivation regulation may be particularly problematic for these students due, notably, to the negative links usually observed between performance-avoidance goal endorsement and academic performance (Van Yperen, Blaga, & Postmes, 2014).

A large body of research has found that the determinants of non-participation in higher education are long-term. Gorard et al. (2006) believe that there is a clear pattern of typical learning 'trajectories' which are both shaped by, and constrain, learning experiences. Furthermore, Gorard et al. (2006) outline the key social determinants predicting lifelong participation in learning include the following: time, place, gender, family, and initial schooling. Such findings emphasise the importance of reviewing evidence on participation through the life course of individuals as opposed to focusing solely on the point of potential entrance to higher education. The metaphor of 'barriers' to participation in higher education is an attractive one that suggests to some that an explanation for differences in patterns of participation between socio-economic groups contains its own simple solution – the removal of said barriers (Gorard et al., 2006).

Removing the barriers to participation, however, is not as easy as it may sound and can cast doubt on the value of the very concept of barriers as an explanation for non-participation (Gorard et al., 2006). Instead of focusing on the immediate 'removal' of barriers, perhaps it would be more beneficial to take a more rounded approach to barriers by considering their construction through personal, social and economic determinants of potential participation in higher education.

Financial Barriers:

When discussing participation in higher education in an Irish context, one must remember that higher education was regarded as something of a phenomenon to a large proportion of the population of Ireland as recently as the 1970's. In 1966, Minister Donogh O'Malley dramatically announced his plan to abolish secondary school fees and to introduce free second-level education for every school-aged child in Ireland (Walsh, 2016). Free second-level education was introduced in September 1967, providing a pathway through the education system for all school going children in Ireland from that point onwards. Denny & Harmon (2000) state that the fee-paying aspect to secondary education prevailing prior to reform [the introduction of free secondary education] was a major hurdle for families in terms of affording to further the education of their children beyond primary school level. As a direct consequence, prior to the reform, those that received second level education – and by implication third level education – came from a wealthier socio-economic background. When taking the relative recency of the provision of free second-level education into account, it is not surprising that inequalities still exist in participation in higher education for those of differing socio-economic status.

Students from socio-economically marginalised areas still experience far lower rates of completion of second level education, as well as progression to third level education (Cahill, 2020). There have been significant efforts at school reform in recent decades to intervene in an education system that continues to provide significantly different outcomes based on socioeconomic position and background (Cahill, 2020). In terms of entry to higher education, the Higher Education Access Route (HEAR) scheme in particular has been of assistance in providing opportunities for students from marginalised economic communities to progress to third level. This is a college and university scheme that offers places on reduced points and extra college support to school leavers from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds who are resident in the Republic of Ireland. In addition, Student Universal Support Ireland (SUSI) have provided financial support to those in receipt of a higher education grant whilst completing their studies. According to recent statistics, 2,933 applicants accepted a HEAR offer to attend higher education in 2020 (Access College, 2020), while over 76,000 students were awarded SUSI funding for the academic year of 2021/2022 (SUSI Media, 2022), showing that these student assistant provisions have proved successful in allowing under-represented students to progress to third level education.

A worrying trend is still visible on progression to higher education, however, as studies have shown that under-represented students consistently find it more difficult to meaningfully adapt to and engage with a new educational setting in comparison with their peers from a background where marginalisation may be less prevalent (O'Shea, 2016; Peterson, Louw & Dumont, 2009). Students from marginalised groups are also consistently seen to have high non-progression and drop-out rates from third level education (Chen & Des Jardins, 2010; Long & Riley, 2007; Frawley, Pigott & Carroll, 2017). Kaye (2020) found that the extent to which grants / bursaries and other

educational assistance schemes can be effective in widening participation in higher education depends not only on their ability to compensate for financial disadvantage but also on the impact their provision can have in changing attitudes around young people's decision-making and students' integration at university. West et al. (2009) found that bursary receipt can increase retention of undergraduates in their first year of study. Interestingly, contrasting studies (OFFA, 2014; OFFA, 2015) have found that financial support is not the biggest determinant in student application in the higher education setting.

Even allowing for the allocation and receipt of student-assistance funding, low-income students have still been found to experience considerable financial stress whilst in full-time education (Harrison & Hatt, 2014). The assumption of household contribution to student funding assumed within the system of higher education financing can be especially problematic for students whose families are not in a position to contribute, with those from lower socio-economic groups particularly disadvantaged by the need to supplement their individual budgets (Moreau & Leathwood, 2006; Hordósy, Clark & Vickers, 2018). Many low-income students will undertake part-time employment alongside their studies in order to meet ever the increasing living costs associated with student life such as accommodation, food, travel, and the provision of books and other required college materials (Hordósy & Clark, 2019; Yorke & Thomas, 2003). Part-time employment is seen to be a bigger influence on working-class students' decision to withdraw from higher education compared to those from the middle or upper classes (Cooke et al., 2004). Unfortunately, the reality for many students is that, despite their best efforts at juggling higher education studies with part-time employment, their incomes will still not be enough to meet the cost of university life (Hordósy, Clark & Vickers, 2018). Whilst it may be stating the obvious, working during the academic year

means balancing the needs of study with the requirements of employment (Richardson, Evans & Gbadamosi, 2014). This is not without problem as part-time work has been found to adversely affect retention, academic involvement and satisfaction with academic performance, anticipated degree outcomes, social integration, belonging and wellbeing (Humphrey, 2006; Yorke & Longden, 2008). A study by Noble (2004) examined how finance plays a role in the decision of students to leave higher education without finishing their degree. Whilst this study found that students did not necessarily regard their non completion as negative immediately, feeling relieved from the pressures associated with university having left. This feeling of relief, however, was also tinged with sadness at what they perceived as wasting time on a course they did not complete.

Social Barriers:

A challenge that exists for under-represented students is adapting to a new educational setting as they transition from secondary school to higher education. Goodwin (2012: 38) speaks candidly about the 'personal growth' experienced by many under-represented students as they move through their journey in higher education towards graduation, but also highlights *"being away from what you know"* as being *"one of the most uncomfortable things you'll ever feel"*. This sense of "being away from what you know" refers to a challenge experienced by many under-represented students when starting their journey in higher education (Bathmaker, 2020; Keane, 2011). Higher education is a completely new environment for students from a marginalised background. For many, it will be the first time in their lives that they will have mixed [both educationally and socially] with people from a different socio-economic background to their own (Bathmaker, 2020). Research suggests that

working-class students tend to ‘stick together’ on campus rather than making new friends (Crozier et al., 2008). Goodwin (2002) argues that this happens as a reaction to a social climate that marginalised students either can’t understand or of which they don’t want to be a part. This self-segregating behaviour is essentially a self-protective buffering strategy in the face of an external threat (Keane, 2011). There is evidence from the literature that these students feel intimidated by the affluence and other markers of middle-class culture and lifestyle amongst other students in the higher educational setting (Lynch & O’Riordan, 1998). It is no surprise, therefore, that this can lead to class-based ‘clique-ing’ together of students based on similarities or commonalities including socio-economic status or background (Keane, 2011). This class-based grouping together of students is unsurprising and resonates strongly with the principle of ‘homophily’ whereby contact between similar people occurs at a higher rate than contact amongst dissimilar people (McPherson, Smith-Lovin & Cook, 2001). As friendship is often based on perceptions of similarity, or ‘social homophily’, it is perhaps not surprising that students on campus may group together in this way by ‘sticking to their own’ (Keane, 2009; Mouw, 2006).

May & Bousted (2004) found evidence that withdrawal, or dropout, from higher education was primarily a result of connected issues of student support in various forms as well as unmet expectations. Lack of support from staff outside the timetable and lack of peer support consistently feature as factors that affect the decision of students to dropout (Gorard et al., 2006). Students often report to having experienced high levels of support prior to university and view support from staff to be an important aspect of their academic life. Many express high expectations of the support they would like to receive when transitioning to higher education and can feel let down if it is lacking (Gorard et al., 2006). Sellers and Van der Velden (2003) outline ‘targeted

learning support' as one of the principles of retention, arguing that support should be targeted towards those who require it by being discipline based, study skill based, key skill based and/or pastoral based. In a study of successful student diversity, Powney (2002) found evidence that institutions are changing towards providing support throughout a student's career in order to maximise retention. Undoubtedly, institutions provide support to students in different ways, and no one way can be deemed superior or inferior to another. Gutteridge (2001), however, identifies the first six weeks of attendance at higher education as the most difficult period for students as they balance their personal expectations of higher education with the realities of the workings of higher education. Gutteridge (2001) also highlights that the anxiety for social and academic integration to be highest in this period, noting that early support mechanisms and resources are vital at this point in transition in assisting students to adjust to their new educational setting.

Tinto (1993) contends that it is important for students to become involved and engaged in other areas of college / university life such as campus organisations, athletic events, and other such activities in order to broaden their spectrum of 'connectedness' and to increase their social contacts within the higher educational setting. Studies have shown that many university students from historically under-represented backgrounds who successfully graduate from their undergraduate degree programme indicate that participation in extra-curricular activities as being important to their success (King, McQuarrie & Brigham, 2021). Despite this, students classified as working-class generally engage less in university-linked extra-curricular activities in comparison to their more affluent peers (Lido et al., 2011). These differences in participation appear to be occurring for a variety of reasons such as time constraints and feelings of non-inclusion (Lido et al., 2011). Lack of participation, or non-participation, in such events

can disadvantage students in obtaining what is considered to be the ‘full’ student experience (Lido et al., 2011).

Cultural Barriers:

Many students from a marginalised socio-economic background will be the first person in their family to progress to higher education (Scanlon et al., 2019). Whilst marginalised students may be trend setters of sorts within the family unit in terms of first-generation progression to and participation in higher education, some academic literature suggests that general attitudes of parents of marginalised students towards higher education tend to be positive in nature. Scanlon et al. (2019) found that working-class parents seemed to value education and were eager for their children to progress beyond second level. Perhaps the alteration of the jobs market in Ireland over recent decades has shaped the thinking of many working-class parents in terms of an understanding that educational qualifications of some sort are now required in almost all sectors of employment, but the main point of focus for parents in terms of their children’s participation in higher education is one of their children receiving “opportunities” that they themselves did not receive (Irwin & Elley, 2012; Kirk et al., 2011). It is the case that many parents of marginalised students certainly understand the value of educational attainment in terms of significant social mobility. For many, the benefits of higher education can often be discussed in instrumental terms, as a route to securing a ‘good' job for example (Scanlon et al., 2019). Of course, a basic knowledge and understanding of the working world tells us that every job is a ‘good’ job, but many of these parents simply lack the necessary vocabulary or terminology to expand on what they mean by the word ‘good’. ‘Good’ in their eyes almost certainly means a position of employment that is unattainable for those not in possession of a

third level degree – for example, teaching / nursing / engineering / accountancy and other professional careers. Although extremely supportive of and enthusiastic towards their children's participation in higher education, in many cases these parents lack the required knowledge to really support their children in the decision-making process with regards to where higher education should be undertaken, what courses to consider, etc. (Ball, Reay & David, 2002). It is also undeniable that these parents possess a lack of familiarity with the third level educational system itself and how best to help their children navigate their way through it (Forsyth & Furlong, 2003). Many parents feel at a disadvantage in terms of gathering information with regards to higher education and very often the research and is left to the student themselves at a time when they may not have a true understanding of what course may be suitable to either their academic abilities or their individual personalities (Ball et al., 2002). It seems almost certain that third-party intervention is needed to ensure that astute and knowledgeable advice is provided in advance of and throughout participation in higher education. Research has shown the importance of effective guidance counselling in preparing marginalised students for participation in higher education, but quite often the reassuring voice of a school guidance counsellor is not replicated on progression to higher education (Christie, 2016). Hence, it is surely not surprising that many marginalised students feel overwhelmed on beginning their journey in higher education. They are aware of the support of their parents and the pride that exists in their continuation along the path of education, but they are also mindful of the fact that their parents do not fully understand this journey having not travelled the road themselves (Bowl, 2001).

Whilst familial support may be present in the lives of marginalised students at the point where progression to higher education may be of consideration, quite often a difference can be observed in the community environment of these young people. It

remains a reality that students from lower socio-economic groups progressing to higher education are likely to be accompanied by fewer peers than are students from higher socio-economic groups (Keane, 2009). For the majority of young people from lower socio-economic groups it is *'normal'* to not progress to university in the same way that it is *'abnormal'* for students from higher socio-economic groups to not progress to university (Forsyth & Furlong, 2000). Indeed, studies have found that many students from lower socio-economic groups who progress to higher education may lose contact with or grow apart from friends or those within their community as a consequence of their participation in higher education (Bufton, 2003). This type of communication breakdown can impact on a young person from both a psychological and sociological point of view. To think that those within the community may be somewhat sceptical of their participation in higher education and may express negativity towards their participation can often be a cause of considerable distress for marginalised students (Thomas, 2002). A study carried out by Smokowski, Reynolds & Bezruczko (1999) found that dreams of a better future often served to soften the impact of the students' current impoverished environments. The researchers found some dreams to be realistic and some to be optimistic, but were unanimous in the assumption that dreaming of a better 'tomorrow' was clearly a strong mechanism to aid in making it through 'today'. While seeing a brighter future may sometimes be enough for marginalised students to look beyond the opinions of their peer group or members of their community to further their own participation in higher education (Smokowski, Reynolds & Bezruczko, 1999), it would still appear that a high level of motivation on the part of students is required to counter such negativity in order to prolong participation in education as the difference between themselves and others in

their community become apparent in terms of higher education (non)participation (Keane, 2009).

2.2 The Works of Pierre Bourdieu: Constructing a Theoretical Framework

Pierre Bourdieu was a French sociologist and public intellectual. Bourdieu was born on 1st August 1930 in the Béarn region of the French Pyrénées-Atlantiques. His father never completed his own schooling, whilst his mother continued her schooling to the age of sixteen. From a young age Bourdieu showed academic talent, successfully passing an entrance examination to attend the *lycée Louis le Grand* in Paris – a school that was celebrated as one of the principal preparatory schools for students aspiring to attend the elite Parisian training schools. From there he gained entry to the *École Normale Supérieure (ENS),* also located in Paris, where he studied philosophy. A career intertwining various positions within education [along with a year-long military service during the Algerian war of independence] led Bourdieu's rise to become a respected chair of Sociology at the *Collége de France* (Stahl et al., 2019). Bourdieu's life represents a dramatic rise in social status from a working-class background to some of the most esteemed educational institutions in all of France (Stahl et al., 2019).

It would appear that Bourdieu's personal experience of schooling helped to construct his perspective of social positioning from an early age. As a rural boarder in the *lycée* he was forced to wear a grey smock whilst day pupils arrived in the latest attire. It should be of little surprise, therefore, that social class and culture were the primary themes behind many of Bourdieu's works. An implicit question lay behind much of Bourdieu's work regarding education: Is school a democratising agent? In other words, can everyone succeed in education? In its most basic form, Bourdieu viewed education as a means of social mobility and as a pathway to achieving societal

equality. In the mind of Bourdieu, education should not be tilted in favour of the middle-to-upper classes. The provision of education should be equal amongst all, irrespective of social class and circumstantial upbringing (Bourdieu, 1977; 1979). Whilst a very noble ideology, Bourdieu was also acutely aware of the fact that this was not the way in which the education system worked. Much of Bourdieu's work around experience within the schooling system focused on the pressures and prejudices placed upon those from poorer backgrounds, like that of his own, within elite educational institutions (Smith, 2020). His own personal experiences, along with the experiences of others of similar socio-economic status to that of his own, almost certainly led to many of the social and cultural ideologies developed by Bourdieu throughout his career. Throughout his works, Bourdieu composed 'theoretical tools to think with' which he refined and adapted over the course of his career (Stahl, 2016a). This approach is central when attempting to outline Bourdieu's understanding on education as he outlines the concept of social and cultural differences being inseparable as well as his belief that, over time, structural disadvantages are internalized to varying degrees which then produce certain forms of behaviours (Robbins, 2005; Stahl et al., 2019).

The starting point for Bourdieu's approach to class is the claim that an ***agent*** [person] holds a subjective position within an objective ***field*** [social space] (Bourdieu, 1993). A field is a hierarchical setting in which all agents are located based on their position within society. Whilst objective in terms of starting class positioning within the field, Bourdieu argues that the social position of an individual agent can be altered subjectively throughout the lifespan. Bourdieu devoted considerable time and intellectual effort to his analysis of education and made a concerted effort to highlight the social (re)productive effects of formal education. Bourdieu (1997) believed that

education acts as one of the tools that can be used to upwardly mobilise one's position within society

Bourdieu defined ***habitus*** as a property of social agents that is structured by one's past and present circumstances such as family upbringing and educational experiences (Bourdieu, 2020). Habitus focuses on our dispositions of acting, feeling, thinking and being. It captures how we carry within us our history, how we bring this history into our present circumstances, and how we make choices to act in certain ways and not others. Where we are in life at any one moment is the result of countless events in the past that have shaped our path. Bourdieu believed that dispositions are (re)produced in relation and in response to the social, economic, and cultural structures with which agents identify and from which they distance themselves (Murphy & Costa, 2016). For Bourdieu, structural disadvantages are internalized through socialization to varying degrees, producing certain forms of behaviour as a result (Stahl et al., 2019). Bourdieu believed that individuals who share a similar social class and/or social space experience many of the same conditions in various aspects of life and work. Individuals who are proximate in social class are more likely to come together in such social space groups as families and neighbourhoods. In addition, they are inclined to develop similar lifestyles, outlooks and dispositions that contribute to their sense of place in the world (Bourdieu, 2020).

As Bourdieu sought to introduce new ways of thinking about social class, he held to his principal belief that society cannot be analysed simply in terms of economic classes and ideologies (Stahl et al., 2019). Bourdieu believed that, in order to gain a more accurate representation of the social classes, we must understand the educational factors that foster classes subjectivities and reaffirm the symbolic power attached to what Bourdieu refers to as capitals (Stahl et al., 2019). According to Bourdieu, every

individual has a portfolio of *capital*. Various forms of capital contribute to a person's identity and the development of that identity (Bourdieu, 1986). Unfortunately, inequalities exist in terms of the availability and/or functionality of various forms of capital. The workings of capital can be evident when looking at the educational journey of agents of differing social class:

- Economic Capital: This refers to the economic resources that are available or not available to an agent *[Does the agent have the financial resources available to progress to higher education? Does the agent have sufficient funding to continue with their studies having progressed to higher education? Is the continuous investment of this capital into higher education transubstantiated into broader future financial gain from chosen employment on completion of a third level degree programme?]*
- Social Capital: This outlines the advantages and/or disadvantages attained from groups belonged to or people known *[How does the agent respond to a new educational setting? How does the agent interact with their surroundings and those who occupy these surroundings? What similarities and differences of taste exist between the those who occupy the educational setting – Clothing, Interests, Mannerisms.]*
- Cultural Capital: This refers to information and skills attained for the mobilisation of an agent within society *[What competencies / qualifications can be attained from education that will allow an agent to mobilise upwards within a society? Does the family of an agent place an emphasis on the importance education? Is there a history of education within the familial and/ or communal structure of the agent? Within the community, are those who attend higher education distinctively classed or perceived differently to those who don't?]*

Bourdieu & Passeron (1977) believed that the university system sustained the reproduction of social inequalities by promoting attitudes, speech, behaviours, and knowledge that are more congruent with the practices of families of high socio-economic status than families of lower socio-economic status. Bourdieu & Passeron (1977) argued that socio-economically marginalised students have a lower chance of success in higher education not only as a result of less access to financial capital, but also as a result of less access to social and cultural capital in terms of the knowledge, behaviours and values that are less familiar to these individuals but which are promoted within a the higher education system. Calarco (2014) uses Bordieuan tools to outline how marginalised students themselves, along with their parents, lack familiarity with and knowledge of the dominant culture of the higher education system and, as a result, are unable to effectively acclimatise to their new educational surroundings.

Drawing upon all of Bourdieu's sociological thinking tools together allows us to better understand his view of agents and how their (inter)actions within in their surrounding fields. Bourdieu's theory of practice was focused on strategies, where the social action of individuals is guided by a practical sense by what he referred to as a "feel for the game" (1988: 782). *Game*, considered here as a provocative metaphor, assists researchers in understanding the relationship between agent, field, habitus, and capital (Wacquant, 2011; Stahl et al., 2019). Bourdieu & Wacquant (1992: 130) remind us that "people are not fools, knowing how to read a present and future that fits them, which is made for them and for which they are made". 'Playing the game' allows agents to place themselves in a societal position in which they feel comfortable, whilst also avoiding situations whereby they may be made to feel uncomfortable or settings they feel are "not for the likes of us" (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992: 130).

Many of Bourdieu's ideas have been applied within educational research to examine various topics such as enrolment, performance, retention, progression, and experiences. Very often Bourdieu's theories have been used when conducting research into the inequalities that exist within the field of education – particularly when dealing with issues such as social class, gender, ethnicity and so forth. Outlined below are some examples of research that has drawn on the work of Bourdieu to highlight inequalities that exist within the educational field when focusing explicitly on the theme of **social class**.

Ingram (2011) draws on Bourdieu's concepts of 'habitus' and 'field' to explore the complex and nuanced expressions of identity amongst her participants [15/16-year-old boys from three different year eleven classes in a Catholic grammar school situated in a working-class neighbourhood in Belfast] and where they view their place in their social world. Ingram highlights that for working-class boys who are academically high achieving there are potential emotional difficulties involved in the process of forging an identity as a 'successful pupil' whilst maintaining, or indeed choosing to ignore, their working-class background and upbringing. Ingram argues that a habitus does not always develop neatly in response to one field but may have multiple influences from different fields. The participants in her study, for example, will have a 'habitus' in response to the 'field' that is their school, whilst also developing a 'habitus' in response to the 'field' that is their working-class home and/or their working-class community. How the participants transition from one field to another can have a huge impact on how they view their position in the social world and how they progress educationally.

Similarly, Stahl (2016b) spent a year researching the educational aspirations of 23 white working-class boys [aged 14-16 years] across three London schools. For many of the participants of this study, attending university was portrayed as an essential step to long-term economic security. Whilst wanting to succeed in education, however, there also very much existed a sense of loyalty to their working-class background that may have had the potential to stall the progress of these students on their academic journey. Their learning at school often needed to be balanced with their home lives which were grounded in emotional commitment, social ties and collective responsibility for the vulnerable. Interestingly, what stood out from Stahl's study was that many of the participants had a somewhat egalitarian view of education and, indeed, of the world in general, in terms of their desire to "fit in" in a society where *"everyone has an equal say"* and *"nobody is better than anyone else"*. Whilst very noble in theory, the boys also were of the realisation that class fairness and equality does not always exist within the field of education. When asked to examine images associated with elite boarding schools and universities, the majority were fascinated yet unsettled by the "otherness" of these lifestyles. Many of the boys said that these institutions would not appeal to them and that they would feel uncomfortable in such settings and surroundings. They felt that such institutions would be more suited to those from the middle-classes and upper-classes who have been brought up with an ambition to attend such schools or universities. Such views informed their own aspirations around higher education, leading them to feel that attendance at these prestigious institutions could bring about feelings of inferiority and possible social exclusion. Bourdieu (1977) often writes of how objective limits become transformed into a practical anticipation of objective limits: A sense of one's place which leads one to exclude oneself from places where one feels they are excluded or may be excluded.

A study by Bathmaker, Ingram & Waller (2013) explored education as a route to social mobility. Within their report, a particular focus was placed on the response of students from differing class backgrounds to the competitive environment of higher education [The students were selected from two universities located within the city of Bristol – University of Bristol and University of the West of England]. The report investigated the extent to which students mobilise capitals in both 'active' and 'internalised' ways to position themselves advantageously for a future career. Bourdieu's notion of "having a feel for the game" is evident throughout the study, i.e. Students of different social classes were observed to be aware of the 'game' that exists within the education system (McCormick, 2006). Students saw the advantages attained from successful participation in higher education and they understood how the system works in terms of advantageous social positioning having attained a degree from an institution of higher education. One interesting point raised in the report, however, was the fact that both working-class and middle-class students in this study were aware of arguments that a degree is no longer enough to mobilise within society. Differences arose in the ease of access and connections that middle-class students had when securing work placements and internships throughout their time in higher education in comparison to their working-class peers. These opportunities can be attributed to the social capital that has been constructed during the life-time of the students in terms of people known – either by themselves or by family members or others in their social circles – in various fields of employment. Experience gained from the aforementioned placements and internships can then be utilised, in addition to the attainment of a degree, to mobilise within society. It appears that the 'game' was no longer just about educational advantage based on quality of degree or the awarding institution of said degree. Whilst participation in higher education for marginalised students has widened, the stakes

have also evidently been raised as the privileged seek ever-increasing ways of maintaining their dominant position and coming out on top.

Reay, Crozier & Clayton (2010) conducted a study with the aim of assessing working-class students' identities and experiences within an environment of higher education in the United Kingdom. Depending on a range of factors, varying results highlighted that the rewards and recognition of being a university student are powerfully differentiated across the higher education field. Working-class students attending both a Northern university and an Eastern university felt quite comfortable in both their geographic and academic field surroundings. The majority of the students interviewed from the Northern and Eastern universities still lived at home and many students of a similar economic background to their own were also in attendance at both universities. Whilst feeling comfortable in their surroundings, however, the outlook of many of the participants towards their academic studies was quite worrying. Although most did not worry about attendance at lectures and seminars, it was therefore unsurprising that many of the working-class students surveyed were taking repeat examinations at the end of the academic year. 'Fitting in' was quite easy for working-class students in this environment, those who 'stood out' were unfortunately those who took pride in their academic work and who strove for high grades. The contrast was stark when comparing working-class students in attendance at a Midland university and a Southern university. Students from a working-class background were considerably in the minority in terms of those attending the universities in question. Whilst academically able in terms of the challenges posed by the workload of their chosen degree programme, the working-class students quite often found it more difficult to associate socially with their more affluent peers. In this instance, the working-class students were able to 'fit in' academically but sometimes 'stood out' in terms of their

marginalised background and upbringing. A persistent issue in this paper is one that highlights the fact that working-class students in the UK, for the most part, end up in attendance at institutions regarded as 'second class' both by themselves and others. By default, the most culturally disadvantaged run the risk of ending up with a devalued degree if, indeed, they end up with any degree at all.

2.3 The Importance of Aspiration in Educational Success

"The unequal opportunity structures of society determine aspirations by determining the extent to which they can be satisfied" **(Bourdieu, 1973: 83)**

One of the earliest experiences of higher education for all students is the phase where participation in higher education is being explored [i.e. as students approach the end of their secondary schooling and are considering their next step in life, either within or beyond the world of education]. Aspiration is a key factor to consider when exploring participation in higher education, particularly when dealing with participants moving towards the point of transition from secondary school to higher education. Closely related to debates around aspiration are how young people plan and develop time spans for their lives (Grant, 2017). The relationship between planning for the future and setting goals is important. Brannen and Nilsen (2017) argue that a goal is something that can only be achieved by careful planning. On the other hand, however, it is widely acknowledged that *hoping* is an integral part of what it is to be human (McGreer, 2004). Webb (2007) outlines two specific modes of hoping which connect with the concept of aspiration:

- **Resolute Hope –** Hope directed towards an object of desire which is future-orientated and deemed to be of significance to the hoper *[In this instance, the hoper has the resolve to set aside one's evidence-based beliefs and perceives oneself as capable of deriving pathways to desired goals that are deemed to be worth the risk of actively pursuing for the purpose of personal transformation]*

- **Utopian Hope** – Hope directed towards a historical plan for a qualitatively different society, a liberating utopia shared by members of a collectivity *[In this instance, hope is grounded in a commitment to a goal-orientated social practice through which human beings become the agents of their own destiny and wilfully strive to create a new and better future for both themselves and others]*

Historically, aspirations have been understood by examining the influence of structural forces [e.g. social class] and spheres of influence [e.g. family/ school/ community] (Archer, Hollingworth & Halsall, 2007). Bourdieu (1984) supports this point when typically conceptualising aspirations as future-focused and embedded in the imaginary, but also informed by social history and current contexts. For Bourdieu (1984: 150), aspirations are continuously (re)produced through the interaction of habitus, capital and field, using words such as “imagined”, “real”, “blurred” and “fuzzy” to highlight how aspirations are always in formation, as well as continually being contested based on earlier structures of objective opportunities as well as present circumstances. What is clear for Bourdieu (1984) is that hopes and probabilities are always working in tandem whereby aspirations of different generations are formed in relation to desired opportunities and their perceived chances of obtaining these opportunities. Therefore, for Bourdieu, aspirations are socially embedded in a way that one may come to understand a future that ‘fits them’ or a future that feels limited and is perceived as being ‘not for the likes of us’ (Threadgold, 2018).

It has been well documented in the past that the transition from adolescence to young adulthood is one of the most influential periods for determining future education and career decisions (Stettersten, Furstenberg & Rumbaut, 2005). From adolescence to young adulthood, young people are exploring different identities and considering

possibilities for their future. Studies examining transition from adolescence into young adulthood have indicated the importance of educational and career aspirations for later success in school and work (Powers & Wotjkiewics, 2004; Schoon, 2006). Indeed, studies have noted that high educational and career aspirations during adolescence are associated with high educational achievement, occupational prestige, and wage attainments in adulthood (Mello, 2008; HEA, 2019).

Whilst aspiration has been positively linked with the aforementioned benefits, one must also remember that, throughout adolescence, young people are becoming aware of the barriers that may hinder the fulfilment of their plans. In this sense, aspirations can be distinguished from expectations, reflecting differences between what one hopes to achieve and what one expects to achieve (Gutman, Schoon & Sabates, 2012). Of course, neither aspirations nor expectations operate in a vacuum and a variety of social and personal factors influence on the ultimate outlook of one's future self. A study by Boxer et al. (2011) examined whether disconnection between educational aspirations and expectations was associated with socio-economic status, academic performance, academic risk-related behaviours and related psychological factors in an economically diverse sample of early adolescence in a public middle school. This study found that students from lower-income neighbourhoods were more likely than their peers to have aspirations that exceeded their expectations, that is to say adolescents that were at risk socio-economically were more inclined than their more affluent peers to believe that they were less likely to achieve the level of academic achievement than they would like to. Furthermore, Boxer et al. (2011) found that, while less than ideal, it is normal for marginalised students to desire high levels of educational attainment while at the same time believing that these desired levels

are out of their reach. In many cases, educational aspirations are typically lowered as students move through the years of second-level education towards the point of transition to higher education as adolescents become more aware of their socio-economic surroundings and other associated barriers which may hinder their potential to successfully participate in higher education. Romito (2021) outlines that university aspirations may not reflect what students realistically expect to pursue or the choice of a specific educational programme. This point is supported by Bourdieu (1984: 144) who states that some individuals may experience disjuncture between "aspirations and real probabilities", something which may have led their predecessors to accept their social destiny almost unquestionably. Seeing how aspirations are structured in the social world and often aligned with the prerogatives of the dominant classes, we understand how Bourdieu sometimes views aspirations as dreams not fully realised where individuals are often obliged to live out the contradiction between their sometimes idealistic aspirations and the reality of their social and cultural identity (Stahl et al., 2019).

A more rounded view of how aspirations are formed, however, could be constructed by applying the layers of Bronfenbrenner's Human Ecology Theory. First introduced by Bronfenbrenner (1977), Human Ecology Theory seeks to understand how person-environment interactions influence individuals. This theoretical approach embeds the individual in a nested and mutually influential system that allows for multiple layers of analysis and interaction of the individual. It is possible to recognise how the layers of Human Ecology Theory below can influence an individual's aspirations and expectations from a young age and throughout their educational journey:

Microsystem	Interpersonal relationships that happen in the immediate context of the individual.	Influence of ….. • Family members • Teachers • Guidance counsellor • Friends
Mesosystem	Collection of interpersonal relationships found in the microsystem and how they interact with one another.	Are similar / different messages being heard from those mentioned in the box above??
Exosystem	Policies, practices and authorities that influence the individual.	• National financial aid policies • Institutional culture
Macrosystem	Societal influences that effect environments and individuals.	• Cultural values • Socio-historical influences • Geographical influences

Table 1: Bronfenbrenner's Human Ecology Theory

It is widely acknowledged that poverty and inequality have a complex relationship with people's self-appraisals as society tends to emphasise individual effort as a method of overcoming adversity – socio-economic marginalisation being an 'adversity' in this instance (Shirazi & Biel, 2005). On the one hand, the stigma attached to being of low socio-economic status can negatively affect people's self-esteem (Twenge & Campbell, 2002). Conversely, research also shows that believing that one's group is deprived can be positively associated with in-group identification (Walker & Smith, 2002). In considering working-class engagement with education, research has previously focused on how embracing the identity of student – at the expense of the working-class identity – can be understood as the beginning of a separation from one's class background (Stahl, 2021). Focus should now be directed towards how some of the factors outlined in blue above can work in tandem to raise aspirations of marginalised students.

Influence of Family

Developmental studies have shown that children learn the importance of educational and vocational attainment from parents who model these values and outcomes (Dubow, Boxer & Huesmann, 2009). A study by Gofen (2009) found the mechanism that enabled a group of under-represented, first-generation students to break the inter-generational cycle of non-participation in higher education and to pave the way to social mobility lay in day-to-day family life during their upbringing. Exploring how families with limited material resources succeed in creating a better future for their children highlights the importance of the non-material resources of a family (Gofen, 2009). Previous studies outline how familial habits, priorities, belief systems, and lifestyles contribute to the familial resilience and their ability to rise above their disadvantages and escape the poverty trap (Furstenberg, 2005; Walsh, 2002). The core idea underlying the concept of familial resilience is that a family can overcome adverse circumstances by utilising its behavioural, emotional, and relational assets (Gofen, 2009). For example, Orthner, Jones-Sanpei & Williamson (2004: 160) concluded that children of poor families could demonstrate an "ability to achieve academically and socio-psychologically despite the lack of economic resources in their homes". For the purpose of this study, interviews were undertaken with 50 first-generation students. These interviews explored events in their lives which they believed enabled them to attain higher education (Gofen, 2009). Education is viewed as a framing value for the participants of this study as each of the interview participants, without exception, stated that their family or one of their family members was the explanation for their educational breakthrough. Within the educational frame,

three main values arose according to which these students were raised: family solidarity, respect, and ambition.

One of the points highlighted in this study was the idea of time being invested by parents in the education of their children. Parents used education as a tool to direct their children to a future far ahead: Investing emotionally in the importance of their children's education as a means to a more secure future for them in the long-term. Some of the parents perceived their children's education as a way to fulfil their own missed opportunity, perceiving education as a pathway out of poverty or a way of bettering what they themselves had achieved within education by consistently speaking with their children about many aspects of their own life which they felt were frustrating and which they would prefer their children to avoid: their low income, their daily struggle, precarity and being unemployed even though they wanted to work, not being able to get ahead, and feeling frustrated at having missed their life opportunity. Time was spent by parents in helping their children with homework from a young age and attending school parent evenings. Furthermore, many interview participants highlighted parental financial investments in their education, sometimes at the expense of other required provisions, to ensure required books and materials were provided for the purpose of class work and independent study at home.

Aspects of the parent-child relationship, including expressions of unconditional love and aspirations for the children, were a significant motive in the data. Participants raised the point that parents expressed firm belief in their children's abilities, at times opposing traditional views of the school system. Parents did not doubt their children's abilities and made them think that nothing was impossible. Phrases like "when you succeed" were consistent throughout the study, indicating firm parental belief in the ability of their children to achieve whatever they aspired to within education. In return,

the students felt a duty to fulfil the expectations of their parents, and their motivations were out of love and respect for the belief their parents consistently showed in their academic capabilities. Some participants leaned on the ability of their parents to “make so much when having so little”. They expressed gratitude for everything their parents have done, often with limited financial resources, and recognise the sacrifices that were made for their own educational betterment.

Throughout the education process, many of the students at the centre of the study also felt that the education of their siblings helped to shape them or, conversely, that they themselves played a role in the education of their siblings. Some saw older siblings attending higher education as the beginning of their own journey. They took confidence from seeing someone close to them entering the world of higher education and used this as a motivational tool for their own potential participation. On the other hand, other participants took their siblings’ education issues into their own hands and helped their parents. They saw themselves as vital to the educational process at home and endeavoured to serve as role models for their siblings.

Influence of School

Institutional Habitus: In his investigation of the relationship between schooling and systems of thought, Bourdieu argued that the school is a central generative space for habitus, where the student is directly and indirectly imparted with patterns of thinking and being (Stahl, 2015). Grenfell (2008: 29) outlines Bourdieu’s perception of education as a “mechanism for consolidating social separation”. Building on this point, Dillabough (2004: 490) again references Bourdieu’s thought process when outlining that education essentially represents “a central ideological and cultural site of

socialization that was often more likely to reproduce, rather than challenge, social inequality in the state". Rendered simply, Bourdieu argued that within educational contexts, the cultural capital of the middle and upper classes are rewarded, while the capitals of the lower classes are systematically devalued (Stahl, 2015). Furthermore, educational institutions ensure the profitability of the dominant classes' cultural capital where abilities measured by scholastic criteria often stem not from natural "gifts" but from the greater or lesser affinity between class cultural habits and the demands of the educational system (Mills, 2008: 83). Based on the above assumptions, it comes as no surprise that for many working-class students, the experience of education is fraught with potential risks and embarrassments, where the majority feel powerlessness along with a sense of educational worthlessness (Reay, 2002). Embracing educational 'success' grounded in middle-class aspiration requires challenging identity negotiations, which means that for many working-class students, the losses may be greater than the gains (Reay, 2002). It is here the institutional habitus of schools becomes important. As research focuses on educational decision-making and how young people assess the different options available to them, examination into the role of school institutional habitus and the extent to which different groups of young people have equal access to the required information for educational progression has become more thorough (Smyth & Banks, 2012).

A study by Tarabini & Curran (2019) found that individuals' identities are deeply rooted in social and relational processes and, consequently, self-perceptions and evaluations are mediated by the perceptions and reactions of "significant others" such as teachers. Feelings of personal incapacity to cope with academic requirements represented one of the ways in which working-class students experienced the schooling process and, in this sense, students' reflections on their own capacities and abilities were not

independent of their previous educational trajectories or of their daily interactions with teachers and peers. Working-class students in the study described themselves as “not good enough” for study and blamed themselves for their failed educational trajectory (Tarabini & Curran, 2019: 55). One of the consequences of this feeling was the students’ sense of futility in the face of present academic requirements and future educational pathways, a sense of “educational worthlessness” in the terms of Reay (2006: 297). As a result of their perceived educational inadequacy, participants of the study demonstrated a resistance to school practices and displayed a feeling of uncertainty and unpredictability that was explained a lack of control over the rules of the educational frame. As Gale & Parker (2015) highlight, aspirations are always conceived within the limits of a social imaginary; they are framed by individuals’ social circumstances and their imagined place in the world. In this sense, students’ assessments of their own possibilities were deeply permeated by their perception of what is and what is not suitable ‘for people like them’ (Bourdieu, 1993). Aligned with this point, the term ‘institutional habitus’ is of great utility in exploring the role of schools in generating different students’ learning identities, dispositions, decisions and ultimately their opportunities for school success (Reay, David & Ball, 2001). McGregor & Mills (2012) argue that the ways in which schools construct their learning environments, teaching programmes and pedagogical relationships are conducive to encouraging such young people to engage with educational processes. Tarabini & Curran (2019) outline that an inclusive institutional habitus is characterized by a high collective commitment to the educational success of all students and, as such, begins by recognising student diversity, in this instance in terms of class. An exclusive institutional habitus, on the contrary, mainly characterizes the role of the teacher as simply to focus on knowledge transmission and therefore placing the educational

success/failure firmly on the shoulders of the students themselves (Tarabini & Curran, 2019). Of course, there are intermediate positions between these two extremes, and more research may be needed in this regard. What the study of Tarbini & Curran (2019) found, however, was that those schools with an inclusive institutional habitus have a more active role in compensating for social inequalities and, collectively, they increase the possibilities for students' educational engagement, whilst those schools with an exclusive institutional habitus tend to reproduce social inequalities to a greater extent, thus reinforcing working-class students' distance from and misrecognition in the educational field.

Beginning in 1990, the Consortium on Chicago School Research initiated an intensive longitudinal study of the internal workings and external community conditions that distinguished improving elementary schools from those that failed to improve. Whilst different in terms of the school-going age of students, the study was similar to this particular research project in the sense that the schools in question were situated in poor neighbourhoods and enrolled students from families considered to be low-income. Five essential supports for school improvement were established which provided a window to examine the complex interplay of how schools are organized to alter the odds for improving student achievement: 1) A coherent instructional guidance system that informs what is being taught and how it is being taught; 2) Professional capacity of school faculty to work together and improve instruction; 3) Strong parent-community ties; 4) A student-centred learning climate to endorse ambitious academic work coupled with support for each student; 5) School leadership to drive change by influencing high instructional and learning standards, supplementing academic and social supports, building relationships across the school community, and enlisting teachers that share in the outlook of school improvement (Bryk, 2010). This work was

motivated by a belief that schools can and must do better to provide a good education for every child, irrespective of the community they come from or their socio-economic status, representing high and noble aspirations for the children of Chicago and the school system (Bryk, 2010). Results varied in response to the study, with improving schools found in all kinds of neighbourhoods varying by socio-economic and racial/ethnic composition. In contrast, stagnating schools piled up in very poor, racially isolated African American neighbourhoods. It is important to remember that not all school communities start out in the same place and confront the same problems, but at the same time importance lies in the efforts of schools to foster the aspiration of students to endeavour to succeed within education and to instil belief in students that it is possible to do so (Bryk, 2010).

Student-Teacher Relationships: Stahl (2021) explored the affective dimension of the relationship between student and teacher in fostering a space to question and critique one's selfhood and, by implication, to – as Bourdieu (1985: 728) would refer to – "permit oneself" to go against the grain. This paper presents an argument that relationships structured around trust and confidence-building are integral to the identity work of marginalised working-class young men, influencing their learner identities and their future orientation towards education. Previous research has sought to capture the importance of student-teacher relationships specifically in regard to unsettling the pervasive deficit views of students from underprivileged backgrounds (Reichert & Nelson, 2012). Whilst research suggests that adolescent girls seem to have a stronger future orientation to education (Holt, 2008; Wong, Parent & Kinoshi, 2019), Stahl utilises this paper to broaden our understanding of how student-teacher relationships work in tandem with working-class boys' aspirations and identities. Like all students,

working-class young men, who are often the least likely to engage in their education, search for spaces where they feel safe and valued (Stahl, 2021). This study documents how 42 males from a working-class background from six different schools in Australia transitioned to a range of Australian universities. None of the participants attended schools where there was a high percentage of students considering university as the natural next step in the educational ladder. This study found the role of the teacher to be broad in terms of fostering educational aspiration in working-class boys. The data suggests that working-class boys who are upwardly mobile value the role of the teacher as *persistent nurturer* in terms of progressing their academic work and as *supporter* in raising their aspirations. What stands out from this study is that educators in disadvantaged areas are routinely adopting varied strategies which resonate with working-class young men who are considering their educational options post-secondary school. Through privileging their emotional life worlds, demonstrating a disposition of 'going beyond' and building trust over time, it opens up the possibility for these young men to establish themselves as a certain type of learner. Furthermore, based on the words of the participants, it appears that the work done by educators to build relationships and foster a future orientation towards further study seemed to fall largely outside the domain of their formal classroom and career guidance counselling as teachers take an interest in the lives of their students and their families, making a conscious effort to support learners with more than solely the learning of their academic course material.

Guidance Counsellor: Gale & Parker (2015) outline that to realise aspirations requires navigational capacities, developed through 'archives of experiences' that create a sense of available pathways. A common challenge for under-represented

students as they try to navigate a pathway to university is a lack of knowledge or information about the general field of higher education, from initial enrolment procedures right through to the workings of the institute itself (Romito, 2022). Perhaps surprisingly, research has shown that working-class students often distrust the official information provided by universities at open days or on their websites, preferring instead to rely on persons they know directly or with whom they feel a sense of proximity for the provision of education regarding higher education (Slack et al., 2014). King (1996) noted that students of low socio-economic status tended to rely on high [secondary] school counsellors as the single most likely and trusted source of information about college, and also highlighted that low-income school students in their senior [final] year who consistently consulted with a school counsellor regarding their post-secondary plans were more intent on attending college. A study by Reid & Moore (2008) supported this point as many participants identified the school guidance counsellor as an important connection in providing them with information about colleges, the college application process, scholarship information, and financial aid information when preparing to transition from second-level education to higher education. Reid & Moore (2008) found the school guidance counsellor to be in a position to provide students with the information needed to make course selections suited to their strengths and interests on completion of secondary education. In addition, as a part of developing an academic plan, the role of the school guidance counsellor also includes providing information about potential career opportunities on attainment of a degree from an institute of higher education. In essence, a knowledgeable school guidance counsellor can vaguely map the educational future of a student. Although variables exist in terms of adapting socially and academically to higher education, a knowledgeable school guidance counsellor can be a valuable

starting point for marginalised students who may not have another source of reliable information regarding potential participation in higher education (Romito, 2022).

Influence of Community

The social status and expectations of educational progression within the peer group or community have often been found to be important indicators for students' expectations of college attendance and success, as well as contributing to academic and vocational development in adulthood (Pascarella et al., 2004; Dubow et al., 2006). Whilst communal influence has been mentioned earlier in this piece as often casting a somewhat negative light on higher education participation, studies through the generations have consistently shown education to be the most accessible means of upward mobility or deliverance from social difficulties for students of socio-economic disadvantage (Willis, 1977; Walker, 1987). This point is supported by Bamber & Tett (2001: 10) who state that working-class students must "critically examine and change some of the underlying assumptions on which their lives have been built".

A study by Bland (2004: 8) highlighted the influence of community on aspirations laying in the deliberate attempts of students to change their cultural habitus by finding solace in education. Many of the participants in this study experienced a "turning point" of sorts that involved breaking away from cultural practices and becoming estranged from members of their family and/or community. This tends to confirm that social mobility and academic success for working-class students requires breaking with class practices and distancing from their home community (Connell et al., 1982; McDonald, 1999). Throughout the study, some members of the participant group suggested that their various turning points saw them break away from any class-related practices or

identity (Bland, 2004). Many of the participants followed what Bourdieu & Wacquant (1992: 10) find to be the interaction of agents' habitus(es) as "a definite trajectory within the field under consideration to a more or less favourable opportunity to become actualized". Each of the participants told of exclusion, sometimes self-imposed, from mainstream peer-groups within their schools or communities, with engagement in their studies perceived to be a distraction from and a potential solution to various social problems [drinking, drug taking, anti-social behaviour, teenage pregnancy, and so on] often prominent within their communities. In McDonald's view (1999: 121), young people in contemporary society must act with a calculative attitude, weighing risks and possibilities, as they negotiate community and networks of opportunity to become "entrepreneurs of self". The participants of Bland's study (2004) viewed gaining access to higher education not only as a means to realise their educational ambitions but also as an opportunity for personal development and change, highlighting their difference(s) to those traditionally thought to come from a background similar to their own. The participants followed a path to distance themselves from their community and, essentially, to become "entrepreneurs of self" as they built their own version of the necessary cultural capital essential for progression through the education system (Bland, 2004: 11).

Influence of Institute of Higher Education

Whilst students from working-class backgrounds are significantly less likely than their peers from the middle- and upper-social classes to attend college and persist to degree completion (McDonough, 1997; Walpole, 2003), the results of a study by Soria & Bultmann (2014) also suggested that social class identification was a strong predictor of students' sense of belonging in higher education when aligned to other

variables such as general campus climate, the pride and respect that students felt the institution placed on diversity, social involvement, and faculty interactions. Working-class students' feelings of alienation, isolation, and lack of belonging may be attributed to the difficulties of navigating a new culture that differs from that of their family or communities of origin (Soria & Bultmann, 2014). As has long been established, few working-class students possess the tools to navigate higher education systems in comparison to their middle- to upper-class peers (Engle & Tinto, 2008). According to Lindquist (2002), working-class students are often socialized within communities that value street smarts over book smarts, which also indicates resistance to an educational system that has left working-class individuals behind. Campus leaders who strive to make institutions more inclusive to students from diverse backgrounds must recognise the need to create respectful and welcoming environments for working-class students (Oldfield, 2007). Oldfield (2007) outlines what he classifies as suggested reforms for institutes of higher education to consider when integrating socio-economically marginalised students into their field of education:

Firstly, he suggests that institutes should develop support systems for working-class students that would assist students to acquire important social and cultural capital by showing them such facets of college life such as how to attain financial assistance, how to locate and use campus resources, and providing support workshops and orientation meetings for all interested marginalised students around the challenges faced on transition to higher education such as developing effective study habits and writing academic papers.

Secondly, it is suggested that classism should be addressed with the institute of higher education so that privileged students are encouraged to understand and appreciate the values reflected in poor and working-class students' ways of life. Faculty and

administrators must encourage all students to become multicultural with regards to class issues.

Thirdly, it is argued that institutes of higher education should diversify the social-class origins of the faculty as bringing more diverse faculty perspectives to a campus reduces its classist assumptions and enhances its learning environment.

Finally, a strong effort should be made to diversify the social-class origins of the student body in order to bring a more diverse collection of opinions and experiences to institutes of higher education. Considering social class in admissions and ensuring the supports are made available to allow for transition to be made could ensure a strong contingent of working-class students within higher education, ensuring a critical mass that would help these students feel comfortable on campus.

2.4 Summation of Literature

An attempt was made in in the first sub-section of this chapter to explore the vast catalogue of academic literature around the barriers to participation in higher education that exist for those coming from a background of socio-economic marginalisation. Although this research project aims to demonstrate how these barriers can be overcome, it is both necessary and beneficial to highlight the very real difficulties that do exist in preventing socio-economically marginalised students from participating meaningfully in higher education.

The works of Pierre Bourdieu featured strongly in the second sub-section of the literature review. The purpose of this sub-section was to create a theoretical framework for the research project and to introducing some of Bourdieu's key sociological thinking tools that will feature strongly in the findings chapter of the project.

Finally, the third sub-section of the literature chapter explored the importance of aspiration when striving to overcome the aforementioned barriers to successfully participate in higher education. This section also focused on some of the key contributors to the forming of young people's aspirations: Family, School, Community, Institutions of Higher Education. These will all feature strongly in the findings section of the project as the aspirations of young people are formed with a desire to overcome any potential barriers for the purpose of successfully participating in higher education.

Chapter 3: Methodology

The data presented in this thesis derives from a two-year qualitative research project which explored the experiences of marginalised students as they transition to and through higher education. The aim of the research project was to examine the barriers that exist in preventing students from a marginalised background from progressing within the field of higher education and how these barriers can be overcome.

3.1 Research Paradigm

This research project is guided by the constructivist paradigm in the sense that knowledge and reality are socially constructed by people through their interactions with others and the environment in which they live (Mertens, 2005), and that researchers should attempt to understand the complex world of lived experience from the point of view of those who live in it (Schwandt, 2000). Within the constructivist paradigm, the researcher must try to understand the social reality of their participants. Whilst constructivist by nature, however, the study could also be viewed through the lens of the transformative paradigm as importance is specifically placed on the lives and experiences of communities that are pushed to society's margins (Mertens, 2009). In this research project, all participants derive from the same marginalised community, a community that has no doubt shaped the lives and outlook of participants. The transformative paradigm places importance on the influence of privilege in determining what is real and the consequences of accepting one version of reality over another (Mertens, 2009). For example, the idea of 'normality' being very culture-specific is evident in this particular research project when exploring the fact that low higher education participation in a marginalised community can be regarded as 'normal', whereas in a more privileged community it can be regarded as 'abnormal'. The transformative paradigm recognises the interactive link between researcher and

participant and highlights the development of a trusting relationship as critical in allowing for the sharing of knowledge (Mertens, 2009). In research focusing on inequality, school and young people, there are undoubtedly issues around power and the research process. The relative position of the researched and the researcher are extremely important, not only in terms of interactions but also in terms of the lenses one brings to bear in the analysis of such work (Cahill, 2019). In the transformative paradigm the manner in which researchers relate with participants such that a fair understanding of key viewpoints is created and such that the power of the researcher to frame questions does not overpower the 'results' is considered as crucial (Romm, 2015). In this research project, each individual participant will have their own experience of education and must be provided with the opportunity to express their honest opinions in response to interview questions posed. It is vital that interview participants do not feel that there are 'right' or 'wrong' answers to questions posed. The role of the researcher is to generate conversation around the topic of progression to and through higher education, and to allow the concepts of importance in the study to emerge as individual interviews are undertaken (Mertens, 2005).

3.2 Unconscious Bias and the Researcher

Unconscious bias in research occurs when we make judgments or decisions on the basis of our prior experience, personal thought patterns, assumptions and interpretations, whilst not aware we are doing so (Fiarman, 2016). As with all qualitative projects of this nature, research findings can be interpreted in multiple ways. Clandinin & Connelly (2000: 121) state that "our research interests come out of our own narratives of experience and shape our narrative inquiry plotlines", and that is certainly the case in this instance. My own professional life is as a teacher in a

school serving the economically marginalised community at the centre of this research project. This piece of work is an attempt to reify the hiddenness of class formation through the lens of higher education participation and success. Undoubtedly, the researcher will attribute personal interpretations of the experiences and phenomena during the process of both collecting and analysing data. The researcher will have a familiarity with other studies of a similar nature, and in turn it is can sometimes be expected that similarities and differences be drawn between one's own study and previous works (Suter, 2012). The biases of the researcher should not be in evidence to interview participants of the study, however, as they may sway participants in the direction of answering questions 'correctly' as opposed to sharing their own opinions and experiences (Suter, 2012). Naturally, research conclusions that match the assumptions and beliefs of a researcher are often the most emphasised in the analysis of a project of this nature, and nobody can be 100% neutral in the interpretation and analysis of educational data (Suter, 2012). Nevertheless, analysis of data of this sort should be naturally subjective as readers of the research are welcome to and, indeed, encouraged to construct their own meaning from what they have read (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2011). No research findings should be withheld for fear that they do not answer exactly with the original research question(s), and in that sense perhaps the research question(s) should be open to adjustment and amendment as the study progresses (Angen, 2000).

3.3 The Transformative Nature of the Study

The outcome of a study of this nature is something that should be taken into consideration when undertaking community research. What does one hope to achieve having conducted a study of this nature? Mertens (2007) notes that researchers

operating within a transformative paradigm need to be aware of societal values and privileges in determining the reality that holds potential for social transformation and increased social justice. Bishop & Shepherd (2011) note that while it is not necessarily clear – either in advance or in hindsight – what kinds of effects our research endeavours might have, the concepts of 'critical awareness' and 'emancipation' should surely be at the forefront of the psyche of a transformative researcher. Midgely (2000) believes the idea of 'critical awareness' involves the examining and re-examining of taken-for-granted assumptions along with the conditions that gave rise to them: In this instance breaking down the barrier of perceived educational standards for those coming from a marginalised background and working with those directly within the community to challenge the assumptions of others. Furthermore, the idea of 'emancipation' is one that resonates strongly for this research project – ensuring that research is focused on 'improvement' (Midgley, 2000). The following paragraph is taken from my own application for ethical approval in my endeavours to conduct this research project and draws on the idea of improving the experience of marginalised students as they transition to and through higher education:

> *As a teacher in a DEIS secondary school in an urban area of a city in the south of Ireland, I can see how a research project of this manner could potentially have an impact on our students in the not-too-distant future. I am a member of the school DEIS committee and the 3rd Level drop-out rate of our students is something that has concerned us as a school in recent years. I have often wondered if, as a school, we could do more to prepare our students for life after secondary school. Gathering information with regards to transitioning to higher education and the potential challenges that may lay in front of our students could be invaluable in terms of preparing them for life in higher education. The information gathered in this piece of research could be used to identify common challenges that exist for students from similar backgrounds when progressing to higher education. By sharing this information with current students, perhaps there would be less of an element of surprise involved in transition to a higher educational environment. I firmly believe that the information gathered in this piece of research could make a meaningful difference in the lives of students*

from marginalised socio-economic backgrounds and schools in their endeavours to participate successfully in higher education.

There is potential in this project to enhance the higher education experience of marginalised students at a local level and national level and I believe this potential exists through the framing of this study through the lens of aspiration. The participants of this study each have valuable experience to offer to the study in terms of the process of transitioning to and through higher education, potential and/or actual challenges that could/can/have prevent(ed) successful participation, how these challenges can/have been overcome on a personal level to further participate. It is hoped that hearing from people coming from the same background to themselves may act as a source of inspiration and belief for those considering participation in higher education in the years ahead. Perhaps hearing from someone similar to themselves who has travelled the same path through school to higher education can be used as an exemplar for potential higher education participants. This difference may be evident only at a local level [within one school in the community, or perhaps within a number of schools in the same community], but at the same time it is possible for incremental change to be witnessed regarding continued participation in higher education as research findings are shared with students throughout the process of transitioning. Indeed, the final study will be shared with interview participants on completion of the project. This is something that I believe will enhance the transformative mission of this piece of work as participants track their own educational journal at various stages and hear from others of similar background and mindset to their own as they negotiate the path to and through higher education together in a way.

3.4 Data Collection

Individual interviews were undertaken with participants at various stages of the journey of transition from secondary school to higher education. Data were generated through interviews with 4 secondary school students [Leaving Cert], 4 parents [of the aforementioned Leaving Cert students], and 7 higher education students. In total, fifteen participants were interviewed as part of this research project. Thirteen individual interviews were undertaken for the purpose of the study, with two of the higher education students interviewed in one pair interview. Each interview lasted approximately 20 minutes. The shortest interview lasted 12 minutes and the longest lasted 24 minutes. A timetable of all interviews is included as Appendix 1 in the appendices section of the research project.

The purpose of interviewing current secondary school students and their parents was to ascertain their prior knowledge of higher education and how they were preparing to transition from secondary school to higher education. The students were chosen as they were coming towards the end of their two-year senior cycle programme within second level education and were in the process of considering what they would like to do on completion of the Leaving Certificate examination. Separate interviews were undertaken with both students and parents to ensure that both parties were provided with an opportunity to honestly and independently share their opinions.

The purpose of interviewing higher education students was to learn how an environment of higher education works from the viewpoint of students who are marginalised or in the minority in such an environment and, more importantly, how these students act within this environment. Similar points were raised by multiple students regarding challenges that exist for marginalised students as they transition from secondary school to higher education. Furthermore, coping mechanisms were

also shared by students as to how certain challenges were overcome to allow for successful participation.

3.5 Interview Sample

The eleven student participants of the study were all either current or past pupils of the same DEIS secondary school which is located in an urban area in the south of Ireland. The parents involved in the study also had a direct link with the school in question in that their children were attending the school at the time of interview. All of the current secondary school students at the time of interview completed their Leaving Certificate examinations in June 2022. The interview sample was mixed in terms of prior experience of higher education, as shown in the table below. None of the parents interviewed for the purpose of the study had any prior experience of higher education themselves. Of the total student body [secondary school and higher education] interviewed, only one had a parent with prior experience of higher education. Sibling experience of higher education was more rounded, with some of the student interview body having a brother or sister who had previously attended higher education or who, at the time of interview, were currently in attendance at higher education. A notable gender imbalance existed in terms of parents interviewed, with four mothers partaking in the study and no fathers.

Student Status	Gender	Parental Experience of HE	Sibling Experience of HE
Higher Education Student 1	Male	No	Yes (Brother)
Higher Education Student 2 / 3	Male / Male	No / No	No / Yes (Sister)
Higher Education Student 4	Male	Yes	No
Higher Education Student 5	Female	No	Yes (Brother)
Higher Education Student 6	Female	No	No

Higher Education Student 7	Female	No	No
Secondary School Student 1	Male	No	Yes (Brother)
Secondary School Student 2	Female	No	Yes (Brother)
Secondary School Student 3	Male	No	Yes (Sister)
Secondary School Student 4	Male	No	No

Table 2: Student Interview Sample [Educational Status, Gender, Parental Experience of Higher Education, Sibling Experience of Higher Education]

This research project could be viewed in the form of both a qualitative interview study and a case study as it is a detailed study of a group of people as an entity within their cultural setting (Mertens, 2005). In case study research, theory development is an essential part of the design phase (Mertens, 2005). Yin (2009) describes theory as an understanding of what is being studied. Very often, the researcher will report on their own specific case with a catalogue of pre-existing knowledge of similar and different cases (Mertens, 2005). Stake (2000), however, warns researchers not to lose what is unique about their own study order to find similarities with other cases. Whilst referring to the findings of others throughout this research project, a conscious effort is also made to focus on a facet that differentiates this study from others in this field of research. Amongst others, authors such as Vignoles & Powdthavee (2009) and Contini, Cugnota & Scagni (2018) have explored the concept of inequality in terms of enrolment in and dropout from higher education for students coming from a marginalised background. The significance and originality of this study, however, lies in the fact that it was conducted in a specific geographical area where high deprivation rates and low levels of participation in higher education have been traditionally documented. The study focuses on students from a marginalised urban area in the south of Ireland and, while focusing on the barriers that exist in preventing progression through higher education for these particular students, the main focus of this study is

to explore the concept of aspiration towards higher education and to examine how this aspiration can allow for institutional, social, and cultural barriers to be overcome to allow for participation and success in an environment of higher education.

3.6 Site of the Study: An Urban Area in the South of Ireland

The research project was undertaken in an urban area located in a city in the south of Ireland. The area in question is a largely working-class area that is close in geographical proximity to the city centre. A report published by the Higher Education Authority (HEA) in 2019 – *A Spatial & Socio-Economic Profile of Higher Education Institutions in Ireland* – highlights the inequalities that exist in terms of participation in higher education for students from a marginalised socio-economic background in the 2017/2018 academic year. This report uses 2017/18 student address data in the HEA Student Records System to analyse the socio-economic profile of Irish higher education students in Ireland by institute. Interestingly, this report highlights that certain deprived areas of the location of this study have relatively few higher education enrolments compared to other areas in the respective city. Although this research project focuses on the experiences of marginalised students within higher education, the trend of low enrolments is nevertheless significant and one that may be applicable as a community factor when exploring the barriers that prevent successful participation. Three specific electoral divisions located within the urban area were mentioned in the report as having high levels of deprivation as well as low levels of higher education enrolments: **Electoral Division 8**, **Electoral Division 7**, and **Electoral Division 1**. The concept of high deprivation aligning with low participation in higher education warrants further investigation, however, and, for the purpose of this research project, additional thought was also given to other electoral divisions in

the area where this study was undertaken with the aim of developing a broader view of higher education participation in the area.

The HEA report used HP (Haase & Pratschke) deprivation index scores based on Census small areas and/or electoral divisions that students come from to assign a relative measure of deprivation / affluence to students for aggregate analysis. HP deprivation index scores are a composite index of 10 Census measures:

1) Age dependency rate
2) Population change
3) Primary education figure
4) Third level education figure
5) Professional classes figure
6) Persons per room
7) Lone parent figure
8) Semi and unskilled classes figure
9) Male unemployment rate
10) Female unemployment rate

Deprivation index scores range from -40 to +40: the most disadvantaged areas having a score of less than -30 and the most affluent areas having a score greater than +30. Outlined in the table below are the various electoral divisions from which the participants of this study derive from and corresponding deprivation index score of each electoral division, along with the percentage of the population in each electoral division who have completed third level education:

HP Deprivation Index Score (2016) per Electoral Division	**Third Level Education Completion (%)**	***Population in Electoral Division***
Electoral Division 1: -13.02	14.12	*690*
Electoral Division 2: 4.77	44.80	*2,185*
Electoral Division 3 -14.90	14.57	*2,466*
Electoral Division 4: -8.66	16.89	*3,699*
Electoral Division 5: -13.29	11.04	*1,577*
Electoral Division 6: -4.49	27.41	*963*

Electoral Division 7: -15.56	12.77	*714*
Electoral Division 8: -22.30	10.28	*746*
Electoral Division 9: -12.00	11.97	*3,610*
Electoral Division 10: -9.08	23.35	*2,044*
Electoral Division 11: -18.06	8.84	*928*
Electoral Division 12: -15.22	13.97	*607*
Electoral Division 13: -15.93	9.33	*769*
Electoral Division 14: -12.75	18.11	*588*
Electoral Division 15: -11.24	16.96	*1,053*
Electoral Division 16: -11.49	14.36	*944*
Electoral Division 17: -13.31	13.50	*1,143*
Electoral Division 18: -20.03	10.06	*4,044*
Electoral Division 19: -2.53	35.28	*3,638*
Electoral Division 20: -1.96	25.79	*5,538*
Electoral Division 21: 4.49	46.02	*1,743*
Electoral Division 22: 8.71	49.69	*1,401*

Table 3: Electoral Division Deprivation Index Score & Third Level Education Completion in Site of the Study

Some interesting information can be drawn from the analysis of the above data:

- Low levels of third level completion are evident within three of the electoral divisions classified as “marginally below average” on the deprivation index scale – **4**, **6**, and **10**

  Interestingly, the electoral divisions of both **19** and **20** have higher levels of third level completion despite being classified as “marginally below average” on the deprivation index scale

- Each of the electoral divisions classified as “disadvantaged” on the deprivation index scale all have low levels of third level education completion – **1**, **3**, **5**, **7**, **9**, **11**, **12**, **13**, **14**, **15**, **16**, **17**

- The two electoral divisions classified as “very disadvantaged” on the deprivation index scale both have low levels of third level education completion – **2** and **18**

- Electoral divisions located in the area where the study was undertaken that do not fall below 0 on the deprivation index scale include **2**, **21**, and **22** and are classified as “marginally above average” – These electoral divisions each have reasonably high levels of third level education completion

3.7 Data Analysis

The data collected from interviews was thoroughly analysed and coded. What Saldana (2013) refers to as ‘the coding cycle’ was deployed as the data analysis process: First Cycle Coding → Transitioning → Second Cycle Coding.

First Cycle Coding: Structural Coding was employed in analysis of data gathered. Structural Coding is a question-based code that acts as a labelling and indexing device, allowing researchers to quickly access data likely to be relevant to a particular analysis from a larger data set by categorising the data corpus to identify and examine segments’ similarities, differences and relationships (Namey et al., 2008). This coding method was kept at a basic level by applying it as a categorization technique for further qualitative data analysis (Saldana, 2013) and was used to determine the frequency of the number of individual participants who mentioned a particular theme, rather than the total number of times a single theme appeared in the text (Namey et al., 2008). A code frequency report was developed to identify which themes were common and which rarely arose. In addition, care was given to the understanding of ‘the language of people’ throughout the process of data analysis as a means of identifying certain folk terms that demonstrate the interview participants’ cultural existence and colloquialisms (McCurdy, Spradley & Shandy, 2005). The ability of the researcher to understand the spoken word of interview participants was particularly helpful in identifying and interpreting certain terms and phrases that participants use in their everyday lives, as opposed to depending fully on those derived from the academic

disciplines or professional practices (Stringer, 1999). Recognising the terms used by participants in their everyday speech proved crucial in allowing the researcher to: 1) Underline/Highlight certain points as they arose based on the vocal emphasis of the participant (Saldana, 2013), and 2) Conduct a crucial check to ensure themes arising from data analysis were applicable and significant to what was being discussed by the participant at interview level (Charmaz, 2006).

Transitioning: Model Diagramming (Miles & Huberman, 1994) was both helpful and effective when categorising themes as they arose from the coding techniques used in first cycle coding. Diagrams with key themes were drawn, along with various branching sub-themes that applied to each key theme. An example of one key theme and its sub-themes is outlined below:

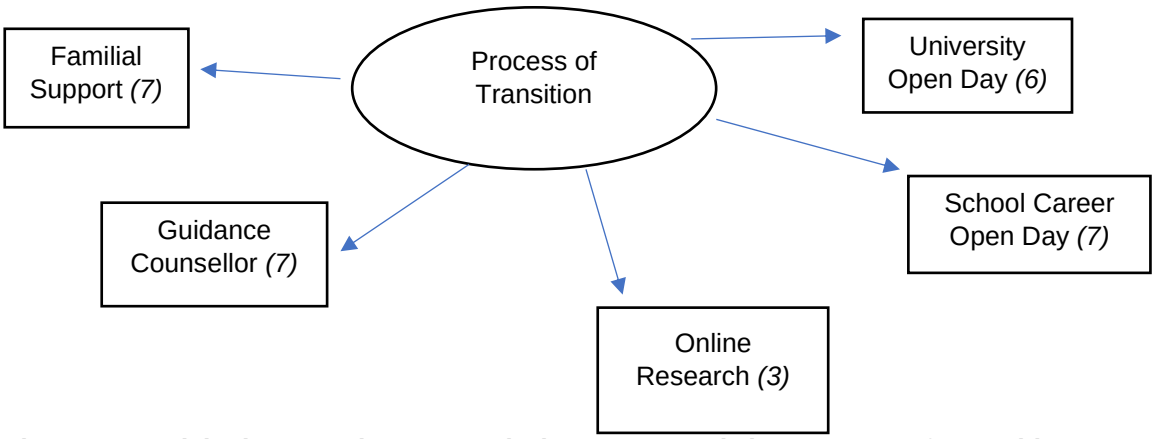


Figure 1: Model Diagram Theme & Sub-themes around the Process of Transition to [Higher Education *[Numbers indicate the frequency of the sub-themes being mentioned by participants]*

Diagrams such as Figure 1 proved vital in the breakdown of large chunks of complex code to more coherent and legible visual displays (Dey, 1993). The code frequency report mentioned in the previous section was again very useful at this point of data analysis as the frequency of which particular key themes and sub-themes were raised by interview participants were inserted next to each key theme and sub-theme [i.e. the number of individual participants who mentioned the key theme or the sub-theme as

opposed to the number of times the theme or sub-theme were mentioned]. The layout shown in the diagram above was not used specifically as these were handwritten by the researcher, but the model diagrams specific to this research project are found in the appendices section at the end of the study [Appendix 2/3/4].

Second Cycle Coding: A form of Elaborative Coding was used as the final coding method for this study. Elaborative Coding was used in the process of analysing textual data in the hope of developing theory further (Auerbach & Silverstein, 2003). This study aimed to identify theoretical constructs as they emerged from the themes of coded data (Auerbach & Silverstein, 2003). In addition, it is hoped that the findings of this study can be used to build upon and elaborate on the major theoretical findings of previous studies. Although the study does not follow the same participants through each phase of the journey of transition from secondary school to higher education, it does map the journey as different participants are identified at each stage of the journey: Those preparing to transition from secondary school to third level → Those who experience(d) challenges on transition → Those who have overcome similar challenges to continue to participate. Key themes from previously coded data were explored in more detail as they arose throughout the process of data analysis. As key themes were examined, information began to emerge that assisted in answering the research questions of the study. This proved invaluable in the write-up of the study as key themes could be examined under sub-sections at each stage of the journey of transition.

The data analysis and coding procedures allowed the researcher to develop various themes around which the journey of students from secondary school to higher education could be viewed through the lens of aspiration. Some of the most common points that arose in interviews with participant groups included: The consideration of

participation in higher education and the reasons for said consideration; Parental aspiration of successful participation in higher education for their children; The role of the school in fostering aspiration for participation in higher education; The changes and challenges associated with progression to and through higher education; The rewards of higher education. As these were the common themes that arose on analysis of collected data, these formed the basis of the findings of the study and will be discussed in more detail in the next chapter.

3.8 Ethical Procedures and Considerations

Ethical research practice and procedures were followed throughout this research project.

1) Prior to Participation

An information sheet was provided to all participants outlining the nature and of the study, see Appendix 5. The purpose of the project was outlined in an understandable manner for those considering participation in the study. It was outlined in the information sheet that participation in the study is voluntary and that there was no obligation to participate. Participants were offered the freedom to withdraw their details and opinions up to a certain point in the aftermath of the interview prior to submission of the thesis.

A written participation invitation was sent to a cohort of each of the interview groups, and the required number of participants required were selected once interest had been highlighted. Participants were chosen for the study on a first-come-first-served basis. The main inclusion criteria for participation in the study lay in the fact that each

participant was either: 1) A current student in the school, 2) A parent of a current student in the school, 3) A past-pupil of the school. A gender balance was also preferable as the study focused on current past-pupils from a mixed-gender school. Seven males [3 secondary school students, 4 higher education students] and eight females [1 secondary school student, 3 higher education students, 4 parents] were interviewed as part of the study.

The area of disadvantage / deprivation was one that needed to be addressed in a very careful manner when dealing with participants from such a background – secondary school students, third level students, and parents inclusive. Interview questions were constructed carefully to ensure the words 'disadvantage' or 'deprivation' were not at the forefront of the conversation [Appendix 6]. Questions were shared with participants in advance of interviews to ensure that participants had a sense of what they would be asked and had time to think about the questions prior to conduction of the interview. No literacy issues were raised by participants in advance of the study.

As the project included children under the age of 18 years, official Garda Vetting through University College Cork (UCC) was sought and granted for the purpose of the project. As outlined in the document *Guidance for developing ethical research projects involving children (2012)*, a commitment was made at all times to prioritise the well-being, protection and safety of participants. Parent/Guardian consent was required for a child to participate in the research project. Participation in the research project wasn't granted without a written parental/guardian signature on a consent form in advance of the commencement of research. As outlined in *UCC Data Protection Impact Assessment (DPIA)*, a child under the age of 18 is considered to be a vulnerable person. As well as parent/guardian consent, child assent in the form of a written

signature on the aforementioned consent form was also obtained prior to participation in the research project [Appendix 7].

Whilst confidentiality is key to research practice, a limitation exists in child-related research if a child protection issue arises and this restriction in relation to confidentiality was explained when obtaining both assent and consent. Although no child protection issues arose through engagement in this research project, all precautions were taken regarding child protection. As outlined in *UCC Child Safeguarding Statement*, no undertakings regarding secrecy were given by any University member to a person reporting an allegation of child abuse – be they an adult or a child. This was made clear to all parties involved in the research process, although reassurances were given that all information would be handled with sensitivity and that all information regarding concerns of child abuse or neglect would be shared on a 'need to know' basis only, [that is with personnel who have a legitimate involvement or role in dealing with the issue]. Giving information reasonably and in good faith to those who need the information for the protection of a child who may have been or is in danger of being abused (including the DLP, TUSLA or An Garda Síochána) is not a breach of confidentiality or data protection laws and was treated as so.

A previous professional relationship was established between the researcher and the participants of this study. A teacher-student relationship had been established as the student participants of the study were either current or former students of the school. Furthermore, teacher-parent relationships were established through previous encounters such as parent-teacher meetings and other school events, for example. Although this ought not impact on the legitimacy of the research findings, there are grounds for an 'ethical dilemma' of sorts to possibly occur in the sense of familiarity

between the researcher and participants. Hauser (2019) states that qualitative research conducted with minority populations brings issues of subjectivity sharply into perspective. Whilst the credibility and unbiasedness of researcher accounts of lived experiences can sometimes be questioned, it is believed that the voice of those being researched can be heard when the researcher observes, records, and reports on events accurately (Maxwell, 1992). To that point, clear boundaries were established prior to participation to ensure that any prior teacher-student and teacher-parent biases were set aside for the purpose of the research project. It was made clear to all participants that the research process would not be conducted as from the point of view of teacher-student / teacher-parent, but from the point of view of researcher-student / researcher-parent. Semi-structured and open interview questions were asked throughout the interview process. This type of questioning allowed the participants to share their opinions honestly with a researcher as opposed to with a teacher.

2) Data Collection

As outlined in previous sections, interviews were used as the method of data collection for this research project. No on-site research was conducted at University College Cork. Interviews were conducted face-to-face in the school building. The school building was deemed appropriate as a familiar location for every interview participant. The interviews with current school pupils were in line with school specific policies relating to child protection and child safety, such as speaking to a child one-to-one. For example, interviews took place in a room with the door left open, ensuring both the child and interviewer were visible to those passing in the hallway. Past pupils of the school and parents were also invited to complete their interviews in the school

building, but these interviews were completed outside of school time. A pilot interview took place with one member of each of the participant groups [one secondary school student, one secondary school parent, and one higher education student] to ensure that the intended data for the purpose of the research project was being collected. The data gathered from each of the pilot interviews was included as part of the findings.

A brief informal discussion took place at the conclusion of each interview to ensure that each participant was provided with an opportunity to express any concerns that they may have and to share how they felt regarding participation in the interview process. Although no ethical issues arose on completion of this research project, information was shared with participants around supports that exist if they feel upset or under stress with any issue that was raised or discussed in the interview process. Some supports that exist for school/college-attending students included school guidance counsellors or university support services. The work of groups such as Jigsaw, Samaritans and Aware was also mentioned to participants of varying ages depending on issues raised at the end of the interview process. Phone numbers for the aforementioned groups were available on hand in the event of them being required. Whilst risk of harm to self and/or others was not expected, disclosures may have been made with regards to teachers or school staff members who may have influenced [or continue to influence] individual students on their path to higher education. This information was treated with the utmost sensitivity and, where possible, teachers remained nameless for the purpose of the interview process. No information was disclosed in relation to any member of staff or another student that needed to be brought to the attention of the school Designated Liaison Person (DLP). On completion of the interview, a brief outline of the study itself and how the

information gathered from interviews was to be used was again provided to all participants. All interviewees were thanked for their participation in the study.

Data collected as part of this research were anonymised and confidentiality was extended to all participants. Audio recordings of interviews were made using an external audio recording device. The audio recordings of interviews were transcribed. I, as the researcher, performed the transcription of audio recordings. Nobody else was involved in the transcription process. Data acquired from interviews were anonymised during the transcription process. In the transcribed interviews, questions were asked under the title of 'Researcher' and the answers were provided under the title of 'Secondary School Student 1' / 'Secondary School Parent 1' / 'Higher Education Student 1' / and so on. Recorded data from the external audio recording device was always deleted once transcription of the interview had been undertaken. I, as the researcher, performed the deletion of audio recordings. Nobody else was involved in the deletion of recorded data. The laptop onto which the interviews were transcribed was encrypted and password protected.

Written transcriptions of interviews conducted as part of the research project were stored digitally. The storing of the interview transcript on the UCC OneDrive allows for the availability of data for the required storage period of 10 years on completion of the research project. Printed versions of completed interview transcriptions along with other forms (Interview Information Sheet & Consent Form) were stored in in a locked filing cabinet in keeping with date protection legislation (Date Protection Act, 2018). Information relating to research findings was discussed in confidence with research supervisors but was done so when data had been anonymised.

3.9 Summation of Methodology

The purpose of this chapter was to outlines in detail the data collection and analysis procedures that were undertaken throughout this research project. This section outlined how the research is situated within both the constructivist and transformative paradigms as knowledge is constructed by people active in the research process, whilst also placing an emphasis on the lives and experiences of those in the community in which this study was undertaken. The ethical procedures and considerations were also explained in detail in this chapter, ensuring that ethical research practices were followed throughout the project.

Chapter 4: Discussion & Findings

Under-Represented Students & Higher Education – Aspiration

The focus of this chapter is to outline higher education participation through the various different lenses of aspiration. The findings outlined and discussed throughout this chapter emerged as a result of rigorous data analysis. This chapter is divided into the following five sub-sections:

1) *Aspiring to Participate: The Consideration of Participation in Higher Education and Exploring the Reasons Why …*
2) *Parental Aspiration of Successful Participation in Higher Education*
3) *The Role of the School: Fostering Aspiration and Preparing Under-represented Students for Higher Education*
4) *Adapting to Life in Higher Education: Changes and Challenges*
5) *The Illusio Effect: Reaping the Rewards of Higher Education*

An attempt is made to draw upon the theme of aspiration throughout the findings, focusing on the positive views of interviewees regarding participation in higher education. Barriers to participation are mentioned at points in the findings, but the focus lays with how these barriers can be overcome to allow for successful participation. The concepts of working-classness and deprivation are not deliberately discussed with interview participants, but points raised resonate strongly with prior research into these areas and are linked to said research throughout.

4.1 Aspiring to Participate: The Consideration of Participation in Higher Education and Exploring the Reasons Why …

One of the earliest experiences of higher education for all students is the phase where participation in higher education is being explored, that is to say as students approach the end of their secondary schooling and are considering their next step in life, either within or beyond the world of education]. Aspiration is a key factor to consider when exploring participation in higher education, particularly when dealing with participants moving towards the point of transition from secondary school to higher education. Closely related to debates around aspiration are how young people plan and develop time spans for their lives (Grant, 2017). The relationship between planning for the future and setting goals is important as students begin to explore their post-secondary school options, feeling a sense of control of where their future may lay either within or beyond education. Brannen and Nilsen (2017) argue that a goal is something that can only be achieved by careful planning. Four secondary school students were interviewed for the purpose of this research project. Each of the students were in 6th Year when interviews were undertaken – their final year of secondary education in Ireland and all sat their Leaving Certificate examinations in June 2022. Each of the interviewees stated that they intended to move directly from school to higher education on completion of their final examinations. So, why did these students want to attend higher education having completed their second level education? What was pushing them to stay in the education system as opposed to, say, entering the workforce immediately after secondary school? And, perhaps most importantly, what planning process was involved in allowing these students to achieve their goal of attending higher education?

4.1.1 Fundamental Aspirations: General Positives of Higher Education

Each of the secondary school students interviewed leaned heavily on what Bronfenbrenner (1977) describes as microsystem relationships [interpersonal relationships that happen in the immediate context of the individual] in their planning to attend higher education. Each of the participants mentioned their teachers at school, their parents, and the school guidance counsellor as the major influences on their desire to attend higher education. Interestingly, three of the four participants also had an older sibling either currently attending or who had previously attended an institute of higher education. Unsurprisingly, common points raised in relation to desire to participate in higher education included: 1) Potential employment opportunities in the future; 2) A desire to further challenge oneself academically having completed second-level education; 3) Being given the freedom to study subjects that were of interest to the students themselves:

> *I think college is important because it gives you better job opportunities. I'm thinking of studying Accounting in college. I enjoy Accounting as a subject in school so I think it would be something I'd be interested in doing more long-term. I heard the pay is good too so that wouldn't be the worst either!* – **Secondary School Student 3**

> *I do enjoy learning and I've always been quite good at school so I think I'd probably enjoy college and enjoy studying at that level.* – **Secondary School Student 2**

> *I think with college you have the freedom to choose what you want to study. Like, you can pick to study something that you enjoy or that you're passionate about.* – **Secondary School Student 1**

4.1.2 Making Others Proud

One point that stood out with one secondary school student interviewed was the desire to make others proud of their academic endeavours. _____, a student who

wants to pursue a career in teaching after secondary school, made explicit reference to the idea of making his parents proud in his attempts to be the first in his family to attend higher education:

> *If I go to college next September, I'd be the first in my family to go. A few of my cousins went alright, but I'd be the first in my actual* [direct] *family. As I said my two older brothers both did an apprenticeship to become electricians so, yeah, I'd be the first to go. I think that's why the parents are pushing me to go maybe … we couldn't have three electricians in the house! But no, all jokes aside, I'd like to be the first* _____ [family name] *to go to college and get a degree. Ehhh, I think my family would be proud of me too if I was able to manage that so hopefully I will.* **– Secondary School Student 4**

The idea of *pride* is of interest here. While not diminishing the chosen career path of his brothers, it is clear that the aforementioned student has focused his attention on a career path outside of those considered to be traditionally 'working-class' (Granfield, 1991). While it would be assumed that the parents of this student are equally pleased with each of the chosen career paths of their children, it is interesting that this student highlights the idea that his parents would be "proud" of his academic achievements if he was to successfully attend and complete higher education. Historically, the working classes have constantly been 'found out' in education; discovered to be inferior, less cultured, or less clever than the middle classes (Reay, David & Ball, 2001). While not the case in any way, the points made by the student above indicate that this mindset of inferiority has transcended the generations and manifested itself deeply within the minds of the working-classes. Academically able students, like the one above, seem driven by the idea of making their parents proud of their academic achievements. A study by Gist-Mackey, Wiley & Erba (2018) examined first generation college students and described the value of positive affirmations in the form of pride that stemmed from the emotional support of parents or other family members regarding their higher education studies. Indeed, Napoli & Wortman (1998) reported that college students

who are seen to engage in higher levels of social support with family have increased satisfaction in college, as well as having better overall social and academic adjustment and integration. Additionally, research also suggests that familial social support is related to further positive outcomes such as increased self-esteem (Grant-Vallone et al., 2003) and self-efficacy (Gibbons & Borders, 2010) as under-represented students strive to successfully participate in higher education.

4.1.3 A Link with Others from a Similar Background

Bourdieu & Passeron (1977) apply the concept of habitus to theorise why educational exclusion rates are concentrated within one social class rather than randomly distributed. Burke (2019) uses the work of Bourdieu & Passeron to discuss the concept of 'subjective expectations of objective probabilities' (24) – in other words, the level of realistic expectation a non-traditional or working-class student has of successfully entering and graduating from the education system to become socially mobile. For many non-traditional students, becoming socially mobile via education is an unachievable goal for a variety of reasons, framing the often-referenced idea that education is "not for the likes of us" (Bourdieu, 1984: 380). The idea of belonging is in evidence here – in this sense belonging to a group where higher education is not deemed to be a part of the dominant culture. Bourdieu (1984) outlines that this sense of belonging can contain a warning and act as a constraint against the ambition to distinguish oneself by identifying with other groups, in this instance those who attend higher education. It is this sense of solidarity and the reassurance that stems from belonging to a group, or collective habitus, that supports the durability of the individual habitus to align an individual's norms, attitudes, aspirations, and expectations closely to those of the larger group and thus reducing opportunity for divergence (Burke,

2019). Evidence arose from interviews with secondary school students, however, that suggested that perhaps habitus may be dominant but ultimately not eternal. Numerous students highlighted that they are familiar with people close to their own age, either through school or from their local area, who now attend higher education. These students were of the belief that more people from their local area are now attending higher education, and one outlined how this trend can act as a positive in terms of their own aspiration to attend:

> *Ehhh, I think the northside probably has a bit of a history of not many people attending college. Maybe it's still not fully seen as something that everyone does … but at the same time I think it's changing a bit in recent years. Like, I know a good few people from the northside who are going to college now.* **– Secondary School Student 3**

> *Yeah, I suppose as I said there seeing people go from* _____ [name of hurling club] *or friends from the year above me in school going … that would make you want to go as well then. Seeing photos of them playing sport with UCC or CIT, seeing photos of the facilities … Why wouldn't you want to go, like? When you see people who you know going to college too … I don't know, you just think that you can go there as well and do well if they're able to do it. That might not make sense now? But you kind of believe in yourself a bit … "If he can do it, I can do it" kind of a way.* **– Secondary School Student 4**

Ingram (2011) draws on Bourdieu's theory to argue that a habitus does not always develop neatly in response to one field but may have multiple influences from different fields, highlighting that for working-class students who are academically high achieving there are potential emotional difficulties involved in the process of forging an identity as a 'successful pupil' whilst maintaining, or indeed choosing to ignore, their working-class background. The above interview extracts, however, demonstrate how seeing others from a similar background to their own can act as an inspiration to current secondary school students considering participation in higher education. A pathway can be created that allows non-traditional students to see themselves as potentially

successful participants in higher education, whilst still acknowledging and being proud of their working-class background (Reay, Crozier & Clayton, 2009).

4.2 Parental Aspiration of Successful Participation in Higher Education

Previous studies have explored parental orientations towards higher education and how the nature of parental support can vary significantly depending on socio-economic background (Irwin & Elley, 2013; Devine, 2004). Indeed, Hossler, Schmit & Vesper (1999) found that strong encouragement and support from parents is the most significant factor affecting whether students aspire to and ultimately enrol in higher education. A recurring theme in literature is that all parents want to do the best by their children and want their children to do well, but how effectively these desires translate into outcomes can vary depending on where people are positioned within an unequal society (Scanlon et al., 2019). Unfortunately, under-represented students often report that they receive less encouragement and support to progress to higher education (Engle, Bermeo & O'Brien, 2006).

Four parents were interviewed for the purpose of this research project, none of whom had any personal experience of higher education. A notable gender imbalance existed in interviews undertaken with parents – participants consisted of four mothers and no fathers. Wainwright & Watts (2021) found that parental levels of education are one of the most effective means for identifying less advantaged students, arguably more so than occupation. It made sense, therefore, to ask parents if they had any direct experience in higher education. None of the parents in this sample progressed directly from secondary school to higher education [though one did start a further education

course having completed second-level education, stating that she *"dropped out after two or three months"*; while another returned to education later in life to train and qualify as a Special Needs Assistant]. Parents were asked a series of questions regarding their own outlook towards higher education, the outlook of those in the community towards higher education, their children's plans for the future, and the challenges of adapting to higher education.

4.2.1 Higher Education as an Opportunity

Responses were revealing in terms of the emphasis and value placed by parents on education, as well as parental aspiration and what constituted a decent future for the children. All parents were supportive of their children's plans to attend higher education on completion of secondary school. All parents compared their own experience of education with that of their children, citing the opportunity for their children to progress to higher education – an opportunity they felt wasn't available to them at the time of themselves finishing secondary school:

> *There was no such thing as going to college … you just did your Inter(mediate) Cert first, and then if you were lucky you did your Leaving Cert. Then you went to work, that's the way it was.* **– Parent of Secondary School Student 2**

> *I did stay on to do my Leaving Cert and that was great, but back in the day we didn't go on to a higher level of education after that. We didn't go on to third level. It wasn't the done thing really. I think college was just that bit out of reach for us at the time.* **– Parent of Secondary School Student 4**

This point is supported by Scanlon et al. (2019) who stated that parents often view higher education as a means of giving their children the opportunities that they themselves had missed. All parents in this study acknowledged that participation in higher education is more of a possibility for their own children than it was for

themselves. Furthermore, there also seems to be a realisation on the part of parents that the importance of education has grown over time. Each of the parents stated that completing the Leaving Certificate examination was considered to be an achievement when they themselves were completing their secondary education, but that third level education is now more important when looking to achieve any kind of upward mobility. Not only were the parents of the opinion that more opportunities were available to their children in terms of progression to higher education but were also eager that these opportunities should be grasped and maximised in terms of ensuring the step of progression is taken.

4.2.2 Future Employment

Future employment featured strongly in the mindset of parents when considering the benefits of participation in higher education. Two of the four parents interviewed highlighted that, in the future, they would like to see their children working in alternative employment to that of their own:

> *At the moment I work in a call centre. It's grand like, don't get me wrong, but I stress to* _____ *so much that that type of job isn't what I want for him in the future. I want him to go to college … Going to college will open more doors for him and give him more opportunities to do something he likes, I suppose. He can give himself options and get paid for something that he likes doing and wants to do.* **– Parent of Secondary School Student 1**

> *The good jobs all require a degree nowadays and that's just the way it is really. I have no degree and I work in a shop in town* [city centre] *which is fine, but I'd like better for my kids. Surely having a degree has to go in your favour down the road, you know?* **– Parent of Secondary School Student 3**

Of course, these parents are not purposely diminishing the importance of their own jobs when thinking of future employment opportunities of their children, but it is clear

that the idea of securing a ‘good’ job is one of the main benefits that stands out for parents as a result of participation in higher education [‘good’ in this instance meaning a position of employment that requires a university degree, when in reality every job is a ‘good’ job specific to those in the position]. The idea of ‘credential inflation’ comes to mind here, i.e., the devaluation of educational or academic credentials over time and a corresponding decrease in the expected advantage given to a degree holder in the job market (Araki, 2022). In essence, are young people having to remain in formal education for longer to compete for jobs? Perhaps parents feel that, both now and in the future, there will be no place for people in the workforce who have not completed higher education. Although this, of course, is not true, there may still exist a desire within parents that their child is given every opportunity to secure stable employment in the future – with higher education participation central to achieving this aspiration.

4.2.3 Higher Education & Employment for Social Mobility

When discussing aspiration and potential progression to higher education, one parent went a step further than simply pointing to the academic education and potential future employment opportunities of her daughter. She highlighted education in a broader, more rounded context:

> *Being able to go into college … hold your head high and say you belong there. Go and educate yourself, be informed and go learn about the world outside of where you come from. We didn’t have that opportunity years ago. We taught ourselves through newspapers and television, that’s how we learned about the world. The kids now have the chance to go and live all that, to learn for themselves.*
>
> *You have to broaden your horizons … get yourself a good job, get a mortgage. As I say to my kids growing up – “Wouldn’t you like to pick a house somewhere you want to live instead of being given a council house?” Have enough money in the bank, you yourself, to pay for it and not be relying on someone else to give you everything. You know, I always try to teach my children that you don’t*

have to rely on anyone in life only yourself. **– Parent of Secondary School Student 4**

Bourdieu (1977; 1979) highlighted the role that 'culture' played as a determinant factor in the way people responded to their surroundings. In other words, cultural background partly shaped how/what people thought and how they acted. An attempt was made by this parent to understand higher education as more than a geographical location for the learning of academic material and content. This parent was clearly eager for her daughter to experience the world outside of the community she has grown up in. Experiencing the world outside of where one comes from is an interesting concept and that may certainly merit further investigation. What is clear, however, is that the idea of Cultural Capital is useful here as the daughter of this parent potentially uses higher education as a means to attain skills and qualifications that will allow her to mobilise upwards within society (Bourdieu, 1986). This parent clearly envisages education as a means to a more comfortable life for her daughter: A secure job providing the surety of a mortgage and the ability of her daughter to own her own home, perhaps something not so common in her own community, a clear aspiration for the parent.

4.2.4 Parental Involvement in the Planning Process for Higher Education

A common trend among parents interviewed was their desire to be involved in the decision-making process regarding participation in higher education. Research shows that parental involvement is positively related to college aspirations and enrolment (Rowan-Kenyon, Bell & Perna, 2008; Cabrera & La Nasa, 2000). In line with that, however, studies have also found that involvement is often limited for low-income parents due to economic, social, and psychological barriers (Furstenberg et al., 1999). Researchers typically conceptualize parental involvement as a form of social or

cultural capital that promotes college enrolment (Perna & Titus, 2005; Lareau 1987). Reflecting Bourdieu's conceptualization, research shows that parents of high socio-economic status use their personal knowledge of their own college experience to advance their children's college enrolment processes (McDonough, 1997). This first-hand experience is not something widely available to many lower-income parents (Lareau, 1987). As previously stated, none of the parents interviewed as part of this research project had any personal experience of higher education. Three of the four parents interviewed, however, had a child who had either previously attended higher education or who is currently attending higher education. An attempt was made by these parents to draw on their previous experience of preparing a child for higher education when exploring higher education participation with their second child.

An interview extract from one parent shows the effort made in trying to draw on her first experience of sending a child to college:

> *Well, I think … looking back I regret not kind of guiding* ____ [older daughter] *a bit more because I felt from the start she was in the wrong course and … She wanted to do the PE* [Physical Education teaching course]*, that was always her thing but she was short of the points that were needed for the course. So then she kind of fell into Arts to study History & Geography because her friends were going down that route really and I just wish that she had better guidance in secondary school. Like, the school knew her well and I think they could have guided her along the road a bit better. I wish that I had been a bit … not more forceful, but a bit more involved because I could see that the course didn't suit her once she started it.*
>
> *Now with* _____ [son] *I'd definitely be stepping in a bit more. I left* _____ [older daughter] *to make her own decisions because she's very head strong and was all "Oh, I'll be able to make up my own mind" … she'd kill me now for telling you too much about her!! But I know I could have guided her a bit better so that's why I don't want to make the same mistake now with* _____ [son]. *I'm definitely guiding him a bit more and discussing his choices with him.* **– Parent of Secondary School Student 3**

Consistent with a study by Lareau (1987), the above extract shows that some parents, particularly those with no personal experience of higher education, are more dependent on the school to provide necessary college-related guidance and information. This was certainly the case with this parent when preparing her first child to transition from secondary school to higher education. This parent clearly understood her daughter's first choice of course to study, but felt she was under-prepared for the course she ultimately enrolled in having not received her first choice due to the fact that little information was provided by her school as a means of a 'back-up' plan of sorts.

As opposed to leaving this experience of preparing a child for college impact negatively, however, the parent has gained more of an insight into the role that she would like to take when preparing her second child for to transition from secondary school to higher education. The parent is taking a more proactive role in the preparation process. Different courses are being discussed between parent and child to decide which career path is best suited to the student himself. Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler (1997) suggest that parents who have not attended college are less likely to participate in college planning activities because they do not believe that their involvement can have a positive effect on their child's college outcomes. This parent dispels this suggestion, however, by undertaking a crucial role in preparing her child to transition to the world of higher education – a world that may be new to her, certainly, but a world that she endeavours to learn more about for the educational betterment of her children.

4.3 The Role of the School: Fostering Aspiration and Preparing Under-represented Students for Higher Education

Using Bourdieu's concept of habitus, Tarabini & Curran (2019) outline that educational dispositions, aspirations and choices are socially and relationally constructed and, as such, are not independent of students' social identities and their respective educational institutions. A common expression of working-class habitus in students' educational experiences, expectations and aspirations is a deep feeling of uncertainty over the 'rules' of the educational frame (Tarabini & Curran, 2019). Indeed, Gale & Parker (2015) highlight that aspirations are always conceived within the limits of a social imaginary – meaning they are framed by individuals' social circumstances and their imagined place in the world. In addition, Gale & Parker (2015) also demonstrate that aspirations are specifically dependent on students' capacity to attain the specific knowledge required to navigate the educational system in order to make their aspirations successful.

Schools can have distinct cultures promoting different expectations and attitudes among their students (Ingram, 2009). The term 'institutional habitus' is of great utility when exploring the role of schools in generating learning identities, dispositions, decisions and opportunities for educational success (Tarabini, Curran & Fontdevila, 2016). An institutional habitus is not really a polarized phenomenon, and can be both inclusive or exclusive on the part of the school. As previously mentioned, an inclusive institutional habitus is characterized by a high collective commitment to the educational success of *all* students and begins by recognising student diversity in terms of class, gender, ethnicity etc. (Tarabini & Curran, 2019). On the contrary, an exclusive institutional habitus is mainly characterized by externalising the responsibility for students' educational failure, i.e. a restrictive conception of the role

of the teacher mostly focusing on knowledge transmission and placing the educational success/failure firmly on the shoulders of the students themselves (Tarabini & Curran, 2019). This research project indicated the positive influence that an inclusive institutional habitus can have on students' aspirations to attend higher education, a point strongly supported by the following quote from by Tarabini & Curran (2019: 62): *"Those schools with an inclusive institutional habitus have a more active role in compensating for social inequalities and, collectively, they increase the possibilities for students' educational engagement"*.

An interesting point was raised by one parent regarding the role of the school in preparing students for higher education. She felt that perhaps more could be done in terms of outlining what actually lays ahead of under-represented students as they move from secondary school to higher education:

> *I know when they're in Leaving Cert they're the oldest in the school but, let's be honest, they're still being minded a lot by the teachers. You go into college then and start at the bottom and you're being treated like an adult. It's a huge jump for them and a lot of them just aren't ready. Trying to prepare them more could be just such a help with regards to how hard it is when you actually go to college … not to put them off, but just to be real about it you know? It's not all about the fun on the campus, like. There's an awful lot of hard work. You can't just go for the social life and get someone else to do the assignments! I think there's a huge gap between Leaving Cert and 1st Year of college and some kids just aren't prepared for that.* **– Parent of Secondary School Student 3**

This parent was speaking from experience as her eldest daughter had previously progressed to higher education, moving from a different secondary school located in the same area as the school at which her son was attending at the time of this research project. It is clear from the above quotation that this parent sees an opportunity for more to be done in terms of preparing under-represented students for life within the system of higher education. The term 'college readiness' is often used when referring to students' academic preparedness for entry-level college coursework (Hatch, 2013).

Given the barriers that many under-represented students face, however, getting students ready for life in higher education involves multiple components. Factors such as the ongoing provision of college information between school and students/families, a comprehensive school counselling model, and creating a visible pathway for success as students progress from second-level to third-level are vital in allowing under-represented students to visualise themselves as potential college-going students (Bryan et al., 2015). An attempt is made in the following sub-sections to outline how the school at the centre of this research project strives to foster aspiration for participation in higher education.

4.3.1 Positive Student-Teacher Relationships

Each of the parents interviewed for the purpose of this study highlighted the difference between their own personal experience of education in comparison with that of their children from the point of view of student-teacher relationships:

> *I think the teachers are very down-to-earth now with the children. They're way more open with the children. Secondary school in particular … the teachers have been brilliant with* _____ [daughter]*. When I was in school you'd never speak to a teacher. The teacher would tell you what to do and you'd do it. I think now, ehhh, the children see the teacher as someone who's very approachable. They can talk to the teacher about anything these days, the relationship is way better. They're very hands on and they'd always be asking* _____ [daughter] *what she'd like to do after school, always pushing her … very interested in the children and their lives. The teachers are all there to help with each of the subjects, but they'd help them with everything really. That's a great thing in my opinion.* **– Parent of Secondary School Student 2**

> *I think one of the big differences now is the relationship between the teachers and the students. I think that might be why* _____ [youngest son] *likes the school so much. He has all of you* [teachers] *to talk to or to ask questions. It wasn't like that when we were in school. We didn't have a teacher that we were close to or that we could talk to about anything other than our schoolwork. It*

just wasn't like that. The relationship between the teachers and the kids now is phenomenal, so so positive. **– Parent of Secondary School Student 4**

The concept of student-teacher relationships has been explored in the past. Early motivation researchers tended to focus more on how to support students' motivation in specific academic domains or academic tasks (Davis, 2003). This original body of research, however, tended to mainly focus on the teacher in their primary role as a provider of education through the classroom-based teaching of academic material, hence concentrating mostly on dimensions that fall within the "control" of the teacher – e.g. class context, behavioural expectations, instructional tasks and strategies (Davis, 2003). As evidenced in the above interview quotes, however, it is clear that the influence of the modern-day teacher stretches far beyond what would have been considered to be traditional classroom-based instruction for student learning. A study by Wells (1996) found that "good" teachers were those who expressed concern over both the social and intellectual lives of their students. Indeed, Freeman (2015) found that teachers at school seem to hold a pre-eminent position in working-class students' early conceptions and expectations of university, shaping these conceptions and expectations by showing an active interest in students' progression within education. Findings across attachment, motivation, and socio-cultural perspectives reveal that "closeness" to teachers continues to be a salient indicator of motivating relationships even among older [school leaving age] students (Davis, 2003). Some of the associated benefits of supportive student-teacher relationships among older students include: 1) Deepening students' intrinsic interest in and value for particular academic subjects; 2) Promoting social efficacy for enhanced inter-personal relationships; and 3) Encouraging students to envision a future self (Perry et al., 2002). Though thorough research regarding student-teacher relationships has been conducted irrespective of social background, the three aforementioned points were certainly noticeable as

interviews were undertaken with DEIS secondary school students as part of the research project. When asked who has had an influence on their desire to attend higher education, most of the secondary school students highlighted that the school as a whole or particular teachers of theirs have had a positive influence in promoting higher education as a viable option to explore on completion of second-level education:

> ***And has anyone in particular, either in school or outside of school, had a positive influence on you wanting to attend college?***
>
> *I'd probably have to say my English teacher, to be fair. She's so passionate about the subject, and I think that makes me passionate about it then as well. She helps me to progress with the subject and then makes me want to improve and learn more. That's why I'd like to study English in college.* **– Secondary School Student 1**

> *Well, ehhh, I'd say all the teachers here* [in school] *would be fairly supportive. Like, they'd all be asking what you're thinking of doing after school and giving you bits of advice to go to college and to carry on your education.* **– Secondary School Student 3**

> *I always got on well with all my teachers and I see how they enjoy their job, particularly the teachers in this school … like, most of the teachers here are young and would have been in college not that long ago. They're very easy to relate to and very easy to talk to. They'd always show an interest and ask what you'd be thinking of doing after school … give you a few tips about what courses to look at, you know?* **– Secondary School Student 4**

The above extracts show the direct impact that positive student-teacher relationships, aligned with the inclusive institutional habitus of the school itself whereby teachers take an interest in the lives of students outside of the classroom, are having on the desire and aspiration of these students to attend higher education upon completion of secondary school.

4.3.2 School Creating a Culture of Higher Education

An interesting point highlighted by the majority of secondary school students and parents centred around the school introducing students to the concept of higher education, using university open days and guest speakers to demonstrate the accessibility of higher education to students:

> *Ehhh, last week we had a Zoom* [meeting] *with someone from UCC who spoke to us about the HEAR and DARE schemes. Just about how you can apply to them and whatever. We had a few talks with people* [guest speakers] *about different courses as well. –* **Secondary School Student 2**

> *We've had speakers that have come to talk to us about college … well, online more so now with everything that's going on because you can't be bringing many people into school* [due to Covid 19 restrictions]*. But, yeah, people have spoken to us about different courses and stuff like that. That's handy* [helpful] *obviously because you can take bits from each of the talks and be thinking "I might like that course" or "I wouldn't like that course".* **– Secondary School Student 3**

> *I think the kids are being brought up now believing that they can go to college. They bring them down to UCC or CIT and the kids aren't afraid of college … not afraid to speak about going or wanting to go.* **– Parent of Secondary School Student 2**

Interestingly, one parent went a step further by highlighting the potential influence that a guest speaker from the local area, perhaps a past pupil of the school, could potentially have on instilling a belief in students that they have the potential to successfully participate in higher education:

> *I think the school are very good for getting people up to talk to the students about different jobs or different courses. I think that's a great idea because it gives them the opportunity to hear from people who are doing or have done whatever course, hear about their experiences and … you know. Anything like that is good because it gives them some bit of an insight into what life is like in college or what certain courses are like. They need to be hearing from people who have had experience of college, just so they know what to expect really if and when they decide to go there. Especially bringing past pupils back. People who went to* _____ [school name]*. The kids can really relate to them because they can see their progression from school to college, same path as themselves. Bringing someone like that back that they can look up to … a role*

> *model for them in a way … that makes all the difference. Someone that can talk to them at their level and understand the position that the kids are in at that stage of their education.* **– Parent of Secondary School Student 4**

Inviting guest speakers or industrial professionals to participate in classroom discussion is a common and popular practice in the field of education (Kong, 2018). As seen in the above interview extract, however, the parent explicitly highlights what she perceives to be a potential benefit of utilising a past pupil of the school in the role of guest speaker as a means of peaking students' interest in higher education. Studies have shown that the way in which guest speakers interact with students can create an enduring impact on students' learning (Kong, 2018). A study by Agha-Jaffar (2000), for example, showed that having a member of the community sharing information with students can be meaningful and may leave a significant impact on students. In the case study of Agha-Jaffar (2000), the guest speaker spoke on the topic of 'Women Employability & Meaningful Employment for Women'. The key point, however, was that the guest speaker shared her disadvantaged background with a group of female students considered to be non-traditional in terms of participation in higher education, which was not only inspiring but also stimulating to students' inferiority complex feelings. It has been well documented that the transition from adolescence to young adulthood is one of the most influential periods for determining future education and career decisions (Stettersten, Furstenberg & Rumbaut, 2005). From adolescence to young adulthood, young people are exploring different identities and considering possibilities for their future (Schoon, 2006). At the same time, however, they are becoming aware of the barriers that may hinder the fulfilment of their plans. In this sense, aspirations can be distinguished from expectations, reflecting differences between what one hopes to achieve and what one expects to achieve (Gutman, Schoon & Sabates, 2012). There lies the possibility that guest speakers who possess

a connection to the school, or indeed the general local area, may act as a positive role model for of under-represented students and increase their aspiration to achieve within education (Freeman, 2005). These guest speakers may contribute to what Webb (2007) would consider to be 'Resolute Hope': Hope directed towards an object of desire which is future-orientated and deemed to be of significance to the hoper. In this instance, the hoper [student] may see similarities (background, upbringing, financial status, beliefs, and so on) between themselves and the guest speaker, thus developing the resolve to set aside one's evidence-based beliefs and to perceive oneself as capable of deriving pathways to desired educational goals that are deemed to be worth the risk of actively pursuing for the purpose of personal transformation.

4.3.3 The Role of the Guidance Counsellor

The role of the school guidance counsellor is one that cannot be understated when discussing the preparation of under-represented students for higher education. Kutty (2014) found that under-represented students often rely heavily on school guidance counsellors for university information. The importance of the role of the school guidance counsellor in the provision of information for various higher education courses was in evidence as interviews were undertaken with secondary school students for the research project:

> *The career guidance counsellor would be a big help to me now this year. You know yourself, sure* _____ [guidance counsellor] *is a sound* [personable] *man. I only had a meeting with him there a couple of weeks ago and we were going through different courses and all that. He's very knowledgeable about the courses and what you need to get into them. He's always very helpful. He always listens to what you have to say and then tries to point you in the right direction. As well as that too though he's always realistic about it. Like, he'll go through your exam results and kind of say "this is how many points you need for this course, and at the moment your results are good enough or not good*

enough to get into the course". Ehhh, I think you need someone to be realistic like that too just to keep you down to earth. **– Secondary School Student 1**

Irrespective of whether higher education is being considered or not, every student in the school has one mandatory career guidance meeting in each year of their senior cycle studies [5th Year & 6th Year] to discuss their plans post-secondary school. As well as this, students can ask to see the guidance counsellor at a suitable time for both student and counsellor outside of the mandatory meetings if any queries arise regarding post-secondary school options. While this research project is focusing on progression to and through higher education, it is important to note and realise that not all students in the school are considering a move directly to higher education. The needs of every student are being met through the provision of career guidance meetings as every student is afforded an opportunity to discuss their post-secondary school options and choices, again highlighting the inclusive institutional habitus of the school. Spiegler & Bednarek (2013) found that under-represented students consult guidance counsellors because they perceive them as more experienced and with more knowledge, and thus able to assist them with the college selection process. Similarly, Scanlon et al. (2019) point to the fact that many under-represented students tend to lean on the school for the provision of information regarding progression to higher education. In line with these points, each of the secondary school students interviewed acknowledged the school guidance counsellor as the main source of information surrounding access to higher education – required entry points for various degree programmes; topics of study on said degree programmes; possible work placements as part of degree programmes; potential future employment opportunities on completion of degree programmes; and other information related to their transition to third level.

4.4 Adapting to Life in Higher Education: Changes and Challenges

The transition of under-represented students from secondary school to higher education, and the challenges they face when transitioning to and through higher education, has been explored in the past. Thomas (2015) proposed that participation in higher education is now broader due to the progressive incorporation of collective groups that were traditionally marginalised from higher education – including students of different nationalities, ages, cultures, or socio-economic situations. Participation levels of under-represented groups in higher education have increased in this country, with a report published by the Higher Education Authority (HEA) in 2019 highlighting that there are now 4.9 students from disadvantaged areas to every 10 students from affluent areas currently in attendance across institutes of higher education in Ireland. While this statistic may indicate that enrolments have increased for under-represented students, we must be conscious that these enrolments vary across institutions, meaning not every institution of higher education is representative of this statistic. And while enrolment numbers have positively increased statistically on a broad scale, one must consider the experience of under-represented students as they progress from secondary school to higher education. Many under-represented students often describe experiencing the same anxieties and problems as other students when making the transition to higher education (Engle, Bermeo & O'Brien, 2006). Studies have shown that non-traditional college-going students tend to perform at lower levels academically in college than their peers (Chen, 2005); while also experiencing more difficulty navigating the bureaucratic aspects of academic life and demonstrating less confidence in their academic abilities (Penrose, 2002). Furthermore, evidence suggests that under-represented students are less likely to engage in the social experiences associated with success in college such as studying in groups, interacting

with other students and faculty, using support services, and participating in extra-curricular activities (Pike & Kuh, 2005). While under-represented students face barriers to their academic and social integration, they also confront obstacles with respect to cultural adaptation due to discontinuities between the culture [norms, values, expectations] of their families/communities and the culture that exists on college campuses (Reay, Crozier & Clayton, 2010). Taking all of this into account, it comes as little surprise that students from under-represented and low-income backgrounds are among the least likely to be retained and complete a degree (Thayer, 2000).

Throughout the interview process with higher education students, various points were raised regarding their experience of higher education including challenges they faced, why they aspired to overcome these challenges and, perhaps more importantly, how they managed to overcome these challenges. These challenges are unpacked in the following subsections, along with methods of coping with the challenges to allow for continued successful participation in higher education.

4.4.1 Transitioning to Higher Education: The Importance of Settling In

Perhaps unsurprisingly, many of the higher education students interviewed as part of this research project initially highlighted general challenges no different to those commonly associated with all undergraduate students as they transition from secondary school to higher education. When probed as to the biggest changes or challenges faced when transitioning to higher education, many students highlighted the structure of the college day, as well as the motivation required to meet the

heightened demand of responsibility required regarding taking ownership of one's own academic studies and progression:

> *There was probably too many* [changes] *at the start!! Your lectures are literally everywhere, like, so it's hard enough to know where you're supposed to be. You could have a lecture at 9.00am and then have none again until around 1.00pm with nothing in between. You have to have kind of self-motivation to do something to fill the time and not go home because you can go home if you want to. Also, you have to be on time in the morning. It's not like school where you get in trouble if you're late or whatever. Probably the biggest change is just about sorting yourself out, being organized and actually being committed to going to all your lectures because, obviously, there's nobody going to be giving out to you for not going to the lectures.* **– Higher Education Student 1 [Arts]**

> *Definitely just the structure of the day. Like, we could have a lecture at 9.00 – 10.00. Then we might have a break between 10.00 – 1.00. Might be back in then from 1.00 – 2.00. For the day then you're just kind of trying to fill up the time, like. At the start alright it was a novelty because you'd be able to go home and stuff but then you'd be at home some days and you wouldn't want to be coming back in, you know yourself.* **– Higher Education Student 5 [Early Years & Childhood Studies]**

> *I think it does probably take a little while to settle into college itself. I do remember the first few weeks thinking it was very difficult to adapt to the college way … Like, in school you have such a generic day. You go from 9.00am – 3.30pm or whatever, you have set times for your lunch break, you have certain subjects at such a time … To come from that structure then into college was a big change. Here you might have 2 or 3 hours in a day, a lot of breaks in between so it did take a while to adjust to that, I think. Having that sense of freedom and independence was good, obviously, but there was responsibility too knowing you have to study this or you have to read that, whatever, that can be tough starting out at 18 or 19 years old when there's nobody there to be looking for work from you. I suppose just figuring out how to manage yourself. Knowing that there'll be nobody telling me "oh you have to know this or that for the exam on Friday" … Just knowing that you need to stay on top of your own work.* **– Higher Education Student 7 [Genetics]**

The above interview extracts highlight the very common challenge of increased independence and responsibility facing all students as they adapt to life in higher education. Deil-Amen & Rosenbaum (2003), however, are among those who argue that this lack of structure increases the importance of 'college knowledge', which in

turn tends to place already disadvantaged groups at an even further disadvantage. A study by Forsyth & Furlong (2003) found that young people had a lack of prior knowledge of what student life involved and, consequently, were unprepared for the amount of free time they had and were unsure of how to manage this productively. Indeed, Scott-Clayton (2015) argues that this unstructured complexity may be most daunting for disadvantaged students – particularly first-generation college students – who may have limited access to those with the required college knowledge to assist with the process of transition. Undeniably, institutes of higher education are under increased pressure to deliver a student-centred academic climate in which timetabling practices are fuelled by individual preferences (Muklason et al., 2017). At the same time however, research shows that many under-represented students often feel they are expected to be too independent too early and are shocked by what they feel to be a lack of supervision and guidance (Leathwood & O'Connell, 2003; Read, Archer & Leathwood, 2003). It may be the case that under-represented students are more reliant on the institution in terms of the provision of effective guidance regarding higher education timetabling and general adaptation to life in higher education (Gorard et al., 2006). The specific students interviewed for this research project had the self-motivation to overcome the initial challenge of transitioning to their new educational setting, whereas many others may lack the required motivation to do so. This shows that a linear development path does not exist when it comes to non-traditional students settling into life in higher education, and that perhaps a longer induction period along with more a comprehensive introduction to the demands of higher education may need to be offered for the retention of under-represented students (Leathwood & O'Connell, 2003; Elliott, 2002).

One student did reference a university access programme as being vital in her ability to adapt to the world of higher education. This university access programme seeks to support students from under-represented groups at third level by providing motivational and educational assistance to these students throughout their secondary schooling in order to enhance their ability to progress to higher education. The programme is accessed through the Higher Education Access Route (HEAR) – A college and university scheme that offers places on reduced points, as well as extra college support, to those who are under-represented at higher education due to their socio-economic background:

> *Then I also actually came in through the HEAR scheme so I had* _____ [university access programme]*. Basically, they provide support … You have a meeting, I think it's every semester, with your support officer. So I'm in the school of Business, so my support officer would be linked to the school of Business too. He'd be able to give me advice now, say if I needed guidance counselling now or anything like that he'd be able to point me in the right direction. Then they offer free extra tuition as well if you need it. They offer support in terms of equipment then as well, so say if you needed a laptop or something they'd be able to source one for you which is good obviously because I know some people might not have a laptop at home or when they first come into college. So* _____ [university access programme] *is very good from that point of view. If you do need support it's there, like.* **– Higher Education Student 6 [Commerce & Irish]**

Interestingly, this student had previously dropped out of higher education. Having chosen to study a different course on completion of the Leaving Certificate examinations, the student was of the opinion that she *"just knew that it wasn't the right course for me, like"*. As opposed to giving up on her aspiration to attend higher education, however, the student took time to reconsider her options before deciding to re-enter higher education to study her current course. On deciding upon the course she would like to study, the student also realised her eligibility for the HEAR scheme [her secondary school having attained DEIS status the year after she herself had

completed her Leaving Certificate examinations] and utilised this opportunity throughout the application process, right up to the point of re-commencing her studies:

> *And as well, like when I actually first came in to Public Health I never signed up for the HEAR scheme through the CAO. But the second year then I applied I did sign up for the HEAR scheme, and I got that. So, then we had an orientation day through* _____ [university access programme]*, say around a week or two before we actually started college. They invited us in and provided accommodation and everything for a couple of nights. During the day then we'd have kind of workshops. I remember we had a library workshop where they showed us all the facilities in the library, we had tours of the campus, we got signed up on the IT systems … So all that kind of stuff then was done in advance of actually starting the course. It was a lot less then that I had to worry about when I started. And that orientation was specific to* _____ [university access programme]*, so say when I came for my own orientation with my course I actually kind knew it all … not knew it all but I was way more comfortable, nearly a bit ahead of the rest of them in a way. I felt like it was a big advantage because I was ready to go really.* **– Higher Education Student 6 [Commerce & Irish]**

There has been a growing movement towards suites of pre-entry activities in recent years, offering more sustained interventions with young people at different stages of their schooling prior to participation in higher education (Gorard et al., 2006). Research has found that participation in pre-intervention entry programmes has been seen to increase higher education attainment and aspiration when conducted with those from households with no tradition of higher education (Morris et al., 2005). Findings suggest that the most effective strategies in raising attainment and increasing pupils' aspirations are those that are part of an on-going programme of events which expose pupils to realities of all aspects of university life (Gorard et al., 2006). While the student above was not exposed to the university access programme throughout her years of secondary schooling due to the attainment of DEIS status when this student had completed secondary school, it is evident of the benefit accrued from such a programme even in the short period in advance of commencing her higher education course. Gorard et al. (2006) may suggest that further research is needed to assess

the effectiveness of pre-intervention programmes as students progress through higher education but, from the first interview quotation above, the student was clearly benefiting from the ongoing support provided by this particular university access programme. She mentioned a support officer, the provision of guidance counselling, extra tuition at no cost, and the provision of resources required for successful participation in higher education. While this may be the perception of one student, it is nonetheless something that is beneficial to her ongoing participation in higher education, and therefore should not be ignored in the context of this research project.

4.4.2 Dropping Out & The Importance of Having a Clear Plan

All of the higher education participants interviewed as part of this research project stated that they directly knew people from their own school or friend group who entered higher education but chose to forgo their studies and drop out of higher education. When probed as to why they felt their peers chose to drop out of higher education, the primary reasons provided by interviewees were: 1) Choosing an unsuitable college course to study on entry to higher education, and 2) Not liking their chosen course. When questioned further as to the difference between themselves and those they knew who had dropped out of higher education, a consistent point raised by interviewees was that they themselves felt they were working towards a set career path on completion of higher education, whilst feeling their counterparts had chosen what they considered to be “broad courses” that maybe didn’t lead to a specific career or position of employment once completed. Choosing a career has often been described as a provocative situation that requires systematic reflection on one’s strengths, values, and place in context (Baxter Magolda, 2008). The term ‘work volition’ has often been used in the context of under-represented students feeling a

sense of control in the making of career decisions (Garriott, 2020). Research with undergraduate students has shown that social support, social class, and institutional support are associated with work volition, specifically referring to the ability of undergraduate students to make career choices despite conceptual constraints (Autin et al., 2017; Duffy, Diemer & Jadidian, 2012). Savickas (2005) suggests that career adaptability includes *concern* about one's career development, *control* over one's career decisions, *curiosity* about one's fit within the world of work, and *confidence* in one's ability to execute academic and career choices. Despite the challenges often associated in choosing a career for undergraduate students, the idea of having a chosen career path, or at least a career path within a chosen field, was something that featured strongly in interviews undertaken with higher education students as part of this research project. Each of the higher education students interviewed were working towards a career within a chosen field on completion of their degree programme:

> *I just think a lot of people pick Arts because they don't know what they want to do, do you know what I mean? Like, I did Arts because I wanted to become a teacher but I think some people do Arts just to say they're doing a course in college. So, for example, I was away in the Gaeltacht for 6 months and I came back, but when I came back I think my motivation levels were a lot higher than theirs* [peers] *because I went there to complete the Gaeltacht residency that I knew needed to be done if I wanted to be an Irish teacher … Again, like, it was that goal of what I wanted to do in the future. When I came back the rest of them were still just kind of going through the motions a bit, probably not still not knowing what they wanted to do in the future. I think you need that goal of knowing you're working towards a certain job in the future to get you through college.* **– Higher Education Student 1 [Arts]**

> *Yeah, because I knew … now, in saying that, I still don't know what branch of Medicine I want to go into … but I had a general idea of what the job was and where I was going to go with it as opposed to someone going into a broader course and they've no idea where they're going to go after it. Like, it's all well and good to say to someone "go away and get a degree" or "a degree is good to have" but a lot of the time I don't think people know what they can actually do with that degree afterwards. What job are they working towards? What does that job entail? Whatever, like.* **– Higher Education Student 3 [Medicine]**

> *I think so yeah because in 1st Year one of the course directors took us on an outing up to a Law firm and that led to us then being pushed to apply for all these internships and stuff so I remember within the first few months doing the course I kind of knew what profession it was leading to. On the other hand, I think when you do these broad courses you might not even know yourself what you want out of it. You might be getting a degree but not know what you're doing with it then.* **– Higher Education Student 4 [Law & Business]**

Whilst a valid point was made earlier in this paper regarding the tendency of under-represented students to lean heavily on the school guidance counsellor for college information, it is clear from interviews undertaken with higher education students that they feel many of their peers from secondary school entered higher education with limited knowledge of their chosen course or the career direction that course could lead to. In fact, lack of course knowledge or the idea of '*not knowing what they'll get from the course'* in terms of putting their degree to use in the future was one of the primary reasons provided as to why many of their under-represented peers chose to drop out of higher education. Billson & Terry (1982) found levels of career aspirations amongst under-represented students to be similar to those of their more affluent peers. This point is perhaps true of a certain proportion of under-represented students, admittedly including those interviewed as part of this research project, who are aware of what career path they would like to follow on successful completion of their degree programme and therefore choose their degree programme with that set career plan in mind. On the basis of information gathered from these research interviews, however, there are other under-represented students who do not possess this career-focused clarity at the higher education application phase. School counsellors generally agree that all students need to understand the relationship between interests, abilities, and the world of work, as well as how to identify and act on information pertaining to furthering their education (Barker & Satcher, 2000). Whilst clear that the interview

participants specific to this research project had thought deeply about their future career prospects in advance of entry to higher education, perhaps more could and needs to be done to ensure all under-represented students are encouraged to explore their interests and academic capabilities in advance of progression to higher education (Gibbons & Shoffner, 2004). Furthermore, the self-efficacy of students must always be taken into consideration when choosing a higher education course (Gibbons & Shoffner, 2004). While discussions between the school guidance counsellor and prospective higher education students can raise the self-efficacy of students by exploring their true capabilities and their expectations of higher education as well as the potential desirable and/or beneficial outcomes aligned with participation in higher education, it appears that a certain level of independence on the part of the student themselves is often necessary when choosing to enter specific fields within higher education (Gibbons & Shoffner, 2004). It would appear that the students interviewed for this research project had the capability to assess their own abilities and interests in a slightly superior manner to that of some of their peers when choosing their selected college courses with an eye on the future regarding their field of potential employment on completion of higher education.

4.4.3 'Fitting In': The Importance of Relationships

It is often said that the university experience of under-represented students can be hindered by how one sees or perceives themselves as a result of their social class (Leathwood & O'Connell, 2003). Studies carried out in the USA found social class differences in academic and social integration within higher education, indicating that social class has an impact on levels of integration and the extent to which students feel that they 'fit in' (Aries & Seider, 2007; Walpole, 2003). Similarly, Thomas & Quinn

(2007) in their study of non-traditional students in the UK found they were relatively unprepared for the university experience and lacked a sense of entitlement to study amongst some of their more affluent peers. This sense of feeling inferior to some of their peers was certainly in evidence at times in this study. When questioned regarding the make-up of their own undergraduate classes / year groups, interviewees emphasised what they found to be a big disparity in the number of students in their courses coming from more affluent schools and/or backgrounds and areas in comparison to their own:

> *Yeah, like I presume most of the schools around the south-side wouldn't be DEIS schools either. The majority of my course are "south-siders". I think that would probably play a role in it. They have no other option BUT to go to college, does that make sense? For people in our area it could be the opposite. There's probably only one or two in my course from a DEIS school I'd say.* **– Higher Education Student 2 [Business Information Systems]**

> *Ehhh, yeah, I think it depends … like, if you look at my class now in college a lot of them would be well-off or from well-off families. You look at them and they're like, … college is kind of a given, that you go to college you know? Whereas other families it's probably not pushed as much. The amount of people coming from private schools, like _____, _____, _____ or even the grind schools as opposed to the DEIS schools … there's obviously some disparity there.* **– Higher Education Student 3 [Medicine]**

> *Do you know what, that struck me … that's one thing maybe going back to the question earlier that I found difficult as well was actually settling into the group of people too. They definitely seemed fairly … like, I get on very well with them now, lovely people and all … but they definitely seemed different to me you know? Different in a way, kind of thing. I suppose just because of the nature of the course too they were all very bright, all came from good schools and probably good areas. They were nice now and stuff, but to me now I suppose there just wasn't as much "northside" in them as there was in the people from secondary school. You wouldn't have as much craic with them or whatever. I don't know … It's a very different environment like. I know I said I was always probably going to go to college, but for them college is a guarantee. There's no question of them not going.* – **Higher Education Student 5 [Law & Business]**

A valid point is raised from the above interview extracts regarding habitus and opportunity to attend higher education. From what is outlined above by participants, it is clear that they believe *"college"* is much more attainable for their more affluent counterparts having met these people in person on transition to higher education. It is almost as if participation in higher education has become part of the habitus of more affluent students, almost that higher education attendance is taken for granted in some way, whereas for under-represented students there may or may not be a chance to attend (Bourdieu, 2020). These participants clearly feel that participation in higher education has been engrained in their more affluent counterparts from a young age as they hear of higher education from their parents or see other family members or members of the community attending higher education, whereas they themselves may have no history of higher education within the home or community (Thomas, 2002).

Also outlined in the interview extracts above is a sense of an inferiority complex that may exist between under-represented students and their more affluent classmates. In their study of UK university life, Reay, Crozier & Clayton (2010) perfectly highlight the potential inferiority complex felt by the students quoted above. When exploring life in one Midland and one Southern university, it was found that students from a working-class background were considerably in the minority in terms of those attending the universities in question. Whilst academically able in terms of the challenges posed by the workload of their chosen degree programme, the working-class students quite often found it more difficult to associate socially with their more affluent peers. In this instance, the working-class students above were able to 'fit in' academically but sometimes felt as though they 'stood out' as a result of their marginalised background and upbringing. Worryingly, the above interviewees appear to almost see themselves as somewhat 'less than' their academic peers, using terms such as *"well off"* [wealthy]

to highlight their financial standing or *"good"* when describing the schools and areas where these people have come from. Of course, equality exists in terms of the academic abilities of these students irrespective of their backgrounds – they have all earned the right to study the same higher education courses and the same opportunities for progression are now on offer to all. So why, even at the point where relative parity has been achieved at least in terms of higher education attendance, do these under-represented students still feel at odds with their surroundings and those who occupy those surroundings? Bourdieu's notion of "having a feel for the game" comes to mind here: A practical sense of how to act or for what is to be done in any given situation (McCormick, 2006). A report by Bathmaker, Ingram & Waller (2013) focused on higher education as a route to social mobility, placing a significant focus on the response of students from differing class backgrounds to the competitive environment of higher education by investigating the extent to which students mobilise capitals in both 'active' and 'internalised' ways to position themselves advantageously within the field of higher education and in preparation for life after higher education. It is thought that students of different social classes are aware of the 'game' that exists within the education system. They see the advantages attained from successful participation in higher education and they understand how the system works in terms of advantageous social positioning having attained a degree from an institution of higher education (Bathmaker, Ingram & Waller, 2013). Differences tend to arise, however, in the way in which students from differing socio-economic backgrounds react to their surroundings as they adapt to higher education. Sani (2008) argues that the mismatch between high-status university and a low-status social background produces a dearth of opportunities for self-affirmation at university, creating tension and unease. Evidence of this was found throughout this research project as interviews

were undertaken. Many felt that their college classmates felt more at ease in the higher education environment when compared to themselves, leading participants to feel less of a sense of belonging to the institute of higher education than perhaps some of their peers as well as a heightened sense of feeling uncomfortable in both their social and educational surroundings:

> *Now, I did make a few friends in Commerce as well but, just say in Commerce & Irish there's only 8 or 9 and they all come from the Gaeltacht. They all knew each other before starting college and they were all living with each other you know? And I kind of felt on the outskirts then a small bit, so I had to make friends in the normal Irish tutorials or else I would have been completely on my own! Now, don't get me wrong, they're very nice people and all … But you can feel sometimes where they're all VERY comfortable with each other and you're just trying to insert yourself in, that can be tough in fairness.* **– Higher Education Student 6 [Commerce & Irish]**

One interviewee did, however, contradict what many of the other participants said regarding the idea of 'fitting in' within higher education. When asked if any services were available to help with the transition from secondary school to higher education, this participant highlighted the benefits attained from becoming a member of a university society:

> *I also got involved in the Genetics Society straight away when I came to college. That was very helpful too because there were students from the older years and they'd pass on any notes for exams or assignments or any general tips. That was a big help then if I found anything difficult. Even now, my sisters would be starting college and I'd always say to them to get involved in something. You know, it's nice to know people because those people might be able to help you with something down the road.* **– Higher Education Student 7 [Genetics]**

Thompson et al. (2013) state that students' experiences of higher education comprise not only of their academic studies but also their extracurricular activities. Jackson (2011) captures this idea through the concept of 'life-wide learning' in suggesting that learning occurs through formal and informal experiences in different 'learning spaces',

with academic study and extra-curricular activities representing different spaces within the higher education student experience. While definitions of the term 'extra-curricular' can vary, Thompson et al. (2013) define extra-curricular activities as activities and events that students engage in which are not part of their formal degree classification such as hobbies, social groups, sporting, cultural or religious activities, as well voluntary or paid work. It is felt that these are all part of the wider student experience. Research into the value of extra-curricular activities has shown that engagement is related to a number of valuable work-place skills and attributes which are desired by employers such as improved critical thinking, leadership and social skills (Tieu & Pancer, 2009). Furthermore, supporting the above interview extract, extra-curricular activities may also play an important role in university adjustment and may act as a predictor for continued participation in higher education (Tieu & Pancer, 2009). Of the higher education students interviewed, this participant was the only one who mentioned a higher education society as a positive contributing factor to their experience in higher education.

In addition to the social benefits of the society, this participant also referenced the career talks organised by the society as something that helped her to envisage where her degree could take her regarding future employment. She felt that hearing from others currently completing the course or who had previously completed the course allowed her to believe in her own ability to do so:

> *It was nice to look and them and be like "okay, they were in my position only a couple of years ago … now they're here and they're happy with their life". People like that make you realise that parts of college might be tough, but you can get through it alright and work towards something that you'll enjoy doing down the road.* **– Higher Education Student 7 [Genetics]**

Evidence gathered from this particular interview points towards the desired outcome of completing higher education. Surrounding herself with others of similar interests to

herself, making new friends, and participating in activities that benefited her future career allowed this student to develop a belief within herself that she belonged in the field of higher education and that she had the ability to succeed there (Thompson et al., 2013).

4.5 The Illusio Effect: Reaping the Rewards of Higher Education

Bourdieu (1990) describes *illusio* as concept for thinking about how meaning is created, maintained and transformed. If someone is invested in the illusio of a field, they are motivated by its stakes as something worth struggling over; they see the investment of their own time, effort and emotion as a valuable endeavour; and they are committed to reaping the rewards of the field, meaning they see something worth aspiring towards (Threadgold, 2019). Bourdieu & Wacquant (1992: 116) argue that once an illusio is personally invested in, a trajectory is formed whereby one is both "taken in" and "taken by" the 'game'. Higher education in this instance acts as the illusio whereby participants consciously invest the commitment of time, effort and emotion into participation in higher education in order to place themselves on a trajectory to their own understanding of educational success.

Illusio is quite commonly used in educational research, especially when studying aspiration and when investigating how the different motivations and goals of students are inflected by modalities of inequality (Bathmaker et al., 2016). The decision on whether to attend higher education on completion of final school examinations is the perfect illusio scenario. While the value of attending university is thought of as an intrinsic good, a disparity still exists between working-class students who often have aspirations of just getting to attend any university, in contrast to more affluent students

who are often seen to consistently choose which university to attend and which professional degree they would like to undertake (Threadgold & Nilan, 2009). Therefore, the very aspiration of university attendance has obvious class implications, where the entering of university is considered to be an achievement in itself for some young people, while others see it just as a taken-for-granted stepping stone on the trajectory to the next phase of their lives (Threadgold, 2019).

Consideration must also be given to the relationship between illusio, forms of capital, and the very possibility of achieving aspirations. Just how committed are students to achieving one's aspirations? How much time, effort and emotion is one willing to invest in education for the purpose of social mobility? Or, indeed, how committed can one afford to be? While illusio can often play a socially reproductive role, it may also function in an anti-dominant way in the sense that the inhabitants of some fields are committed to resisting change (Threadgold, 2019). The rejection of illusio has been implicit in youth transition research, especially in instances where young people are seen to 'fail' in the eyes of society – an anti-school culture where 'working-class kids get working-class jobs' (Willis, 1977). Even today, it remains very difficult for under-represented young people to escape the social norms when exploring the world of higher education. Those looking from the outside may not fully understand the field within which these young people are striving to achieve. Aside from academic ability and a desire to achieve educationally, it appears that a strong sense of character and pride is needed to come from a working-class background and be able to achieve within higher education.

4.5.1 Ties to Home: Progressing in education, but never too far from home

Whilst higher education participation was strongly favoured and promoted throughout the research project, something that stood out amongst each of the interview groups was the idea of remaining close to home for the undertaking of higher education:

> *I don't know, really. I live very close to the city so it's easy to get to* **_____** [institute of higher education]*. My brother was going to college too at the time and he was in* _____ [another institute of higher education]*. I suppose it was easy to stay living at home too, do you know? Say if I was to move to* _____ [another Irish city] *or something, my Mam and Dad would have had to pay a load of money for me to stay up there so it was just handy to stay living at home when college is so near anyway.* **– Higher Education Student 1 [Arts]**

> *We're saving* [money] *for him to go to college because the cost is high as you know yourself. Tell you the truth, he has to go to college in* _____ [home city]*. We couldn't afford the living cost of student accommodation in* _____ [another Irish city] *or anywhere else.* **– Parent of Secondary School Student 1**

> *I was thinking about a few other teaching courses as well alright … Up in* _____ *and up in* _____ [other Irish cities]*. But I'd rather stay at home to be honest. It would be too expensive to be paying for accommodation up the country, like. Sure,* _____ [institute of higher education] *is perfect here in* _____ [home city]*. They have loads of courses that could lead me towards teaching so why would I need to go anywhere else; do you get me?* **– Secondary School Student 4**

Bourdieu (1986) often understands staying close to home to be linked to necessity. From the above interview quotations, it would appear that staying close to home in this instance is a personal choice and one that is favoured by all interview groups for both personal and financial reasons. Finn (2017) compared the cases of various higher education students and found that more working-class students lived at home throughout their time in higher education in comparison to those of greater affluence. Patiniotis & Holdsworth (2005) outline that, for working-class students, participation in higher education is not only a perceived financial risk, but also an identity risk as students may potentially 'stand out' both academically and culturally from their home community. Whilst research has found that this 'stickiness of place' can have negative connotations regarding the ability of students to fully experience all that higher

education has to offer (Grant, 2017), it is clear that living at home throughout one's time in higher education acts a means of minimising the financial burden of higher education, while at the same time maintaining ties with the local community and providing the emotional security of the familiar (Patiniotis & Holdsworth, 2005).

4.5.2 Transitioning Between Fields: Belonging to Two Communities and the Stigma of Higher Education

Bourdieu & Passeron (1977) feared that habitus would doom working-class students to failure as they would not be able to hide their working-class backgrounds and their lack of cultural capital. This seemingly deterministic nature of habitus has been contested, with some observers believing it possible to develop a new habitus through the acquisition of cultural capital or for the habitus to be adapted to a greater or lesser extent (Bland, 2004). Mills & Gayle (2002) suggest two types of habitus – reproductive and transformative – in which those demonstrating the former accept their presumed fate and the constraints of their social circumstances, while the latter improvise through developing a 'feel for the game' in response to a new field or those occupying said field. Participants interviewed as part of this research project noticed the difference of understanding of sorts that exists when comparing their own outlook towards education to that of members of their own community:

> *People in the community would be supportive when you tell them that you want to go to college or that you're thinking about going but, at the same time, they probably don't fully understand college because they haven't gone themselves you know? Like, it's hard to explain really … I think sometimes people nearly think "oh, done school now you should be out getting a job straight away". Maybe people don't get* [understand] *fully why you'd want to be going on studying full-time for another four years after finishing school.* **– Secondary School Student 2**

For the older generation … like, my Nana [grandmother]*, she still thinks I go to school because that's all she knows. She'd be saying "are you going to school today, love?" and I'd be like "I'm actually in college" … But she doesn't mean anything bad, she just doesn't really have an idea of how college works. Like, honestly, at home I still don't think my Mam and Dad have a full understanding of how college works, what actually goes on in college or the work that goes into it. They probably reckon I have a few hours a week and that I have a grand social life.* **– Higher Education Student 6 [Commerce & Irish]**

From working in the bar in the local GAA club I think I realised that people don't really see college or higher education as a necessity. When you tell them you're in college they'd be kind of like "oh, sure you're going off now to go partying for a few years", you know that kind of way? They think you've a great life below in _____ [institute of higher education]*.* **– Higher Education Student 7 [Genetics]**

Whilst located geographically close to the institute of higher education, it is clear that the understanding of some in the community regarding the importance of higher education is still somewhat far removed in comparison with those directly involved in the transition process. To add to the above points, some participants stated that they found a stigma exists regarding attendance at higher education and one's standing within the community, placing an emphasis and importance on working full-time on completion as opposed to continuing to higher education:

They're [People on the northside] *fierce on getting over to McDonald's or down to Dino's at 16 years of age and getting a job. I see all the children changing out of their school uniforms and going to work. You can't be working in McDonald's and get a good Leaving Cert all at the same time. I'm telling you now, they're all for it … This business of "Oh my child is down in Silversprings now washing pots", and I'm there looking at them stupid thinking to myself why aren't they focusing on their education? I'd be telling* **_____** [daughter] *that she'll be out working for the rest of her life. I think it's all about money on the northside. Very few and far between are would be people completely focused on education and not worried about making money from the start.* **– Parent of Secondary School Student 2**

Now, ehhh, I suppose there are still the few people within the northside that would be saying "Oh, look at your one there she thinks she's great heading off to _____ [institute of higher education] *… why isn't she out working full-time?". But you have to rise above that really. There'll be long enough time to*

> *be working … 40 years is plenty of time to be working, do you know what I mean?* **– Parent of Secondary School Student 3**

> *It's starting to change, definitely, but I think there's still a bit of a stigma that if you go to college that you kind of think you're better than or higher up than other people. That thought process still kind of exists for a lot of people in our community, maybe not as much as it did before but it's still there. I know a few people who have gone straight into work or to colleges of further education to do PLC courses and they'd be like "oh, you're in* _____ [institute of higher education] *and you think you're better than everyone else" kind of thing, when that wouldn't be true in any way.* **– Higher Education Student 6 [Commerce & Irish]**

Research has shown that very often a turning point is reached by students attending higher education as they find that breaking with working-class practices and distancing from the identity of their home community becomes necessary for the purpose of their academic success and social mobility (McDonald, 1999; Bland, 2004). One must ask themselves why this "cultural suicide", whereby students turn their back on their culturally working-class upbringing, should need to be the case for the purpose of higher educational success (McLaren, 1989). Should these students not act as an inspiration to others from the community and show no turning point to be necessary for educational success? Two students highlighted in the closing stages of their interviews how they felt the process was self-dependent in the sense of taking ownership for their own educational journey:

> *I think a lot of it comes down to yourself and whether you want to push yourself enough to do well, it shouldn't really matter where you're coming from.* **– Higher Education Student 7 [Genetics]**

> *I think more people from the northside are going to college now compared to years ago. People are coming out of school and they want to go to college so it shouldn't matter where you're from really … if you want to go and you're able to go, that's all that matters.* **– Secondary School Student 4**

Perhaps the turning point for these participants is not entirely towards higher education or away from their community or upbringing. Perhaps it is possible to not forget where

one comes from, yet still be able to capably function in two fields – the field that is their home community and the field that is higher education. This is a point that needs to be introduced to students from a young age: It should not be community VERSUS higher education, rather community AND higher education. No student should have to turn their back on their community and upbringing in the pursuit of higher educational success. The above interview quotations show that, with the right mindset and belief, opportunities are limitless despite what may be said by some within or from outside the community.

4.6 Summation of Findings

In essence, this chapter explored each of the facets that make up the educational journey of a marginalised student from an aspiration point view.

The first sub-section drew upon findings from interviews with secondary school students that explore their consideration to participate in higher education and why they aspired to participate. The second sub-section drew upon interviews with the parents of secondary school students to explore the concept of parental aspiration and why they would like to see their children participate in higher education. The third sub-section featured information derived from interviews with secondary school students and parents and centred around the role of the school in fostering aspiration and preparing under-represented students for participation in higher education. Findings from these sections related back to the first research question around which this thesis was based. It was clear from the findings that the participants of this study place significant value on education as a foundation for social mobility. Both secondary school students and parents focused on education as a means to securing

employment on completion their third level studies. Other points raised in these sections included the idea of students making others proud of their educational achievements, parents viewing participation in higher education as an opportunity they themselves did not have and therefore would like their children to attain, and the planning process involved in preparing for a student to transition from secondary school to higher education [both from student/parental and school points of view].

The fourth sub-section used interviews conducted with higher education students to focus on the challenges that exist on transition to higher education from secondary school and, more importantly, the coping strategies that were used to allow these challenges to be overcome to allow for successful participation. The fifth and final sub-section drew upon interviews conducted with each of the aforementioned groups to explore marginalised students' desire to maintain a connectedness to home and their community whilst still 'belonging' in higher education. These sub-sections dealt with the second and third of the original research questions. Students spoke of the importance of settling into their new surroundings of higher education, and the challenges that can be associated with adapting to a new educational setting with which one is not familiar with and may feel uncomfortable in. The idea of "fitting in" with new classmates from more affluent backgrounds was prevalent, along with the importance of having a clear plan regarding the direction one wanted to take regarding their studies initially but also on future employment-wise on completion of their studies. The challenge of belonging to two communities – that of their home community and the community of higher education – came to light also, something that can be challenging for many under-represented students as they aspire to 'belong' in two often contrasting fields.

Chapter 5 – Conclusion

The final chapter of the study aims to summarise the relevance and importance of this work for research, policy, and practice. A case is presented in an attempt to highlight some recommendations that can be made as a result of the research, while spaces for further research in the area are also brought to the attention of the reader.

The primary aim of this study was to examine the barriers that exist in preventing students from a background of socio-economic marginalisation from progressing to and through higher education and, more importantly, how these barriers can be overcome. An attempt was made at all times by the researcher to remain focused on the guiding research questions of the study. I believe the originality of this study lies in the focus on aspiration. Educational aspiration is something that has been under-researched in an Irish context. Too often research with marginalised students has focused on educational under-representation and failure. I was eager to find out why students from a working-class socio-economic background wanted to participate in higher education, what was pushing them to succeed within education and to overcome the barriers presented as the study developed.

The literature review [Chapter 2] allowed me, as a researcher, to gain an insight and understanding into the workings of schooling and higher education from the perspective of marginalised students.

The first section of the literature review focused on the barriers to participation in higher education for those coming from a marginalised socio-economic community, focusing on financial, social, and cultural barriers that can and do prevent working-class

students from progressing to and participating in higher education, highlighting that those from the lower socio-economic classes have traditionally been marginalised in terms of higher education participation and success. This section drew on literature to highlighted that, worryingly, the systemic workings of higher education institutes seem to be built around the sometimes taken-for-granted norms of the middle-to-upper classes, often neglecting experiences of working-class students on progression to and through higher education.

The works of Pierre Bourdieu were explored in the second section of the literature review. Exploring the theoretical thinking tools of Bourdieu allowed me to construct a theoretical framework for this research project. Studying the theories of Bourdieu around education allowed me to better understand the workings of education from a social class perspective and highlighted to me how the higher education system sustains and maintains the reproduction of inequalities between the social classes in terms of access, participation, and success.

The final section of the literature review focused on the concept of aspiration. The construction of aspirations was examined in this section, with a particular focus on the shaping of aspirations for students from a marginalised background. Bronfenbrenner's Human Ecology Theory was referenced in this section to gain an insight into how person-environment interactions influence individuals across all facets of their lives, educational aspiration included. The influence of 1) Family, 2) School, 3) Community, and 4) Institute of Higher Education were explored in this section to investigate how positive interactions within each of these settings can positively influence the aspirations of marginalised students.

Chapter three summarised the data collection and analysis procedures that were undertaken throughout the project. It outlined how this research is situated within both the constructivist and transformative paradigms in the sense that knowledge is socially constructed by people active in the research project, but also as importance is placed on the lives and experiences of communities that are pushed to the margins of society. A section on ethical procedures and considerations was also included to ensure that ethical research practices and procedures were followed throughout the research project.

Chapter 4 outlined and discussed the findings of the research. This chapter was divided into various sub-sections that explored points raised by participants throughout the data collection process. The aim of this chapter was to tell the story of the participants of the study and a conscious effort was made in allowing the participants to construct their own sense of being. This chapter was divided into sub-sections as findings were developed throughput the process of data analysis. The findings focused on the consideration of participation in higher education on completion of secondary school, parental aspiration for successful participation in higher education, the role of the school in fostering aspiration and preparing students for participation in higher education, the changes and challenges of adapting to life in higher education, and the illusio effect as marginalised students endeavour to ‘belong’ to two often differing communities [that of their community and that of higher education]. Although points raised are supported with academic research material, the words of the interviewees carry the most weight in this chapter as they endorse findings of the literature. The interviewees are notable contributors to the piece as they describe their reality and tell the story of their existence.

5.1 Relevance of Research Project

5.1.1 Relevance for Research

I believe this piece of work can be of relevance to future research around the area of aspiration concerning students that are marginalised as a result of social class. Social class works in different ways for different people. Findings from this particular research project suggest that social class seems to manifest itself within the mindset of individuals of low socio-economic status, and I believe that more research needs to be conducted around this concept.

Students: Many of the student body interviewed as part of this research project touched on social class issues without necessarily mentioning the concept. How they viewed their own class standing varied depending on the interaction. In a way these students have been caught in the middle of two contrasting fields. They are members of a home community that does not possess a great knowledge or understanding of the workings of higher education. At the same time, they are members of a community of higher education that has traditionally favoured students that come from more affluent backgrounds than those of their own. So, what makes these students special and why should they be celebrated? From the moment higher education is considered in secondary school to the day they are presented with their degree scroll having completed their higher education studies, these students are ‘different’. They are different to so many of their neighbours in the sense that they are progressing to higher education, a step not taken by many from their community in the past. They are different to the majority of their classmates in higher education as a result of the community from which they come. Resistance can come from both sides in this instance with, very often, the student having to attempt to negotiate two contrasting worlds. This is a point supported by Bathmaker (2020: 10) who states that “going to

university involves biographical ruptures and discontinuities which force individuals to revise their perceptions of their own class location, and to review where and how they may fit into this milieu". The students interviewed as part of this research project should be praised for their endeavours to, firstly, attend higher education and, secondly, continue to participate despite the many challenges they may face. These students are an exemplar to all from a similar background and their voices both deserve and need to be heard. I believe more research around the positive attitudes of working-class students to participate and succeed in higher education can only be of benefit in raising aspirations for those coming from a marginalised background around the topic.

Parents: The parents of secondary school students interviewed as part of this research project spoke very positively around the reasons they would like their children to attend higher education. Internationally, there is now a significant body of literature on parents' orientations to their children's education and the role which they play in supporting both formal and informal learning (Buckingham & Scanlon, 2004). A number of studies have suggested that working-class parents feel less confident in their dealings with schools, and in their ability to support their children's school-work and educational choices (Lareau, 1989; Reay, 2005), and that was a point that was raised by parents in this particular study also. What stood out for me amongst parents interviewed, however, was their commitment to ensure that their children were supported as they showed an interest in higher education participation. Parents interviewed were very future orientated regarding their children's participation in higher education. All compared their own experience of schooling to that of their children and spoke of the opportunities that would be afforded to their children on completion of higher education, with employment and upwards social mobility featuring strongly amongst those interviewed. I believe more positive parental-related research arising

from this study could centre around the role of parents in the decision-making process around higher education. The parents interviewed for as part of this project were all involved in the discussion around their children's higher education participation. Higher education was discussed at home and parent-child communication seemed to be open as the parents interviewed strived to actively involve themselves in the process of transitioning from secondary school to higher education. I firmly believe that parental interest in the education of a child to be a strong determinant of future educational success, and I feel that this is a topic that should and needs to be researched more amongst the marginalised community.

5.1.2 Relevance for Policy & Practice

Undoubtedly, the Higher Education Access Route (HEAR) scheme and the Student Universal Support Ireland (SUSI) grant scheme have gone some way to increasing participation in higher education for those coming from a background of socio-economic marginalisation. Whilst these schemes have been financially beneficial in allowing marginalised students to access higher education from an admissions point of view, I believe that more must be done in raising the aspirations of students in having the desire to participate in higher education, in believing that they can participate successfully in higher education, and in offering a support system on transition from secondary school to higher education. I believe that both schools and institutes of higher education have a crucial role to play in raising the aspirations of marginalised students. Some possible methods of raising aspirations, as highlighted in interviews throughout the research project, are highlighted below:

Secondary School: DEIS secondary schools need to create an inclusive institutional habitus whereby all students are provided with an opportunity to reach their educational potential. Of course, it would not be right to expect participation in higher education from all students. Every student has their own outlook on what they would like to do on completion of secondary school and no 'one size fits all' model exists when it comes to educational aspiration. I do believe, however, that a positive outlook towards participation in higher education should be promoted within DEIS secondary schools with the aim of raising aspirations of marginalised students and fostering a belief that participation and success in higher education is attainable. Many useful school strategies that were used by the school at the centre of this research project were outlined by interview participants in this study, and I feel that these strategies are transferable to other DEIS secondary schools:

- Positive teacher-student relationships and discussions are key in raising aspirations for participation in higher education. It is very important for teachers in DEIS secondary schools to remember that a teacher can act as a positive role model for young students. Highlighting the benefits of continued participation in education and praising the desire of students when striving to reach higher education can only serve in raising educational aspirations for marginalised students.
- Having a thorough career guidance model in DEIS secondary schools cannot be understated. It is vital for guidance counsellors to make a continuous effort to promote higher education participation amongst students. Guidance counsellors need to become familiar with the interests and strengths of students which, in turn, allows them to point students in the direction of courses that suit these strengths and interests.

- The school at the centre of this project has made a conscious effort to promote participation in higher education within their school. Inviting guest speakers to the school was considered to be beneficial, particularly when these guest speakers have a direct link to the school [past pupils of the school, for example]. Current secondary school students can relate to past pupils as they may come from the same area, have attended the same school, and so on. These act as positive role models for current students as a pathway to educational success becomes clear. Seeing how these speakers have negotiated their personal educational journey(s) allows students to believe in the possibility that they could also create their own pathway towards educational success.

A recommendation that would be of benefit to DEIS secondary schools is the organising of a school-based higher education open day, whereby past pupils of the school are invited to speak to current senior cycle students about their higher education courses. This is very similar to the idea of a guest speaker sharing their experiences of higher education, but I would recommend bringing these past pupils together in one central location such as a school hall. It is essentially a higher education open day focusing on past pupils of the given secondary school. These higher education students could share their experiences with those from their own former secondary school, again creating a pathway to educational success.

Another of my recommendations is the expansion of current school guidance practices to prepare secondary school students for life in higher education. I believe that marginalised students are entering higher education unprepared for the world that they are entering into. The challenges that they may experience need to be outlined in advance of progression from secondary school. I strongly believe that guidance modules on adapting to higher education, dealing with the independence of their new

educational setting, and so on need to be devised and implemented in all DEIS secondary schools to properly prepare these students for higher education.

Institutes of Higher Education: A big onus should be placed on inclusivity of all social classes within institutes of higher education. A recent interaction with Secondary School Student 3 of this study [now studying Accounting in higher education on completion of Leaving Certificate examinations] again highlighted to me the outlook that many within higher education have regarding those coming from marginalised backgrounds or low socio-economic areas. This interaction was very informal and took place at a basketball match in recent weeks, but went something along the lines of:

> ***Researcher:*** *How are you settling into college? All good?*
>
> ***Participant:*** *Yeah, not too bad. It's a lot different to school alright.*
>
> ***Researcher:*** *Have you gotten to know many people in the course?*
>
> ***Participant:*** *A few, like. They're all sound* [personable] *in fairness but they'd be from 'out there'* [outside of the city] *mostly. When I'd tell them where I'm from or where I went to school they'd all be like "oh, that's a very rough area isn't it?".*

More clearly needs to be done to positively highlight the different 'classes' that exist within higher education. Oldfield (2007) states that proposed campus reforms are necessary to better reflect the needs and values of students from low socio-economic backgrounds, outlining that collecting data on the socio-economic origins of students would allow institutions to monitor the effectiveness of their proposed social-class based diversity efforts. Whilst university access programmes have been effective in assisting marginalised students with their transition to and through higher education, I believe more needs to be done by institutes of higher education in increasing aspirations of working-class students by positively promoting their working-class'ness'. Some suggestions are outlined below:

Firstly, the provision of mentors within each school/department of higher education. These individuals could offer support to students coming from a marginalised socio-economic background and working-class background, building relationships with students as they progress to and through higher education. Though staffing and people power may be an issue for the provision of this service, I believe these students would feel more comfortable in the higher education environment if these specific people were made known to them early on and were aware of their availability to support/advise them throughout their higher education cycle.

In addition, higher education success stories of those from the working-classes need to heard. Similar to the point mentioned above regarding past-pupils returning to DEIS secondary schools to speak to current students, working-class college graduates should also be invited to speak to current higher education students. This would allow current students of a similar background to see a pathway to success and to believe in the possibility of their own educational success.

5.2 Limitations of the Study

A possible limitation of this study is the size of the interview groups [4 secondary school students, 4 parents, 7 higher education students]. I believe this type of project could be rolled out on a larger scale for the purpose of identifying the aspirations of any, if not all, of the aforementioned groups. Furthermore, this type of project could be undertaken in more schools as opposed to the one school that was essentially at the centre of this research project. I believe that a greater body of data would allow for more depth in analysis, making the findings of this research project more generalisable as they become applicable to the aspirations of under-represented students from similar schools and backgrounds on a national and international level.

5.3 Importance of Research Project

I believe this research contributes to the field of social justice in school and higher education in an Irish context. Whilst exposures of educational inequality were referenced throughout the study, it is hoped that the focus of the study lays not on the barriers to participation in higher education for those coming from a marginalised socio-economic background, but on the overcoming of said barriers to allow for successful participation. It is fair to say that the worlds of identity and social class enmeshed within education, society and the community can unearth powerful messages about our place in the world and the interlocking and situated nature of experience and action (Cahill, 2012). The aim of this research project was to highlight how aspiration and a desire to succeed within higher education can positively influence participation. Those interviewed as part of this research project are the heroes of the study. Their aspiration to succeed shows that, with a positive attitude and a willingness to learn, no educational barrier cannot be overcome. Education is for everyone, irrespective of where one is positioned within the social classes. Always be proud of who you are and where you come from. Never give up.

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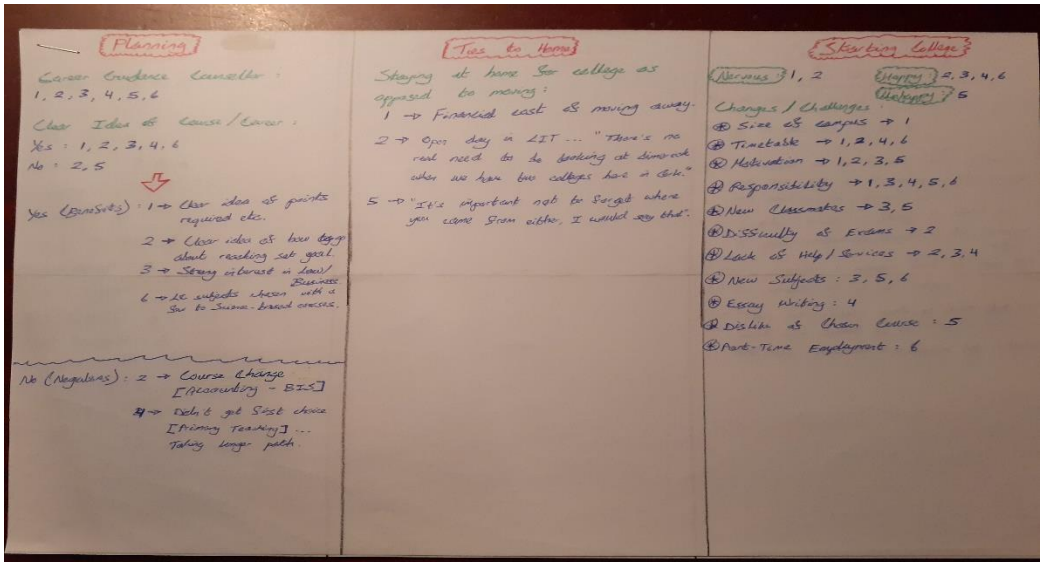
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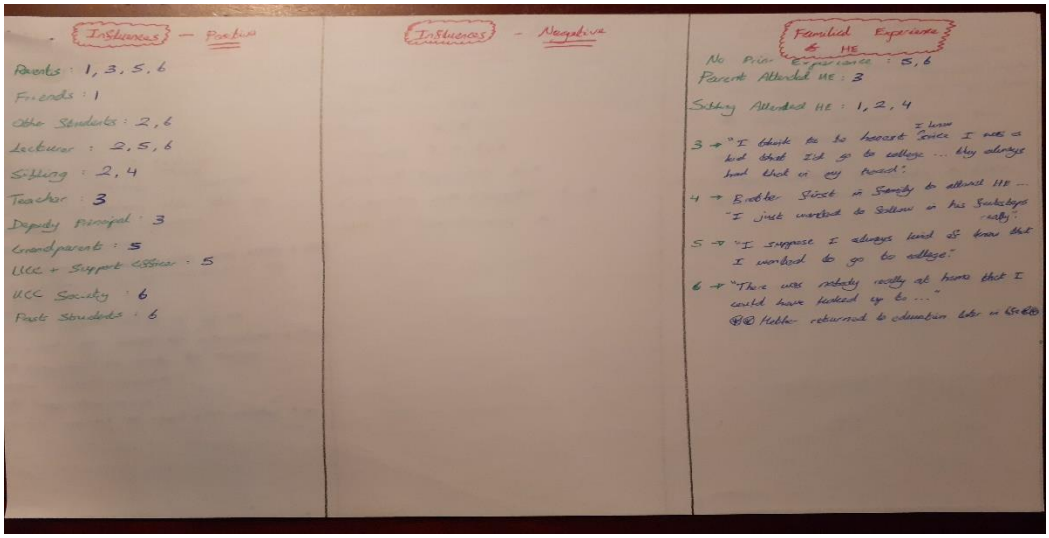
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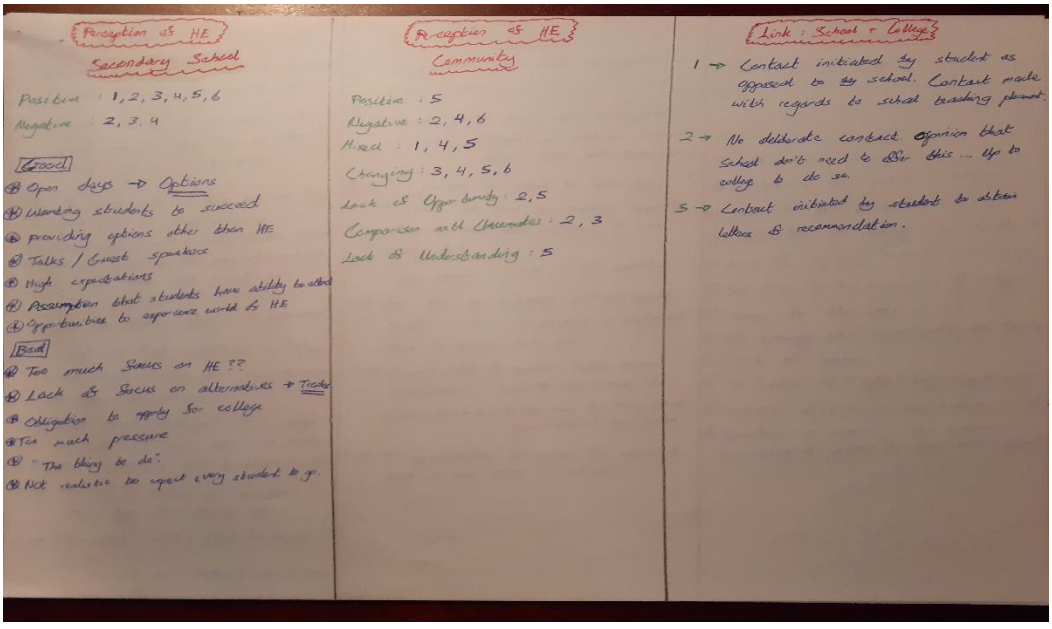
Appendix 1: Interview Schedule

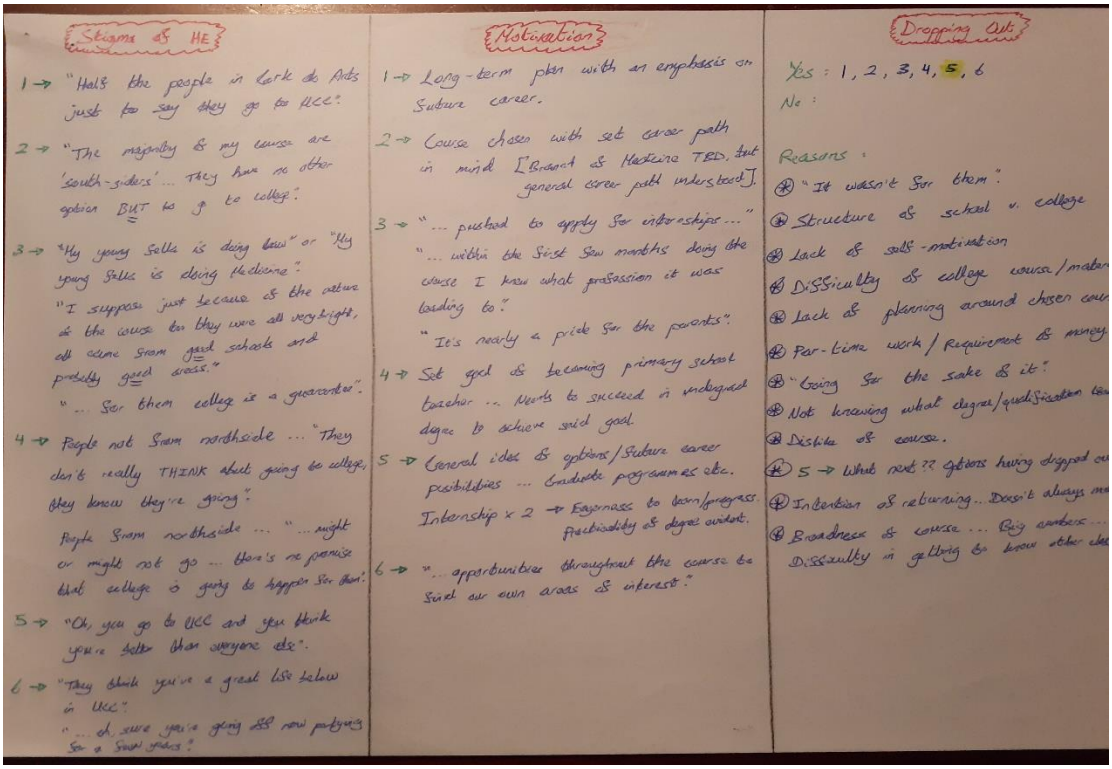
Higher Education Student 1	7th July 2021
Higher Education Students 2 & 3	9th July 2021
Higher Education Student 4	13th July 2021
Higher Education Student 5	29th July 2021
Higher Education Student 6	10th August 2021
Higher Education Student 7	17th August 2021
Secondary School Student 1	29th November 2021
Parent of Secondary School Student 1	30th November 2021
Secondary School Student 2	2nd December 2021
Parent of Secondary School Student 2	2nd December 2021
Secondary School Student 3	15th December 2021
Parent of Secondary School Student 3	15th December 2021
Secondary School Student 4	17th December 2021
Parent of Secondary School Student 4	22nd December 2021

Appendix 2: Model Diagrams for Data Analysis [Secondary School Students]









Stigma of HE

1 → "Half the people in Cork do Arts just to say they go to UCC".

2 → "The majority of my course are 'south-siders' ... They have no other option BUT to go to college".

3 → "My young fella is doing law" or "My young fella is doing Medicine".
"I suppose just because of the nature of the course for they were all very bright, all came from good schools and probably good areas."
"... for them college is a guarantee".

4 → People not from northside ... "They don't really THINK about going to college, they know they're going".
People from northside ... "... might or might not go ... there's no promise that college is going to happen for them".

5 → "Oh, you go to UCC and you think you're better than everyone else".

6 → "They think you've a great life below in UCC".
"... oh sure you're going out now partying for a few years".

Motivation

1 → Long-term plan with an emphasis on future career.

2 → Course chosen with set career path in mind [Pharm & Medicine TBD, but general career path understood].

3 → "... pushed to apply for internships ..."
"... within the first few months doing the course I knew what profession it was leading to."
"It's nearly a pride for the parents".

4 → Set goal of becoming primary school teacher ... Wants to succeed in undergrad degree to achieve said goal.

5 → General idea & options / future career possibilities ... Graduate programmes etc.
Internship x 2 → Eagerness to learn / progress. Practicality of degree evident.

6 → "... opportunities throughout the course to find our own areas of interest."

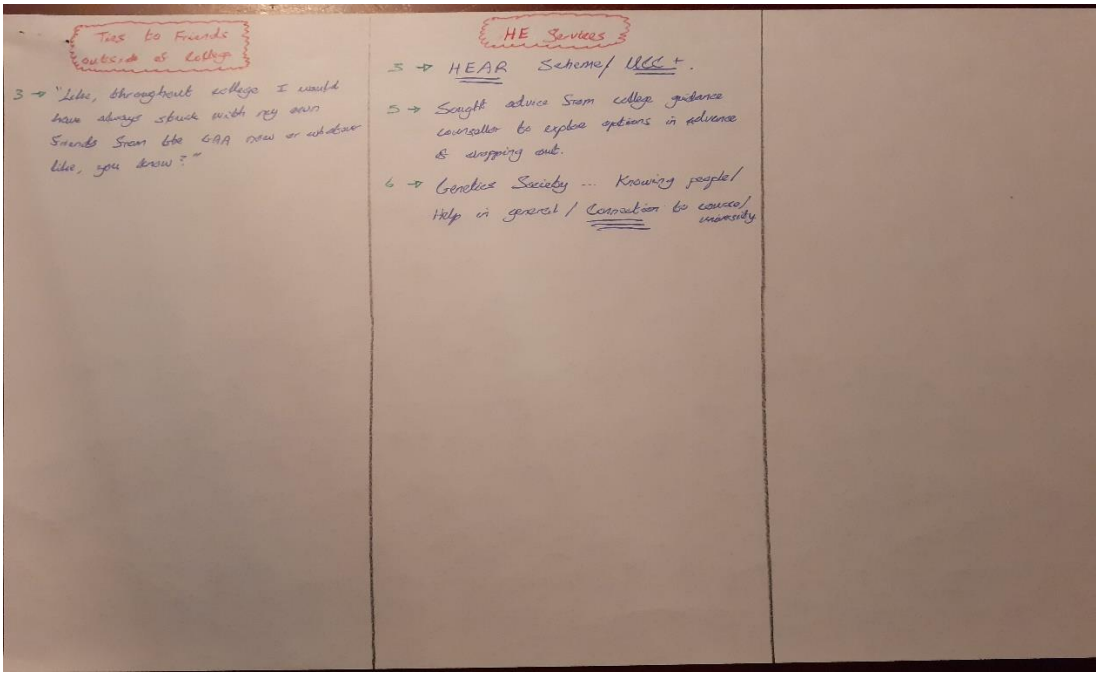
Dropping Out

Yes: 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6

No:

Reasons:

- "It wasn't for them".
- Structure of school v. college
- Lack of self-motivation
- Difficulty of college course / mater
- Lack of planning around chosen cou
- Part-time work / Requirement of money
- "Going for the sake of it".
- Not knowing what degree / qualification
- Dislike of course.
- 5 → What next?? Options having dropped
- Uncertain of returning .. Doesn't always
- Broadness of course ... Big numbers ...
  Difficulty in getting to know other



Ties to Friends outside of College

3 → "Like, throughout college I would have always stuck with my own friends from the GAA now or whatever like, you know?"

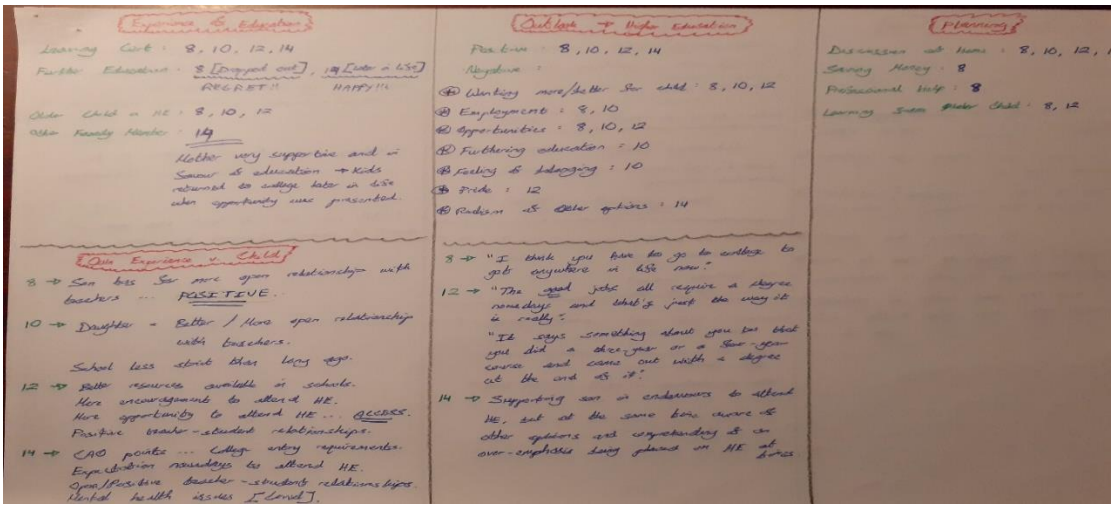
HE Services

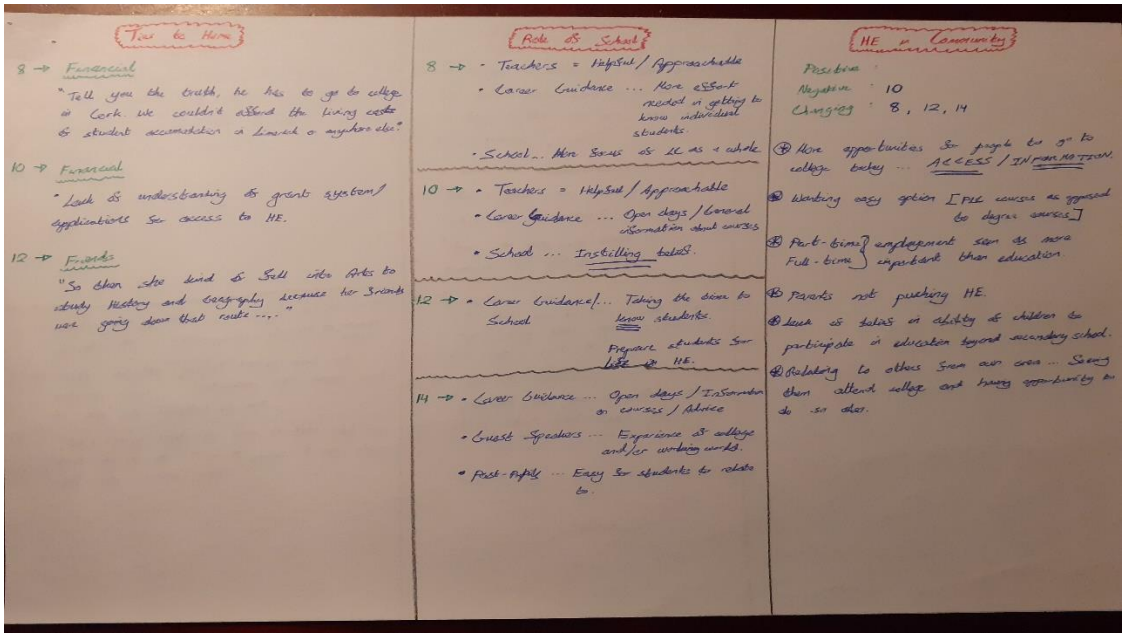
5 → HEAR Scheme / UCC+.

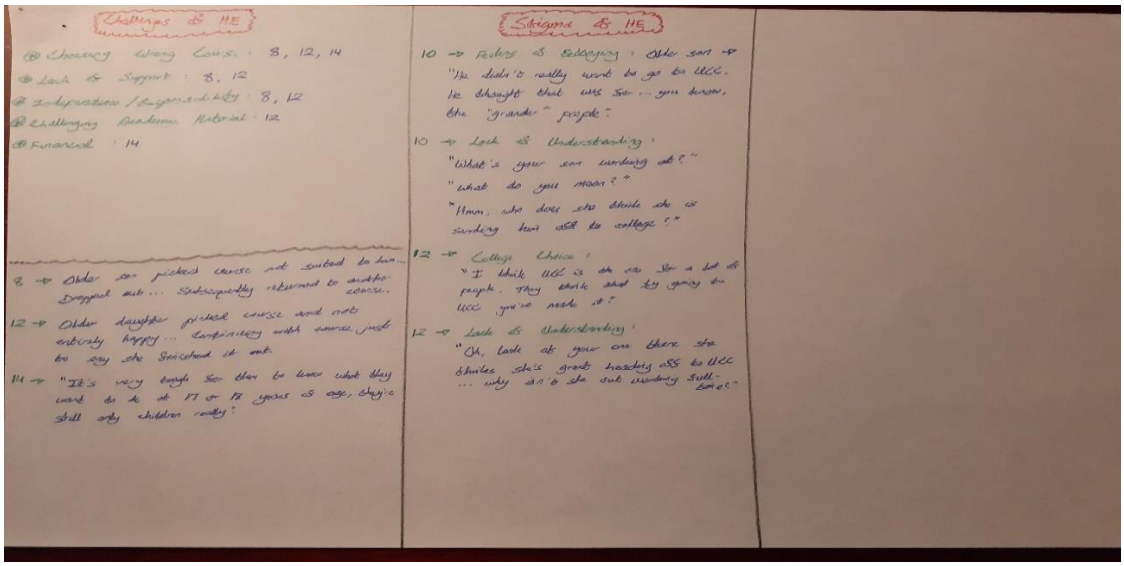
5 → Sought advice from college guidance counsellor to explore options in advance of dropping out.

6 → Genetics Society ... Knowing people / Help in general / Connection to course / university

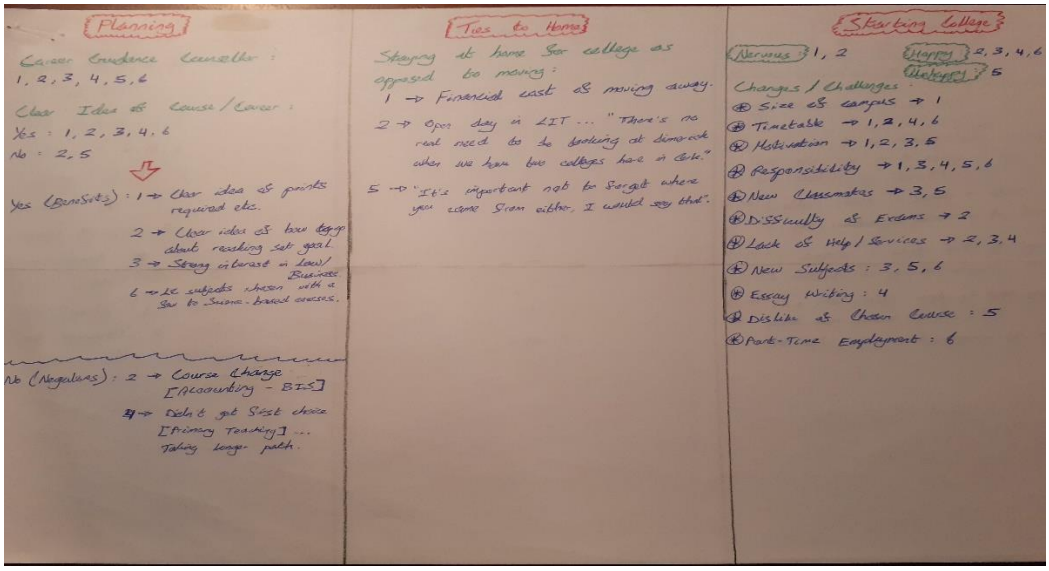
Appendix 3: Model Diagrams for Data Analysis [Parents of Secondary School Students]

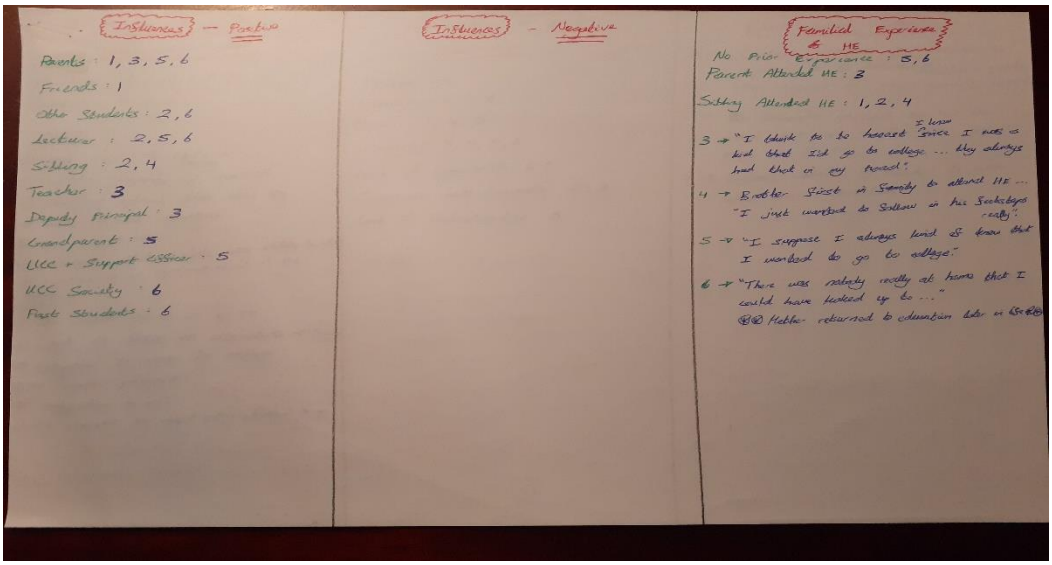


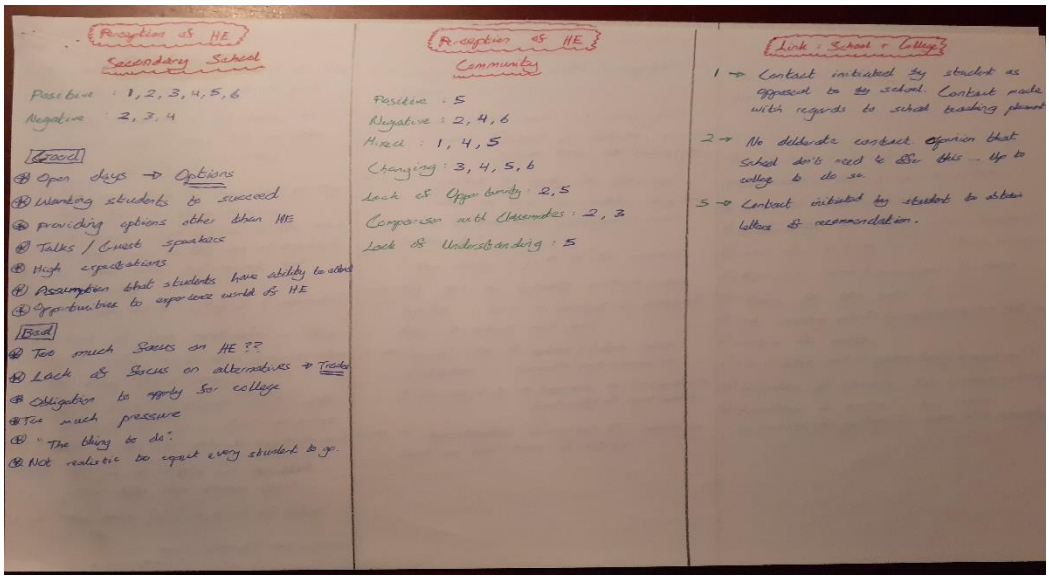


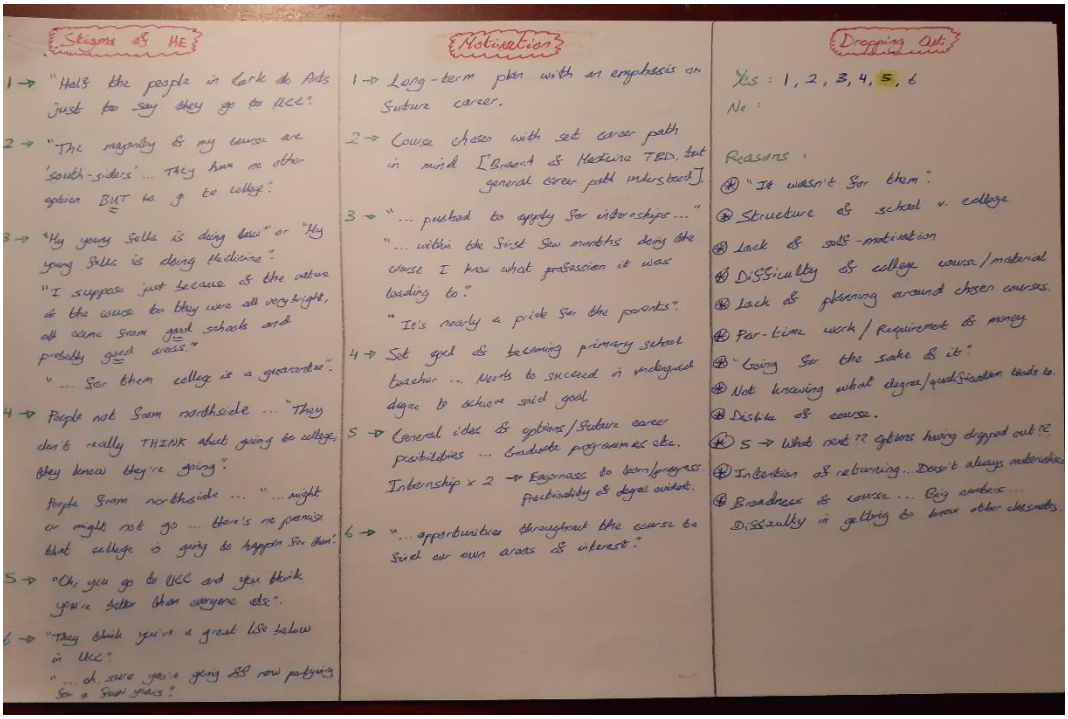


Appendix 4: Model Diagrams for Data Analysis [Higher Education Students]









Stigma of HE

1 → "Half the people in Cork do Arts just to say they go to UCC".

2 → "The majority of my course are 'south-siders' ... They have no other option BUT to go to college".

3 → "My young Sally is doing law" or "My young Sally is doing Medicine".
"I suppose just because of the nature of the course so they were all very bright, all came from good schools and probably good areas."
"... for them college is a guarantee".

4 → People not from northside ... "They don't really THINK about going to college, they know they're going".
People from northside ... "... might or might not go ... there's no promise that college is going to happen for them".

5 → "Oh, you go to UCC and you think you're better than everyone etc".

6 → "They think you've a great life below in UCC".
"... oh, sure you're going out now partying for a few years".

Motivation

1 → Long-term plan with an emphasis on future career.

2 → Course chosen with set career path in mind [Branch of Medicine TBD, but general career path understood].

3 → "... pushed to apply for internships ..."
"... within the first few months doing the course I knew what profession it was leading to."
"It's nearly a pick for the parents".

4 → Set goal of becoming primary school teacher ... Work to succeed in undergrad degree to achieve said goal.

5 → General idea of options / future career possibilities ... Graduate programmes etc.
Internship x 2 → Eagerness to learn / progress practicality of degree content.

6 → "... opportunities throughout the course to find our own areas of interest."

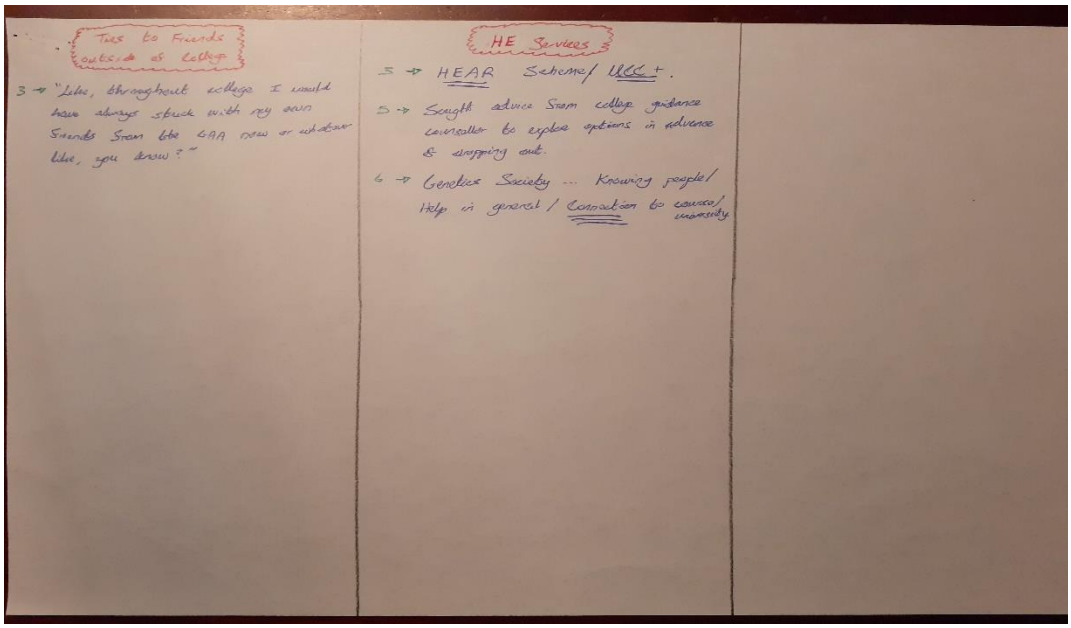
Dropping Out

Yes: 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6

No:

Reasons:

- "It wasn't for them".
- Structure of school v. college
- Lack of self-motivation
- Difficulty of college course / material
- Lack of planning around chosen courses.
- Part-time work / Requirement of money
- "Going for the sake of it".
- Not knowing what degree / qualification leads to.
- Dislike of course.
- 5 → What next?? Options having dropped out??
- Intention of returning ... Doesn't always materialise
- Broadness of course ... Big numbers ... Difficulty in getting to know other classmates.



Ties to Friends outside of college

3 → "Like, throughout college I would have always stuck with my own friends from the GAA now or whatever like, you know?"

HE Services

5 → HEAR Scheme / UCC+.

5 → Sought advice from college guidance counsellor to explore options in advance of dropping out.

6 → Genetics Society ... Knowing people / Help in general / Connection to course / university

Appendix 5: Information Sheet



Information Sheet

Thank you for considering participating in this research project. The purpose of this document is to explain to you what the project is about and what your participation would involve, so as to enable you to make an informed choice.

The purpose of this study to examine the experience of students as they transition from second level to third level education, exploring the challenges they face in adapting to a new educational environment and how these challenges can be overcome.

Should you choose to participate, you will be asked to take part in a one-to-one interview with myself as the researcher. This interview will be audio-recorded and is expected to take 20-30 minutes to complete. Once the interview is completed, the recording will immediately be transferred to an encrypted laptop and wiped from the recording device. The interview will then be transcribed by the researcher, and all identifying information will be removed. Once this is done, only the anonymized transcript will remain. This will be stored on the University College Cork OneDrive system and subsequently on the UCC server. The data will be stored for ten years, in line with quality research protocols of the university. The information you provide may contribute to research publications and/or conference presentations and will also contribute to a thesis as part of a research project.

Participation in this study is completely voluntary. There is no obligation to participate, and should you choose to do so you can refuse to answer specific questions as they arise in the interview. Once the interview has concluded, you can choose to withdraw your details at any time **in the subsequent two weeks** from the date the interview is conducted.

All of the information you provide will be confidential and anonymous and will be available only to the researcher. The only confidentiality exception that exists is should information be disclosed which indicates that there is a serious risk either to yourself or to others.

We do not anticipate any negative outcomes from participating in this study. At the end of the procedure, however, I will discuss with you how you found the experience and how you are feeling. Should you experience distress arising from the interview, the contact details for relevant support services will be provided for assistance.

This study has obtained ethical approval from the UCC Social Research Ethics Committee.

If you have any queries about this research, please don't hesitate to contact me at 113377721@umail.ucc.ie.

If you agree to take part in this study, please sign the consent form overleaf.

Appendix 6: Interview Questions

Secondary School Students

1) Could you tell me about your experience of school up to this point?
2) Could you tell me about your plans once you finish school?
3) Could you tell me why you would like to progress from secondary school to higher education?
4) Could you tell me why you think it is important to attend an institute of higher education?
5) Are there any particular higher education courses that you would like to undertake? Are there any particular reasons why you would like to study *said* course?
6) What changes do you think exist between secondary school and higher education?
7) Are there any particular challenges that you envisage to encounter on transitioning from secondary school to higher education?
8) Has anyone in particular had an influence, either positive or negative, on your desire to attend higher education? Could you tell me how they have influenced you?
9) What outlook do you feel your classmates have towards participation in higher education?
10) What outlook do you feel your school has towards participation in higher education?
11) What outlook do you feel your community have towards participation in higher education?
12) Could you tell me about a time, within your school or community, where someone has expressed positivity / negativity towards participation in higher education?
13) Do you personally know someone who currently attends an institute of higher education? Do you know how they are finding their studies in their new environment?

Parents of Secondary School Students

1) Could you tell me about your own experience of education?
2) Could you tell me about your outlook towards higher education?
3) What is the importance of higher education, in your own opinion?
4) Could you tell me why you would like your child to attend an institute of higher education?
5) Could you tell about the planning that was involved in completing the application process for your child to attend an institute of higher education? Who has been involved in the process? From where has information been retrieved?
6) Have you discussed specific third-level courses with your child? Is there any particular reason why you would like your child to study *said* course? Has your child expressed an interest in studying *said* course? Has your child expressed any concerns with regards to studying *said* course?
7) What outlook do you feel the school of your child has towards participation in higher education?
8) What outlook do you feel the local community have with regards to participation in higher education?

Higher Education Students

1) Could you tell me about your experience of education up to this point?
2) Could you express how you felt when you first transitioned from secondary school to higher education?
3) Could you tell me about some of the changes that you experienced having transitioned from secondary school to higher education?
4) Was there any change that you found particularly difficult to adjust to having transitioned from secondary school to higher education? Could you tell me how you went about overcoming these challenges?
5) Was there anyone in particular who had an influence, either positive or negative, on your desire to attend an institute of higher education?
6) Could you tell me about the planning that was involved in completing the application process prior to participation in higher education? Who was involved in the process? From here was information retrieved? Were specific third-level courses discussed as part of the planning process?
7) How do you feel about the course that you have chosen to study?
8) Has anyone in particular had an influence on your participation within higher education? Has anyone helped or supported you along the way? Could you tell me what they've done to help / support you?
9) Have many of your friends from secondary school transitioned from secondary school to higher education?
10) Do you personally know of many people who have dropped out of higher education having transitioned from secondary school? Could you tell me about some of the reasons these people have dropped out?
11) How do you feel participation in higher education was perceived in your own secondary school?
12) How do you feel participation in higher education is perceived in your own community?

Appendix 7: Consent Forms

Consent Form (Over 18)

I, _____, agree to participate in **Stiofán Ó hUiginn**'s research study.

The purpose and nature of the study has been explained to me in writing.

I am participating voluntarily.

I give permission for my interview with Stiofán Ó hUiginn to be audio-recorded.

I understand that I can withdraw from the study, without repercussions, at any time, whether before it starts or while I am participating.

I understand that I can withdraw permission to use the data within two weeks of the interview, in which case the material will be deleted.

I understand that anonymity will be ensured in the write-up by disguising my identity.

I understand that disguised extracts from my interview may be quoted in the thesis and any subsequent publications if I give permission below:

(Please tick one box):

- I agree to quotation/publication of extracts from my interview ☐
- I do not agree to quotation/publication of extracts from my interview ☐

Signed: _____ Date: _____

PRINT NAME: _____

Consent Form (Under 18)

I, _____, agree to participate in **Stiofán Ó hUiginn**'s research study.

The purpose and nature of the study has been explained to me in writing.

I am participating voluntarily.

I give permission for my interview with Stiofán Ó hUiginn to be audio-recorded.

I understand that I can withdraw from the study, without repercussions, at any time, whether before it starts or while I am participating.

I understand that I can withdraw permission to use the data within two weeks of the interview, in which case the material will be deleted.

I understand that anonymity will be ensured in the write-up by disguising my identity.

I understand that disguised extracts from my interview may be quoted in the thesis and any subsequent publications if I give permission below:

(Please tick one box):

- I agree to quotation/publication of extracts from my interview ☐
- I do not agree to quotation/publication of extracts from my interview ☐

Signed (x2): _____ Date: _____

PRINT NAMES: _____