SOCIAL CLASS AND EDUCATION:

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN SOCIAL CLASS AND ENGAGEMENT WITH EDUCATION

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Submitted in part fulfilment of the requirements for the

MEd in Adult and Community Education

Department of Adult and Community Education

National University of Ireland Maynooth

2012

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am very grateful to all those who have supported me during the course of my studies and wish to offer my thanks to:

The participants of this study, for their openness and honesty and their genorosity in giving time to be involved in this research.

Brian Sheridan, my supervisor in NUI, Maynooth, for his clear direction, advice and attention to detail.

My children, Claire, Jean, Stephen and Liam who have been patient and listened and offered words of encouragement along the way.

To my husband, Sean, for his ongoing support, encouragement and always believing in me.

Lastly, my grandchildren, Anna, Evan, Darren, Grace and Nathan for keeping me grounded.

ABSTRACT

This study explores the relationship between social class and engagement with education. A qualitative approach was used in the investigation. Four participants narrated their stories of their journey through the education system. Three participants were at Bachelor of Arts level in a community education centre and one at Masters Degree level in an Institute of Technology. A focus group, comprising women from an English/Literacy class in a community education centre was conducted using the following themes which emerged as significant in the narratives:

- Social and cultural norms
- Conditions in the classroom (a) the State (b) the teacher
- Parental support
- Community education

The four narratives and a summary of the findings from the focus group is also given. They are then analysed under the themes already mentioned. The findings demonstrate that although there is a strong relationship between social class and engagement with education, the other four factors are quite significant. In order to ensure a more equitable education system, the State must take responsibility for the legislation which impacts on education. It is also responsible for the provision of remedial services and these should be available to all children who need them. Teachers must be aware of the importance of their role in providing a classroom environment which is conducive to learning. The study emphasised the importance of parental support in children's education and the need for the government to support parents in their efforts to do this by the provision of parenting courses and other services which would benefit families in this regard. All the participants were unanimous in their praise of community education and how it had impacted positively on their lives. It is imperative therefore that the government reconsiders its decisions to reduce funding for worthwhile services such as family support projects and community education.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Rationale for this study

This thesis will explore the relationship between social class and engagement with education. My interest in this subject stems from my work in childcare and family support for the last fourteen years in a disadvantaged area of Dublin. During that time I have worked with several families who have ongoing difficulties with early school-leaving and literacy skills and these two factors seemed to contribute to their limited motivation towards education in general. I have also met many adults who have had negative school experiences themselves and now find it difficult to engage with teachers and schools on behalf of their children. Consequently their children feel unsupported in their education and often conform to the expectation of their family and friends by leaving school without attaining Leaving Certificate or even Junior Certificate level.

My awareness of this situation developed further when, in the course of my work, I began to deliver parenting courses to groups of parents. One of the modules on this course was 'Supporting your child's education'. Many discussions within the group revealed the participants' lack of confidence regarding their literacy skills and their dealings with teachers. Some parents admitted they felt intimidated if they had to enter the school to attend parent/teacher meetings or just to have an informal chat with a teacher. This brought back memories of their early education, many of which were negative experiences, and consequently they avoided these occasions if possible. Many of them recalled how little emphasis there was on education within their home environment, with nowhere to study and no pressure to do homework. This attitude towards school and sometimes teachers was then passed on to their children, resulting in their children disregarding the importance

of school attendance. While they did not necessarily want to be responsible for this, they felt powerless to change these situations. However, with support from facilitators and other group members, and some useful communication skills learned throughout the course, parents were able to confront their fears and attend meetings with teachers which were reported to be successful and useful in their dealings with their children's education.

Aim of this study

Having been a Montessori teacher for several years, and believing in the importance of education in the formative years, the situations I encountered in my current work aroused my interest in the relationship between social class and engagement with education. Education plays an important role in socialising individuals in society and through this socialisation, the rules, values and social norms of a society are learned. The process begins at birth and proceeds throughout childhood and then extends to family, school and community. It is a powerful, transformative force which can ultimately change individuals and this can translate into the wider community. It is also important because it can be a significant factor which contributes to adult life chances and in particular that of future employment. It is clear then that those with low levels of education are at greater risk of unemployment and low levels of pay.

While reviewing the literature to explore this subject, I was aware that the role of inequality in education is a favoured subject for many Irish sociological commentators, in particular Kathleen Lynch and her colleagues in UCD Equality Studies Centre.   I also became aware that much of the government policy focused specifically on social class with particular emphasis on 'disadvantaged' areas and

also that special consideration and resources were given to these areas to improve education performance and retention rates. However, I was confident that other significant factors, besides social class, would emerge which impact equally on education. My intention then in exploring this subject further was to see what other factors were involved which caused so many of our young people to leave the education system without reaching Leaving Certificate standard, while others did not even reach Junior Certificate level.

Throughout this thesis, the terms 'middle class' and 'disadvantaged' will be used frequently. Traditionally, sociologists have relied on occupation and economic factors as an indicator of class location and it is on this basis that the term 'middle class' will be used. The term 'disadvantaged' will be used as applied by the Irish government in their policies on education. According to Kellaghan, Weir, O hUallachain and Morgan (1995), indicators of disadvantage include poverty, family structure and size, socioeconomic status, unemployment, location and school performance. In fact, these authors refer to school performance as possibly being regarded as 'the most significant indicator of educational disadvantage as far as the educational system is concerned'.(p.52) However, this study will aim to establish that school performance is but a symptom of more deep-rooted social issues and the result of State structures which impact significantly on all levels of the educational system.

Overview of the thesis

In this study I draw attention to the theoretical frameworks by which we gain an understanding of the education system, with particular emphasis on functionalism, and Drudy and Lynch's (1993) ideologies, namely, consensualism, essentialism

and meritocratic individualism. This will be followed by Bourdieu's concepts of cultural capital and habitus; reference will also be made to the writings of Gambetta regarding choices in education, Goldthorpe's rational action theory (RAT) and Gardner's theory of multiple intelligences. I will then relate these theories to the sociological approaches in an Irish context. Reference will be made to the social and cultural norms of the 1950s and 1960s. The current educational attainment rates will be considered as will the conditions in the classroom which are laid down by the State and also those conditions as set by the teacher. The role of parental support in education will be presented, followed by consideration of current research into the role of community education.

The following chapter on methodology/methods will describe the research methods used in conducting this study of social class and education and will also provide the rationale for using these methods. It will include a reflection on my own role in the study, in particular how my epistomologial stance serves as a platform for including my personal interpretation of the narratives of the participants and the information gathered from the focus group. Ethical considerations will also be given.

The findings of the study will be presented in the form of the narratives of the participants and will be separate from the analysis. I decided to give this platform to the participants to tell their stories in order that the reader may absorb their personal and powerful accounts of their journeys through the educational system. Their narratives also pay tribute to the role of community education in transforming their attitudes to education. They also demonstrate how this transformation has filtered through their parenting role to facilitate them in

supporting their children's education. The themes which emerged from these accounts were then used to formulate questions for the focus group.

Structure of the thesis

The thesis is laid out in six chapters, with chapter one being the introduction to, and rationale for and aim of the study. Chapter two presents the literature review of this topic and serves as a backdrop to the themes which emerge from the study. Chapter three outlines my methodology which includes my epistomological stance, followed by the methods I used in the investigation of the research topic. Chapter four presents the narratives of the four participants who were interviewed, followed by the themes which were identified. The findings from the focus group are then presented. Chapter five is a themed analysis of the findings which emerged. Chapter six reviews the research study, drawing conclusions and giving recommendations for the future.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

This chapter will consider functionalism as the theoretical framework underpinning the role of the education system in Ireland. Other theories which will be considered will be Goldthorpe's rational action theory and Gambetta's theory on 'choice'. Reference will also be made to the claims of Bourdieu. However, in an Irish context, consideration will be given to the writings of Kathleen Lynch and her colleagues in the Equality Studies Department of University College Dublin. Other areas which are considered include the role of social and cultural norms in educational participation. The roles of the State and the teacher in providing the conditions in the classroom will also be addressed, whilst the impact of parental support on children's education will also be explored. Finally the benefits of community education will be examined.

Functionalism

Functionalism is considered to be within the structuralist paradigm and it is this paradigm which Lynch & O'Riordan (1998) consider to be one of the most enduring theoretical models which purport to explain social-class related inequalities in education. The State, which works in and through various agents, such as the Church and the Department of Education and Skills, plays a pivotal role in the production and reproduction of inequality. Because of the State's role in the setting up of schools and the provision of subjects and assessment of examinations, ultimately then, it is the State which dictates the educational choices made by students as they choose between various schools and colleges. It is also responsible for policies on income, welfare and education, all of which impact differentially between and within social classes. The State also controls

teacher appointments and curricula and decides on subjects for assessment and how they will be assessed.

McCullagh (2005) describes functionalist analysis as being built on the 'assumption that societies are based on consensus and cooperation and that they are typically characterised by a shared value system' (Unit 6, p.14). The assumption is that achievement is based on a combination of ability, effort and social class background, whilst secondary factors such as gender and race are irrelevant from this perspective, thus giving the impression that the success of high achievers in acquiring high status jobs is appropriate and necessary for social order. From this perspective:

> It is the task of education to make sure that every member of a society has, as it were, an equal chance to be unequal and can move according to skill and effort into the social position most appropriate to their talents (Drudy & Lynch, 1993, p. 31).

This perspective implies equality of access and assumes that other factors have very little impact and that those individuals with reasonable intelligence and who work hard can do well within the current educational system. In terms of the theoretical framework, the idea of equality of educational opportunity is firmly embedded within the functionalist frame of reference. Drudy and Lynch (1993) refer to functionalists as having tended to discuss the problem of education and social class, in particular, in the liberal language of 'equality of educational opportunity'. This argument rests on the idea that modern industrial societies are or should be 'meritocratic', meaning that it is the combination of ability and effort and not one's social class that should lead to achievement and success. However, if this were the case, one would expect different results to emerge

from the study of educational attainment rates which are given later in this chapter. One would also expect better examination results and higher school retention rates in all areas.

Drudy & Lynch's ideologies: consensualism, essentialism, meritocratic individualism

Drudy and Lynch (1993: p.49) claim to have identified three of the most prominent ideologies which constitute the dominant frameworks within which educational participation and achievement is viewed in Ireland. According to the authors, these ideologies are sometimes used to explain and to obscure inequality in the educational system. They are: consensualism, essentialism and meritocratic individualism.

Consensualism

Consensualism implies that there is an assumption that all sectors involved in education agree on what is meant by the collective interest in education and that other factors such as class or gender are not perceived as effective forces directing the education system (p.50). Drudy and Lynch (1993) have also suggested that the use of the word 'disadvantage' instead of social class inequalities in Government reports only serves to obscure the structural nature of educational inequality. As outlined in Chapter One, the term 'disadvantaged' comprises indicators (Kellaghan et al, 1995) such as poverty, family structure and size, socioeconomic status, unemployment, location and school performance. In my experience I have met people from 'disadvantaged' areas who believe they have not had the same educational opportunities as others. They name lack of economic resources, choice of schools and subjects, place to

study, access to educational resources such as laptops, grinds and private tuition as just some of the factors which contribute to this belief.

Essentialism

Essentialism focuses on the individual's basic intelligence, skills and talents and implies that an individual's academic success or failure reflects their innate qualities. It also reflects the importance attached to the ability to do well at exams and effectively relieves teachers and policy makers of certain responsibilities as it is perceived that poor performance is attributed to a lack of intelligence. This form of thinking ignores the fact that, to date, according to Gardner (1989), there are several different kinds of intelligences which reflect different ways of interacting with the world. In Irish education however, there is greater credit given for logical-mathematical and linguistic intelligence which are just two of the multiple intelligences that Gardner has identified. The other seven intelligences are spatial, bodily-kinesthetic, interpersonal, intrapersonal, musical, naturalist and existential but apart from musical, none of the other intelligences are assessed in Irish mainstream education.

Meritocratic individualism

The meritocratic individualism concept is concerned with the relationship between the individual and society. It posits that those with ability who make an effort will be rewarded. However, it does not consider the evidence that social class is a structural reality which influences the level and type of educational achievements. Neither does it acknowledge the fact that prestigious well-paid jobs are sometimes only available to those with high educational achievements, which in effect reflect their socio-economic background. Within this socio-

economic background there are particular kinds of opportunities and this material well-being can be in the form of wealth or income, access to study areas, technology or extra tuition when required.

The socio-economic system is just one of four systems which Lynch (2001) suggests has a complex relationship with education, the other systems being political, socio-cultural and affective. The political system is often reflected in power-related issues. These inequalities may stem from the state, the Church or may be related to power issues within the classroom context, involving teachers and students. Socio-cultural inequalities are essentially status or prestige related and are generally related to minority groups such as Travellers or those of a different race or sexual orientation. The affective system, referred to by Lynch (2001), which also has a complex relationship with education, refers to the socio-emotional relations which give people a sense of being loved and appreciated by others, and this contributes to a sense of belonging. To challenge inequality in this area, it is necessary to promote social conditions which can nurture one's sense of well-being.While inequality may exist at any one of these levels, it can also be compounded by being at more than one of these levels (Lynch & Lodge, 2002, p.3).

Bourdieu

Cultural capital

The French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (1986) has written extensively on how one can convert economic capital into various other forms of capital. In 1986 he wrote that cultural capital was a form of hidden hereditary transmission of capital and that it served as a strategy for the reproduction of social class. The term 'cultural capital' refers to the cultural goods transmitted by different

families and it can take three different forms. It exists in the embodied state, such as accent and tone of voice; secondly, in the objectified state, which includes cultural goods such as books and works of art; and thirdly, in institutionalised form which includes educational credentials.

Included in this cultural capital is a lifestyle and consumption pattern, an area which clearly divides the classes and is easily recognisable in Irish society today. Leisure activities such as attending a gym, horse-riding or playing golf are expensive pursuits and because of this, are more likely to be associated with middle class people. Other forms of cultural capital which may be associated with the middle class include technology, fee-paying schools and private tuition. Because this form of cultural capital can be passed from generation to generation, it represents the economic factor in the reproduction of social class and those who have access to these commodities are automatically advantaged in the current educational system. At present, the education system is representative of middle class values. This is reflected in the fact that it facilitates those with adequate finances to access the resources required to facilitate the attainment of points in the Leaving Certificate. Although education is presented as value neutral, nevertheless, its intention reflects the values of that class with the individual being marked and classified according to his achievements (Drudy & Lynch, 1993).

Habitus

Bourdieu used the term 'habitus' to describe the everyday habitual practices of a social environment which influences and impacts the future education of individuals in society (1986). He views education as a cultural site that plays a

crucial role in the reproduction of class inequalities in society and one in which the dominant class will always win. In sum, those who come from a privileged background on entering the educational system will maintain that privileged position throughout the process, just as will those who are from a less privileged background. The implication is that one cannot change his/her habitus. However, this subject will be examined further in Chapters Four and Five to see if Bourdieu's theory is challenged as a result of this study.

Bourdieu/Marxism

Bourdieu contends that even when the economic resources are not adequate the middle class will still have the advantage as their cultural capital can be exchanged into other forms of capital such as private tuition and college fees. Bourdieu's theory is in keeping with the traditional Marxists who are of the opinion that social class positions stem from structural inequalities and favour those from economically advantaged backgrounds. They see education as representing a highly dependent system within capitalist societies which reflects the conflict between classes in society (Lynch & O'Riordan, 1998). Bourdieu, however, considers education credentials to be real forms of capital and that without them, one is seriously disadvantaged in accessing life opportunities (Bourdieu, 1986).

Gambetta: choice

According to Gambetta (1987) it is difficult to separate social structure from choice. He notes that educational choices are the result of three main processes. He identifies these choices as what one can do, what one wants to do, and thirdly, the conditions that shape one's preferences and decisions, all of which

are partly causal and partly intentional. In other words, he claims that structuralists maintain that people are 'pushed' into making educational choices in that they do not freely choose their educational pathways. However, if too smuch emphasis is placed on the choice of the individual, our attention will be directed from the influence of economic capital in producing classed outcomes (Lynch & Moran, 2006). According to the Irish Constitution (1939, Article 42:1), the family is the 'primary and natural educator' of children and as such, parents are free to send their children to whatever school they choose. While there may be restrictions regarding school transport, nevertheless, economic resources will dictate how far children will travel to attend school and what school will be attended.

Goldthorpe: rational action theory (RAT)

This structuralist explanation has been challenged by Goldthorpe (1996) who uses rational action theory (RAT) to explain the persistent inequalities in education. He claims that social phenomena and in particular, inequality in education, can be explained by the action and interaction of certain individuals across social classes. He posits that working-class people make choices based on the proposed future costs and benefits of education and perceive the opportunity costs to be too high in relation to their income (Goldthorpe, 1996). To take the risks involved in pursuing education they need to be assured of a successful outcome in the form of employment. Therefore they are making rational decisions based on the circumstances which prevail for the different classes. While RAT may be a useful model to explain why people make choices regarding education it gives very little explanation regarding the conditions which direct the choices that are made. This theory is also lacking in its

investigation of state structures which impact on educational opportunities and decisions. Moreover, it does not account for the social environmental factors which influence those choices.

Social and cultural norms

During the 1950s and 1960s, when second-level education was fee-paying, the Intermediate Certificate was an acceptable level of education and was sufficient to access office work or a trade, whereas the Leaving Certificate was required for the civil service, banking or teaching. It was also a time when many women did not work outside the home once they married and had children. This was the social norm at that time and was a result of the 'marriage bar' which was in operation. This legislation applied mainly to women's white-collar occupations in both public and private sector but was removed in 1973. With the removal of fees for secondary school in 1967 and more latterly (1995), for third-level education, the Leaving Certificate is now considered to be a very basic education with degree standard becoming the desired attainment for many students. The removal of these fees impacted on my own education as it was a foregone conclusion that once the fees were removed, I would continue until completion of the state examinations. However, pursuing third-level education at that stage in my life never occurred to me. No-one in my social or family circle had ever been to university and it was not something I aspired to at that time. On reflection, clearly my family's economic situation would not have allowed me to pursue third-level education when the fees were still in existence and it was envisaged that I would go to work and contribute to the family income which is in effect what I did.

However, with the removal of second-level and third-level fees, the question remains as to why so many people do not avail of these opportunities. It has been my experience in working with families from an economically disadvantaged position that many children do not succeed in completing second level education (up to Leaving Certificate) and many have never considered pursuing education to third level. The removal of third-level fees has not improved access to education for these underprivileged students. In many ways, the removal of these fees has facilitated middle-class parents to provide fee-paying education and private tuition for their children at second-level, thereby improving the potential for higher grades which generally leads to higher education and greater opportunities for employment. With this in mind it is important to look at the Irish context to consider the relationship between the socio-economic background of the student and educational attainment.

Current educational attainment rates

In Ireland the issue of equality of educational opportunity has, in recent times, been assessed by examining the participation rates of different social groups at various levels of the education system with the social group divided in terms of parents' occupation. Depending on the proportional representation of each group, each social group is then categorised by its position and any marked degree of variance among social categories would indicate educational inequalities. In the 2007 Annual School Leavers' Survey, Byrne, McCoy and Watson looked at the relationship between the socio-economic background of the student and their leaving certificate results which are presented below.

Table 1 presents the Leaving Certificate exam results of school leavers by parental socio-economic background. Leaving Certificate results are divided into four categories:

  • less than 5 'passes',

  • 5 or more passes with no 'honours',

  • 1-3 'honours' and

  • 4 or more 'honours'

Table 1: Leaving Certificate Examination Results by Socio-Economic Background

Parental Occupation (2007)

	<5 Ds	5+Ds, No Cs	1-3 Hons	4+Hons	Unknown
Farmer/Agriculture	0.6	22.5	30.6	39.6	6.7
Higher/Lower professional	2.2	10.5	21.1	59.9	6.3
Employer/manager	5.3	23.4	28.2	35.6	7.5
Intermediate non-manual	5.0	27.4	29.6	24.2	13.9
Skilled/semi/unskilled manual	7.3	33.3	27.2	19.0	13.3
Unemployed	8.1	35.6	33.1	9.7	13.6
Other/unknown	7.3	21.9	21.4	27.8	21.7
Total	4.6	23.6	26.9	33.8	11.1

Note**:** *Row percentages for each socio-economic background.*

Overall, of those who sit the Leaving Certificate, 5 per cent achieve less than 5 'passes', 24 per cent achieve 5 or more 'passes' (but no 'honours'), almost 27 per cent attain 1-3 'honours' and 34 per cent achieve 4 or more 'honours' (Byrne et al 2008). These results demonstrate that those students from professional

backgrounds emerge as having stronger results, with 40, 36 and 60 percent respectively, achieving four or more honours. These results are significantly higher than the average with those from professional backgrounds being over six times the proportion of students from unemployed backgrounds who do so (Byrne et al, 2008).

However, should the study be done now during the economic downturn, the results may present very differently as so many professional people, such as architects and solicitors, who would normally be considered 'middle class' are currently unemployed and an individual's socio-economic status is not as clearcut as it has been in the past. Many middle-class families cannot afford the extra tuitions and grinds which, before the current recession, would have facilitated their children in the acquirement of extra points in the Leaving Certificate. Their financial position will undoubtedly influence their decisions regarding their children's education in relation to school choices and private education. Depending on the length of the recession and the impact it has on Irish society, it is yet unclear how this will impact on educational attainment rates.

Conditions in the classroom (a) the State

Measures introduced to alleviate disadvantage

In the publication *Literacy in Disadvantaged Primary Schools* (Eivers, Shiel & Shortt, 2005) it was revealed that socio-economic status is the single most important factor in relation to achievement and underachievement. Further research carried out by the Department of Education and Skills (DES, 2005)

found that there was still very little change in the attainment levels in working-class areas. This was followed by the introduction of several government-led measures to help alleviate the problems of disadvantage in schools (DES, 2005) and these measures have had positive impact on the provision of quality schooling. These measures included the Early Start pre-school service which was introduced in disadvantaged communities to promote early childhood education acknowledging the fact that the seeds of disadvantage are sown very early in children's lives. However, the findings of this study reveal that these services are not available to all children who require them and this will be addressed in Chapters Four and Five. While these measures are welcomed as a positive move which benefit children, there is still only emphasis placed on the role of social class and education. There is little attention given to other factors which impact on educational achievement and these will also be considered in Chapters Four and Five.

Mac Ruairc (2009) takes issue with some of the more 'aspirational' parts of the policies. As an example he refers to policy which aspired to halve the proportion of pupils in designated disadvantaged schools with serious literacy difficulties by 2006 and believes it did not take into account the difficulties and variety of issues which are encompassed in the term 'educational disadvantage'. He acknowledges that while extra teachers, increased financial resources and a range of new schemes and programmes have been introduced, there has been a lack of overall cohesive ideas on how to make a significant difference at all levels of the educational system.

The introduction of the Delivery of Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS) (DES, 2005) acknowledged the need to deal with disadvantage in a co-ordinated

way. Programmes such as the School Support Programme (SSP) served as a means to integrate and develop the initiatives already in place. The DEIS model allowed schools to have greater autonomy with respect to financial resources and having acknowledged the need to respond to disadvantage and marginalisation at local level, schools were then encouraged to engage with planning at this level (MacRuairc, 2009). However, it is unfortunate that because of the current economic climate, funding for the DEIS model has been reduced leaving schools vulnerable with many of them unable to meet targets formulated during better economic conditions. This will be of concern to those parents whose children need additional remedial supports but who cannot afford to access these services privately.

Conditions in the classroom (b) the teacher

Lynch and Baker (2005) have emphasised the importance of equality of condition in order that fair choices can be made regarding education. They posit that there must be respect and welcome for diversity in the school environment rather than just tolerating it. Teachers and students must focus on the value of love, care and solidarity which is fundamental to mental and emotional well-being and development. They suggest that some key areas of equality need to be addressed in order to achieve equality of condition. These areas include education and related resources; respect and recognition; love, care and solidarity; power; and working and learning.

In the past the teacher was often referred to as the 'sage on the stage'. This reflected the perception of the teacher held by students as an authoritative, all-knowing figure who 'spoke down' to the students while the students took on the

role of 'hearer only'. This is in contrast to the ethos of community education, which is one of inclusiveness and participation with everyone in the group having opportunity to have their voice heard. When conditions such as these are in place there is a greater likelihood that inequalities can be overcome as people feel accepted for who they are, and this sets the tone for an environment more conducive to study and to learn. The role of the teacher is fundamental in providing a learning environment which is inclusive and non-threatening for children and conducive to learning and development. The State, which is responsible for the appointment of teachers, the provision of schools and the class curriculum, must have appropriate policies in place which will facilitate teachers in setting a suitable tone in the classroom which will allow students to develop and learn at their own pace.

Parental support

There are many factors which impact on education and one of the most significant of these is the role of parents in supporting and encouraging children to engage with education. In the Report for the One Foundation (2004), it states that:

> home organisation, parental expectations and parent-child interaction, which comprise the 'atmosphere' of the home are central in determining if a child experiences educational disadvantage (McKeown & Clark, 2004).

The White Paper on Early Education *Ready to Learn* has clearly outlined that parents are the prime educators of their children and play the central educational role in providing the stimulation and care which is required to ensure their children's appropriate development. The White Paper also states that:

effectiveness of formal education is linked to the acquisition by a child of certain skills, such as socialisation skills and readiness to learn. These skills are developed, not only in the formal education system, but also in the home environment (1999: 9.1).

Many families are currently under pressure, given the recent changes in the economic climate, along with complex demands and responsibilities. Coping with these pressures alongside other social issues, such as relationship breakdown and family conflict, can impact negatively on the welfare of families. One of the challenges outlined in the White Paper on Early Education has been the fact that many parents may feel inadequate in dealing with the early education needs of their children and this inhibits them in getting involved. It has been recommended that the availability of, and access to, parenting courses would be beneficial for parents in this regard (1999: 9.3).

One of the National Economic and Social Council's (NESC) recommendations in its report *Opportunities, Challenges and Capacities for Choice* (1999) concerning lifelong learning is the development of early childhood provision and the White Paper on Adult Education refers to the White Paper on Early Childhood Education, *Ready to Learn* (1999:14) which identifies the principal objective of Government policy regarding early childhood education as supporting the development and educational achievement of children through high quality early education. This commitment is located within an overall concern for lifelong learning, which until recently was focused on mainstream education but is now shifted towards a continuum of lifelong learning. While the overall benefit will impact on the levels of educational attainment of Irish adults, I am particularly interested in the fact that emphasis is placed on supporting

parental involvement in early childhood education, in particular from the Adult Education viewpoint. The Paper emphasises the central educational role which parents can play in the early development of children, in particular the:

> provision of parenting courses building on existing provision for Adult Education and on courses run in the private sector and by community and umbrella groups (2000:61).

By providing parenting courses and making them available to all communities, the participants will learn many useful skills which will impact on their parenting style. However, while parenting courses are provided in many communities, there is little recognition given to their importance in relation to children's education. Parental support is fundamental to children's education and as such, these courses should be subsidised and made more accessible and available to all communities.

Community education

In its acknowledgement of the benefits of adult education, the White Paper, *Learning for Life* (DES 2000) places great importance on the role of adult education in addressing the social and economic needs of Irish society, especially considering Ireland's lower levels of education and qualifications compared to most other OECD countries (Connolly, 2001). The White Paper defines adult education as 'systematic learning undertaken by adults who return to learning having concluded initial education or training' (2000:2). This includes aspects of further and third-level education, continuing education and training, community education and other systematic deliberate learning by adults which can be both formal and informal.

The NESC's report, *Opportunities, Challenges and Capacities for Choice* (1999) emphasises the pivotal role of lifelong learning in the social and economic development strategy of the country and has adopted the EU Employment and Labour Market Committee's definition of lifelong learning as:

> all purposeful learning activity, whether formal or informal, undertaken on an ongoing basis with the aim of improving knowledge, skills and competence' (1999:170).

The findings in the recent Aontas research report titled '*More than just a Course*' (AONTAS, 2011) found that the Department of Education and Skills (DES) community education provision is highly effective at promoting the personal development of learners and supporting them to continue with their education. In a community setting, the learning process involves both group process and individual learning and is learner-centred. It is therefore an effective setting in which to develop generic skills, particularly for those adults who are early school-leavers. This new learning can be a transformative force in changing people's lives and as a result, many are motivated to challenge the inequality which impacted on their earlier education.

Barriers to adult education

Many people who have not managed to attain the basic educational requirement often look to adult education in order to acquire the educational requirement necessary to obtain suitable employment. However, many adult learners are discouraged from returning to education because of certain barriers. Along with the lack of qualifications for entry, many people, mainly from the lower socio-economic groups, have been excluded from the advances in adult education. Mature students who have completed Leaving Certificate are automatically more

advantaged than those who have not, while the lack of adequate qualifications is considered a major barrier to higher education entry (Lynch, 1997).

Other barriers for these groups can include low levels of literacy skills, lack of information regarding further education, guidance in making choices, social supports and finance. For those who work fulltime in the home caring for children or other dependents, the cost of alternative care, books and travel, along with childcare fees and lost opportunity for paid work and education can actually be prohibitive. The system fails to address the way in which individuals gain access to and participate in education which is directly related to one's economic and personal circumstances. Thus, someone who has left school early is likely to have limited access in terms of seeking further education.

To address the poor levels of literacy skills the National Adult Literacy Programme, which was a key strategy of the White Paper, made much progress in terms of implementation. Funding increased dramatically with the number of literacy students increasing from 5,000 in 1997 to 17,150 at the end of 2000 (Aontas, 2001). However, with the recent downturn in the economy there have been many changes, most notably reductions, in the funding for the provision of adult literacy. This will undoubtedly have implications for the funding required to address the literacy needs of the 500,000 Irish adults identified in the OECD International Adult Literacy Survey (2000).

According to Drudy and Lynch (1993) the problems in adult education, in equality terms, are not radically different from those in other sectors of society. In spite of major political changes such as removal of third-level fees (although the current registration fees are significantly high), Access courses, recognition

of accredited courses and huge investment in literacy skills, barriers still persist for those from an economically disadvantaged position. Other evidence suggests that those from lower socio-economic backgrounds have little ambition or expectations for higher education and often believe it to be the prerogative of the middle-classes (Lynch & O'Riordan, 1998). It is unclear why this is the case but there are several possible causes. Many people have the view that education itself is representative of middle-class values and cannot seem to relate to it as a given right. Some people place little value on education and this can develop into an intergenerational cycle which is difficult to break without the proper supports in place. Negative early educational experiences can also impact, and this, combined with literacy issues and lack of confidence, can often seem like too big a hurdle to overcome.

Conclusion

This chapter has set the scene for this study on the relationship between social class and education. The intention of this literature review was to ascertain if social class alone impacted on levels on education or if other factors played a significant role in educational attainment and pursuance of education. It is clear from the literature review that this is the case. The role of the State has emerged as significant in many instances. Social and cultural norms are dictated by the State as was demonstrated by the legislation which impacted on women's role in the workforce. The State is also responsible for policies which influence the employment of teachers, the school environment, availability of sujects and examination assessment. It also has a role in providing parental support in the form of parenting courses as outlined in the White Paper on Adult Education (2000). Finally, it is responsible for the funding provided for community

education which has been established as an effective force in promoting personal development for individuals. Through this means, lives can be transformed, thereby motivating people to contribute to the development of their community.

While much of the literature regarding education focuses on the impact of social class, there is a gap in terms of attention and consideration given to other significant factors. This study has identified other factors, besides social class, which are related to engagement with education. It has been shown that educational policy is dominated by middle class values and this is demonstrated by the persistence of the State in introducing policies which address only one aspect of educational inequality, that of social class, while there is little emphasis on other factors which contribute to inequality in education.

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY/METHOD

Introduction

For many years I have worked with families in 'disadvantaged' communities and have seen how early school leaving can impact on young people. With a lack of confidence and motivation, and sometimes poor literacy skills, many are left with little scope for employment while also being deprived of other life chances. I am also aware that many from 'disadvantaged' communities manage to overcome these barriers and go on to successfully complete their education and obtain gainful employment. I am interested in the relationship between social class and engagement with education and its effects on subsequent life experiences. This chapter will outline the methodology and methods used in this study of social class and its relationship with education.

Methodology

- *Qualitative research*

While quantitative research would have yielded interesting statistics it would not have explored the reasons and meaning that individuals attach to their actions nor can it gather information on personal insights. For this reason, and considering the theme of this study, I chose to use a qualitative research. However, in order to discuss educational attainment rates from an Irish perspective, it was necessary to include the results of a quantitative study which are presented in table form in Chapter 2: Literature Review and demonstrates current educational attainment rates

According to Mason (2002), qualitative research allows me to explore a broad array of dimensions of the social world and to capture the ways that social

processes and discourses work and the implication of the meanings that they generate. It therefore has enormous potential although I was aware that it could be challenging in terms of the requirement of engagement from the researcher. I realised that I needed to think critically about the process and confront and challenge my own assumptions. I also needed to acknowledge and recognise the extent to which my own thoughts, actions and decisions could impact on how I researched and generated the data.

- *Ontological/epistemological stance*

The experiences of the participants are their personal reality and from this ontological stance it was necessary and valid that I gathered my data directly from the people most affected by these issues. Therefore, I used a social constructivism approach, which according to Cresswell (2003), is characterised by several assumptions. He maintains that individuals seek understanding of the world in which they live and make meaning of their experiences. These varied meanings led me, as the researcher, to look at the broader context and to rely on the participants' views of the situation being studied which they had constructed based on their historical and social perspective. At the same time I was conscious that my own background would influence and shape the interpretation of the research process. Given that I have worked in disadvantaged areas for several years and have formed views and opinions on how social class appears to influence and shape attitudes and perceptions of the education system, it was very likely that I would have preconceived ideas about this phenomenon, thus giving the study an epistemological perspective. Clearly, however, the experiences of the participants were many and varied, and all were valid and deserved to be heard. In other words,

the varying views of the participants represented different ways of looking at and interpreting social reality (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2000).

- *Reflection*

However, I was very aware that this type of qualitative research required critical self-scrutiny and I constantly had to evaluate my own performance in the conduct of the research (Mason, 2002) and the production of the data. I was also aware that because this type of research was heavily dependent on interview data, it was important that I developed a high level of trust in the relationship between myself and the participants. To help achieve this situation and to facilitate that trust to develop, I spoke to them of my own journey into adult education before the interviews. I told them of the highs and the lows of my experience up to and including my current role as a researcher. It was intended that this would form a common bond between us and alleviate in some small measure the perception of power difference between the researcher and the participants.

- *Research question*

This study attempted to answer the following research question: *'Is there a relationship between social class and engagement with education?'*

In particular it aimed to answer the following questions:

1. Does a person's social and cultural background impact on their educational performance and attainment?
2. Do the conditions which prevail in the classroom impact on students' performance?
3. What role does parental support play in children's education and school retention?

4. How does community education differ to that of early school education?

Method

- *Selection of participants*

I contacted an education and training centre which was set up to empower adults through education and to bring about change. I was aware that there were students attending there who were at different levels in their education and I was interested in finding out if their social class had played a role in this situation. As my study focused on social class specifically, I had not planned to only interview women. However, having made my request known to the manager of the centre, I was happy to be told that there were students, all women, who were willing to facilitate me in my study.

The participants from this centre who took part in the research were randomly chosen in that they were individuals who were available at a particular time to participate in the study. Three of the four people who took part were attending this centre and the fourth person was a woman whom I know through my work situation. To protect the identity of these women, their real names have not been used and where possible, all identifying information has been removed. The three women who attend the education centre are currently studying for a Bachelor of Arts degree in Leadership and Community Development. The fourth woman who participated is attending an Institute of Technology and is studying for a Masters degree in Therapeutic Childcare. The women were aged as follows: Anne, 42 years, Barbara, 32 years, Deirdre 38 years (all from the education centre) and Colette, 33 years. Only one woman described herself as being from a middle-class

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background. All their earlier education varied considerably in that all of them left at different stages in their education and for different reasons.

The focus group comprised women who are currently attending the English/Literacy class and ranged in age from 20s to 60s.

Design

- *Triangulation*

I decided to use the 'triangulation of method' which refers to a combination of methods to explore one set of research questions (Mason, 2002). This involved a focus group, narratives and my exploration of the literature on the topic which was effectively a co-production involving researcher and interviewees (Mason, 2002). I judged the validity of the different methods and sources by comparing the products which was in effect, a way of measuring the same phenomenon from different angles. I was aware however that this would not be easy as it was likely to highlight different social phenomena. I was also aware that it would not provide an easy route to the demonstration of the efficacy of the method. Considering this, it was still an attractive method to use and one which I hoped would further enhance and enlighten the outcome of this study.

I used a narrative approach in interviewing three students at BA degree level. I also conducted a similar interview with a student at MA level who is known to me through my work situation. I then conducted a focus group with an English/Literacy group in an adult education centre and posed open questions based on the themes which emerged during the narratives.

- *Narrative approach*

As the subject of this research concerned social class and education I considered that the only way to get firsthand knowledge of the subject was to speak to the people most affected. Having decided on qualitative research, I began looking at a narrative approach as a way of acquiring the data which was relevant to the study. This method gives opportunity for respondents to tell their own personal story during the interviews. I considered it to be the optimum design to allow the participants to respond more elaborately and in greater detail (Bell, 2001). It also allowed me to acquire information from non-verbal responses which is never acquired through the questionnaire format. This narrative approach was most appropriate as I was interested in hearing the personal accounts of human experience. This method also ensured responses which were rich and explanatory in detail and were concerned with how the social world, pertaining to each individual, was interpreted, understood and experienced. According to Gray (1998), one of the major strengths of the narrative approach is the ability to allow the readers with dissimilar cultural backgrounds to the storyteller, to develop an understanding of the motivations and the consequences of actions described by the participants in the narrative account. The approach to the focus group allowed me to probe ideas and attitudes which would otherwise have been difficult to articulate in a quantitative survey.

Although a narrative approach was used and participants were encouraged to tell their own personal story of their journey through the educational process, where appropriate, I also asked questions regarding their perceptions, thoughts and ideas on answering the above questions. Their personal experiences have given them

great insight into the ongoing debate regarding the issues surrounding social class and education.

- *Individual stories*

The women were asked to tell the story of their journey through their earlier educational experiences and how they came to return to adult education. They spoke of their experiences in education from childhood up to and including their adult education. I did not use a strict interview schedule as I wanted the participants to speak freely and naturally. However, I did steer them through some open questions to ensure that certain themes were covered. These themes were as follows:

1. early educational experiences

2. family support at that time

3. cultural and familial expectations regarding education

4. motivation for returning to adult education

5. barriers to returning to education

6. support in adult education

7. aspirations for their own future

8. aspirations for their children's future

Semi-structured, recorded interviews were chosen to allow the respondents to talk freely about the subject, yet allowing me to guide the conversation in order to illicit the necessary, relevant information. While interviews are time-consuming and more difficult to analyse, I chose this format in order to gain greater insight into the respondents' thoughts, feelings and reactions to the research questions (Bell, 2001). This method allowed me to follow up ideas and probe responses,

while also investigating motives and feelings. Face-to-face interviews allowed me to acquire information from non-verbal responses and yielded rich material which can never be acquired through the questionnaire format. This was particularly evident when the participants spoke about their aspirations for their future and that of their children and all seemed to become more animated and enthusiastic in their responses. Although there was much preparation and patience needed in the formation of appropriate questions to be used during the procedure nevertheless I considered it to be time well spent.

- *Focus group*

A focus group was selected for members to offer their perceptions, attitudes and opinions on the relationship between social background and education and it was hoped that listening to participants' experiences would stimulate memories and ideas in others. Open questions were chosen to allow the respondents to talk freely about the subject, yet allowing me to guide the conversation in order to illicit the necessary, relevant information. While focus groups can be more difficult to analyse, I chose this format in order to gain a broader perspective on the subject being investigated. This method allowed me to follow up ideas and probe responses, while also investigating motives and feelings.

Questions were asked about their early educational experiences and their reasons for leaving the education system. They were also invited to talk about their current educational experiences and the supports and barriers which they have encountered along their journey.

- *Procedure*

Before embarking on the field work, I consulted with my own family members regarding the interview questions to ensure there was no ambiguity or insensitivity shown to the participants and also to ensure the most suitable order in which to ask the questions. I had already communicated with the manager of the education centre by letter (appendix 1) and phone call outlining my position and making my request to conduct my research in her centre. I submitted the proposed research schedule to her and an information letter (appendix 3) to clarify the aim of the research and received a very positive response.

Prior to the interviews, I communicated with the individual participants by email and explained who I was and what I was planning to do. I provided information letters (appendix 3) and consent forms (appendix 2) which were given to each of the participants prior to the interviews and participants were asked to acknowledge their consent before taking part in the research. A mutually convenient time was arranged for the interviews and three of the four interviews took place in the adult education centre. The other interview was carried out in the person's place of work. The focus group took place in the adult education centre. All respondents were assured of confidentiality and the right to refuse to answer any questions, without explanation, if so desired. However, within the focus group, confidentiality could not be guaranteed from other group members. Contact telephone number and email address were provided to facilitate respondents who had queries about the study.

- *Analysis of the findings*

The participants' stories and the information generated from the focus group were recorded and transcribed. They were listened to several times before being transcribed and the transcripts were read several times. They were then coded by identifying concepts and themes and noting any overall patterns which emerged in comparing the transcripts (Merrill & West, 2009). The information was then analysed and interpreted by categorising the information acquired into groupings and themes based on similarities and differences. All the information was stored securely in my home.

Ethical considerations

I was aware that I had a duty of care to the respondents and ensured that at all times I adhered to the highest professional standards in conducting the research. I was conscious that I needed to have a critical, open-minded approach when organising and analysing the data and must act with honesty and fairness with regard to the contributions of participants (National University of Ireland, 2002). As the interviewer, it was important that I did not unduly influence the respondents throughout the interviews. However, I was mindful that the data was produced as suggested by Cresswell (2003: p.182) through a 'personal lens'. As I was known to one of the participants who agreed to take part in an interview, I was conscious that I would have to aim to be completely objective in the course of the research and to withhold my own views on the subject matter.

Consent forms (appendix 2) were provided for the respondents outlining the purpose of the study and what was required of them. They were told how the information would be safeguarded and for how long and also who would have

access to this information. All details of the study were explained and relevant questions were answered prior to the interviews. They were given an information sheet (appendix 3) with my name and contact details (NUIM details only), my supervisor's name and contact number. Confidentiality from me was assured. However, regarding the focus group, I could not guarantee confidentiality from all the members. The names of the participants were changed to protect their anonymity and attempts were made to remove all identifying information from the narrative accounts and also from the information which emerged from the focus group.

I let the participants know that they were free to withdraw from the study at any time and that if they participated they may need debriefing after the process. This information, along with information regarding a grievance procedure was also given and was included in the information letter and consent form respectively.

This chapter described the methodology and method used for this research study. The following chapter will present the narratives in the form of the lived experiences of the four participants who were interviewed and a summary of the information which emerged from the focus group is also included.

CHAPTER 4: PARTICIPANTS' STORIES AND INFORMATION FROM FOCUS GROUP

Introduction

This study addressed the following research question: 'What is the relationship between social class and engagement with education?'

In this chapter I present an overview of the participants' journeys through education in order that the reader may absorb the information given from their life experiences. It is necessary to hear these stories first as they represent part of my journey as I explored the research question. Several themes emerged from the interviews but for the purpose of this study attention will only be drawn to the following:

- Social and cultural norms

- Conditions in the classroom: (a) the State (b) the teacher

- Parental support

- Community education

I will then present the views and attitudes of members of the focus group regarding the four main themes which emerged during the interviews and which I identified as significant in exploring the research question. Whilst no analysis will be given at this stage, inevitably, my selection of themes has involved some element of analysis but my main focus is a commentary on the narratives.

Participants' stories

Anne's story

Anne is from a middle class background. She is 42 years old and a single parent of teenage children. There was addiction in her family and because of that she felt people looked down on her. She felt that she did not 'fit in', that her family were underdogs. She grew up in a middle class area where it was the norm for people to have employment and she believed that the people around her were better off than her family was.

Anne hated school. She felt 'pressurised' into staying in school but she wanted to leave. She described it as a bad experience. In third class she had a teacher who disliked her and this contributed to her dislike of school. Although she had several teachers after that, particularly in secondary school, she still 'could not wait' to get out of it. Anne completed her Intermediate Certificate although she does not remember it as a happy experience. Having left school she worked mainly in shops and hairdressers.

Anne describes herself as having 'messed up her life' and was going through a very tough time when she met a woman who encouraged her and believed in her. This was the first time in her life that Anne thought anything good about herself. This friendship changed her life and Anne then felt confident enough to get employment and went on to do a counselling course. This was the beginning of Anne's adult education. She completed a Back to Work scheme along with other courses and is now doing a Bachelor of Arts degree in Leadership and Community Development.

Anne has worked mostly in the community with people with disabilities and homeless people, so would be interested in getting more involved in the community. She is very angry about inequalities and injustices in society. She understands these situations better now since doing this course. Anne has a great sense of achievement and describes herself as now feeling part of the world because she has a better understanding of what is going on in society.

Anne finds it difficult trying to juggle studying, work and raising a family. She also finds it difficult paying for courses and for childminding. She feels lucky to be studying in this education centre as the supports are so good, including financial supports. She found the staff very supportive when she went through difficulties.

It has been Anne's experience that her children's teachers are better at instilling confidence in students than the teachers she remembers from her own schooldays. However, Anne notices differences between the two different schools that her sons attend, one of them being a DEIS school. This school got money from the government to give the children breakfast when they come in to school. While this is a very good service Anne thinks the other school in a middle-class area has better facilities and describes it as having 'all the technology' and the parents are a lot more involved in their children's education. Every child has one to one reading, the older children with the younger children. This latter situation, in her experience, is a very different approach than the one in the DEIS school.

Regarding education, Anne would love everyone to have the opportunity to get a good education and thinks the lack of education is what causes inequality in life.

Barbara's story

Barbara is 31 years of age and a single parent. She was raised in a disadvantaged area. She sometimes went to school with no socks and often had to borrow a skirt.She always hated school. She went to a convent and the nuns 'used to parade' her in front of the class and say 'terrible things' about her. She said she was made to feel 'worthless' by the nuns and that she would never amount to anything. She never had any aspirations for her future and never wanted to work. She left school at 13 years of age and 'nothing was said' by her parents to discourage her.

She had her first child at 15 years and another at 19 years. She went to and from jobs but never held one down. There was a culture of heavy drinking in her family and this culture was rampant in her area. All she knew about was 'early school leaving, early pregnancy and unemployment'. No-on in her family or neighbourhood went to work or college after leaving school.

In her twenties Barbara did a Back to Work scheme. While working on this scheme she met a woman who greatly influenced her because she talked to her every day. This woman also believed in her and could see something in her which Barbara could not see in herself. As a result, Barbara completed this course and it was the first time she had ever completed anything in her life. She wanted more for herself then and more for her children as she did not want them going the same path as her. She came to the conclusion that education was so important and wanted to set a good example for her children.

Barbara continued her education by completing Further Education and Training Awards Council (FETAC) courses up to and including Level Five. She has also completed a community based diploma in counselling and is now doing a Bachelor of Arts degree in Leadership and Community Development. Barbara has found that adult education which is community based tends to be more supportive. Staff members are very understanding about childminding difficulties. She says they are also very encouraging. When she is feeling negative about herself they often give her praise and encouragement. She says she is treated with respect in adult education. She does not feel forced to do things as she was in school. In community education everybody encourages each other and she describes the subjects as being discussed in 'layman's terms'.

In her experience, Barbara thinks there is a difference in the level of education which her children receive in a disadvantaged area and that which their cousins receive in a middle-class area. This angers and frustrates her and fosters aspirations about social change, about challenging equality. She is now aware of how disadvantaged areas are marginalised. She, along with two other women, is now in the process of setting up a community development group for the children of her housing estate.

Barbara finds childminding a great barrier to her education. She has to separate her children when they are being minded and that is difficult. It becomes more difficult when the children have school holidays or days off school. She thinks this is hard for the children but hopes they will understand it better when they are older.

Colette's story

Colette is 33 years of age and the mother of two children. She was reared in a disadvantaged area and continues to live there. She found school very difficult because of some learning difficulties she experienced. She was the only one of three siblings to complete her Leaving Certificate. She struggled in primary school although she got more help in secondary school. She wanted to leave school in fifth year. There were family problems but her friends and their parents encouraged her to stay on at school. She spent a lot of time in friends' houses and got huge support there. At 17 years of age, after the Leaving Certificate, she had enough of school. There was addiction in the family at that time and there was no encouragement from her family to go to further education.

After leaving school Colette travelled but came home to have her first child at the age of 19. She attended a Back to Education course and also completed a Personal Development course and a Women's Studies course. These courses were free for anyone getting social welfare payments, and as she was a lone parent at the time, she was eligible to do them. Only for the childcare provided at the education centre, she says she would never have accessed that service as she did not have any family members who would have minded her child at that time. She finds this situation a little easier now as both her children attend school.

She continued her education in addiction studies and play therapy, and is now doing a Masters Degree in Therapeutic Childcare. When Colette got a job in a childcare agency, she had other financial difficulties. She found that there was very little financial support for anyone who was working. Occasionally she got support

from the local drugs task force or her employer. However, she is funding the Masters Degree herself.

Colette chose to send her children to school outside of the disadvantaged area in which she lives as she thought they would get a better education. However as her son was later diagnosed with learning difficulties she now regrets this decision as, in her experience, the remedial resources available are better in DEIS schools. She hopes that her children will experience the value of education. She feels she will take more time and effort to support them through education which she did not experience but she knows it will be of benefit to them.

Deirdre's story

Deirdre is 38 years of age, is married and has one three year old boy. She was reared in a disadvantaged area where her parents continue to live. She moved to a different area when she got married.

She has no bad memories of school and always enjoyed it. Her parents were very supportive. She was always encouraged to do homework and was not allowed to 'pull sickies' (pretend to be sick). She and her siblings were always told it was important to go to school and as a result she completed her Intermediate Certificate and Leaving Certificate. However, going to college was not an option and no-one in her social circle went to third level education as it just was not the norm at that time. Her older brother did not sit the Leaving Certificate as he was allowed to leave school because he had got a job. Nevertheless, Deirdre always felt it was normal to stay at school until Leaving Certificate. She got a job in a factory after

leaving school and afterwards travelled and managed to work until she was made redundant two years ago.

She was not aware of any difference between schools growing up as she had nothing with which to compare her education. Her son is now in preschool in the area in which she grew up as he is minded by his maternal grandmother. He has been able to access speech therapy there. Deirdre thinks this service would not have been available to her as quickly in her local area. This is because most pre-schools in middle class areas are privately run and do not have immediate access to these services. Her son will go to school in his local area as she has no transport and needs to be near the school.

Deirdre would like her son to get his Leaving Certificate and would encourage him in that direction. She would then support him in whatever direction he takes, whether that is an apprenticeship or further education as she just wants him to be happy.

Deirdre was made redundant two years ago and used it as an opportunity to do further study. Both her family and her husband's family are very supportive in this. She is very happy with her progress and describes her current learning experience as a very positive experience. She hopes that her return to education will benefit her in terms of employment. She is hoping to work in the social area. She has always had a social conscience. Her mother fostered children and there was always contact with social workers in her family so she thinks that is where her interest stems from.

Information from the focus group

The themes which emerged organically from the individual interviews and which I identified as impacting on participation in education were as follows:

- social and cultural norms

- Conditions in the classroom (a) the State (b) the teacher

- Parental support

- Community education

As a result of these emerging themes, the participants in the focus group were then asked their views on these themes. The group comprised all women who were attending a English/Literacy class in a community education setting. The findings are presented below.

Social and cultural norms

Back in the 1960s and 1970s it was considered the norm for women to be fulltime homemakers. There was a feeling among the group that mothers, in particular, were too busy washing and cleaning and looking after the children and did not have time to consider education. It seemed like it just was not a priority. According to some participants in the focus group, education did not seem so important in working-class areas as people were too busy worrying about paying bills.

Conditions in the classroom: (a) the State

Some participants in the group said they were happy with the services offered in their local DEIS school. These included remedial servicess for children who had different levels of learning difficulties. However, they expressed cocern about the

long-term effects of the recession as many of these services have been reduced and this may impact on their children's long-term education.

Conditions in the classroom: (b) the teacher

Most of the participants thought that teachers had a huge influence on children's attitudes towards education. Many of them expressed resentment at how some teachers in their early school experiences had exercised their power. Some of the women had teachers who smacked, bullied and called names and, in the women's experience, seemed to have too much power and authority. There was a general opinion that parents, at that time, did not challenge the teachers' behaviour.

Parental support

Most participants expressed the view that family support was not available to them during their early education. Some of them said they were angry when they thought about the fact that nobody sat with them to help with homework even though they would get slapped in school the next day for not having it correctly done. Those who were parents said that it was important to support children's education and that they wanted to encourage their own children in their education.

Community education

All the participants in the group who contributed to the discussion said that adult education which is community based is very supportive. Staff members are very understanding about childminding difficulties. They give praise and encouragement and treat participants with respect. All the participants in the focus group praised their current educational experiences in community edcuation and

described it as being very positive in comparison to their earlier educational experiences.

Overview of narratives and information from the focus group

The findings demonstrate that, according to the participants' stories and the information collected from the focus group, there is a relationship between social class and education but it is only one factor which impacts on education. A summary of the findings under the four themes which emerged as significant are presented below:

Social and cultural norms

Cultural and familial expectations were significant in Barbara's and Deirdre's situations as they both complied with what was expected of him within their social background. In other words, despite both of them being from a disadvantaged area, Deirdre was expected by her parents to sit her Leaving Certificate which is what she did. However, Barbara's parents did not object when she left school at thirteen years of age and she refers to the fact that there was considerable early school leaving in her area and that this was the 'norm'.

Both Anne and Colette acted against the expectations of their families. Colette acknowledges that she was expected to leave school before her Leaving Certificate although she went on to complete this examination. However, Anne's family, which she describes as middle class, tried to encourage her to stay on at school but she was anxious to leave and did so after her Intermediate Certificate.

The general consensus from the focus group was that they were not expected to stay within the education system which, in their experience was within the cultural and social norms of their area.

Conditions in the classroom: (a) the State

The differences identified between the quality of education in schools in different social class areas also emerged as having impact on education performance and attainment.One participant described how her son's 'middle class' school had 'all the technology' and children had one-to-one reading. However, it was also noted that there was a positive difference between DEIS schools and schools in middle class areas in terms of resources available for remedial purposes in DEIS schools. While some members of the focus group were in agreement with this, they also expressed concern about the impact of the current economic climate on these services.

Conditions in the classroom: (b) the teacher

The role of the teacher in the classroom emerged as significant in exercising power and authority over the children. Two participants identified a negative relationship with a teacher as being influential in their decision to leave education. Some members of the focus group recalled stories of bullying and name-calling by the teachers and, in their experience, teachers' behaviour impacted on the overall atmosphere in the classroom causing fear and anger for many of the participants in this study. It was noted in the focus group that most parents did not intervene in what went on in the classroom but that this was not unusual.

Parental support

All four participants noted that support and encouragement from parents played a significant role in school retention. They believed that parental involvement in their own education played a pivotal role in placing value on education. Anne described being 'pressurised' by her parents rather than being supported in her education. Barbara had no support or encouragement to stay on at school. Colette received support from her friends and their parents who encouraged her to do her Leaving Certificate and Deirdre had ongoing support from both her parents. Only Deirdre received the clear message from her home environment that education was worthwhile and valuable.

All members of the focus group felt that parental support was important in children's education. Most women in the group said that they did not receive parental support themselves but are conscious of giving it to their own children. One member described how she already talks to her young children about going to college as she wants them to be prepared and to know the importance of education.

Community education

There was a general consensus of opinion from all the individual participants and from the members of the focus group that community education is a very different experience to that of their early educational experiences. It is a very inclusive environment where everybody feels they have a voice and are able to contribute to class discussions. Participants are very supportive of each other and staff acknowledge the participants' individual life experiences. As adults they are choosing to be there whereas as children they felt forced to go to school.

Conclusion

This chapter has presented the findings of the study based on the transcripts of the interviews and the information collected from the focus group. They were then summarised and arranged in themes which emerged organically during the interviews and which related to the research question. The following chapter will present an analysis of the findings in the light of the review of the literature presented in Chapter Two. This analysis will be presented under the themes which emerged during the study.

CHAPTER 5: ANALYSIS OF FINDINGS

Introduction

As outlined in Chapter Two, according to Lynch and O'Riordan (1998), the structural functionalism paradigm assumes that individuals with reasonable intelligence who work hard can do well within the current Irish educational system. Chapter Two also referred to Marxists' theory which claims that structural inequalities exist based on social class position and favour those children from economically advantaged backgrounds. This study does not fully support the aforementioned paradigm or Marxists' theory, nor has it found that social class alone automatically determines one's educational outcomes. The literature review however, did reveal that there is an over-emphasis on social class in relation to inequality in education and while it is a key factor, nevertheless, this study identified several additional factors which influence and impact on educational achievements and are significant in determining life chances.

Initially, I set out to examine what the relationship was between social class and education. The participants in this study all left the education system at various levels with no aspirations at that time of further education. If ability and effort were all that were needed (meritocratic system) (Drudy & Lynch, 1993) and social class background had no bearing on the outcome, then I consider it worth exploring how these women present very different accounts of their journey through the education system. Their stories present a vivid selection of themes which required further investigation in order to establish if there is a significant relationship between social class and education.

The discussion which follows will outline and discuss the themes outlined in Chapter Four and which I identified as significant. I will develop our understanding of the links between social class and education by analysing the literature review in the context of the interviews. This analysis will establish the relationship which exists between the theoretical approaches to social class and education and the lived experiences of the participants in this study.

Social and cultural norms

Each participant highlighted social and cultural norms as a factor which impacted on their education. Barbara, who was from a disadvantaged area, never thought about staying on at school and did not receive any parental support to do so. She felt it was the 'norm' to leave school early and she followed this trend by leaving school at 13 years of age:

> ...I had only started second year when I left, with the intention of finishing school....and in my family and where I lived, people didn't go to college.

In the literature review I referred to the writings of Bourdieu (1986) who speaks about 'habitus'. This concept describes the everyday habitual practices of a social environment and these practices influence and impact the future education of individuals in society (1986). Barbara said all she knew in her local area was 'early school leaving, early pregnancy and unemployment' and this was representataive of the social environment in which she lived. She also said that in her area it was not the 'norm' to go to college. While her 'habitus' may have influenced and impacted her early educational experience as contended by Bourdieu, this theory is challenged later in this chapter by Barbara's experience in community education

which demonstrates that even though one's 'habitus' may influence and impact one's future education, nevertheless, it is possible for people to change when their social environment changes.

Barbara went on to tell of her ability to contribute to the household when she got her first job at 14 years of age. Her parents did not object to her going to work at such a young age. It is likely that they, like Barbara, accepted the situation as the 'social norm' at the time, given that no-one in their social circle continued their education up to examination level.

However, it is also likely that Barbara's contribution to the household income may have been a causal factor in her parents not objecting to her leaving school at such a young age. If this is the case, Barbara's actions would support Goldthorpe's (1996) theory which claims that inequality in education, can be explained by the action and interaction of certain individuals across social classes. He claims that working-class people make choices based on the assumed future costs and benefits of education and may believe that these costs are too high in relation to their income (Goldthorpe, 1996). They need to be sure of future gainful employment to justify the costs involved and are therefore making logical decisions based on the conditions which prevail for them at that time. Barbara's contribution to the household income may have been a welcome reprieve from her family's current financial position and this may have been the reason that Barbara's parents did not object to her early school-leaving. Therefore the financial situation which prevailed for them at that time dictated their decision and social class alone did not determine the choice they made.

In considering Barbara's situation, her early school-leaving could not be attributed exclusively to 'the social and cultural norm' or simply making a choice. If too much emphasis is placed on the choice of the individual, our attention will be directed from the economic factors which produce classed outcomes (Lynch & Moran, 2006). These factors impact significantly on the choices people make when considering education.

Even though there is now 'free' education, very little recognition is given to the hidden costs of education which continue to be prohibitive for many families. Many schools request donations from parents to supplement the already restricted funding from government sources although this is perceived by many as a 'compulsory' fee. All other expenses, including books, stationery and school trips, to name a few, are all funded by the children's parents. According to the Irish Constitution (1939, Article 42:1), the family is the 'primary and natural educator' of children and as such, parents are free to make choices regarding their children's education. This is reinforced by the United Nations (UN) Convention on Human Rights (Article 26) which states that

- (3) Parents have a prior right to choose the kind of education that shall be given to their children.

However, the choices they make are often dictated and restricted by their financial means and this brings us back to Goldthorpe's theory (1996). His theory does not account for state structures which impact on educational opportunities and decisions nor does it explore the social environmental factors which influence those choices. This study has identified that state structures play a significant role in education by being responsible for the employment of teachers, legislation

regarding education, costs in pursuing education, along with the obligation to facilitate parents in supporting their children's education. Therefore, it is the State who is ultimately responsible for the factors identified in this study which influence and impact on education.

Although Barbara acknowledged that she did what was the norm in her situation, Anne, on the other hand, acted in a way which was different even to her siblings, yet they both had similar educational experiences. Although all her siblings continued in education up to and including Leaving Certificate, Anne had no interest in staying in education after her Intermediate Certificate. While Anne's family may have had the economic resources to facilitate her in continuing her education, her poor relationship with a teacher and difficult home circumstances played a significant role in her decision to leave school after her Intermediate Certificate. In both cases, Barbara's and Anne's relationships with teachers seemed to be the dominant reason for their early school leaving, although economic factors may have been significant in Barbara's story.

Deirdre's account of her life in a disadvantaged area contrasts greatly to that of Barbara's. Deirdre enjoyed her early education and continued up to Leaving Certificate. It had not occurred to her not to do so as she was always encouraged by her parents to value education. Despite being reared in what was known as a disadvantaged area, she did not experience any struggle in staying on in education. She refers constantly to the fact that her parents were very supportive and encouraged her to stay on at school. This was a significant factor which instilled in her the value of education. She, therefore, did not succumb to what would have been the norm in her area and cites the support and encouragement from her

parents as being a significant factor in her staying in school until Leaving Certificate.

Having left school after Leaving Certificate, Deirdre began a secretarial course and got a job in a factory during the following summer. She was then able to contribute to the household income. Although she considered this to be very worthwhile, her mother had a different opinion:

> I went on and did a secretarial course. That summer, I got a job in a factory, and I told my mam I wasn't going back to do the secretarial course because I was getting all this money. It was the first time in my life that I had money in my pocket. So she reported me and got me fired, by telling them all I wasn't eighteen.I didn't speak to her for a long time but I did go back and do the secretarial course. It meant that the jobs I had were in offices as opposed to...(shop, factory).

> That was her giving me her best shot... it was big money because I was working nights... I couldn't understand her decision when I was handing her all this money... That was my parents; very much about giving us the best, even though they couldn't give us college.

Deirdre's experience leads us to reconsider the theory of Goldthorpe (1996) who claims that working-class people need to be sure of gainful employment in the future to justify the expenses involved in education. Deirdre's experience challenges Goldthorpe's theory and Deirdre says she later understood that her mother was looking at the 'bigger picture'. She was more interested in Deirdre acquiring skills which would enhance her chances of gainful employment in the future. This was in fact the case as she managed to stay in employment, mainly in office and administration work, until she was made redundant two years ago. She does acknowledge however, that at that time, it was not the 'norm' to go on to third level education and no-one in her family or social circle had done so. Clearly though, her early happy memories of school influenced her in her decision to

return to adult education at the first available opportunity and she did not hesitate in doing so.

Colette, who was also from a disadvantaged area, was of the opinion that her parents did not expect her to stay on at school. Her older siblings had left before Leaving Certificate and Colette was prepared to do the same in 5th year. She does not think that her social class was significant in causing her to think about leaving school before Leaving Certificate. She refers to difficulties within her family circle as being the main obstacle. However, it is interesting to note that she cites support from her friends and their parents as being instrumental in encouraging her to stay on until Leaving Certificate. Although it was the norm in her family to leave school early, and there was no encouragement from her parents to continue in education, the support from her friends and their parents was sufficient to help her overcome the doubts she had about continuing and without this support, she would have left the education system.

Analysis of information from the focus group

The focus group which comprised women from an English/Literacy class were in agreement regarding the influences of cultural and social background on education. One woman spoke about the 'social norms' of the time when women were expected just to marry and have children and men were seen as the breadwinners. This was the social norm of the 1960s and 1970s and was in keeping with the legislation of the time called the 'marriage bar' which prevented women from working once they got married. Because of this bar, parents often opted to get their sons educated rather than their daughters (unless their economic situation allowed both) to increase their chances of gainful employment. However, they expected

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their daughters' working lives to be shorter as women were not expected to stay in employment once they married and had children. It is clear from the discussion within the group that State structures brought about these situations, thus dictating the 'social and cultural norm' and this had a much more significant impact on these women's education than that of social class.

One woman spoke of leaving education at twelve years of age to work in a factory while her brothers were educated until they were eighteen years of age. While she resented this, she accepted it as being a social norm of the time. Another participant in the group made the comment that this was not the social norm for her as she was aware of women from farming backgrounds who were educated while their brothers left school at an early age to work on the farms. In sum, there was a general consensus of opinion that social and cultural norms which prevailed at the time had impacted on their levels of education. There was no expectation that they would continue in education at that time and consequently they have now returned to education.

It is clear from the findings of this study that social and cultural norms had some influence regarding the educational journeys of many women in the focus group and also that of Barbara. This is in keeping with Lynch's (2001) claim, outlined in Chapter Two that the socio-cultural system has a complex relationship with education. However, social and cultural norms were not significant for Anne, Colette and Deirdre. Anne's relationship with her teacher and the 'pressure', rather than support from her parents played a bigger role in her educational attainment. Colette was supported by her friends' parents to continue her education, while Deirdre acknowledges her parents' support as significant in her completing her education.

In reflecting on the theme of 'social and cultural' norms throughout this study, it has been identified that the role of the State, through legislation, emerges as a more significant factor than social class in its impact on education.

Conditions in the classroom: (a) the State

Drudy and Lynch (1993) have suggested that the use of the word 'disadvantage' (which is used to describe lower socio-economic areas) instead of social class inequalities in Government reports only serves to obscure the structural nature of educational inequality. All four participants interviewed for this study referred to the differences they noted in the quality of education between 'disadvantaged' and 'middle class' areas, although these differences were not of a negative nature in all four cases. They noted that there was inequality in the type of services offered to children in different social class. Anne had personal experience of these differences within her own family:

> One of them (sons) is in a school in (middle class area) which is a better area, and it's much better, it's amazing the difference. They have all the technology, and the parents are an awful lot more involved. Every child has one to one reading. The older children do one to one reading with the younger children. It's just completely different. The school my other son went to was...they got money from the government to give them breakfast when they come in, a disadvantaged school.

> The area you come from makes a big difference. I think it's extremely sad that the wealthier a child is, the better their education.

Barbara also expressed her frustration at what she perceived as the inequality in education which she noted within her own family circle:

> And even down to my children, the level of education they would get in comparison to their cousins in (middle class area). That frustrates me, that angers me. Why can't my children have the same education as their children?

Both Anne and Barbara have similar perceptions regarding the levels of quality of education in different social class areas. They share the opinion that the quality of education offered in middle-class schools is superior to that offered in DEIS schools and consider it to be further evidence of the fact that the education system favours those who are already economically advantaged.

However, Anne and Barbara's perceptions of DEIS schools contrasted with those of Colette and Deirdre who spoke of the 'advantages' of attending educational services in the DEIS schools. They were of the opinion that remedial services were more readily available in DEIS schools. Colette chose to send her son to a school outside the disadvantaged area in which she lives. However, she now regrets that decision as she is firmly of the opinion that her son would have fared better in a DEIS school.

> I decided to send my children (to school) outside of this area as I figured they'd get a better education. To be honest I'm sorry now. Alan was diagnosed with dyslexia after a few years but he didn't get as much help as he would've got in a DEIS school in this area. If I'd known that he had dyslexia I'd never have sent him outside cos (sic) I know there are better resources in the disadvantaged schools.

Deirdre also spoke of the benefits of pre-school in a disadvantaged area for her son.

> He's had minor speech problems but there is a speech therapist there. It's a fabulous service and I suppose if you look at the other side of the coin, if we had put him in somewhere more local, in (named middle class area), maybe he wouldn't have got that.

Deirdre refers here to the fact that her son is in an Early Start pre-school which is linked to a DEIS school. According to Smyth & McCoy (2009), there is a greater concentration of contact with external agencies, such as the Health Services

Executive (HSE) and it is they who provide the speech and language service in DEIS schools. This is not the case in pre-schools in middle-class areas which are privately owned and this situation refutes the argument that being 'middle-class' is an automatic advantage within the Irish education system.

Both Colette and Deirdre have very positive perceptions of services in DEIS schools. Their comments suggest that remedial services in middle-class schools are not as good as those in DEIS schools. This situation implies that social class does not automatically determine the services received in education. Clearly there are differences in services offered in different geographical areas but what is unclear is whether the level of need in disadvantaged areas is greater than those in other social class areas. Irrespective of that, it seems that the same level of remedial services are not available to both middle class and disadvantaged areas. In using the term 'disadvantage' the State implies that extra resources need to be provided to offset the 'disadvantage' in schools in these areas, yet no cognisance is given to the fact that it is the State which sets up these communities and therefore must be held responsible for the conditions which prevail in these disadvantaged communities.

Notwithstanding that fact, Colette and Deirdre referred to resources which are just some of the government-led measures to help alleviate the problems of disadvantage in schools (DES, 2005) and clearly they have had a positive impact on the provision of quality schooling. These measures also acknowledged the fact that disadvantage begins very early in children's lives. However, the cuts in funding which is presently underway because of the economic downturn does not auger well for these disadvantaged areas. The government has provided worthwhile services in these areas and it is unfortunate that because of the current

economic climate, funding for the DEIS model has been curtailed leaving schools less able to cope with targets which were agreed during better economic conditions. Considering the views of the participants regarding this subject, the government would do well to reconsider its decisions and prioritise funding measures in order to continue the services for children who are benefitting from these worthwhile services.

One participant, Deirdre, who completed her Leaving Certificate, had reservations about some of the attitudes portrayed in her school. She expressed the view that there was more attention paid to those who demonstrated the ability to achieve high grades.

> School is definitely geared towards the more academic students. I found there was a lot more work put into honours students. The classes were divided into honours and pass classes, then into the students who were expected to get As and Bs. It's a way of working with the different kids, but some can get left behind as well.

This system is referred to as 'streaming' where children of the same ability are kept together. However, a study commissioned by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) (2007) has shown that students left in a mixed-ability environment actually fare better. This NCCA study demonstrated that students in a 'slow stream' tend to reach the level expected of that stream whereas students in a 'fast' stream can, sometimes but not always, be tempted to settle into a comfort zone and often fail to strive forward and to challenge themselves. This system of 'streaming' supports the ideology known as essentialism within which, according to Drudy and Lynch (1993), educational participation and achievement is viewed in Ireland. This ideology focuses on the individual's basic intelligence and skills and implies that an individual's academic

performance reflects their inherent qualities. The system of 'streaming' reflects the significance attached to the capacity to do well at exams and effectively relieves teachers and policy makers of certain responsibilities as it is alleged that poor performance is attributed to a lack of intelligence.

It is unfortunate that there is such an emphasis on logical-mathematic and linguistic intelligences in our education system and that so little attention is given to more generic skills. The participants in this study have demonstrated that they are intelligent people. Many of them however, did not fare well at school, not because they were not intelligent, but because there were other factors at play which had significant impact. They have all demonstrated great courage in returning to the education system which some people would say had failed them. They are open to learning and willing to use their skills, life experience and knowledge to better serve their communities. Perhaps it is time for the government to introduce new ways of assessing students which would include assessment of generic skills. This would be a fairer system than the current one which focuses so much attention on logical-mathematic and linguistic intelligences and would be equally valuable in the workforce.

Conditions in the classroom: (b) the teacher

As outlined in Chapter Two, Lynch (2001) suggests that the socio-economic system has a complex relationship with education. However, she also refers to the political system as being equally complex in its relationship with education. This is often reflected in power-related issues power issues within the classroom context, involving teachers and students. This was a recurring theme in this study with two of the participants who told their stories. The theme again emerged during the

focus group with several group members recalling negative experiences within the classroom because of the role of the teacher.

Both Anne and Barbara experienced problems in the classroom which arose as a result of the power imbalance, real or perceived between teachers and students. These issues impacted on their choice to leave the education system. As young as eight years of age, Anne identified a negative relationship with a teacher as being instrumental in causing her to develop an intense dislike of school and she was eager to leave as soon as possible.

> I can't really remember when I started to hate it that much. . I know it was down to one teacher; we just didn't like each other. There was a clash of personalities there but I was only in third class at the time, I was very young. She didn't like me, and that was it for me then...

Barbara had similar experiences with teachers in her primary school.

> I know exactly why I hated school, it was the way I was made feel; that I was worthless, that I'd never amount to anything. I hated that. I got that feeling from the nuns. They used to parade me in front of the class, and say terrible things about me.

Many of the participants in the focus group also spoke of the treatment they received from teachers in their early education. They referred to bullying, name-calling and physical punishment (the latter was legal at the time) which greatly influenced their decisions to leave education. They felt that teachers had too much authority, that parents had very little voice in the matter and did not challenge the teachers' authority.

One woman in the focus group remarked that only a few decades ago, parents did not intervene in what went on in the classroom. There seemed to be a prevailing view at that time that teachers 'knew what was best' and as a result, teachers had the freedom to exercise excessive power and authority in the classroom. However,

this situation has changed somewhat and Anne referred to a recent situation in which she intervened on behalf of her daughter.

> The same thing happened to my daughter (bullying) with one teacher, and I went up and got it sorted because I said, she's not going to go through what I went through, because of a teacher mistreating her.

This was perhaps a different response to that which was tolerated by parents in the past. Since Anne returned to adult education, she has grown in self-confidence. The power imbalance which she experienced in her early education has now been eroded and she is more aware of her rights and obligations to her children. She referred to her current course where she is given a voice and allowed to speak her mind. She wants her children to enjoy their education and knows her support will help them with that. She is determined that her children's experience will be happier than hers and in this situation she did not hesitate in intervening on her daughter's behalf.

These situations within the classroom validate Gambetta's (1987) claim that it is difficult to separate structure from choice. He identifies 'conditions' as being one of three choices which shape and determine one's decisions and preferences. He contends that people are 'pushed' into making educational choices because of the conditions and circumstances in which they find themselves and therefore do not have free choice in choosing their educational pathways. The conditions which Barbara and Anne experienced, and which some members of the focus group described regarding their negative experiences with teachers, were not conducive to learning and affected them to such an extent that they no longer wished to continue with their education. They therefore made the choice to discontinue their education based on the atmosphere or conditions set by the teachers in the classroom.

Clearly, the government and policy makers must take some responsibility for allowing these conditions, as described by the participants, to exist in our schools and must also ensure that these conditions are not allowed to persist for the current school-going population. The following quotation by Barbara attributes the hatred she had for school to one particular teacher and it gives a poignant account of her feelings towards her early education.

> It was the way I was made feel, that I was worthless, that I'd never amount to anything. So I believed that, then and I never had any aspirations in school - didn't want to work or anything like that. I never thought I'd go to college. Even with jobs, I never held down a job. I went to and from jobs but never held on to them.

Although this is a sad indictment of our education system, thankfully it is in stark contrast to the accounts given by the participants regarding their current experiences in community education. For them, community education has provided an environment which is conducive to learning and is similar to the 'atmosphere' in the home environment and parental support which is essential in supporting children's education. This theme of parental support will be outlined in the following section.

Parental support

The findings in this study support those in the Report for the One Foundation, compiled by McKeown & Clark (2004), who found that parental expectations, parent-child interaction and home organisation which comprise the 'atmosphere' of the home are significant in impacting on a child's educational experiences. All the participants were in agreement with this and referred to the different levels of support in their own situations. Although there was pressure on her to stay on at

school there is implication from Anne that the level of parental support which she received, combined with addiction, was not strong enough to withstand her desire to leave school. Barbara had no parental support at all to continue in education and consequently left school at 13 years of age.

Deirdre who was also from a disadvantaged area had a very different educational experience. She has very happy memories of school. She had significant support from her parents who always encouraged good attendance and had a great value on education.

> You'd come in, you did your homework; you couldn't just take days off, your sickies would be questioned! We were always told it was important to go to school.

This leads us back to Bourdieu's 'habitus' theory which describes the everyday habitual practices of a social environment and one which he claims influences and impacts the future education of individuals in society (1986). In Deirdre's home it was normal practice to attend school and participate in school activities up to and including Leaving Certificate. It is likely that it was this 'habitus' that influenced and facilitated her in developing a love of education, thereby ensuring easier access to adult education. It is equally likely that it was also Barbara's 'habitus' or home environment which played a role in influencing her choice to leave education so early, given that there there was no discouragement offered when she made the choice to leave school at thirteen years of age. However, as has been demonstrated by this study, situations and circumstances can change, thereby refuting Bourdieu's claim that one's habitus automatically predicts one's future journey through life.

As previously outlined in Chapter Two, Bourdieu (1986) views education as a cultural site that plays a crucial role in the reproduction of class inequalities in society and one in which the dominant class will always win. He contends that those who come from a privileged background on entering the educational system will maintain that privileged position throughout the process, just as will those who are from a less privileged background. However, again, this study has demonstrated that one's background does not always determine one's educational journey. Deirdre may not have described her background as privileged as determined by Bourdieu, however, there was instilled in her a value on education as something to be respected and not treated lightly. However, although Anne was from a middle-class family, this did not automatically predict her educational journey as her relationship with a teacher and addiction within her family had a much greater impact. Colette did not experience support from her own family for her education but despite her background, she managed to complete her Leaving Certificate through the encouragement of her friends and their parents.

> I had a lot of family problems in my home. I wanted to leave school in fifth year, and very nearly did. My friends kept me there; there was a huge support system there, with two girls I was hanging around with. They had family support and I would have stayed at their house a lot. Their parents encouraged me to stay in school...

> ...Even though there was family stuff going on, I found that she (her mother) didn't encourage me to stay in school.

Colette was given the encouragement and confidence to believe that she could achieve more than was expected of her from her own parents. The lack of parental support was further identified as significant by the participants in the focus group who referred to the fact that they were not supported by their

parents to continue their education and therefore did not see the importance of continuing in education.

The White Paper on Early Education (1999) has clearly outlined that parents are the prime educators of their children and play the central educational role in providing the stimulation and care which is required to ensure their children's appropriate development. Children's socialisation skills and readiness to learn are developed, not only in the education system but also in the home environment (1999:9.1). The findings in this study support this fact and all the participants acknowledged that parental support played a significant role in their different levels of engagement with the education process. Although social class served as a backdrop to this analysis it is evident that it does not exclusively determine one's educational journey. The role of parental support is arguably one of the most important factors which impact on education. The participants in this study have already identified the importance of their own roles as parents in their children's education. All the participants expressed their determination to encourage their own children to pursue their education and want to be supportive and involved in the process. One woman in the focus group referred to the fact that she already talks to her children about going to college in order for them to aspire to this in the future. It is hoped that the government will also support their roles by prioritising appropriate services and providing required funding to ensure these support systems are in place.

Community education

Barbara compared her earlier experience of school to that which she is now experiencing in community education.

> In adult education it's a choice you're making yourself. You're not made to do anything, it's up to you to do it. And it's something you want to do, whereas in school you were forced to. You're treated with respect here. As a child you're just told what to do and you're given out to.

Colette described her adult education as 'non-judgemental'. Her first experience was in a community education centre as a young single mother. She was grateful for that as she had no family contact at that time.

> I got in touch with a young mothers' group when I found out this place existed, and they very kindly opened their doors to me, and were very willing to support me and my son to get back into education, with the childcare facilities, which were fabulous. I wouldn't be here today without that support.

Although she is now doing a masters degree, she acknowledges that it was the support she received in community education which helped her begin her journey into adult education and she gives credit to the facilities which were available to her there at that time.

Lynch and Baker (2005) have emphasised the importance of equality of condition in order that fair choices can be made regarding education. They posit that there must be respect and welcome for diversity rather than just tolerating it. Teachers and students must focus on the value of love, care and solidarity which is fundamental to mental and emotional well-being and development. It is interesting to note that two of the participants in this study attribute their early school-leaving to the classroom environment and the lack of respect which they experienced there from their teachers. They are of the opinion that their negative relationship with these teachers impacted on their feelings towards school and their desire to leave at at the earliest opportunity. They describe situations which were not conducive to learning and were in fact in very different to what they

were now experiencing in community education. These perceptions of inequality inspired them to undertake their current course in community development and have motivated them to aspire to tackling inequalities in society in the future. This concurs with Connolly's (2001) view that community education is liberating, and that women feel 'empowered, enabled and freer' (p.10) by their participation in it. Barbara says of her experience:

> For me, someone who had no aspirations, sometimes I think I'm a bit crazy, because I have these dreams about social change... Getting the whole country behind us, challenging inequality, and I would be aware of the structural inequalities, and marginalising disadvantaged areas. I had that awareness but didn't know how to name it.

Anne agrees with her comments:

> Like Barbara I'd be very angered about inequalities and injustices. I love it (her course), and I'm more angered because I understand it better. (I want to)...change the world!

Barbara also referred to her current plans for community development.

> I have big dreams, I know it's a long term process. I'm currently in the process of setting up a big community development group for the children of our estate, with two other ladies, which there is nothing for. It's starting off small but I'll get there. Me and Anne will have the whole of Ireland behind us!

Barbara's aspirations for the future are very encouraging. She has grown in confidence and her aspirations validate the principles of community education whereby those individuals who participate are both the 'subjects and the authors of the whole process' (Connolly, 2001, p. 10). Deirdre also has plans for the future, expressing her desire to 'work in the area of community development'. The findings from this study support those of Aontas' research (2011) which found that participants in community education exprience a range of outcomes, particularly those relating to personal development. Enhanced self-confidence

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and self-esteem are evident in the narratives of the participants, and for those who have been out of the education system, such as these women, community education, which is learner friendly, provides a welcome alternative to the difficult experiences of education which some of them had.

All four narrative accounts, along with the participants in the focus group, reported very positively on their experiences in adult and community education. It is encouraging to note that these findings concur with the findings in the recent Aontas research report titled 'More than just a Course' (AONTAS, 2011). The results of the study found that the Department of Education and Science (DES) community education provision is highly effective at promoting the personal development of learners and supporting them to continue with their education.   In a community setting, the learning process involves both group process and individual learning and is learner-centred. It is therefore an effective setting in which to develop generic skills, particularly for those adults who are early school-leavers.

This nurturing environment was also referred to by members of the focus group who spoke highly of the respect and recognition, the care and solidarity they are enjoying in community education. The tone of the classroom is set by the tutor and this is a very positive experience for them in comparison to their earlier experiences in education. These conditions are similar to those to which Lynch and Baker (2005) refer and they have captured the optimum conditions in which equality can be achieved in education. They maintain that these conditions are essential in order to overcome inequalities and that people feel accepted for who they are.   This sets the tone for an environment which is more conducive to

study and to learn. It is also worth noting that this environment is similar to the home environment which is recommended as a means to encourage and promote in children the confidence and stability which enables them to grow and learn and to blossom in their education (McKeown & Clark, 2004).

Conclusion

This chapter has discussed the themes outlined in Chapter Four and which I identified as significant in exploring the relationship between social class and education. The literature review was analysed in the context of the narratives and the information from the focus group. While social class is undoubtedly an important factor, the other factors are arguably as important in their impact on participation in education and this study has identified the State as a leading player in this situation. I will elaborate on this statement and draw conclusions and make recommendations in the following chapter.

CHAPTER 6: CONCLUSION

In this thesis I set out to examine the relationship between social class and engagement with education and to explore the possibility that other factors may impact on one's engagement with education. I was aware that education had an important role in socialising individuals and that education was a powerful force in changing people's lives which can then impact on the wider community. In reviewing the literature on education and social class it became apparent to me that inequality in education was a subject which was often under discussion and that government policy regarding inequality in education mainly focused on social class with special consideration given to designated 'disadvantaged areas'. I also noted that the theory of functionalism implies that all have equal opportunity and that a combination of ability and hard work will guarantee success. However, clearly, the situation is not that simplistic.

The role of the State

In this study, the State, through its interventions, emerged as a leading player in providing state structures which reinforce inequality at different levels of the education system. This was highlighted by the emergence of several factors. Firstly, the State was responsible for the enforcement of legislation in the past which prevented women from remaining in the workforce after marriage and this was acceptable as a 'social norm' up until the seventies. The State was also identified as being responsible for the employment of teachers, and this factor was significant in some of the narratives in this study. The negative experiences with teachers caused many to leave school before completing their basic education. The teacher is responsible for providing a school environment which

is happy and nurturing and conducive to learning and this study demonstrated that this does not happen in all cases.

By the removal of third-level fees in particular, the State has served the middle classes by allowing them to invest their finance in other educational resources, thus ensuring the attainment of high points in the Leaving Certificate examinations, and procurement of places in third-level institutions which is then more likely to lead to reinforcement of class inequalities. The current practice of state examinations in evaluating performance does not take into account the fact that many students do not have equality of opportunity in terms of choice of schools, access to study areas, grinds, private tuition and eductional resources and this in turn impacts on their level of participation in education. Neither does it consider the fact that within the Irish education system, credit for examination success is mainly focused on just two areas, linguistic and logical-mathematical intelligences with major emphasis on achieving sufficient points in these areas in the Leaving Certificate. This type of assessment further excludes those who cannot afford to send their children to private schools or pay for grinds or resources to get those extra points.

In spite of major government interventions to address the issue of social class inequalities, there has been a failure by the State to adequately recognise the ongoing disadvantages for many people in our society. The State through its interventions, has acknowledged these difficulties by implementing measures in DEIS schools to offset these difficulties by the provision of remedial services and other support systems. While these services are to be applauded, nevertheless, they are not available to all children who need them irrespective of social class.

This study has also demonstrated that although there is a strong relationship between social class and engagement with education, other significant factors emerged which are arguably more significant, one of these being the role of parental support in children's education.

Parental support

The role of parental and family support in facilitating children to have a positive regard for education emerged throughout the study as being a highly significant factor in impacting on levels of education. All the participants referred to this role in either a positive or negative way and the impact it had on their own education. Because of their own experiences, they are now aware of the significance of parental involvement in their children's education. They are conscious of ensuring that they play a positive role in their own children's education and are keen to instil in them a value on education. Some of the factors which influence parents in this regard may be their own negative experiences of education, possibly resulting in low value on education, low levels of literacy skills and ultimately lack of confidence.

The individual stories in this study are personal experiences of the education system at different levels. Each story is unique in that the individuals have created their world based on their experiences with significant people in their lives and how they have perceived those relationships. West and Merrill (2009) note that Rustin (2000) argues that the validity of individual cases depends on their potential to create understanding of how people make their worlds in communication with others, in different ways. I believe this to be particularly significant in family relationships and this study has highlighted the importance

of ensuring that family support is provided to give children the best possible life opportunities. It is worth recalling that in Chapter Two of this thesis I referred to the White Paper on Early Education (1999:9.3) which recommended the availability of, and access to, parenting courses which would be beneficial for parents in supporting their children's education. I also noted that the White Paper on Adult Education reinforces this recommendation by advocating the provision of parenting courses:

> building on existing provision for Adult Education and on courses run in the private sector and by community and umbrella groups (2000:61).

These needs have already been identified and it is important that government measures are put in place to ensure that funding is prioritised and made available in order that parents can be supported in their efforts to encourage their children in pursuing their education.

Community education

The participants in this study had left the education system with no aspirations for further education yet there came a point when each one returned to adult education albeit for different reasons and at different levels. All the participants were unanimous in their approval of their current experiences in community education. The benefits of these experiences emerged in their stories as they revealed how community education had acted as a transformative force which was motivating them to get involved in community development and to 'change the world' as one participant aptly described it. They are now empowered and enabled to challenge the inequality which they experienced during their lives and aspire to improving facilities and making positive changes within their own

community. These women are inspirational and have much to offer in terms of community development.

Currently there are major funding cuts nationwide and these have resulted in several community family support projects closing down, many of which were involved in direct pre-school service and also provided parenting support programmes. Other funding cuts have taken place in the provision of courses in community education, including literacy courses for adults and these cuts ultimately penalise those who are seeking to further their education having already been failed by the education system. Aontas (2011) aptly named their recent research report 'More than just a Course'. This report highlights the efficacy of community education in promoting the personal development of learners and supporting them to continue with their education. The findings of this study has further reinforced those of the Aontas report and this was clearly demonstrated in the narratives of the participants and the discussion in the focus group.

Recommendations

From the findings in this study, I make the following recommendations:

- Teachers, who are employed by the State, must be aware of the importance of their role in providing a classroom environment which is conducive to learning. The importance of open and honest communication between parents and teachers cannot be underestimated and parents can be helped in this regard by the provision of appropriate services which would help them to support their children's education.

- The State has responsibility for conditions in the classroom, such as choices of subjects, curricula and assessment procedures. In order to ensure a more equitable education system, consideration needs to be given to the possibility of different assessment procedures to facilitate all students, with less focus on the 'points system' and more focus on generic skills.

- The State is responsible for the provision of remedial services, and in order to provide equal opportunities to all children, these services should be available and accessible to all children who need them, regardless of their social class or geographical area.

- The government has a responsibility to support parents in their efforts to support their children's education by the provision of parenting courses and other family support services which would benefit families. These services could be provided through community education, which in many ways, for the participants of this study, serves as a substitute support system, replacing that of parental support which has been identified in this study as significant in supporting children's education.

- The government must reconsider its decisions to reduce funding for worthwhile services such as family support projects. These projects play a positive role and meet the needs of many children and families, thereby supporting not only individuals but communities at large.

- There needs to be further investment in community education for the betterment of communities. Notwithstanding the current financial crisis, this study has demonstrated the need to address the 'bigger picture' and to provide funding for ongoing training and development in community

education which will ultimately benefit those who wish to continue their educational journey, thereby fulfilling the principle of lifelong learning.

To conclude this study, I consider it fitting to quote Lynch & Lodge (2002: 195) who have written extensively on the subject of inequality in education. They maintain that social-class-related inequality in education is generated by economic injustice and therefore the solution to the problem cannot be found in just the area of education:

> If the response to inequality in education is focused on only one aspect of inequality, then social change will be very limited (Lynch & Lodge, 2002, p.195).

Summary of study

In this study I have drawn attention to the theoretical frameworks by which we gain an understanding of the education system, with particular emphasis on functionalism and Bourdieu's concepts of cultural capital and habitus. I referred to the writings of Gambetta and Goldthorpe's rational action theory (RAT) and Gardner's theory of multiple intelligences and have addressed these theories to the sociological approaches in an Irish context. Education was considered in the context of social class and the educational attainment of students from different socio-economic backgrounds was presented based on parental occupation. Chapter Three outlined the methodology and method used in this qualitative research in which I applied the 'triangulation of method'. This method included narratives, a focus group and an examination of the literature on social class and education. The findings, in the form of four narratives of the participants were presented, followed by the themes which emerged along with the information from the focus group. The fifth chapter was a themed analysis of the findings of

the research study, and was followed by the sixth chapter which was the conclusion of the study with recommendations.

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APPENDIX 1: LETTER TO COMMUNITY EDUCATION PROJECT

162 Castletown

Leixlip

Co. Kildare

1st December 2011

Mobile: 087 6302897

dolores.mcdermott@gmail.com

xxxxxxxxxx

The Manager

The xxxxxxxxxxxxxxx

xxxxxxx

xxxxxxx

Dear xxxxx

Thanks for taking the time to consider my request to engage with staff and participants in your project. As discussed on the phone this is to facilitate research for my thesis on the role of social class background and its relationship with education.

I have outlined further information for your consideration which I hope will be useful. In carrying out my research I would like to conduct a focus group with participants from the xxxxxxxxxxx or surrounding areas who are currently engaged in adult education. I am interested in getting their perspectives on the following issues which may have impacted on their level of participation in adult education:

- Social class
- Early school leaving
- Literacy issues
- Financial issues
- Childcare
- Their expectation regarding for their children's education

I would also like to have individual interviews with students who have been in adult education in xxxxxxxxx It would be useful to get their perspectives on the above issues and also on recent trends in adult education to ascertain if there have been changes in the issues arising for mature students presenting at your project.

Should you require any further information please do not hesitate to contact me. Many thanks for your help and I look forward to hearing from you.

Yours sincerely

Dolores McDermott

APPENDIX 2: CONSENT FORM

Participant Consent Form

Social class and education: the relationship between social class and engagement

with education

Thank you for taking the time to participate in this study. If during your participation you feel the information and guidelines that you were given have been neglected or disregarded in any way, or if you are unhappy about the process please contact the Secretary of the National University of Ireland, Maynooth Ethics Committee at research.ethics@nuim.ie. Please be assured that your concerns will be dealt with in a sensitive manner.

I have read the information letter provided and I am happy to participate in this study. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time without explanation.

Signature: _____

Date: _____

Researcher: Dolores McDermott

Contact details: dolores.mcdermott2011@nuim.ie   Phone: 087 6302897

Supervisor: Brian Sheridan

Contact details: brian.sheridan@nuim.ie

APPENDIX 3: INFORMATION LETTER

Information Letter

National University of Ireland

Maynooth   1st February
2012

Dear Student

I am a student in NUI Maynooth doing an MEd in Adult and Community Education. I am in the process of conducting a research study entitled: *Social Class and Education: the relationship between social class and levels of engagement in adult education.* This study will form part of a thesis required to complete my studies and is intended solely for that purpose.

As part of this project I am seeking permission to collect data from participants attending xxx xxxxxx in xxxxxxxxx. I have worked in this locality for the last fourteen years and am familiar with the excellent work taking place in this project.

I am particularly interested in speaking to those who were educated in the xxxxxx area and have now returned to adult education. I would like to conduct a small focus group (4-5) among participants on the BA Degree in Leadership and Community Development course which would have a narrative approach in that each member would have opportunity to tell their story. I would also like to conduct a focus group (8-10) among participants on the Literacy/English course. This group would be more interactive and would not necessarily comprise personal stories, but hopefully would be more interactive and would answer semi-structured questions regarding attitudes, opinions, perceptions and ideas on education and adult education in particular. Early educational experiences and barriers to adult

education which you may have encountered will also be addressed. Both groups will be recorded and will take about an hour and a half to complete.

Confidentiality of Data:

Every effort will be made to ensure confidentiality of the data although confidentiality cannot be guaranteed from other group members. You may refuse to answer any questions, without explanation, if so desired. All information will be securely stored until the research is completed in June of this year, assessed by examiners and will then be destroyed. The data collected will be available to me, my college/supervisor and/or the appropriate academic body who will assess the final research. A copy of the study will also be made available to the manager of xxxxxxxxx. The transcript of the data can be accessed by you if required. I can be contacted by phone or email if any other information is required prior to the research taking place. You are free to withdraw from the study at any time or withdraw your data up until the work is published. The focus group/interviews do not constitute any kind of counselling although debriefing can be provided if required after the process and will be discussed then.

Thank you for taking the time to read this information letter.

Yours faithfully

Dolores McDermott
Email: dolores.mcdermott2011@nuim.ie
Mobile: 087 6302897