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ABSTRACT

This paper investigates the impact of a widening participation outreach intervention on the *future goals and aspirations* of Irish second-level students attending schools in areas experiencing educational disadvantage. The paper uses data gathered in 2019 and 2022, from an Irish, large-scale, longitudinal study ($N = 3697$) of widening participation with second-level schools ($N = 19$) located within areas where progression to higher education is low. The paper utilises Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems model to assess the influence of the outreach programmes on students' future goals and aspirations. Findings show that even when controlling for a variety of individual characteristics, participating in a school-university outreach programme was associated with students having higher future goals and aspirations. In particular, students who engaged in a mentoring programme and multiple college information activities were significantly more likely to have higher scores.

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Introduction

It is widely acknowledged that inequality in higher education is an important yet complex and multi-faceted problem (Piketty 2021). Research involving students from lower socio-economic backgrounds clearly indicates that educational inequity exists at post-secondary level, with students more likely to face barriers in both accessing and progressing through higher education, compared with their more affluent peers (Burney and Beilke 2008; Engle 2011). However, barriers to educational progression often stem from earlier contextual and educational experiences that can leave parents and students marginalised. Even when controlling for attainment, social class continues to predict psycho-social and academic attainment at second (Crawford and Greaves 2015) and third level (Bathmaker et al. 2016; Walkerdine 2021). Barriers to education frequently stem from earlier life experiences that have marginalized both parents and students. These challenges may include financial difficulties, a lack of accessible information, inadequate guidance, and limited access to mentors who share similar backgrounds or experiences (Sanderson and Spacey, 2020; Hoxby & Turner, 201, 3; Smyth and Banks 2012; McCoy et al. 2014). Consequences of this kind of disenfranchisement have been

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shown to contribute to lower academic achievement, low levels of parental support, difficult student-teacher relationships, high rates of early school leaving, and negative perceptions of higher education (Bray et al. 2021; Byrne and Smyth 2010; Chowdry et al. 2013; Keane 2016).

Across the EU and Ireland, various initiatives have sought to expand access to higher education for students from low socio-economic backgrounds (Guerin 2014; Keane 2013). Guerin (2014) describes these initiatives as efforts to counterbalance the overrepresentation of wealthier students in universities. They target students at different stages: pre-entry (in primary or secondary school), entry (preparing students for the application process academically or by providing information and guidance), and post-entry (supporting students in adapting to university life personally, academically, and socially) (Ferrier, Heagney, and Foong Lee 2010). Some initiatives focus on community-based outreach, while others establish links between schools and higher education institutions (such as this study) (Osborne 2003). In their systematic review of widening participation (WP) outreach programmes with secondary school students, Ní Chorcóra, Bray, and Banks (2023) highlighted the need for studies with larger sample sizes, longitudinal studies, and more detail on the demographics of participants in order to assess the impact of the programmes across different groups over time. The data used in this paper is from an Irish, large-scale, longitudinal study of WP with second-level schools who are linked with Trinity Access Programmes (TAP), Trinity College Dublin (which is described in detail by Tangney and colleagues (2021) and Bray, Tangney et al. (2021)). This paper examines the extent to which students' *future goals and aspirations* are influenced by contextual variables (gender, ethnicity, school-type, parental education, etc). It explores whether and how external interventions provided by the WP programme have an impact once such contextual influences are considered. More specifically, the paper addresses the following overarching and subsidiary research questions:

- What influence does participation in the Trinity Access Programme schools outreach programme impact on participating second-level students' *future goals and aspirations*?
- Are there contextual factors that influence the extent to which student *future goals and aspirations* are impacted by the outreach programme?
- Are students' levels of *future goals and aspirations* sustained over their time in secondary school?

By examining these questions, this study aims to deepen our understanding of the potential impact of WP outreach programmes such as Trinity Access Programme schools outreach programme particularly when taking into consideration some of the many contextual factors at play. Ultimately, we hope to provide information to support policymakers and practitioners in making decisions about targeted outreach programmes as well as to guide research and policy and drive change in the area of widening participation.

Policy context

Universal recognition of the issue of educational disadvantage is evident within the international policy context. The United Nations (UN) sustainable development goal number

four (SDG4) aims to ‘ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote life-long learning opportunities for all’ (UN 2024). Specifically, target 4.5 focuses on the fact that all individuals should have equal opportunity to enjoy education of high quality, achieve at equal levels and enjoy equal benefits from education. In Europe, since the turn of the twenty-first century, more emphasis has been placed on the areas of access, widening participation and inclusion in higher education by policy makers, academics and the public in general. Equity in education has been given its place at the policy table through initiatives from the European Commission as well as those driven by the Bologna Process. Since the early twenty-first century, the European Commission and the Bologna Process have played a key role in promoting equity, inclusion, and widening participation in higher education. The Bologna Process, launched in 1999, aims to create a more compatible and competitive European higher education system, with recent efforts focusing on social inclusion through the Bologna Follow-up Group (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice 2022). Despite progress, the 2022 Eurydice report highlights ongoing structural barriers to participation for disadvantaged groups, with Ireland ranking 24th out of 38 member states in implementing EU equity policies, signalling the need for further improvement (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice 2022).

The significant underrepresentation of people from low socio-economic backgrounds in higher education in Ireland has been placed squarely at the front of the Irish government’s higher education agenda. The National Access Plan outlines students from low socio-economic areas and those attending *DEIS* schools as a priority for access to and participation in higher education (HEA 2022). The Irish government introduced the *Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools* (DEIS) scheme in 2015 to address educational disadvantage. It operates as a policy of positive discrimination, providing additional funding to schools with a high proportion of students from low socioeconomic status (SES) backgrounds (Fenwick, Kinsella, and Harford 2022, p. 515).

Schools are identified for DEIS support using a deprivation index (Haase and Pratschke 2017), which calculates scores based on factors like employment status, education levels, single-parent households, overcrowding, and dependency rates. This index relies on Small Area (SA) mapping developed by the Ordnance Survey of Ireland (OSI) and the Central Statistics Office (CSO) (2016). Schools with lower deprivation scores receive extra funding and resources which aims to help break cycles of disadvantage (DES 2005; Weir and Kavanagh 2018).

The most recent data from the Higher Education Authority, notes that just 10% of students in higher education come from disadvantaged backgrounds (HEA 2022). Furthermore, only 1% of Travellers have a third-level qualification compared to 55% of the general population. The latest National Access Plan (2022-2028) identifies students who are socioeconomically disadvantaged as well as members of the Irish Traveller and Roma communities as some of the main groups that are marginalised in higher education. Some of the key performance indicators highlighted by the National Access Plan include access and participation for students attending a DEIS school as well as progression and completion among this priority group. The evidence-based plan emphasises the importance of early intervention, creating a sense of belonging in education as well as instilling a culture of high aspirations in schools (HEA 2023).

Factors influencing student progression

This paper interrogates the development of goals and aspirations among second level students attending schools in areas experiencing high levels of educational disadvantage. In this section, factors influencing student progression are explored.

Future goals and aspirations

The idea of raising aspirations with a view to increasing progression to further and higher education is commonly used within widening access and participation policy and research (Guerin 2014; HEA 2023; Sanderson and Spacey 2020), however there are some conflicting findings and opinions around educational aspirations. Guerin (2014) mentions in her review of EU policy in the area that, although the evidence varies and appears weak, the assumption that students and their parents from poorer backgrounds have lower aspirations may be incorrect. Research in the UK indicates that many students from poorer backgrounds do have high aspirations and do want to go to university but are less likely to attend university and more likely to instead to go on to obtain managerial or skilled jobs (Goodman and Gregg 2010; Kintrea, St Clair, and Houston 2011). This could be explained by a disconnect between aspirations (what we hope for) and expectations (what we think will happen). Harrison and Waller (2018) challenge the discourses of aspiration and the provision of ‘aspiration-raising’ activities to promote higher education. Instead, the authors use the lens of ‘possible selves’ (Markus and Nurius 1986). This theory differentiates between what students would like-to-be and their probable future selves, the latter being grounded in expectations rather than merely aspirations. Khattab (2015) estimates that 25% of young people have high aspirations but low expectations, and that these discrepancies are most prevalent among lower socioeconomic groups (Boxer et al. 2011).

In Ireland, research shows social class differences in relation to aspirations to attend higher education are evident as early as junior cycle years (~13 years old) (Smyth et al. 2006, 2008). More recent Growing up in Ireland findings have shown that having high aspirations and goals are important for achieving academic resilience (even when levels of maths and literacy are controlled for) (Kong 2020). Other studies in Ireland have shown that schools, teachers and guidance counsellors that promote a culture of high expectations and support in promoting successful post-school transitions for second-level students are especially important for marginalised students (Smyth and Banks 2012; Smyth et al. 2014).

It is vital that researchers and practitioners highlight that lower HE participation rates or lower aspirations of students is a result of major structural inequalities as opposed to any personal failing of the individual (Campbell and McKendrick 2017). There are real risks and concerns associated with attending higher education, and these issues need to be addressed to allow students to make an informed choice about post-school education. Baker and colleagues (2014) suggest that students may aspire to go to university but may have realistic expectations about the challenges they face, but little guidance or a lack of role models to help them to overcome those challenges (Baker et al. 2014). The WP intervention being investigated in this paper looks to support students by providing that guidance and student mentoring.

Fraysier, Rechly, and Appleton's study (2020) investigated a variety of student engagement measures and their influence on students' postsecondary enrolment. Findings indicated that secondary school student engagement does predict postsecondary enrolment and persistence above and beyond academic and behavioural variables. Furthermore, as is consistent with research among secondary students, the *Future Goals and Aspirations Scale* of the Student Engagement Instrument (Appleton et al. 2006) was the strongest engagement predictor. This instrument (*Future Goals and Aspirations Scale*: Appleton et al. 2006) was used as part of the survey conducted with adolescents in this research paper. This paper investigates the extent to which the WP outreach programme has an influence on students' future goals and aspirations over and above a series of other characteristics in line with Bronfenbrenner's Process, Person, Context and Time (PPCT) framework, which is described below. The measure assesses students' self-reported ideas about their educational future. It incorporates students' attitudes towards their education, their future goals, as well as their intentions and plans to continue their education after secondary school (see materials section for details of measure).

Parental education

Research has shown that education level is strongly predicted by maternal education, with those whose mother had obtained a third level degree significantly more likely to gain a third level degree themselves (Smyth and McCoy 2009). Longitudinal findings that looked at data from over 5000 young people in Ireland over ten years found that there were high levels of HE participation (86%) among those whose parents had high levels of education themselves, compared with those who had the lowest educational level (48%) (O'Mahony et al. 2022). Research has shown that over time the influence of parent's educational status decreases, however, the impact of the mother's education status on young people's educational attainment is substantive (Korupp, Ganzeboom, and Van Der Lippe 2002). This may be related to the value that is placed on education in the home, as well as the kinds of conversations that may occur in homes in which a parent has attended university and where it is not seen as something alien (Smyth and Banks 2012).

Gender and Ethnicity

In Ireland, research has shown that HE participation rates for males in disadvantaged areas are lower than those of females from similar contexts (HEA 2022). Similarly, longitudinal research in the United Kingdom (UK), showed that females were significantly more likely to attend university than their male peers, although males are more likely to attend selective or prestigious institutions (Crawford and Greaves 2015).

In the UK, participation for ethnic minorities has seen a more rapid increase in recent years compared to their White British peers, with those from minority backgrounds now significantly more likely than White British pupils to attend university (Crawford and Greaves 2015). Even after accounting for socio economic background and prior attainment, students from all ethnic minority groups are, on average, more likely to go to university than their White British peers. Crawford and Greaves (2015) discuss how aspirations may play a role in the remaining differences in university participation by

ethnic background however, they did not have the data at their disposal. This study aims to investigate differences according to gender and ethnicity within the Irish context, and to explore the interplay between these variables and students' *future goals and aspirations*.

Widening participation interventions

Across the EU, various initiatives have been implemented in an attempt to help increase access to higher education for students from low socio-economic backgrounds. Guerin (2014) describes these initiatives as being designed to counterbalance the overrepresentation of wealthier students in universities. Some universities focusing on outreach provision have created links between schools and higher education institutions or have provided community-based outreach (Osborne 2003). Outreach interventions can include guidance, mentoring, financial supports, multi-dimensional activities, and providing college information, advice and guidance (IAG) (Ní Chorcóra, Bray, and Banks 2023; Robinson and Salvestrini 2020; See et al. 2012; Torgerson et al. 2014).

A systematic review of widening participation outreach programmes for second level students found that 'multi-dimensional' activities were particularly beneficial for students, resulting in positive impacts on students' college readiness and progression to college (Ní Chorcóra, Bray, and Banks 2023). The systematic review explored literature published in the last decade. However, despite increased funding for widening participation programmes in recent years (European Commission/ EACEA/ Eurydice 2022; HEA 2022), the review identified just 19 studies that quantitatively evaluated the impact of such programmes, five of which were conducted in Europe (Italy, Germany and the UK); none were conducted in Ireland. Furthermore, the systematic review highlighted the need for studies with larger sample sizes, longitudinal studies, and more detail on the demographics of participants in order to assess the impact of the programmes across different groups over time (Ní Chorcóra, Bray, and Banks 2023).

This study aims to address this gap by investigating the impact of two aspects of a multi-dimensional project that is trying to support students in areas that are traditionally underrepresented in higher education, within a system that does not work for them.

WP outreach programme and context

The TAP schools outreach programme aims to support secondary students by informing them about college courses, providing college taster days, guidance, campus tours, and mentoring programmes (Tangney et al. 2021). The outreach programmes engage directly with secondary school students (in Ireland secondary school runs from 1st to 6th year, with students aged ~12-18), as well as indirectly with students through their schools and teachers. These programmes take place either on the College campus, in school or in the local community. The WP programme's approach consists of three core practices: Pathways activities, Mentoring and Leadership in Learning. A detailed overview of the outreach interventions and overall research project can be found in Tangney and colleagues (2021) and Bray, Hannon, and Tangney (2022). This study looks at the impact of two of the core practices – mentoring and pathways activities – and explores whether and how they influence students' *future goals and aspirations*, particularly when accounting for contextual factors as outlined above.

Pathways activities

Pathways activities are an outreach initiative aimed at supporting students' exploration of post-secondary options by providing them with information, advice and guidance (IAG). Research suggests that IAG activities can be particularly effective as WP initiatives (Hannon, Faas, and O'Sullivan 2017; TASO 2020). Campbell and McKendrick (2017) suggest that sustained interventions were perceived to be impactful by participants as they increased awareness of university life. Robinson and Salvestrini's review (2020) also found that tailored IAG which starts early in secondary school can be particularly effective.

Pathways activities include, for example, projects relating to college/courses choices, mock college applications, subject area taster programmes, college campus visits, careers fairs, talks by professionals, and workplace visits. Within the TAP schools outreach programme, students from 1st to 6th year are provided with opportunities to engage in activities that promote college-going. These activities aim to promote college in an inclusive way so that students from diverse backgrounds are encouraged to consider college as an option for them.

Mentoring

The Mentoring core practice involves various types of mentoring programmes, designed to foster academic and personal growth among all students. These include college-focused mentoring, peer-to-peer mentoring, and career-focused mentoring. Mentoring aims to provide students with a supportive relationship with a more experienced individual who can serve as a role model. The WP literature describes the positive impact of mentoring for widening participation (Reilly 2024; Robinson and Salvestrini 2020; Torgerson et al. 2014).

The mentors in this study were either teachers, past pupils, university students or older pupils in the school mentoring younger pupils. This paper investigates whether having a mentor has any impact on students' future goals and educational aspirations.

Methodology

Context and participants

TAP aims to support students to enhance their cultural and social capital through various pathways and mentoring outreach activities, the overall aim of which is to equip students with the essential knowledge and skills they require to make informed decisions about their progression from school into further and higher education.

Schools in Ireland that are identified as catering largely for students from low socioeconomic status (SES) backgrounds (lower deprivation scores) are allocated additional funding and resources to support them in breaking down barriers and eradicating inter-generational disadvantage (DES 2015; Weir and Kavanagh 2018). Schools that are allocated this funding become part of the Delivering Equality of opportunity In Schools (DEIS) schools' scheme (DES 2005). This study uses data generated from 3697 students from 19 secondary schools in the greater Dublin area in Ireland that are linked to the TAP widening participation programme. While not all of the schools

have official DEIS status, all of them have been identified as having catchment areas where progression to higher education is low. The DEIS (N = 2266) and non-DEIS (N = 1431) classification is however considered as a contextual variable in this research.

Students in the university linked schools who had provided parental and personal consent, were asked complete a survey annually, at the end of each school year (April – May), as part of a major longitudinal educational initiative in Ireland (Tangney et al. 2021). The full questionnaire, its measures and their scoring can be found in (Tangney et al. 2021). This study provides an in-depth exploration of data generated in 2022. A unique, longitudinal perspective is added by exploring change over time in the *future goals and educational aspirations* variable, with a subset of these students for whom data were also collected in 2019. Ethical approval was granted by School of Education, Trinity College Dublin.

Materials

This study uses students' self-reported *future goals and aspirations* as the dependent or outcome variable. Measurement of participation in the outreach interventions (mentoring and Pathways activities) are the independent variables. A series of other demographic variables are used as contextual independent variables. A breakdown of each measure and their values are listed below (Table 1).

Students were asked about whether they participated in a mentoring programme and if so, what type of mentor they had. They were also asked to select all the Pathways activities they participated in in the last school year (if any). Not all students in the school

Table 1. Materials.

Name	Measure	Variable
Future Goals and Educational aspirations (Appleton et al. 2006)	Five-point Likert scale; strongly disagree to strongly agree (1-5). My education will create many future opportunities for me; School is important for achieving my future goals; I plan to continue my education following school; Going to college after school is important; I am hopeful about my future.	Dependent
Ethnicity (CSO 2016)	What is your ethnic or cultural background? White or white Irish; Irish traveller or Roma community; Black or Black Irish; Asian or Asian Irish; Indian/ Pakistani / Bangladeshi / Irish; Other; Unknown.	Independent
Parental Support (The Economic and Social Research Institute)	This academic year, how often have your parent(s)/ guardian(s): Checked that you've done your homework; Discussed how you are getting on in school; Discussed how you did in tests or exams; Discussed post-secondary school options with you? Five-point Likert scale Never or hardly ever (1), a few times (2), about once a month (3), several times a month (4), several times a week (5).	Independent
Gender	Male/ Female / Prefer not to say	Independent
Year group	1st to 6 th year	Independent
Mother's Education Level	Does your mother have a university degree? (Yes/ No)	Independent
School Type	DEIS/ Non-DEIS School	Independent
Mentoring Programme	In the last academic year, did you take part in a mentoring programme? (Yes/ No)	Independent
Pathways Activities	In the last academic year, did you participate in any of the following pathways activities? (Yes/No) (College fairs, campus tours, careers fairs/ talks, workplace visits, college finance workshops, college admissions clinics, talk by an expert, talk by a college student, other).	Independent

participated in every programme. Some volunteered and some were chosen by teachers or school management as they were identified as children who may benefit or were at risk of disengagement. To identify students who had been exposed to prolonged and consistent interactions, a new variable was created that differentiated between students who had done three or more Pathways activities and those who had done less than three activities, in the last school year.

In order to provide some contextual data, students were asked to provide information relating to ethnicity, parental support, and mothers' education. Given that personal questions of this kind could be perceived as sensitive and could thus potentially skew subsequent responses negatively for students who may feel 'less' than others (Hoff and Pandey 2004), they were positioned at the end of the survey.

Bronfenbrenner's ecological theory of development

Many researchers studying underrepresentation in higher education focus on consequences resulting from a single setting in which the student interacts (e.g. home, school). However, less attention is given to the nested network of interactions between multiple environments that play a role in underrepresentation in tertiary education. To frame this research in such a way as to make sense of the myriad influences that interact within the context of any individual, this study makes use of Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Theory of Development.

Bronfenbrenner's theory provides a broad ecological model that allows researchers to make sense of other theories within sociology, psychology and education. Bronfenbrenner's model recognises that, in reality, children do not exist in compartmentalised worlds for ease of research. Bronfenbrenner's (1979) bio-ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner 2005; Bronfenbrenner and Morris 2006) illustrates how the developing child is embedded within a series of environmental systems and societal structures that interact with each other and with the child to influence development (Shaffer and Kipp 2014). Neal and Neal (2013) have argued that the idea of nested systems in the earlier version of Bronfenbrenner's theory (1979) places too much emphasis on the individual, however this paper is based on Bronfenbrenner's more recent work (Bronfenbrenner 2005; Bronfenbrenner and Morris 2006) that focuses more on proximal processes and the interinfluence between systems. This theory takes into account the proximal processes in a young person's environment as well as the structural inequalities within society that are beyond the control of the individual themselves.

The holistic perspective provided by this ecological model, with its focus on proximal processes influencing developmental outcomes, as well as the environment(s) and social structures in which development occurs, offers a powerful theoretical lens for understanding how students from low SES households make decisions about college and evaluating whether widening participation programmes can support students in making these decisions. In this way, Bronfenbrenner's ecological model focuses on the environmental systems within development, which enables researchers to consider many different factors (Hayes, O'Toole, and Halpenny 2022).

Bronfenbrenner's theory also describes how young people are nested in multiple environments through a larger ecology consisting of the *person, place, context*, and *time* (PPCT model). The young person interacts with their school (place), which is

influenced by their parents' educational involvement and school university partnerships (context) and ultimately by dominant ideologies and political environment (time) (Tudge et al. 2009; Tudge et al. 2009). The PPCT model reflects Bronfenbrenner's paradigms of the microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem and chronosystem (Tudge et al. 2009).

Operationalising bronfenbrenner's model

Tudge and colleagues (2009) have highlighted the importance of fully utilising and operationalising all aspects of the bioecological model when conducting research. This study uses Bronfenbrenner's updated theories (Bronfenbrenner 2005; Bronfenbrenner and Morris 2006) by utilising the PPCT model to account for the many levels of influence a young persons' environment and interactions has on their educational *future goals and educational aspirations*. Operationalisation of the PPCT model for this study is outlined in Table 2.

By using Bronfenbrenner's model as an evaluative lens for the TAP outreach project, this study focuses on the student at the centre. Bronfenbrenner's theory describes how young people are nested in multiple environments (micro, meso, exo, macro, chronosystems) through a larger ecology consisting of the person, place, context, and time (PPCT). For the purposes of this study, the post-primary student has personal characteristics such as gender and ethnicity (person) and they interact with widening participation programmes (processes) within the school (place). Other societal and contextual variables such as parental level of education, school university partnerships, cultural norms and values (context) can also have an impact on students as well as dominant ideologies, political environments and personal and historical time (time).

Using the PPCT model, this study considers the young person themselves; not just their demographics but their perception of themselves in relation to education and university, as conceptualised through their *future goals and educational aspirations*. When considering the context, it is important to explore what it is about the environment (school, home) that enables or inhibits educational *future goals and educational aspirations*. This analysis therefore explores demographic factors that influence these constructs (PPCT variables), as well as what it is about the TAP outreach initiatives (proximal processes) that help students to progress (if at all).

Consideration of time (personal and historical) is a highly important, aspect of Bronfenbrenner's model. This study investigates whether a student's year group (personal time) influences their self-reported *future goals and educational aspirations* by

Table 2. Operationalising Bronfenbrenner's Model.

PPCT Model	Ecosystem	Variables
Person	Microsystem – the individual	Gender, ethnicity, self-reported <i>future goals and educational aspirations</i>
Context	Meso, Exo and Macrosystems.	Mother's education level, DEIS/ Non-DEIS School, parental support.
Time	Chronosystem: Personal and historical time.	Year group, 2019–2022 (pre and post Covid pandemic).
Proximal Processes:	Micro and mesosystems	Engagement with mentoring programme, engagement with pathways activities, parental support with education.

comparing mean scores across year groups (1st – 6th). A particular strength of this research is provided by a longitudinal perspective (historical time) on the development of these constructs, as data were collected from a sample of students in 2019 (pre-covid pandemic) and again in 2022 (post-pandemic). This study therefore provides a unique view on the extent to which *future goals and educational aspirations* are sustained over time (Table 2).

Data analysis

Students' mean scores on the *future goals and educational aspirations* measure were compared between groups related to the Person, Place, Context, and Time variables (Table 1). These included comparing scores by gender and ethnicity (Person), school type (Place), mothers' education level (Context), and year group (Personal Time). In order to achieve this, two types of statistical tests were used. Independent samples *t*-tests were conducted where the independent variables were binary (Gender, School type and mother's education level), and a one-way ANOVA was conducted to look at group differences between year groups and ethnicities. Games Howell post-hoc analyses were used to investigate group differences as variances between group were not equal (See Table 2).

The proximal processes that were investigated were represented by variables relating to students' self-reported engagement with a mentoring programme and their involvement with pathways activities as part of the TAP widening participation programme. A multiple hierarchical regression was conducted, which investigated the influence of these proximal processes on students' *future goals and educational aspirations*, while controlling for the PPCT variables.

In order to investigate the development of *goals and educational aspirations* over time using a longitudinal sample, *goals and educational aspirations* was investigated using a paired samples *t*-test. Student surveys collected at the end of the school year in 2019 were matched with student survey data collected at the same time of year in 2022. The total number of matched surveys was 776.

Results

This section of the paper will present the results of the analyses described in the previous section. Firstly, between group differences will be explored in relation to students' *future goals and educational aspirations*. The influence of the PPCT variables on *future goals and educational aspirations* as well as the impact of the proximal processes of Pathways activities and mentoring, while controlling for the PPCT variables, will then be presented. Finally, a longitudinal view of a sample of students' *future goals and educational aspirations* scores will be discussed.

Between group comparisons according to PPCT variables

This section highlights any between group differences that emerged through the initial analyses. It aims to answer RQ 1: Are there group differences between students' *future goals and aspirations*?

Person (Gender and ethnicity)

An independent-samples t-test was run to determine if there were differences between males and females in relation to their *future goals and educational aspirations*. There were no outliers in the data, as assessed by inspection of a boxplot. Engagement scores for each level of gender were normally distributed, as assessed by Shapiro-Wilk's test ($p > .05$), and there was homogeneity of variances, as assessed by Levene's test for equality of variances ($p < 0.5$). Males ($M = 3.94$, $SD = 0.72$) had higher scores on this measure than females ($M = 4.08$, $SD = 0.68$) a statistically significant difference, $M = -0.135$, 95% CI $[-0.18, -0.08]$, $t(3544) = -5.71$, $p < .001$ (Table 2).

Differences of future goals and educational aspirations scores were also compared by ethnicity of students who completed the survey. Data were normally distributed for each group, as assessed by boxplot and Shapiro – Wilk test ($p > .05$), respectively. Homogeneity of variances was violated, as assessed by Levene's Test of Homogeneity of Variance ($p < .05$), therefore a one-way Welch ANOVA was conducted to determine any differences in scores between ethnic groups. Statistically significant differences were also noted in *future goals and educational aspirations* scores in relation to ethnicity groups (Welch's $F(6, 4.746) = 304.803$, $p < .001$). Games-Howell post hoc analysis revealed that students who reported being from Indian/Pakistani or Bangladeshi backgrounds had significantly higher scores (on both measures) than all other ethnicity groups except for the Asian/Asian Irish group. Those who reported being White or White Irish had significantly lower *future goals and educational aspirations* scores than those who reported being Black or black Irish, Asian or Asian Irish, or Indian or Pakistani or Bangladeshi Irish. Students who reported being from the Traveller or Roma community had significantly lower scores for *future goals and educational aspirations* than all other ethnic groups (Table 3).

Place (School)

There was no significant difference between scores of students from DEIS or Non-DEIS schools in this sample (Table 2).

Context (Mother's education)

Students whose mother had completed a university degree had statistically significantly higher scores than those whose mother had not (Table 2).

Time (Year group)

One way ANOVA tests were run to investigate group differences between year groups and ethnicities. Games-Howell post hoc analysis revealed that students in their first year in secondary school had significantly higher *goals and educational aspirations* scores than their peers in 5th or 6th year. Similarly, students in their 2nd or 4th year had significantly higher scores than those in 6th year (Tables 3 and 4).

Table 3. Future goals and educational aspirations scores – independent samples t-tests.

Variable	M	Std. Deviation	t value	Significance
Gender (Person)				
Male	3.94	.725	-5.71	<.001*
Female (ref)	4.08	.684		
School (Place)				
DEIS	4.01	.72	.09	.921
Non-DEIS	4.01	.68		
Mother's Education (Context)				
Completed University	4.11	0.69	-7.25	<.001*
Did not complete university	3.93	0.73		

Influence of PPCT variables and proximal processes on student outcomes

This section aims to answer RQ2: *Are there contextual factors that influence the extent to which student future goals and educational aspirations and post-school plans are impacted by the outreach programme?*

Future goals and educational aspirations model

A hierarchical multiple regression was conducted to determine the level of influence of the PPCT variables of Person (gender, ethnicity), Place (school type), Context (mothers' education level and parental educational support) and Time (year group) on students' *future goals and educational aspirations*, and to determine whether the addition of the proximal process variables – participation in the mentoring programme and pathways activities – improved the predictive power of the model (Table 4).

The full model of gender, year group, ethnicity, school type, parental support, mother's education, having a mentor and engaging in three or more pathways activities to predict *future goals and educational aspirations* scores (Model 3) was statistically

Table 4. Future goals and educational aspirations scores – one way ANOVA test.

	Mean	Std. Deviation	Number of cases
Ethnicity (Person)			
White/ White Irish	3.98	0.71	N = 2469
Irish Traveller/ Roma community	3.40	0.92	N = 37
Black/ Black Irish/ African Irish	4.13	0.70	N = 273
Asian/ Asian Irish	4.20	0.65	N = 122
Indian/ Pakistani/ Bangladeshi/ Irish	4.45	0.51	N = 100
Other	4.02	0.72	N = 398
Year group (Time)			
1st Year	4.08	.70	N = 745
2 nd year	4.03	.68	N = 876
3 rd year	4.02	.71	N = 649
4 th year	4.06	.68	N = 430
5 th year	3.93	.72	N = 469
5 th year LCA*	3.71	.81	N = 29
6th year	3.89	.73	N = 466
6th year LCA*	3.62	.88	N = 33

*Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA) is a pre-vocational programme which prepares students for adult and working life. Students with the Leaving Certificate Applied cannot gain direct entry through the Central Applications Office (CAO) system to the universities or institutes of technology. Students can however gain access to further education and training courses (FET). Many FET courses lead to either a level 5 or level 6 award. In some cases, you can progress with this award to a third level course in a higher education institution such as an institute of technology or a university (www.citizensinformation.ie).

significant, $R^2 = .125$, $F(8, 2807) = 22.287$, $p < .001$; $R^2 = .125$. The addition of parental support and mother's education to the prediction of *future goals and educational aspirations* scores (Model 2) led to a statistically significant increase in R^2 of .085, $F(2, 2809) = 133.893$, $p < .001$, indicating that these Context variables have a significant impact even when controlling for the Person, Place and Time variables of gender, year group, ethnicity, and school type. The addition of mentoring and engagement with pathways activities to the prediction of *future goals and educational aspirations* (Model 3) also led to a statistically significant increase in R^2 of .019, $F(2, 2807) = 30.358$, $p < .001$. This suggests that, even when controlling for all the PPCT variables in the model, student engagement with these proximal processes has a statistically significantly positive impact on their *future goals and educational aspirations*.

Educational aspirations and goals – change over time?

This section looks to address RQ 3: Are students' levels of *future goals and educational aspirations* sustained over their time in secondary school?

A total of 776 students took the survey in both 2019 and 2022. A paired samples t-test was conducted to compare students' *future goals and educational aspirations* scores over the two time points. There was a significant decrease in students' *future goals and educational aspirations* scores over time $t(775) = 12.303$, $p < .001$, $d = .44$.

Discussion

In Ireland, the latest National Access Plan 2022- 2028 (NAP) (HEA 2022) emphasises the importance of early intervention, creating a sense of belonging in education, and instilling a culture of high educational aspirations in schools (HEA 2022). Findings from this research show that, even when controlling for the PPCT variables of gender, ethnicity, year group, parental support, mothers' level of education and school status, participating in the TAP widening participation outreach programme practices of pathways and mentoring was associated with higher educational *future goals and educational aspirations* scores for secondary school students. Previous research has shown that *future goals and educational aspirations* is a strong predictor of postsecondary enrolment (Appleton et al. 2006). This aligns with previous research that has found that mentoring and IAG activities are particularly impactful for students from marginalised backgrounds (Ní Chorcóra, Bray, and Banks 2023; Robinson and Salvestrini 2020; Torgerson et al. 2014). This provides robust evidence for the need for sustained in-school models of mentoring and IAG activities. The results also indicate that the impact of such interventions could be increased through increased partnership with parents, and by developing tailored and culturally sensitive mentoring and IAG activities for those who are most effected by educational disadvantage e.g. those from Roma and Traveller communities.

Gender and ethnicity (Person)

The study investigated group differences within students' *future goals and educational aspirations*. Findings suggest that gender has a significant influence on a young persons' *future goals and educational aspirations* scores, with females scoring higher

this measure. This aligns with international research (Stahl 2012) and recent Irish research that shows that entry rates from males in disadvantaged areas are lower than that of females from similar contexts (HEA 2022). Future research should investigate the factors that contribute to lower *goals and educational aspirations* of males from disadvantaged areas and what early interventions are needed.

This study also investigated the influence of a young persons' exosystem and their ethnic and cultural background on goals and educational aspirations scores. In line with findings from the UK on HE participation (Crawford and Greaves 2015), all ethnic minorities (with the exception of those from the Traveller or Roma community) had significantly higher goals and educational aspirations scores than their White or White Irish peers.

Results showed that those who identified being from the traveller or Roma community had significantly lower goals and educational aspirations scores than all other ethnicity groups. Derrington (2007) identified several push and pull factors that impact on educational engagement including cultural dissonance and a high level of social exclusion. In the UK, Danvers and Hinton-Smith (2024) argue that public education systems have been designed for students who do not come from Gypsy, Roma or Traveller backgrounds (GRT) and that these institutions have been systematically and structurally othering GRT. However, their article describes an outreach project that was designed as a collective effort among academics, GRT representatives, teachers, and outreach professionals. The project involved guided small group discussions, individual journey maps, targeted outreach for GRT students, provision of resources on GRT culture and history for the school, and a celebration and learning day where community members and education professionals came together. Similar interventions for young Travellers and Roma students are taking place in Ireland in recent years through specific Programme for Access to Higher Education (PATH) funding that is being made available from the Higher Education Authority (HEA), which specifically names Travellers and those from the Roma community as a priority target group (HEA 2022; HEA 2023)., However, sustainable funding is needed for these types of programmes to continue as well as the ongoing evaluation of the impact of such programmes. These types of interventions could help support students from the Traveller and Roma communities in accessing higher education by providing additional resources, cultural awareness, and community support. However, the authors also recognise the need to avoid producing an 'expected' mobility pathway for learners and to recognise the specific cultures, histories, and experiences shaping such possibilities. With the recent publication of the Traveller and Roma Education Strategy 2024 –2030 and Implementation Plan it is hoped that dedicated resources will become available to action these plans to support young people from the Traveller and Roma communities in Ireland.

Family and school influences (Context)

The link between the level of parental education and young peoples' goals and educational aspirations is well established (Dickson, Gregg, and Robinson 2016; Lundborg, Nilsson, and Rooth 2014; Sewell and Shah 1968). When looking at the context of the young person's mesosystem and the interactions between their family and their families' relationships with education, findings from this study showed that students whose

mother had completed a university degree were significantly more likely to have higher goals and educational aspirations scores. Parental involvement in a young persons' education was also significantly associated with goals and educational aspirations scores within the hierarchical regression model. These findings reflect some of the literature in the field, which highlights the intergenerational nature of educational disadvantage (Byrne and McCoy 2017; Lynch and O' Riordan 1998; Reay 2017), however, the fact that parental support can also have a profound impact suggests that intergenerational educational disadvantage can be tackled in collaboration with parents where that is possible (Harackiewicz et al. 2012; Harackiewicz and Priniski 2018; Rosenzweig and Wigfield 2016). Strayhorn (2010) suggests that by partnering with parents, encouraging them to be actively involved in their child's education, and promoting their participation in school events, WP outreach programmes can support families and students. It may be that WP outreach programmes should engage and co-create activities with parents as well as exploring the potential difficulties that may exist (e.g. work schedules, caring duties, parental distrust of schools). By acknowledging these challenges, we would be better placed to work together to find solutions using new and innovative strategies.

In this study, both designated DEIS and non-DEIS schools were included. However, it is important to acknowledge that the context of the non-DEIS cohort in this sample is firmly rooted in areas that have traditionally low progression to tertiary education. Any participating non-DEIS schools are also located within areas where progression to higher education is low, and it is for this reason that they are linked with TAP's outreach programmes. This is not normally the case for the majority of non-DEIS schools which are located in medium to high socio-economic areas. educational aspirationsResults in this study indicate that within this sample of schools, school type did not have any significant influence on students' goals and educational aspirations. While it might come as no surprise to outreach practitioners that there were no differences between these groups, it does point to the issue that many young people in non-DEIS schools are experiencing educational disadvantage and may therefore be even more at risk of 'falling through the cracks.' As they are not targeted by the DEIS scheme, they do not receive additional supports.

Despite its benefits, the DEIS scheme has limitations (Fleming and Harford 2023; Singleton 2025). A key issue is the scheme's reliance on students' addresses for deprivation scores, which may exclude some children in homelessness, temporary accommodation, or Direct Provision (Trutz and Pratschke 2017; Children's Rights Alliance 2020). Additionally, Pavee Point National Traveller and Roma Centre (2024) highlights that area-based DEIS classification overlooks some disadvantaged Traveller and non-Traveller families who do not live in designated areas. As a result, their children attend schools that do not qualify for DEIS, leaving them without essential resources.

In their recent review of the DEIS scheme, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) highlights the need to continue refining and validating the indicators of social disadvantage underpinning the targeting of DEIS resources. It is clear that educational disadvantage is not confined to schools officially designated as DEIS, and that many students in non-DEIS schools also require support. The review also notes that non-DEIS schools often lack the resources to provide additional supports for disadvantaged students, with many relying on teachers or parents volunteering their time to fill these gaps (DES 2023; OECD 2024). Further support and resourcing for these students is necessary.

Year group (Time)

Time, in this study, is conceived of in two ways: firstly, using a ‘point in time’ analysis on the full student sample, which investigated differences in mean scores between year groups; and secondly, through the investigation of a longitudinal sub-sample of 776 students who had taken the survey in April/ May 2019 and again in April/ May 2022. This combination of longitudinal and ‘point in time’ analysis highlights both the importance of personal time of the young person over three years but also historical time as the students moved up in year groups while also navigating their education through the Covid-19 pandemic.

Students in their first year in secondary school (age 12/13) had significantly higher *future goals and educational aspirations* scores than their peers in 5th or 6th year (ages 16-19). Similarly, students in their 2nd or 4th year had significantly higher scores than those in 6th year. Although these findings do not come from the longitudinal data set, they do indicate that the *goals and educational aspirations* scores may decrease as students’ progress through school, particularly as they move into their final two exam focused years.

In order to investigate this further, paired sample t-tests were used to explore changes over time. This analysis revealed significant decreases in *goals and educational aspirations* scores over these students’ journey through their schooling, strengthening the hypothesis raised by the ‘point in time’ analysis.

There are many possible and plausible reasons for this decrease in *goals and educational aspirations* scores. As students grow older and progress into senior cycle year groups they may be faced with challenges of reality, including the cost of living and providing for themselves and their families. Previous longitudinal research in Ireland has explored students’ decision making about their post-school pathways (Smyth, Banks, and Calvert 2011). Findings showed that young people highlighted the importance of intrinsic motivation for progressing to further or higher education – wanting to study a subject they were interested in, personal fulfilment and being able to get an interesting job. However, young people who had attended DEIS schools were more likely to have extrinsic motivation – an income and a secure job, suggesting greater risk aversion among this group (Reay, David, and Ball 2005).

Another potential reason for this decrease in *goals and educational aspirations* may be that young people from lower socio-economic backgrounds have more realistic expectations about the challenges they face but little guidance or a lack of role models to help them to overcome those challenges (Baker et al. 2014). Yet again we must demand that we cannot view this as a personal failing of the young person rather, it is a result of structural inequalities (Campbell and McKendrick 2017). Young peoples’ perceptions of the risk associated with attending university are based upon real concerns which need to be addressed for an informed choice to be made (Sanderson and Spacey 2020).

Furthermore, Kintrea, St Clair, and Houston (2015) highlight how, even within designated disadvantaged areas in Britain, there can be significant differences between patterns of goals and educational aspirations and how they change over time in different locations. Their paper suggests that understanding how goals and educational aspirations are formed requires a nuanced approach to the nexus of class, ethnicity, and institutional

influences within local areas. This decrease of future goals and educational aspirations over time raises important questions about the structural and social factors shaping young people's educational trajectories. Further research is needed to explore the underlying causes and, crucially, to identify targeted interventions that can better support young people during this pivotal stage of their education.

However, despite the decrease in *future goals and educational aspirations* scores over time, the findings presented in this paper highlights the positive influence that school-university partnerships can have on students' educational outcomes even when accounting for the variety of influencing factors in the young persons' life. Considering WP through the lens of ecological systems such as Bronfenbrenner's model highlights the influence of a complex interplay of contextual elements on a young person's future goals and educational aspirations. Findings from this paper help to highlight the intersectionality within disadvantaged communities and therefore the importance of meaningful WP and university action plans to address these issues. This research provides an evidence-based example of what works in terms of raising *future goals and educational aspirations* for secondary school students in communities experiencing educational disadvantage.

Strengths and limitations

In their systematic review of widening participation programmes (Ní Chorcóra, Bray, and Banks 2023), highlight the need for longitudinal studies with large sample sizes as well as the collection of baseline data of participants. This is necessary to support the evaluation of interventions and to identify what aspects might be particularly beneficial for specific types of students, and why. This type of analysis supports WP practitioners to be strategic in their use of targeted interventions. It is a strength of the research presented in this paper that it begins to tackle these issues through its evaluation of TAP's outreach programme.

The quasi-experimental design employed in this study is likely the most feasible method for conducting outcome evaluations in the social sciences. It uses pre-existing groups, those adolescents already participating in mentoring or pathways activities, enabling evaluation and avoiding ethical concerns related to withholding or delaying the intervention, or providing a less effective intervention to a control group. The major drawback of this design is the lack of randomisation, which means the study groups might have pre-existing differences that influence the outcomes after the intervention, and these differences cannot be fully accounted for in the analysis. Thus, this design offers practical but weaker evidence of programme effects compared to a randomised design. In the absence of randomisation, using a matched comparator group can offer a reasonable estimate of the intervention's impact.

Widening participation is a very complex space, and the context of every individual within this space has diverse influences acting upon it. It is important to try to consider how these contextual elements interact on the variables under examination, before attempting to explore the influence of an external programme. The quasi-experimental design allows us to compare students within schools and environments according to who has (or has not) participated in the WP initiatives, and even according to their level of participation. By utilising a large dataset and the PPCT model, this paper controls

for many variables within the individual's environment in order answer the research question and account for as many other factors as possible within both groups. Attainment data was not available for these students, and it must be noted that not being able to account for this in our model was a limitation given the link between attainment and progression. However, the other variables in the PPCT model which include gender, ethnicity, parental education, school type, and year group ensure that as much variability is accounted for as possible making this a novel and useful paper given the powerful underpinning dataset.

On the other hand, the impact of the programme may be under-reported due to the spillover effect that may have occurred: if some members of peer groups participated, and others did not, those that did not still may reap the benefits from engaging in conversations with their peers, thus promoting social capital amongst friend groups (Vander-Weele et al. 2013). Research is also currently being conducted to follow this cohort of young people into the post-school period to explore whether their *future goals and educational aspirations* match their post-school destinations.

The items that make up the variable of *Ethnicity* were drawn from the Irish Census form. However, there may be scope for some increased granularity within the categories provided. This is particularly pertinent in relation to the White/White Irish category, which was by far the most populous, but also, for the large proportion of students that selected 'other' as their ethnicity. Although this is in line with the results of the Irish census data (CSO 2016), it suggests that we need a more accurate measure of ethnicity that enables all groups to feel included.

Implication for practitioners, policy makers and researchers

Overall, this paper provides evidence-based insights into effective strategies for raising future goals and educational aspirations among secondary school students experiencing educational disadvantage, offering valuable guidance for policy makers in shaping educational access policies and programmes in Ireland. Findings from this paper with over 3000 students, give a strong justification for a model of practice that works in terms of school-university widening participation partnerships and one which could potentially be scaled to other universities and schools. The paper highlights the intersectional nature of educational disadvantage and although many of the models can be used for all students, they may need to be targeted to specific priority groups such as those from Traveller or Roma communities. Further longitudinal studies are needed to evaluate the outcomes and impact of widening participation programmes and their influence on post-secondary education.

Finally, policy makers should also consider the finding that there was a decline in future goals and educational aspirations as students progress through school, particularly in their final exam-focused years. The authors stress that this is not due to a personal failing of the young person rather, it is a result of structural inequalities (Campbell and McKendrick 2017). Young peoples' perceptions of the risk associated with attending university are based upon real concerns which need to be addressed for an informed choice to be made (Sanderson and Spacey 2020). Policy makers must address the challenges and realities students face, including financial concerns, and providing support and guidance to maintain their educational aspirations and a holistic approach to tackling the risks associated with entering higher education.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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