

University of
Dublin
Trinity
College

**An Exploration of
Students’
Experiences in one
DEIS second level
school**

A thesis submitted as part of the requirements for a
Doctorate in Education in the School of Education,
Trinity College

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Declaration

I declare that this thesis has not been submitted as an exercise for a degree at this or any other university and it is entirely my own work.

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Abstract

Existing qualitative studies on DEIS and the lived experiences of students in DEIS schools are limited, particularly at second level. There has not been much analysis of the ways in which the affective elements of education, particularly caring, influence the lives of students.

This study was a single case study carried out in a second-level school designated as ‘disadvantaged’ and serving marginalized students in an area of economic, social and geographical disadvantage . It looked at the students’ experience in that DEIS school, using the conceptual lenses of student voice, power and empowerment, and the ethics of care. It has drawn on the work of Bourdieu, Freire, Shor and Noddings, among others, in relation to power and empowerment, social reproduction, the hidden curriculum and caring relations, key themes in this thesis. As a result, it adopts a social justice perspective, emphasising the benefits that the affective elements of schooling and authentic consultation with students can bring to individual students and school communities as a whole.

This study explored students’ experience of school in terms of the place, the people and their experiences of both. It sought to explore the role of care in the context of schooling and examined how prioritizing the affective elements of education can bring about academic achievement and promote student wellbeing, particularly for students from challenging backgrounds. It explored how valuing and promoting student voice research can have a transformative impact on the student participants and on the school community as a whole. Focus group interviews were conducted with 42 students. This thesis presents the experiences of those students. The findings showed that the students identified three key themes as being critical to their engagement with school – their experience of care, positive relationships and a

sense of belonging as being crucial to their engagement with school. By adopting a qualitative approach, this research challenges the heavy emphasis on accountability and measurement in most analysis of what is happening in DEIS schools.

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Each May I tell my graduating 6th year students that it has been a pleasure and a privilege to see them grow and that they have taught me more than I could ever teach them and it's true. Each student brings something fresh and wonderful to our school community. This research process has allowed the 42 participating students to teach me so much about their experience in our school. I am so grateful to them for sharing their thoughts and trusting me to do them justice and represent them accurately.

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List of Abbreviations

ASD	Autism Spectrum Disorder
DCYA	Department of Children and Youth Affairs
DEIS	Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (Designated Disadvantaged Schools)
DES	Department of Education and Skills
DCU	Dublin City University
ERC	Educational Research Centre
ESRI	Economic and Social Research Institute
HEAR	Higher Education Access Route
HSCL	Home School Community Liaison Scheme
NCCA	National Council for Curriculum and Assessment
NESF	National Economic and Social Forum
OECD	Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development
SCP	School Completion Programme
TAP	Trinity Access Programme

Chapter 1 – Introduction

‘Who better to tell us what works in schools than students who learn in them’
(Jacobs, Kuriloff, Andrus & Cox 2014, p.69)

1.1 Introduction

The research proposed in this study is concerned with gaining insight into students’ experience of life in school, in particular a DEIS school. It will seek their perspectives and attempt to understand their perceived reality. It is designed to generate an increased body of knowledge and provide a platform for the introduction of more student-devised and student-led practices in the school. The current absence of such an approach in research on DEIS has been noted in a recent review of the programme (Smyth, Banks, Whelan, Darmody & McCoy, 2015).

1.2 Locating the research in context and in theory

The Irish secondary school system was traditionally made up of single-sex, socially stratified schools run by religious orders, where students took an entrance exam before enrolment and were placed in streamed classes according to their results. This resulted in a system that was not only socially stratified but where internally schools stratified according to a child’s performance on a given morning. Schools in more affluent areas enrolled students who were more educationally and socially advantaged from the area. While the educational landscape of Ireland has changed considerably over the past number of years, four distinct school settings remain at second level. These are:

- i) Fee paying private schools – usually faith based

- ii) Voluntary secondary schools, traditionally religious owned but now also encompassing the Gaelcholáistí – where the Irish language is the medium of tuition for all subjects and Educate Together Non-denominational Schools
- iii) Community and Comprehensive Schools
- iv) Vocational Schools run by Education and Training Boards

The location of a school often denotes the students who will attend due to house prices and the lack of social housing in the most affluent areas of the country. The tradition of family members attending the private school to which parents and even grandparents went also has an impact on the social mix of schools and perpetuates stratification. Historically, students were separated academically in advance through entrance and assessment examinations. Mixed ability settings are now more commonplace in the Irish system. However, streaming continues in many schools and often takes place in the core subjects of English, Irish and Mathematics. At Senior Cycle, streaming continues through to Leaving Certificate, both through the High and Ordinary level examinations offered and the different Leaving Certificates offered to students. A review of the various programmes to tackle educational disadvantage will be presented in Chapter 2, while the impact of the way in which education is offered at second-level on those students who are less advantaged will be further explored in Chapter 3.

1.3 Rationale and importance of the study

This research study has developed from my work as a teacher in the vocational education sector, in a school with disadvantaged status, for 8 years. This was followed by two years working on a positive behaviour project that had student voice and the importance of student-teacher relationships as key components. I have spent the last

nineteen years as principal of a school with designated disadvantaged status, subsequently the DEIS (Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools) programme, serving students from one of the most socio-economically disadvantaged areas of the country. In each of those experiences I have recognised the power of a caring educational experience and the positive impact of a caring school environment. Such environments hold significant possibilities for emancipation within disadvantaged schools. Those experiences have laid the foundations of this study in the context of social justice and the power imbalances that exist in education, as in society as a whole. The writings of Giroux (1981, 1983, 1997), Noddings (1984, 1992, 2006, 2007, 2013, 2015), Bourdieu (1986), Freire (1992), Shor (1992), McLaren (1993) and Apple (2012) influence the thinking and lie at the heart of the theoretical framework, specifically in relation to power and empowerment; social reproduction; the hidden curriculum, and caring relations. The study looks at the students' experience in a DEIS school, using the conceptual lenses of student voice, power and empowerment, and the ethics of care.

DEIS (Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools) is a programme in place since 2006 in those primary and post-primary schools that serve the most socially and economically disadvantaged communities in the country. It aims to improve the educational outcomes for the student cohort in those schools through focusing on retention, attendance, literacy, numeracy, attainment, progression, partnership with parents and partnership with others. Much of the research around the DEIS programme is quantitative. It involves ascertaining in numerical terms by how much we have raised

the reading age; what percentage of students took higher level Maths; by what percentage attendance has improved; how many students missed 20 days or more etc. DEIS inspections laud those schools whose planning is SMART (specific, measurable, attainable, realistic, timely), who set targets, who have a DEIS plan that emphasises measurement, data ranges and target areas. Yet, if as Fullan (2007) suggests, ‘the heart of improving schools lies in improving relationships in school’ what place is there for a student-centred, caring approach where building collaborative relationships is key, or for the concepts of student well-being, resilience, confidence and independence – often unquantifiable and intangible concepts that are essential to success in school and beyond.

The 2017 DEIS Policy document purports to ‘present an ambitious set of objectives and actions to support children who are at greatest risk of educational disadvantage and introduces the actions required to support them based on 5 key goals’. (DES, 2017).

Those 5 goals are presented below:

1. To implement a more robust and responsive Assessment Framework for identification of schools and effective resource allocation
2. To improve the learning experience and outcomes of pupils in DEIS schools
3. To improve the capacity of school leaders and teachers to engage, plan and deploy resources to their best advantage.
4. To support and foster best practice in schools through inter-agency collaboration
5. To support the work of schools by providing the research, information, evaluation and feedback to achieve the goals of the Plan

In line with that policy, a review of DEIS programmes in schools, mainly carried out through the inspection model, seldom asks the students about their experience of school and what impact a particular activity, intervention or indeed the programme as a whole has had on them and their experience of school as a result. DEIS evaluation reports make reference to interviews with school personnel, review of school documents and records, observation of student learning and other activities and inspection of students' work. Questionnaires are completed by a sample of parents and students and some inspection reports make reference to a small focus-group of students. Such reviews measure what interventions such as breakfast clubs, homework clubs, summer provision and a wealth of other student supports do in terms of numbers. For example, reading recovery and literacy programmes such as Accelerated Reader (AR) are assessed and analysed in terms of number of books read, reading age progression etc. without ever asking the student if she enjoyed the book, if the range of books on offer through the programme is of interest or if participation in the AR programme will encourage reading for leisure in the future. What we are doing to the student and for the student is the focus of review. As with the Whole School Evaluation – Management, Leadership and Learning (WSE-MLL) process it would seem that the wider student perspective is missing.

This study seeks to redress the imbalance between the quantitative and the qualitative in the study of life in one DEIS school. It draws on the students' interpretation of their experience and has a particular focus on care and how they feel cared for. Its

timing is opportune given the current spotlight on the issue of wellbeing throughout society and the introduction of Wellbeing as a subject at Junior Cycle. This study seeks to fill the gap that exists in the research on DEIS at second level, by gathering the perspectives of those who should be at the heart of DEIS policy – the students themselves.

1.4 Research questions

This research uses a student voice approach to focus on student perspectives and insights into their experience. By exploring the existing situation in the school, the research hopes to answer the following questions:

- ☐ What is students' experience of the school?
- ☐ Do students feel cared for in the school setting?
- ☐ Can the experience of being consulted through student voice research have a transformative impact for student participants?

Chapter 2 – Dealing with Disadvantage – the historical perspective

2.1 Introduction

Reducing school failure and improving the educational outcomes for disadvantaged pupils is a key priority in Ireland's education policy agenda, coupled with a focus on education as a pathway to economic prosperity. The roots of that policy may be traced back over 50 years to the publication of the Investment in Education report of 1966. In examining the history of policy development and provision in relation to educational disadvantage it seems appropriate to start over half a century ago with the impact of that Investment in Education report. This section of the review of the literature will look at policy through the decades that followed the report to today's provision under DEIS.

2.2 Investment in Education

The impetus for much of the policy formation of the 1960s was the economic crisis of the late 1950s. Education policy at the time was conservative and the system was controlled by interest groups, primarily the Catholic Church (Coolahan 1981, Fleming & Harford 2014). There was growing criticism of the existing system in the late 1950s and early 1960s, in particular, because of its failure to produce young people ready for the labour force. In addition, it was increasingly seen as a system that was rife with inequality. Among the criticisms of the time were the prevalence of unqualified teachers; disproportionate pupil-teacher ratios; deficiencies in school facilities such as lack of running water, sanitary provision or electricity and problems with curricula (Coolahan,

1981). Far more significant were the huge drop-out rates. Over half of all children left school at or before the age of 13, many thousands of them leaving primary school without a primary certificate. The non-progression to post- primary school pointed to inequitable social class patterns of participation and wide discrepancies between income groups (Coolahan 1981, Frawley 2014).

Investment in Education came after a decade of economic struggle and difficulty. It was a pilot study initiated by the OECD and commissioned by Patrick Hillery, Minister for Education in the government of Seán Lemass. Lemass was keen to tackle the poor performance of the economy and recognised that the lack of a skilled workforce was hugely detrimental to Ireland's attempts to progress economically. He saw education as a key element in the effort to reform the economy. The report reflected the increasing recognition that education was an investment that would contribute to economic expansion. Equally central was the issue of social inequality (Clancy 1996, Coolahan 1981, Frawley 2014, Loxley, Seery & Walsh 2014, Walsh, McCoy, Seery & Conroy 2014).

The findings of the report led to a shift from a theocentric education system to one driven by the economy and human capital theory. Its commissioning is seen as arguably one of the most momentous decisions taken by Irish political elites (Loxley et al. 2014). The focus on human capital that was to the fore in the report stemmed from the belief that education could drive the economy and from a recognition of the direct causal connection between levels of attainment and economic growth (Barry 2014). There was

also a recognition of the role of education in the technological and scientific development that would be necessary to bring economic prosperity to Ireland. Loxley et al. (2014) suggest that this emphasis on technology and science mirrored international practice and was also derived from western dismay that Russia had succeeded in launching Sputnik in 1957.

The second key concern of the report was equality. In the 1960s Ireland setting of *Investment in Education*, post-primary education remained out of reach of a substantial segment of the population. The report recognised this. It outlined the very poor state of the existing system, which was grossly neglectful of children of poorer classes and noted the strong association between participation and social grouping.

There is general consensus that *Investment in Education* was the seminal document in terms of education in general and educational disadvantage in particular (Barry 2014, Clancy 1996, Coolahan 1981, Fleming & Harford 2014, Frawley 2014, Loxley et al. 2014, Walsh et al 2014). It is hugely important since it laid out in clear unequivocal terms the structural and curricular weaknesses of the existing system (Fleming & Harford, 2014) and it is lauded by commentators for the unambiguous way in which the inequalities of the existing system were laid bare. It exposed the Irish education system to unprecedented scrutiny. What it found was an education system in poor order, where large social and regional disparities existed. *Investment* provided a sharp critique of Irish education and its publication marked a shift in thinking and a new direction in policy development as it linked the education system to the needs of the

economy. It gave Donagh O'Malley the opportunity to introduce free second level education and the school transport scheme in one fell swoop, without the approval of the Department of Finance. Loxley et al. (2014) suggest that Investment in Education provides the key to understanding education policy over the two generations that followed. There is evidence to suggest that it continues to influence educational policy to this day.

2.3 Post Investment in Education

The Irish state made a long term commitment to investment in education from the 1960s onwards. This was a result of factors including the influence of the Investment in Education report, compelling domestic and international pressures, particularly economic, the global power struggle between east and west, the influence of international organisations such as the OECD and the ready adoption of theories of human capital formation (Fleming & Harford 2014, Loxley et al. 2014). The economic imperative still prevailed and the influence of international economists, the OECD and human capital theory remained prominent. The role played by key individuals was also essential - men like O'Malley whose concerns about social justice had led to the introduction of 'free' education and Seán O'Connor who led the Development Branch of the Department of Education, formed following a recommendation in Investment (Barry 2014, Fleming & Harford 2014).

There was also greater awareness of the education problems and needs of children who suffer educational disadvantage because they are socially or economically deprived

(Coolahan 1981). Investment was followed by a series of policy measures that would expand secondary school enrolment and graduation rates, including the aforementioned ‘free’ second level education and the school transport scheme. This expansion was not without its difficulties as schools strived to cope with bigger student populations in often cramped and unsuitable buildings and teachers found that with increased class sizes came students with additional learning needs and behavioural difficulties (Barry 2014, Coolahan 1981, Loxley et al. 2014). The late 1960s and early 1970s saw the introduction of Regional Technical Colleges, the common Intermediate Certificate and community schools, among other reforms. In addition, the school leaving age was raised. Such reforms were enhanced by particular programmes to address disadvantage. Those areas of the country exhibiting the highest social and educational disadvantage were targeted with specific programmes such as the Rutland Street Project (also known as the Van Leer project), which was a pilot pre-school scheme for children aged 3-8 set up in 1970. The project aimed to build strong foundations for good school performance and behaviour in national schools.

2.4 Policy in the eighties and nineties

The years following the publication of *Investment in Education* and the introduction of free second level education were marked by increasing efforts to address educational disadvantage but it was not until the 1980s that state assistance became explicit policy (Clancy 1996). The Disadvantaged Area Scheme of 1984 saw schools selected on the basis of socio-economic and educational indicators such as the

unemployment levels of parents and possession of a medical card. During the late 1980s and into the 1990s the focus of policy was on the equality of opportunity and the need to tackle disadvantage featured heavily in the discourse surrounding education policy making (Fleming & Harford, 2014).

In 1992 a comprehensive Green Paper was issued as a way forward for educational development as part of social and economic policy (Coolahan 1995). The Green Paper continued to emphasise the link between industrial, economic and education policies and the importance of school in preparing young people for the labour market. It revisited familiar territory in its focus on the achievement of economic growth and industrial development dependent on the availability of qualified personnel – with language such as knowledge, skills and competencies in evidence and a suggestion that employer involvement was necessary to promote the development of vocational skills. It followed on from the Culliton (1992) report of the same year, which called for a shift away from liberal arts education to one which provided students with more practical and marketable skills and emphasised further the links between the economy and education. The National Economic and Social Council (NESC) 1993 document, Education and Training Policies for Economic and Social Development, further propounded the human capital perspective.

Both the 1992 Green Paper and the 1995 White Paper, as well as the discussion during the interim, also devoted considerable attention to the issue of disadvantage. There were continued references to the need to tackle inequality throughout the 1990s. In

addition to the Green Paper, the 1993 Special Education Review Committee report, the 1994 Programme for Competitiveness and Work and the 1995 White Paper, Charting our Education Future reiterated government's commitment to tackle educational disadvantage. The White Paper, in particular, aspired to many admirable principles and gave a strong commitment to values such as equality within the education system (Coolahan 1995). Its key target for 2000 was that 90% of those who entered second-level school would complete senior cycle. However, Coolahan (1995) suggests that despite its best intentions, meritocracy and competition were far more the order of the day than egalitarianism, and its aims were driven more by economic needs than by concern for the learner.

According to Coolahan (1995, p.9) the 'real-world' interplay of political, economic, social and intellectual factors rarely converge to form the 'ideal' milieu and circumstances for action but the publication of the White Paper was one such moment. Charting our Education Future was followed by a tranche of new interventions in relation to educational disadvantage. Breaking the Cycle, which was launched in 1996 following the publication of a Combat Poverty Agency-Educational Research Centre report, advocated positive discrimination in favour of schools in selected areas where there was a high concentration of children not reaching their potential.

Finally, the Education Act (1998) defined educational disadvantage as "the impediments to education arising from social or economic disadvantage which prevent

students from deriving appropriate benefit from education in schools” and placed an onus on school Boards of Management to make provision to address such impediments.

2.5 Current provision – the DEIS Programme

The current action plan for addressing disadvantage in both primary and post-primary schools is DEIS – Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools – launched in May 2005 and fully operational from the 2006-07 school year. A review of the plan was initiated in 2015 and an updated plan was published in 2017. The DEIS themes that form the basis of each school’s plan are outlined in Appendix 1.

DEIS emphasises the importance of educational inclusion. The overall rationale is based on targeting additional support to schools serving disadvantaged communities and promoting parental involvement (Frawley 2014). DEIS subsumed some existing schemes and incorporates 8 social inclusion programmes. Its goal is to address the needs of the most disadvantaged children and young people in Ireland and it aims to address one of the frequent criticisms of social inclusion programmes, that is the disjointed nature of such interventions. The programme is co-ordinated by the Social Inclusion Unit of the Department of Education and Skills, although a multi- agency approach is evident with the involvement of agencies such as the Child and Family Agency (TUSLA) and the Department of Youth and Family Affairs (DYFA), among others. DEIS includes 700 primary schools and 198 post-primary schools. These schools receive additional resources such as staffing, funding, access to literacy and numeracy programmes and access to supports such as the School Meals Programme and School Completion

Programme. The elements of DEIS include the Home School Community Liaison Scheme (HSCL), originally established in 1990; Early Start; Breaking the Cycle, introduced in 1996 to target 52 of the most disadvantaged schools and subsumed into the Giving Children an Even Break programme in 2001. As the focus of this study is a DEIS post-primary school, the measures and supports available to second level schools through the action plan and its sister SCP are explored in more detail below.

2.5.1 Supports for DEIS Post Primary schools

Appendix 2 outlines the full range of supports made available to DEIS post-primary schools according to the DEIS Plan 2017 (DES). The following supports are in place in the case study school:

2.5.1.1 Additional staffing

Annual circulars from the DES outlining the Approved Allocation of Teaching Posts assign additional staffing to DEIS schools. Currently, that additional staffing comes in the guise of extra guidance provision and an improved Junior Cycle reform allocation for DEIS schools.

2.5.1.2 DEIS grant paid based on level of disadvantage and enrolment

An additional grant is provided to DEIS schools. Guidelines for appropriate use of the grant are issued annually by the Social Inclusion Fund and the payment is also allocated to fund the activities of the HSCL programme. For the 2018-19 school year, the grant was calculated as follows: €159 x number of pupils x 30% so that for a school of

400, the grant would be $\text{€}159 \times 400 \times 30\% = \text{€}19080$. In the case study school, this is used to fund the employment of a Student Support Officer specific to the school. This member of staff has responsibility for engaging with the most marginalised students.

2.5.1.3 Access to Home School Community Liaison services

The Home-School-Community Liaison (HSCL) Scheme was established in 1990 in designated areas of disadvantage by the (then) Department of Education. Initially introduced as a pilot project, the scheme was extended several times, and in 2005 became available to all primary and post-primary schools that were participants in DEIS. The philosophy underpinning the scheme is the promotion of partnership between parents, teachers, and the community in order to maximise outcomes for students at risk of experiencing educational disadvantage (Conaty, 2002).

The HSCL scheme aims to increase the link between home and school by encouraging parents to become more involved in their children's education. It also aims to encourage self-development, literacy skills and activities of parents so that they as the primary educators of their children will be positive role models, encouraging the educational and personal advancement of their children. The goals of the scheme include the following: To maximise active participation of the children in the schools of the scheme in the learning process, in particular those who might be at risk of failure and to promote active co-operation between home, school and relevant community agencies in promoting the educational interests of the children. Locally based activities are organised

by the HSCL coordinator which set out to encourage greater contact between parents, teachers and with local voluntary groups.

2.5.1.4 Access to School Meals Programme

The School Meals Local Projects Scheme provides funding directly to primary schools, secondary schools, local groups and voluntary organisations, in both urban and rural areas, which operate their own school meals projects. Projects must be targeted at areas of disadvantage or at children with special needs. Priority for funding is currently given to schools which are part of the Department of Education & Skills' initiative for disadvantaged schools. However, there is no automatic entitlement to funding and all applications are considered in light of the available budget for the Scheme. Funding will be provided only to existing projects that have shown ongoing viability. Funding under this scheme is for food only, which must be of suitable quality and nutritional value, and prepared and consumed in an appropriate environment.

2.5.1.5 Access to range of supports under the School Completion Programme

In 2006 a broadening of the School Completion Programme (SCP) was sanctioned to complement the work of DEIS. The programme aims to help students from disadvantaged areas stay in post-primary schools to complete their Leaving Certificate. The School Completion Programme (SCP) is a Department of Education & Skills initiative that aims to have a positive impact on levels of pupil retention in primary and second level schools and on the number of pupils who successfully complete the Senior Cycle, or equivalent. SCP entails targeting individual young people of school-going age,

both in and out of school, and arranging supports to address inequalities in education access, participation and outcomes. It is based on the project model with an integrated approach involving primary and post primary schools, parents and relevant statutory, voluntary and community agencies. SCP work focuses on targeting and providing supports to young people identified to be most at risk of early school leaving and includes: Identifying and supporting children at risk of not reaching their potential in the educational system because of poor attendance, participation and retention via initiatives such as breakfast clubs; homework clubs; afterschool supports; mentoring programmes. Ensuring that schools have in place the appropriate procedures to monitor, identify and respond to attendance, participation and retention issues.

2.5.1.6 Access to Junior Certificate Schools Programme

The Junior Certificate School Programme (JCSP) was introduced by the Department of Education and Science in September 1996 as an intervention within the Junior Certificate specifically aimed at those students who are potential early school leavers. The programme is designed to ensure that these young people can benefit from their time in school and enjoy the experience of improvement and success. It does this by providing a curriculum framework which will assist schools and individual teachers in adopting a student centred approach to education and in providing students with a programme to meet their individual needs (PDST, 2007).

2.5.1.7 Access to planning supports and a range of professional development supports

This includes priority access to the Centre for School Leadership (CSL) and to the Professional Development Service for Teachers (PDST). According to the DEIS Plan 2017, DEIS schools applying for the range of supports available from CSL and PDST will receive priority over other schools within the current capacity. The CSL will give priority to DEIS Principals who wish to access the coaching service and, for the post-graduate diploma in school leadership, a number of places have been reserved for teachers from DEIS Schools. PDST will also give priority to DEIS Schools in facilitating school visits from advisors. There are also a number of DEIS specific programmes for which PDST provide support such as Reading Recovery, JSCP, etc. All teachers in DEIS schools can now access both the Incredible Years Teacher Programme and the Friends Programme which are supported by the Government's National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS). Teachers in all DEIS schools have been invited to apply for places on these programmes which are being delivered through the Education Centre Network. The Friends Programme reduces anxiety and promotes coping and resilience in children and young people from 4 – 18 years and can be delivered by teachers universally or targeted smaller groups of pupils.

2.5.1.8 Additional funding under School Books Grant Scheme

The DES allocates funding for school books to all post-primary schools at a rate of €24 per pupil. DEIS schools receive an enhanced grant of €39 per pupil.

2.5.1.9 Priority access to the Friends Programme

The Friends for Life Programme is designed to build resilience in students, specifically those in 2nd Year.

2.6 Other non-DES funded DEIS supports:

2.6.1 Business in the Community

Business Action on Education is an initiative aimed at matching schools with businesses around Ireland. Business Action on Education is delivered to schools under the name, The Schools' Business Partnership. There are two primary school initiatives and five for post primary schools. The post primary programmes are Skills @ Work, Mentoring, Management Excellence for Principals, Management Excellence for Teachers and STEM - Seeing is Believing. Once a school is matched with a local company, a dedicated programme coordinator works with both parties.

2.6.2 Third level supports

Students attending DEIS schools may benefit from pre-university supports through school-college links and through college access services. For example, Dublin City University (DCU) runs programmes such as DCU-Transition Year and UFirst – a programme for 5th and 6th year students whose families may not have experience of third level or the financial wherewithal to support students in achieving that goal. Trinity College operates College for Every Student (CfES) and the Trinity Access Programme (TAP).

2.6.3 Higher Education Access Route

Higher Education Access Route (HEAR) is a college and university scheme that offers places on reduced points and extra college support to school leavers from socio-

economically disadvantaged backgrounds. Applicants must meet a range of financial, social and cultural indicators to be considered for a reduced points place and extra college support. One indicator is that the student must have spent five years in a secondary school that takes part in the DEIS scheme. As well as entry on reduced points students may avail of other college supports including: An Orientation Programme; Extra tuition if required, study skills and exam preparation; One-to-one meetings with student advisers; Social gatherings and mentoring; Extra financial assistance when available/ advice regarding grants and scholarships.

2.6.4 Subsidised places on various co-curricular courses and financial support

Charities such as St. Vincent de Paul fund additional tuition for Leaving Certificate students from DEIS school. Places are allocated by application and awarded to those seen as most in need because of financial circumstances. St. Vincent de Paul also funds supports students through direct funding for books and uniforms where necessary.

2.6.5 Financial support from Partnership Agencies

Local Partnership agencies operating in areas that are designated as disadvantaged offer supports for DEIS students throughout their school journey. This includes sponsored additional tuition through the form of ‘grinds’, assistance with completing paperwork for grant applications and direct financial support for students.

2.6.6 Credit Union Scholarships

These are provided on a local basis to students who have achieved a place at third level. Letters of support are requested from schools outlining the reasons support is required.

2.6.7 1916 Bursary

This bursary offers financial support to students who have achieved a place at third level and who meet some of the following criteria: living in a disadvantaged area, have attended a DEIS School, is a Higher Education Access Route (HEAR) student or on the Trinity Access Programme (TAP), comes from an ethnic minority and is a first time student in third level. The bursary is awarded via competition and letters of support are required from the applicant's previous school confirming that they meet the criteria.

2.7 Conclusions and challenges

Over the 50 year period since Investment in Education was published, interventions have varied between those designed for particular individuals, families or schools to more general supports. There has been a move towards progressive universalism – the notion of giving support to all and extra help to those who need it most. In the intervening years, education policy and policies to tackle educational disadvantage have broadened the focus beyond primary and post-primary schooling.

The recognition of the importance of early intervention saw the introduction of the Early Start programme and more recently the Early Childhood Care and Education Scheme (ECCE). Similarly, second chance programmes for early school leavers have

formed part of policy for many years. Such programmes included Vocational Preparation and Training 1 (VPT1) and Vocational and Preparation 2 courses (VPT2) , Vocational Training Opportunities Scheme (VTOS), Youthreach, VTOS for the over 21s and the Back to Education Initiative (Frawley 2014).

The lack of cohesion and breadth of programme providers can pose a challenge to the successful implementation of policy, despite the efforts of the Social Inclusion Unit. Murphy (2000) compiled a guide to government funded initiatives which listed 6 government departments and a number of other state agencies with a role in running initiatives funded by the exchequer. In addition, the European Social Fund financed a number of measures to address educational disadvantage, as did the European Structural Fund through the Regional Development Fund, while a plethora of non- government organisations was also involved.

Educational disadvantage is now considered to be about much more than the social background characteristics of children – it encompasses material deprivation, transmitted deprivation, societal, community and school-level factors, as well as important individual processes of student engagement in education. It is a multi-dimensional issue that has permeated all levels of the Irish education system and requires intervention on a number of fronts. There is evidence that Irish policy is slowly changing focus to take account of this (Frawley 2014, Loxley et al. 2014). Investment in Education focused exclusively on social class and regional disparities and for much of the 1970s

and 1980s the policy emphasis was on increasing overall participation levels so as to boost the labour force (Loxley et al. 2014).

Intervention through education alone is not sufficient to counteract the structural inequalities of society and, despite a myriad of interventions and huge levels of funding, the gap is widening in terms of educational disadvantage (Coolahan 1995, Frawley 2014). Just over 40 years after the publication of *Investment in Education*, a NESC (2006) study found that while 77% of students from Dublin 4 (socially advantaged area) went to college, only 9% of their counterparts from Dublin 1 (a socially disadvantaged area) did so. *Investment* underlined the fact that universities were predominantly the preserve of the upper and middle classes – 50 years on, the most economically advantaged in society are still over-represented. A significant proportion of young people are at risk of educational disadvantage throughout their lives e.g. a child attending school in a disadvantaged area of Dublin has 30% chance of exiting primary school with a serious literacy problem, a 50:50 chance of sitting Leaving Certificate and a 90% probability that he/she will not go to college (Frawley 2014). Indeed, Barry (2014) suggests that the 10% or so of students who leave without qualification are placed at almost insurmountable disadvantage and are at greater disadvantage today than were the early school leavers of 1966.

The conditions in which inequality exists are not solely created by education, nor can they be alleviated by education alone – structural inequalities, income differentials, the cultural aspects of inequality, along with the intractability of the inequality issue, the

impact of political will or lack thereof and the systemic nature of disadvantage mean that the education system is not sufficient to counterbalance deep-rooted societal forces (Clancy 1996, Coolahan 1995). In fact there are dangers inherent in suggesting that education can solve society's problems since the creation of unreliable and unrealisable expectations may lead to disenchantment and disillusionment. There is also growing evidence of the impact of the affective elements of education and the importance of emotional support services in reducing early school leaving. Policies tackling educational inequality and aiming to reduce drop-out rates must take into account mental health and student engagement. Downes's (2011) study of developments in a number of European countries points to a recognition of such needs. His work echoes the recommendations of OECD (2008) No More Failure report, where the two key themes were fairness and inclusion.

The focus on the human capital interpretation that was to the fore in *Investment in Education* 50 years ago continues to permeate thinking on education to this day. In assessing the impact of the report Loxley et al. (2014, p.177) point to the "almost universal acceptance of the rhetoric and vocabulary of human capital in the discussion of education policy". Their call for a reimagined theory of human and social development echoes the contention of Robert Harris, as cited in Coolahan (1995, p.16) that "the primary purpose of education is to develop each individual to become a whole human being, not just to become an economic resource. Acquisition of knowledge and skills must be accompanied by character training, cultural awareness and social responsibility".

Nowhere is this more important than in educating those who are already marginalised and disadvantaged and who need to experience ‘the more humane concerns of education’ (Coolahan 1981) and ‘the language of human development, of self-formation and social justice transformation’ (Loxley et al. 2014).

The next chapter examines the various interpretations offered on inequality. It looks in more detail at how schools cannot be solely responsible for dealing with inequality but recognises that they do have the potential to improve the experience of our most marginalized young people.

Chapter 3 - Literature Review

3.1 Introduction

This chapter looks at the existing literature in a number of key areas relevant to this study. They are the sociology of educational inequality, relationships and care in education and student voice in research and policy.

3.2 Sociology of educational inequality

The issue of educational disadvantage and inequality is complex and multifaceted, so much so that agreement on the causes and possible solutions is difficult to achieve. Whichever definition is applied, what is apparent is the potential lifelong impact of inequality and the acknowledgement that whilst education can break intergenerational cycles of disadvantage, it can also act to reinforce them (Lynch & Lodge 2002, Machin 2006). Kathleen Lynch (2009) refers to the immorality of inequality in education and suggests that schools have a moral purpose in redressing such inequality. This section seeks to examine some of the elements and causes of inequality as they pertain to schools. It also looks at the impact of such inequality and seeks to identify factors that might be addressed to alleviate and remediate such inequality.

At the NESC forum in 2010, Áine Hyland suggested that there still exists a lack of understanding of disadvantage and its complexity. This is evident in the numerous definitions and interpretations that exist and are used in discussion around inequality. The use of terms such as disadvantage, inequality, social exclusion, among others, points to a 'lack of' or an 'absence of' something. Many of the approaches involve a deficit model,

a suggestion that those not benefitting from education are at fault. The deficit model uses negative labels and language such as disengaged, disadvantaged and disempowered. Deficit model thinking suggests that blame lies with the pupil, the family, the community or a cultural mismatch (Friends & Carruthers 2012). It does not question whether the method of teaching, the culture of the school or the curriculum itself is what is lacking. It also absolves those in power from dealing with inequality through a systemic approach and has brought little change over the years to the levels of inequality experienced by the most marginalised social groups (Bull 2008, Downes & Downes 2007, Gilligan 2007).

3.2.1 Factors for consideration in educational inequality

“Those who receive much formal education are considerably advantaged over those who receive little, and those who receive their education in elite institutions are privileged over those who do not” (Bourdieu 1996).

The causes of educational inequality come from within and outside of schools, making it difficult to address them separately. Factors such as the curriculum on offer, streaming and the relationships fostered in school communities, can be dealt with through school-based approaches. However, in-school factors are not the sole determinants of inequality, with issues such as social class, poverty and power having equal if not greater impact on educational outcomes for young people. The inter-relatedness of the causes, for example, school stratification and social class, means that understanding and dealing with the issue of inequality needs a multi-faceted approach and a recognition that inequality is not generated from a single source (Higgins & Tymms 2014, Lynch & Lodge 2002, Travers 2013). Armstrong (1998) examines inequalities in terms of resources, curricular content, access and opportunities, structural procedures and processes.

Drawing on the work of Bourdieu on capital, Lynch & Lodge (2002) identify three inter-related core contexts in education that impact upon inequality, namely the socio-economic, socio-cultural and the political. Lodge & Lynch (2004) refer to elements such as redistribution, representation and the affective elements of education, while Lynch (2009) looks at the issue in related but even broader terms – economic, socio-cultural, power and affective relations.

There is a need to acknowledge the impact of poverty, social class, geographic and social stratification and power inequalities as they present in schools and in our wider society. The direct relationship between social background and educational outcomes is acknowledged across literature on educational inequality (Drudy & Kinsella 2009, Gorard 2014, Lynch & Lodge 2002, Lodge & Lynch 2004, Machin 2006, Zappone 2007). Baker (2004) refers to the correlation between social class and level of education and acknowledges that social mobility is stronger, the more education one acquires. Indeed, the more equal the country, the stronger the level of social mobility. Equality, and being provided with the ability to avail of education lead to the development of the individual and are vital for accessing rights and goods. They are also essential in defining one's role in terms of personal identity and cultural worth, and creating better life chances (O'Hanlon 2003, Ryan 2008).

Apple (2012), Giroux (1981, 1997), McLaren (1993) and Shor (1992) acknowledge that the dominant cultural capital may be in conflict with the culture of students. The type of social and cultural capital valued and perpetuated by those in power

involves the network and relations that individuals develop with a view to optimising their interests – a useful but unequally distributed good – not unlike money, prestige or power (Bourdieu, as cited in Dubet 2013).

Social reproduction is frequently brought about through stratification, both within and across schools. Stratified groups differ in many respects – dialect, dress, income, aspirations and political participation (Shor 1992). School stratification tends to mirror family and community stratification, with schools enrolling from their surrounding geographic area in the main. This leads to segregation by location where the cost of housing defines the intake of a particular school and gives rise to the notion of equality of places leading to equality of chances (Drudy & Kinsella 2009, Gorard 2014, Reay 2010). This residential segregation influences a school's socio-economic context. Stratification within schools often comes about because of streaming or tracking. Janmaat (2013) and Banks, Byrne, McCoy & Smyth (2014) found that grouping by ability was proved to enhance social and ethnic segregation and lead to discrimination, thus excluding some children from social mobility and denying them the possibility of availing of the same educational opportunities as their peers. Evidence suggests that it is children from lower economic backgrounds who tend to be placed in the lowest streams. Lynch & Lodge (2002) refer to the complex issue of 'ability' and explore the ways in which students may be stratified on the basis of their assumed abilities into different classes. Where streaming still exists, the students who end up in the lowest streams tend to be those from the least socio-economically privileged backgrounds. In schools where

streaming does not take place, subject choice may be the mechanism by which students of perceived lesser ability are placed. For example, those students perceived to be more capable are assigned to Science, sometimes on the basis of a single assessment examination before entry. So called weaker students are placed in practical subjects such as Home Economics or Woodwork.

In the race for 3rd level or further education, social class offers advantages such as the ability to purchase extra tuition or ‘grinds’, avail of preparatory courses for examinations like the H-pat, opportunities to visit the Gaeltacht or to do after school or summer courses in European languages. In addition, visits to museums, the theatre or concerts which afford some children the opportunity to acquire the social and cultural capital that makes schooling easier may be closed off to families who are struggling financially. The absence of such opportunities prevents children from lower- income families from competing equally with the children of middle and upper-class families. The issue is therefore not just one of social class and providing opportunities but of alleviating poverty and creating real equality. In analysing the redistributive perspective, Lynch & Lodge (2002) refer to the futility of trying to promote equality of opportunity without equality of condition. This resonates with the work of Iris Young in this regard, who acknowledges that issues of power and unequal recognition, in tandem with poverty and economic policies, exacerbate inequality.

Another aspect of stratification in schools is the notion of what intelligences are valued. Teachers work within a curriculum that is biased towards linguistic and numerical

abilities, the very abilities that are enhanced by the cultural capital provided in middle and upper income families. Schools and the examinations system use a very narrow measurement of a human's being. The notion of teaching to the test, predicting what questions might come up is readily accepted by schools and society. This narrow view of intelligence also leads to a limited view of who constitute the most valuable students. A continuous cycle has been created. For schools to maintain their positions in league tables they need to recruit those who are likely to perform well in examinations. Parents see that as essential and there is an accepted equation of middle-class or upper-class status with being good in school. (Lynch & Lodge 2002) Added to that perception issues such as entrance tests, 'voluntary' contributions and amenities fees, as well as the added costs of extra-curricular participation, result in a closed shop for some students. Drudy & Kinsella (2009) found that despite the economic gains and growth of the 1990s and early to mid-2000s, the amount Ireland spent on education remained low compared to other OECD countries. Economic growth did not improve Ireland's situation with regards to income inequality, poverty or social inclusion. Rather, it appeared to create a wider gap between social classes.

The impact education can have on the life prospects of young people is given much attention, particularly at government and think-tank level. For example, the Limerick Regeneration Masterplan of 2008 asserted that education sits at the core of the social regeneration process as it is critical for social inclusion, economic success and sustainability. Such an approach appears to minimise the impact that poverty and

economic inequality plays and fails to acknowledge that both injustice and inequality are economically generated and have a cultural and political manifestation. Drudy & Kinsella (2009) assert that an inclusive social system is dependent on an inclusive system that is located within a re-distributive set of state fiscal policies while Lynch & Lodge (2002, p.185) suggest that “inequality is endemic in a class-driven capitalist society”. Within education, economic inequality manifests itself fundamentally as a social class problem, an issue of unequal access, participation, outcome and conclusion. The notion of equality as a principal of democratic distribution is propounded by writers such as Freire (1992), Bourdieu (1996), Shor (1992), Apple (2012), Lodge & Lynch (2004). O’Hanlon (2003) suggests the need for equality of treatment and education for choice and empowerment while Osler (2010) contends that democracy implies equal access and active participation in all aspects of school life. Shevlin & Rose (2003) assert that certain voices within society have tended to be ignored, isolated and patronised as the discourse of professionals and policy makers have dominated, while there is little spontaneous awareness of the needs and rights of those whose identities rendered them socially subordinate (Lodge & Lynch 2003). This lack of representation or voice for marginalized groups in relation to schools and education comes as a result of hegemony and the impact of the hidden curriculum.

3.2.2 Power and hegemony in education

It is now understood that there is little or no evidence of real or relevant differences among children per se, instead, a social construction of schooling functions to serve the powerful interests of the school, the state and the dominant classes and powerful groups (O’Hanlon, 2003).

Hegemony refers to the power relationships that exist across all strata in society including schools, whereby one group dominates and where the socio-political and cultural ideologies of that group are seen as being superior and preferable to those of others. The dominant group controls society and its moral and intellectual beliefs permeate everyday life. It promotes and protects its dominant position, leading to a stratified society, where those who do not form part of the dominant group are perceived as ‘deviants’ and can become marginalized. The concept of hegemony is addressed in the writings of many of the world’s most significant educational philosophers and commentators. Its impact on and relation to schooling is acknowledged. Apple (2012), Bourdieu (1996), Freire (1992), Giroux (1981, 1997) and Shor (1992), among others, have written extensively about how education reproduces the social and cultural capital deemed legitimate by the dominant class. Gramsci (as cited by Giroux, 1981a) proposed that cultural domination is achieved by a variety of sophisticated means using the notion of “civil society”, although that domination is not necessarily achieved by coercion. It is more likely to be maintained through winning the consent of subordinate groups (Jay, 2010) and through what Apple (2012) refers to as consent and consensus, though that consensus is often superficial (Giroux, 1981a). Hegemony is rooted in daily school practices, texts, rituals, beliefs, values and attitudes (Giroux, 1981a). It encourages people not to recognize how institutionalized sexism, racism, homophobia and the like affect individuals (Trifonas, 2003) and legitimizes social order through the production and distribution of ‘acceptable’ knowledge and classroom processes (Giroux, 1981a). This ‘terrain of social control’ (Whitty, 1985) allows schools to act as one of the primary modes of production of the

cultural commodities needed by a corporate state and that state influence is evident across the system (Apple, 2012).

Henry Giroux, in his forward to McLaren's 1993 book, urges us to critique the traditional assumption that schools are the major mechanism for the development of a democratic and egalitarian social order. The very nature of the Irish education system is hegemonic, with the dominant values being middle class. Stratification exists across the system and within schools. Drudy and Kinsella (2009) refer to the four levels of schooling at second level: a) private, elite, fee paying, b) voluntary secondary schools, c) community and comprehensive schools and d) vocational schools. Schools transmit messages about what is valued or not in terms of knowledge and culture and "advantage some and provide barriers to the educational success and social mobility of others" (Banks et al. 2014, p.399).

Socialization involves learned behaviour, received values, familiar language and habitual perceptions (Shor, 1992). The work of schools in socializing young people is seen by Giroux as a means of social control where 'the social order is legitimized and reproduced through the production and distribution of 'acceptable' knowledge and classroom social processes' (1981a, p.37). The focus is on achievement measured in a narrow way, where the purpose of education is to "get a good grade, agree with the teacher and memorize as much as you can" (Shor, 1992, p. 117). At its most extreme, the interpretation of what schools do to students through socialization has been likened to the work of prisons (Friend and Caruthers, 2012). The use of uniforms, time constraints

through timetabling, top to bottom communication, prescriptive texts, rules and structures ensures that the school environment resembles a prison, echoing the view that teachers are the prison guards and students the inmates (Althusser, as cited in Giroux 1981a, p. 97) and that children are compulsorily confined (Devine, 2003).

Lodge and Lynch (2009, p.31) present an equally bleak view of the impact of school socialization. Not only does the school reproduce societal norms and values but young people actively reproduce hierarchical, oppressive relations in society. They write of an education system characterized by segregation and lack of recognition for difference and diversity in its institutional processes and structures. These formal aspects of schooling allow schools to disseminate the perceived common sense view of the world, that by working hard and going with the consensus, the student will be able to progress and gain social mobility.

3.2.3 Impact in schools

The DEIS programme, with its use of market-driven, economic language and focus on targets that can be set and outcomes that can be measured seems to epitomize the problem of what is valued in education at present. A conflict appears to arise between education for its own sake and education for the economic, often perceived as the common, good. School systems seem to mirror the economic system and the workplace, and pose questions for us in relation to what skills and intelligences are valued by society. Interventions from the state are based on what industry needs (Apple, 2012). The alignment of the functions of schools with the desired outcomes of industry is in evidence

worldwide. Mental work, both in school and later, is the proviso of the middle and upper classes, while the working classes are to be prepared for manual work. As a result, middle class students are taught intellectual open-mindedness, problem-solving and flexibility. Working class students are taught punctuality, neatness, respect for authority and habit formation (Bowles and Gintis, as cited in Apple 2012, p.62). Anyon (1997) echoes Bowles and Gintis with her recognition that working class students get work that is mechanical and routine, and Giroux (1981b) asserts that the school functions to transmit the necessary skills and discipline required to socialize students passively into their future work roles.

While Apple (2012) dismisses the writings of Bowles and Gintis as too mechanistic and deterministic, their correspondence theory linking industry to schools remains valid. At its most extreme the impact of economic needs ‘determine’ what goes on in other sectors of society including school. Much of the evidence in Irish schools would seem to back the view that schools stratify students from differing classes in preparation for the workforce. Banks et al. (2014) refer to the notion of ‘curricular location’ – students being aware of their social and academic position within school. The notion that students from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds will be prepared for a different work role and workplace than their middle class peers is evident in our education system, an example being the Leaving Certificate Applied Programme (LCA), an alternative senior cycle programme.

The LCA was the brainchild of entrepreneur Fergal Quinn and a significant aim in its introduction was to make students more employable. The numbers taking the programme stand at approximately 5% of the student cohort at senior cycle and there is evidence that those taking LCA come almost exclusively from the lower socio-economic bands (Banks, Byrne, McCoy & Smyth, 2014). LCA also has a higher proportion of students with learning difficulties, behavioural difficulties and special educational needs and the student cohort is often made up of those students who entered second level with the lowest reading ages, were in the lowest stream at junior cycle or are perceived as most likely to drop out of school (Banks et al, 2014). The number of schools in which the programme is offered is limited, with it often being the local Education and Training Board (ETB) – the ‘tech’ that is the sole provider in a suburb or town. For example, in the areas of Dublin 5 and Dublin 13, none of the single-sex girls’ voluntary secondary schools offers LCA, with only one of the all-boys schools doing so.

In addition, the nature of the modules offered on the LCA curriculum propounds economic priorities. Hotel, Catering and Tourism, Office Administration and Customer Care, Childcare/Community Care, Hair and Beauty, among others, seem to be preparing those young people who follow the programme for the service industries, in low-paid positions with poor job security, where zero-hour contracts may be the norm. Students prepare tasks as a key part of assessment and there is much emphasis on vocational education and preparation, as well as IT skills. The use of the word tasks in relation to LCA coursework and assessment implies an emphasis on economic and mechanistic

language and actions. Students are not asked to analyse or ask questions, rather they are encouraged to ask questions about how to do things and to accomplish tasks (Apple, 2012). The Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme (LCVP), an add-on to the established Leaving Certificate, requires students to complete two economics based modules – Preparation for the World of Work and Enterprise Education, its emphasis again being to produce a suitable workforce for the economy.

The modes of assessment in operation in education systems utilize the language and strengths of the dominant culture with their emphasis on linguistic and numeric abilities. In Ireland, the points system pits students against their peers and results in the transmission of knowledge simply to fulfil examination criteria. What Freire (1972) described as a ‘banking’ model of education – where students are filled with knowledge to enable them to pass an exam, rather than learning, engaging and thinking for the sake of it – seems to prevail. All the while, the purpose is to produce suitable employees. Assessment is presented as meritocratic, offering a level playing field since all have an equal chance of success if they work hard. This position does not acknowledge the unequal starting points of many students or recognise the differences between and diversity among students (Jay 2010, Apple 2012). Armstrong (1998, p.154) contends that “assessment procedures, far from being neutral or objective, are an integral part of hegemonic, social and cultural reproduction, producing and reproducing differences and inequalities” while Karabel and Halsey (1977, p.25 as cited in Apple 2012) state that everyday life in the education system “upholds those meritocratic values that justify

differential rewards and the separation of the ‘successful’ from the ‘failures’ provides daily object lessons in inequality”. In essence, some students become what Bourdieu termed ‘outcasts on the inside’, with examination outcomes strongly related to social class (Reay, 2010).

External checks such as those from the inspectorate focus on accountability, measurement, performance indicators and SMART (specific, measurable, attainable, realistic, timely) planning - all language associated with business and the market economy. Students and parents are perceived as clients. The focus is on efficiency, efficient use of resources, categorising students and using baseline data (Devine, 2003).

Textbooks present certain aspects and values as facts. The exam system and the ‘points race’ mean that learning the perceived or accepted right answer is valued over the ability to be a critical, independent thinker. The view presented tends to be that of the predominant culture. Nowhere is that more telling than in relation to History where textbooks tend to be Eurocentric – the accepted version of Columbus discovering America being an example – and where the subject is used for hegemonic purposes, to promote the idea of nationhood, national culture and historical heritage. (Armstrong 1998) Similarly, what constitutes literature for study on English courses can present a restricted view of the world. Business studies textbooks focus almost exclusively on the management and capitalist side of the commercial world. Labour law, the history and role of trade unions and social aspects of economics scarcely feature.

The range of subjects offered in schools and the value placed on those subjects says much about the type of knowledge that the dominant culture believes is valid. Technical and technological knowledge carry weight with mass media and with economic and political forces and there is a near total corporate monopolization of technical knowledge and technological intelligence (Apple, 2012). Moreover, Drudy and Kinsella (2009) point to ‘an ever-widening gap between those who have access to the new knowledge and those who are excluded’. The emphasis on STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Mathematics) subjects and the funding of technology-based subjects mirrors what is valued currently in Irish society in terms of the economic and employment needs of the country. Students in need of learning support or perceived as less able are often withdrawn from Science or perhaps not offered the subject in the first place. The need to produce top scientists and technological entrepreneurs is to the fore, with those who excel in the arts and humanities less valued and perceived as less valuable. Giroux (1983) links this rise of science and technology to the subsequent growth in the culture of positivism – where public school curricula are limited to the reproduction of objectivity, efficiency and technique. Intuition, insight, philosophy and non-scientific theoretical frameworks are not acknowledged and facts take priority over values. PISA reports focusing on Maths, Science and literacy are examined and analysed to the nth degree, with Irish results being compared to others, without taking into account the differing contexts of education systems. When the OECD/Pisa 2012 findings were reported in the media in 2015, it was in the context of how much an improvement in our position could do to increase GDP. All of this delivers a message about the importance

of subjects seen as essential for economic improvement and the value placed on other subjects. In 1981 Giroux was lamenting the decline of History in the US education system. In Ireland 2015, History teachers were fearful that whatever the format of the new junior cycle, their subject would be relegated in importance and numbers taking it would fall further.

Schools propound hegemonic aspects of society in an even more widespread fashion through the hidden curriculum, present in every school context. Jay (2010, p.5) argues that “the hidden curriculum can serve as a hegemonic device for the purposes of securing, for the ruling class (and other dominant groups in society) a continued position of power and leadership.” Devine (2003, p.53) refers to the “powerful impact of the hidden curriculum in the formation of social identities, with children internalising distinct messages regarding their rights and status through the curricular, pedagogical and evaluative practices employed by the school”, while Reay (2010) argues that too often, for too long and across many educational spaces, education has been about the making of one class at the expense of another.

Schools are not the only agents of reproduction. Mass media is a factor, and parents and family play a significant role as active agents of socialization (Giroux 1981a, Siraj & Mayo, 2014). Those in the middle and upper classes invest heavily in extra-curricular activities – sport, music, drama, art. They are more familiar with the language of schooling than their less well-off counterparts. By providing opportunities to travel, attend concerts and plays, visit museums, they give their children the cultural capital that

offers them a direct path into the dominant culture. That cultural capital is subsequently used as a device by schools and society to allocate students to their “proper” position (Apple, 2012) and is a commodity not unlike money, prestige or power (Dubet, 2013).

3.2.4 Transforming the status quo – the role of teachers and knowledge

Schools distribute and produce culture through their formal and informal workings. Yet the impact that such socialization has does not have to remain static or uphold the dominant status quo. Freire (1992), Giroux (1997) and Shor (1992) see pedagogy as an emancipatory activity, believing that education can be transformative and that teachers and students can create a more equal society. They write of the possibilities offered by critical consciousness, transformative knowledge and critical theory as means of what Shor (1992) calls ‘desocializing’ schools from the accepted norms and dominant paradigms. The role of teachers and the nature of the knowledge that they present as valid are also key to any transformation.

At present, it seems that the teaching desired by the dominant culture is essentially academic and exam-focused (O’Hanlon, 2003). Teacher talk is to the fore and education is something that is “done to” students. Shor’s (1992) assertion that the classroom is populated by passive students - spectators rather than participants - and knowledge is transferred unilaterally, still rings true in many classrooms and for many subjects. Teachers are the power holders in the classroom since they control the methods by which knowledge is transmitted and the language used to do so. As a result, they help maintain

the status quo, transmitting tacitly a benign and neutral version of social reality (Giroux, 1981a).

However, there is potential for a different landscape. Teachers can displace the tendency of schooling to become merely a ritual of self-perpetuation (McLaren, 1993). Educators and community members can devise opportunities “to reconstruct the culture of urban schools and those schools can be recultured as a counter discourse to the hegemonic discourse of teaching” (Friend & Caruthers, 2012, p.372). Kincheloe & Steinberg (1997, p.28, as cited in Jay 2010) write of the necessity on the part of teachers and other cultural workers “to take back power from the educational, political and economic groups who have for far too long been able to shape school policy and curriculum in ways that harm students from low status groups”. It is up to teachers and school administrators to ensure that the culture produced is one which has at its core the removal of inequality since “it is teachers in the end who will change the world of education, by understanding it” (Stenhouse, as cited in O’Hanlon, 2003, p. 29).

Frequently, the knowledge in school is divorced from the lives and experiences of students. The knowledge which ‘counts’ is technical rather than transformative (Anyon, in Giroux 1981a). It is institutionally selected and sanctioned, and sometimes even sanitized (Giroux, 1981a). Apple (2012), Freire (1992), Jay (2010 and Shor (1992) acknowledge the power of educators to challenge the status quo and to empower marginalized groups, asserting that transformative knowledge threatens the dominant

group. Shor (1992) calls for a critical examination of existing knowledge so that it can be transformed into a dynamic knowledge that makes connections with all young people.

Echoing Freire's optimistic belief that humans have the power to learn and to change things, Ira Shor (1992) contends that human actions make society, that society is unfinished and that ordinary people can change history and social policy. He writes of a critical consciousness whereby knowledge, language and power can be used to counteract rigidly policed curriculum, mandated texts and frequent standardized testing. Giroux (1981a) points to the lived experiences of students as a starting point for developing classroom experiences that allow students to discover how they make sense of their world. He asserts that "educators need to develop a critical pedagogy in which the knowledge, habits and skills of critical citizenship, not simply good citizens, are taught and practiced (1997, p. 123), asserting that such an emancipatory stance could be counterhegemonic. This means providing students with the critical capacity to challenge and transform existing social and political forms, rather than simply adapt to them. Friend and Caruthers (2012) call for the preparation of teachers and educational leaders who will act from a philosophical stance that promotes social justice, acknowledging Freire's belief that "the active presence of pupils, pupils' fathers, pupils' mothers, security people, cooks and custodians in program planning, content planning ... does not mean denying the indispensable need for specialists". Any move towards social equity, multiculturalism and gender balance must be genuine, however, coming about through the use of what Freire calls 'true' knowledge in the classroom and the synthesis of students' real

experiences into learning. McLaren (1993) and Jay (2010) refer to the need for schools to critically engage with, rather than simply celebrate, their students' experiences and culture.

Aronowitz, as cited in Giroux (1981a) proposes that "education is the great democratic institution that enabled even the most humble of its citizens to enjoy the chance for self-improvement". It does not always seem that this is the case with schools appearing to be sites of economic and cultural reproduction where only particular kinds of knowledge are valued (Apple, 2012). Reay's assertion that schools are conflicted would appear to ring true. They are held up as the means of achieving equality but also implicated in the reproduction of inequalities (2010). Hers is a more pessimistic view than that of Freire, Giroux or Shor as she questions any school's capacity to compensate for economic and social inequalities.

In order to change the way in which students are socialized, schools and educators will be required to produce new thinking around what constitutes social and cultural capital, with the concepts of freedom, equality, justice and growth at the heart of the socialization process (O'Hanlon, 2003). The values of school will still be reflected in its curriculum, resources, communications and procedures but by using them in a manner that reduces inequality, schools will do far more than distribute the existing dominant culture. Rather, they will be in a position to produce an educational landscape that reduces marginalization and inequality. Whatever happens, education cannot remain neutral

(Apple 2012, Shor, 1992) since education that tries to be neutral supports the dominant ideology of society (Freire, as cited in Shor, 1992).

Ryan (2008) refers to the role of schools in building communities and developing values, as well as increasing achievement and contends that “education makes a powerful contribution to the social construction of inclusive communities in an inclusive society”. Shor (1992) believes that by ‘desocializing’, schools can nurture in students a passion for justice, concern for the environment, commitment to community and public life, and can acknowledge emotional dimensions of knowledge such as the value of humour, passion, curiosity and intuition. In Ireland, aspects of the formal curriculum such as CSPE and SPHE, along with more informal programmes on Transition Year courses such as YSI (Young Social Innovators) promote the notion of community over the individual, and place more emphasis on engagement in social justice issues rather than economic ones. Schools’ desires to promote social justice can also be met through having the whole school community work together to complete programmes such as the Green Flag and Yellow Flag, allowing students to get involved in environmental or diversity awareness.

The potential is clear. Schools have the capability of doing more than just distributing culture. They can be producers of a culture that emphasizes justice, equality and improved life chances and experiences for all students. Such a setting would offer students, irrespective of social class or academic ability the opportunity to study and socialise in a more diverse environment and differences could cease to be seen as deviant

or subordinate (Lodge & Lynch, 2003) though it may be difficult to counteract the dominant culture (Giroux, 1981a).

Schools should not merely reflect the world of which they are a part, but be critical of it, and show in their own processes that its shortcomings are not inevitable, but can be changed. They aim to show that society can be characterized by communal as well as individual values, that all people merit equal treatment and equal dignity, that academic ability is not the only measure of a person, that racism and sexism are neither inevitable nor acceptable” (Dale 1988, p17, as cited in Fielding 2010). The next section will address the issue of care in the school setting, suggesting that a focus on affective relations, especially in schools that serve those perceived to be at an educational, social or cultural disadvantage, can bring improved outcomes in terms of student wellbeing and in terms of educational achievement.

3.3 Relationships and care in education

“You love school when it makes you feel smart, when you know the teachers care about you and your future...when they think you’ll be someone in life” Cushman (2003).

Ellerbock & Kiefer (2014) assert that two specific needs of young adolescents that have not received much attention in educational literature are their needs for care and fun. This section of the review of the literature focuses on the importance of care in schools. There is evidence of growing interest in the importance of the affective aspects of schooling - relationships and care - on alleviating inequality, with Lynch & Lodge (2002), Noddings (2005, 2006, 2007) and O’Brien & Flynn (2007) examining its impact. The importance

of the relationship between teachers and students is acknowledged, as is the influence of the biographies of both teachers and students on the interactions that take place in the classroom. Factors often referred to by students when asked what type of teachers or teaching they like include having a good rapport, enjoyable lessons, confident teachers, teachers who respect their students, and teachers who are sensitive to the needs of students (Siraj & Mayo 2012). Shevlin & Rose (2003) emphasize that teachers' expectations for young people from marginalised groups are a critical component in school success or failure. The impact of such affective relationships warrants further exploration.

3.3.1 Care and the importance of the relational in schools

A community of care can be defined as a school culture in which students and teachers care about and support each other, individuals' needs are satisfied within a group setting, and members feel a sense of belonging and identification with the group (Ellerbrock & Kiefer, 2014).

A caring school will mean that the worth of people is not measured in how much they can add to the nation's balance sheet. Rather, the uniqueness and multi-dimensional nature of intelligence will be recognised and each person valued. The presence of care in school is essential for creating a climate where students have a sense of belonging and feel welcome irrespective of capability or disability. Ryan (2008) outlines several ways to create such a climate including valuing all students and staff equally; viewing differences between children as being a strength and seeing the purpose of the work of the school as developing caring, tolerant and understanding participants in a diverse society. At the heart of each of these is the notion that care is an essential element in the

school make-up and that it has as valuable a place in the school curriculum as does logic and reason.

Baker, Lynch, Cantillon & Walsh (2004) argue for the recognition of the importance of affective relations, not just to promote happiness but academic progress as well. There is acknowledgement that the affective parts of education can lead to improved participation and motivation (Fielding 2006, Flynn 2013, Noddings 2005, Shor 1992). There is recognition also that students, like adults, learn better when they are happy. Academic progress, feeling cared for and enjoying school are not mutually exclusive (Ellerbock & Kiefer 2014, Lynch & Lodge 2002, Noddings 2005, O'Brien & Flynn 2007, Toshalis & Nakkura 2012). On the contrary, Lynch (2009) argues that 'careless' education undermines learning and promotes inequalities of outcome, while Nel Noddings (2005) believes that most of us who would argue for caring in schools are intuitively quite sure that children in such settings will in fact become more competent learners. She also suggests that the curriculum can be selected with caring in mind and that incidental learning and intrinsic motivation can happen when teachers help students bring their interest and topics together in ways that have meaning for them.

The writings of Nel Noddings are significant in any review of the role and importance of care in education. Across a body of work dating from 1982 to 2017, she outlines an ethics of care that involves modelling, dialogue, attention and confirmation in a reciprocal relationship between teacher and student, so that we can create schools

that teach for developing as human beings in contrast to an ethos of competition and economic superiority.

Modelling involves showing students how to care by having caring relationships with others and through our relationships with students. Dialogue is the second essential component of Noddings' ethics of care. She suggests that for genuine care to take place, we must have open dialogue with students – genuine conversations and decision making, where the adults have not already predetermined the outcome of the discussion. Another central aspect of care in education is attention – paying attention to students and others and being open and empathetic. We must listen to the needs that the students express and not try to meet what we assume their needs are. Finally, Noddings' 4th component of care in education is confirmation, affirming and encouraging the best in students. She suggests that we can only do this if we know the person well enough and that dialogue and a reciprocal relationship are necessary first. Teachers tend to be those who excelled in the traditional school setting, with its emphasis on examination success. For those people to meet the needs of their students, both relational and academic, they need to listen to those students and build relationships with them in the manner that Noddings outlines.

It is worth noting that the work of Noddings and those who advocate an ethics of care is neither universally accepted nor lauded. Critics such as Diller (1988) and Houston (1990) contend that the focus is too based on traditional roles with women as caregivers and caring interpreted as mothering, and that it cannot sit comfortably with the work of

feminists. There is also concern that an over emphasis on care can result in lowered expectations of students from disadvantaged settings from teachers who may unintentionally focus on their circumstances rather than their academic potential. Darminan's 2003 case study of a Maltese school highlights how this may occur and the impact it can have on students.

Schools are places of emotional work and schooling relations are relations of dependency and interdependency (Lynch & Lodge 2002, Lynch 2009, Reay 2010). The aim in creating a caring school is that students not only feel cared for and cared about, but learn to care for others and the environment (Fien 2003, Smith 2004). Such caring leads to moral development and affective empowerment (Fielding 2006, Noddings 2005, O'Brien & Flynn 2007, Shor 1992). Noddings (2005) suggests that caring in education is more than just checking that students are alright. It is not the same as caring in the virtue sense. Rather, it is a reciprocal relationship built on trust, modelling and dialogue, where being cared for by the teacher leads the student to learn to care about others – those whom they know intimately as well as strangers. The student also learns to care about humanly created things and the environment. Care also needs to be purposeful – it must mean something to both participants. This emphasis on reciprocity is essential so that caring does not become one sided or patronizing. Noddings's emphasis on reciprocity and dialogue echoes Freire's view that dialogue between teacher and student marks the democratic position between them. Freire, as cited in Downes & Downes (2007), sees the

role of teacher and student as a dialogical partnership and suggests that the need for dialogue is even more important in the context of disadvantage.

Noddings's belief in the need for modelling is also crucial since young people learn by what they experience. The way in which members of staff are treated by school leaders and by each other also provides a model for students. The attitudes, practices and policies of schools need to reflect the fundamental and inescapable importance of care and emotions to human development and flourishing, since the main aim of education should be to produce competent, caring, loving and loveable people (O'Brien & Flynn, 2007).

3.3.2 Challenges to caring

One of the biggest challenges to promoting the affective elements of schooling is the over-emphasis on the economic agenda and the neoliberal view of what is valuable in education. Schools are under pressure to set and meet targets, and to be accountable for all that is taking place within the classroom. Yet, measuring the impact of caring or indeed careless schools is very difficult (Lynch, 2009). We cannot measure many of the hoped for outcomes of care such as critical thinking or concern for the common good (Noddings, 2006). Conflict exists between emotional indicators and SMART outcomes and an individual learner-focused curriculum may be at odds with a generic economics-driven focus (Downes, 2007).

There is a marked contrast between educating from the care perspective and the insistence on more and more standardized testing and accountability. The lack of trust

often inherent in such testing – where fear and competition take the place of anticipation and delight in learning – may result in teachers losing sight of why they entered the profession (Noddings, 2005). Pressure to produce high test scores inhibits the work teachers regard as central to their mission: the development of caring and competent people. This view is echoed in a recent study of early career teachers in DEIS primary schools (Burns 2014). The young professionals entered teaching to make a difference but are overwhelmed by the need to prove to the inspectorate that standardized test results in literacy and numeracy are improving. In addition, as ever increasing emphasis is placed on STEM and literacy and numeracy, the time available to focus on the affective aspects of schooling is further diminished. One hopeful sign may be that wellbeing is one of the 8 key principles that underpin the new junior cycle framework and that the time allocated for SPHE, CSPE and PE has been increased in the guidelines for JCT (NCCA, 2015).

Noddings, as cited in O'Brien & Flynn (2007), suggests that the neglect of emotions and care in the educational field is also a function of the low economic value placed on such activities in the wider society and that there is an undervaluing of the skills, attitudes and capacities traditionally associated with women. According to O'Brien & Flynn (2007, p.71) "an understanding and recognition of care, and the labour it necessarily involves is fundamental to tackling the reproduction of educational inequality for vulnerable groups, and to disrupting the processes which privilege others, thus deepening our understanding of the significance of care and emotions in education".

Any acknowledgement of the position which care should have in schools brings us to revisit questions about why we teach, what we teach and how we teach it. It also requires us to continue to look at who and what we value in schools and in society (Gilligan 2007, Lynch & Baker 2005, Lynch 2009, Noddings 2006, O'Brien & Flynn 2007). If we are to create caring classrooms, we have to return consistently to the question of what our purpose is. Noddings (2005) urges us to engage in continual dialogue on the aims of education. There is a need to acknowledge the full range of capabilities of our students and realise that we cannot reasonably describe one model of an educated person. Too often intelligence is measured in a very narrow fashion, limited to verbal, linguistic and numerical capacities. Schools need to consider not just cognitive but also affective issues. Hargreaves (2005, as cited in Downes and Gilligan) refers to the importance of the uniqueness of each person and the acceptance of the multi-dimensional nature of intelligence, while Noddings (2006, p.339) proposes that "an education worthy of its name will help students to develop as persons, to be thoughtful citizens, competent parents, faithful friends, capable workers, generous neighbours and lifelong learners". How we define knowledge and how we nurture each person's potential and capabilities is crucial (Gilligan 2007, Lynch 2009) and adopting a more holistic view of the human as vulnerable, interconnected and inescapably affected by human relations is equally if not more important in the case of disadvantaged young people (O'Brien & Flynn, 2007, p.71).

Given that emotional care is morally significant and potentially socially transformative (O'Brien & Flynn, 2007), it is imperative that it gains wider recognition. Education and welfare policies should consider not just cognitive but affective issues (Guedes-Teixeira & Araujo, 2015). It is vital that care, emotional intelligence and emotional well-being become part of the public education debate and personal caring should be a public normative consideration (Baker et al., 2004, Bull 2008). Schools can be empowering and can develop people as citizens who think critically and act democratically (Shor 1992). The idea of the reciprocal relationship and engaging in dialogue and listening will equip our students to do just that. Teaching and learning have the potential to affect change. Teachers can be very special people in the lives of children, and it should be legitimate for them to spend time developing relations of trust, talking with students about problems that are central to their lives, and guiding them toward greater sensitivity and competence across all domains of care (Noddings, 2007).

Just as care in education is about dependence and interdependence, the concept of care is inextricably linked to issues of power and student voice. The following section will explore the research on voice work and examine why it is necessary to locate any work on transforming schools in an environment that welcomes collaboration with students and conversations about all that concerns them in education.

3.4 Student voice in research and policy

... it is a challenge to convince people of the value of the paradox that to listen to students, to build relationships, is to better understand, to be more engaged, to be more successful” (Cook-Sather, 2006, p.26).

Student voice work is described using many labels including pupil voice, student as researcher, consulting pupils and, most recently, learner voice. There is common ground in all writings on voice although their emphasis may differ. Very often, the differing discourse lies in the issue of purpose. This section examines the issues surrounding student voice in terms of its origins, differing interpretations and the purposes of voice work. It also explores the challenges such work faces and looks at the possibilities that using a student voice perspective can offer schools and students. What is clear is that there are various notions of voice and a spectrum of possibilities for engaging with the issue and that all schools are starting from a different point – some of them very low (Leitch and Mitchell, 2007).

Michael Fielding (2010, 2012) traces the student voice movement back to the pre- and post-war radical tradition of educators like A.S. Neill and in particular Alex Booker. Student voice work gained further attention in the 1970s and 1980s through the work of Lawrence Stenhouse. It was with the publication of the 1989 articles of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child that formalised attention was given to the issue and much of the writing on voice traces its origins to the publication of those articles. The influence of the UNCRC (1989), which promotes “the rights of children to actively participate in all matters concerning them” has resulted in increased international attention being given to using pupil perspectives although there continues to be limited awareness or implementation of the terms of the convention and its continued non-acceptance by the United States is significant (Flynn, 2013). Jean Rudduck, Julia Flutter

and Michael Fielding made key contributions to student voice research during the 1990s and 2000s. Nind, Boorman and Clarke (2012) suggest a link between voice issues in disabled children's lives and the subsequent and more widespread mainstream interest in the issue of voice that followed. Added to this was the increasingly vocal school improvement movement and a view of students as consumers in some quarters.

3.4.1 Interpretation and purpose

Student voice has become a catch-all term for work that elicits or seeks to elicit student views on a range of issues that concern them, directly or indirectly. As recognition of its importance has grown, so too has the range of interpretations of voice. Any attempt at a single definition of voice is fraught with difficulty (Noyes, 2005). Pupil voice, students as researcher and consulting pupils are ascribed in the literature, each of them with the avowed aim of improving the context in which children live and learn. One thrust of pupil voice research, as outlined by Flutter and Rudduck (2004), is that pupil consultation is the key to improving teaching and learning. This notion of performativity, closely associated with economic metaphors, is possibly unintended but schools are using it as a means to improve measured outcomes. Similarly, according to Noyes (2005), the work of MacBeath, Demetriou, Rudduck & Myers (2003) proposes pupil voice as a form of remediation for disengagement and suggests that it enables professionals to work 'on' and 'on behalf of' young people to improve quality of life, educational experience and attainment. The work of Fielding and Bragg (2003) and Fielding (2004, 2010 and 2012) on student as researcher has a social justice imperative and recognises students as

producers of knowledge. It is more transformative in nature and owes less to government and economic requirements. Its focus is broader and it seeks to bring about change in more than just attainment but also in the student's experience of school, calling for "a practice which encourages us to break out of pre-existing moulds and shape the world together in ways that affirm what we wish to become, rather than one that reminds us of what others wish us to remain" (Fielding & Bragg, 2003, p.55). This social justice imperative acknowledges the role of control and power in any involvement of pupils in designing their own learning and their own schools. For transformative potential to become more fully realised, focus on improved teaching and learning needs to be complemented by explicit intentions of developing participatory citizenship, democratic partnerships and challenging powerful assumptions and practices that maintain educational hierarchies and social injustice. (Bragg, 2007).

The reason why we are eliciting the views of students may well affect the success of the exercise and purpose is a significant issue in voice matters. Brooker & McDonald (1999) suggest that a positivist or technical approach has frequently been at the heart of student voice, with a focus on achieving 'the narrow ends of a grade- obsessed society rather than empowerment' (Rudduck & Flutter, 2000, as cited in Johnston). Bland (2011) refers to a notion of student voice – a pervasive form of instrumentality - where voice is viewed as a tool to improve measurable outcomes.

Performativity and surveillance are to the fore. Fleming (2014) suggests that the purposes of voice work range from fulfilling a rights-based position founded on

legislation and the UNCRC to external accountability, active citizenship, inclusion, participation and retention. Other reasons for consulting include improving teaching and learning and fostering a more democratic school ethos. The purpose of such research is not always the same though Streeting (as cited in Czerniawicki and Kidd, 2011) suggests that despite the diversity of practice, what is evident is the commitment of practitioners to principles of social justice, democracy, active citizenry and children's rights'.

3.4.2 Challenges for voice work

The key challenge is to allow the voices to have genuine influence on what happens in schools. Osler contends that "student' perspectives have often been ignored in studies of schooling and children have in many ways been treated as an invisible minority" (2010, p.27). One of the most significant challenges is to find methods of collecting and representing pupil views that genuinely illuminate their thinking and experience (Bland 2011, Bragg 2007, Fielding 2004, Toshalis & Nakkula 2012). Biddulph (2011), Cook-Sather (2006), Friend & Caruthers, Leitch & Mitchell (2007), Simmons et al (2015), Thomson (2011) and Simmons et al (2015) point to the danger of tokenism in voice work, where students are given a voice but not a say, and voice is used as 'cover up' (Arnot & Reay, 2007). Students are often invited to speak about low-level things (Hargreaves, 2004). Cook-Sather (2006) acknowledges the potential danger of creating expectations that may not be fulfilled, warning against the assumption that student voice is a term for universal enfranchisement that will guarantee all young people their agency.

Schools also face the dilemma of ‘whose voice’ is listened to – is it the ‘joiners’, the high fliers, the ‘nice’ students, the middle class students who share our cultural capital and sound ‘like us’? How do we hear the silent, the non-verbal, and the school refusers? (Bahou 2011, Biddulph 2011, Brooker & McDonald 1999, Brown & Gilligan 1991, Cook-Sather 2006, Lundy 2007, Nind et al. 2012, Thomson 2011). Fielding (2010) refers to the notion of prudential inclusion, inviting in the voices we want to hear, while Tangen (2009) suggests that students who shout are often the ones heard least and points to the failure to capture a range of student voices, e.g. from lower socio-economic groups. Students may not have the appropriate language. They may not understand the discourse of schooling. The challenge for teachers and school leaders is to listen to things we don’t want to hear. What do we do with what has been heard or do we operate a policy of selective hearing? Whose interests are being served? Whose interests are being excluded? What does real engagement look like? (Brooker & McDonald 1999, Rudduck & McIntyre 2007).

A key factor in the success of student voice research and practice is the level of genuine participation by students. In order for such participation to take place there must be a recognition of the unique knowledge students possess and a valuing of student experiences (Britzman 1990, Mitra 2005). By giving recognition to that lived experience of students we can allow them to make sense of their context and create relationships and a sense of belonging. (Cook-Sather 2006, Fielding 2010, Nind et al 2012, Rudduck & Flutter 2004, Shirley 2015, Simmons et al. 2015). Fielding (2010) suggests that ‘personal

encounters are at the heart of daily educational processes and intentions’ and highlights the need for the valuing of students as persons, not as units of performance. Central to creating such relationships are dialogue, attentive listening and reciprocal engagement (Fielding 2010, Johnston 2005, Mitra 2005, Thomson 2011). Mitra (2005) urges us to see youth as part of the solution, not part of the problem. Lundy (2007) challenges us to find the space to listen in creative ways, while Toshalis & Nakkula (2012) outline the notion of making student thinking ‘visible’. Creative methods of hearing voice include exit cards, idea books, photography, collage, multi-media and scrapbooks. Such image-based work can complement traditional approaches (Bragg 2007, Flynn 2013, Leith & Mitchell 2007, Toshalis & Nakkula 2012). Whichever mode of recording voice is employed, what is essential is engaging in a dialogic model (Fielding, 2004, 2010).

3.4.3 Voice as possibility

Cook-Sather (2006) contends that positive aspects of student voice lead to positive possibilities and can lead to a critical shift, altering dominant power imbalances. Nowhere is what Fielding (2012) calls ‘the insistent affirmation of possibility’ more important than in working with marginalized students. Friend & Caruthers (2012) point to the need to have in place a strategy of listening to students’ voices as a critical component for restructuring the cultural context of urban schools. We need to look at the purpose, not only of student voice, but of education and to recognise the interconnectedness of power, relationships and voice. There exists ongoing conflict between the neo-liberal, market-led approach to education and the more generously conceived,

humane alternative, one that is person-centred and democratic. Where genuine dialogue exists and space to listen to and hear young people is created there is potential to influence curriculum, assessment, citizenship and lead to distributed leadership for students as well as teachers. Mitra (2015) writes of the difficulty in maintaining the balance of being a school that encourages democracy and student activism while working within the system. If schools can co-create with disadvantaged young people a range of 'spaces' where they can deal with themselves' they can create what Fielding (2012) terms 'democratic fellowship', where students transform their educational experience through participation, wellbeing, power sharing and relationships.

By exploring the possibilities that student voice work affords schools, this section of the literature review has clarified the importance of using a student voice approach when undertaking any research aimed at transforming the school experience, particularly of our most marginalized students.

3.5 Conclusion

This chapter has traced policy developments and thinking in the areas of human capital and disadvantage in Irish education over the past 50 years. It has drawn on the work of Bourdieu, Freire, Shor and Noddings among others, in relation to social and educational inequality, power and empowerment, social reproduction, the hidden curriculum and caring relations, key themes in this thesis. The work of Nel Noddings on the role of care in education was particularly significant when analysing the findings of this study.

The chapter has located the literature in the context of a school serving marginalized students in an area of economic, social and geographical disadvantage. As a result, it adopts a social justice perspective, emphasising the benefits that consulting students can bring to individual students and school communities as a whole.

Chapter 4 - Methodology

4.1 Introduction

This chapter outlines the theoretical framework in which the research was situated, as well as the research methods considered and undertaken during the study. It outlines the research process and examines the considerations around the researcher's position as an insider in a position of power in the research setting.

4.2 The DEIS context

There are currently 198 second level schools who are with DEIS status. According to the Department of Education and Skills the DEIS Plan 2017 sets out the government's vision for education to more fully become a proven pathway to better opportunities for those in communities at risk of disadvantage and social exclusion.

There is extensive use of the quantitative and measurable in assessing how the DEIS plan is working in schools, with an emphasis on accountability. Appendix 3 outlines the guidelines on SMART targets delivered to DEIS school personnel at planning seminars. This study's focus is the qualitative - the students' experience in a DEIS school, using the conceptual lenses of student voice, power and empowerment, and the ethics of care.

4.3 Research questions

The focus of this research was on the student experience of being a member of one DEIS school community, the level of care, if any, experienced by students and its importance to their progress and overall wellbeing. This research used a student voice

approach to focus on student perspectives and insights on their experience. By exploring the existing situation in the school, the research hoped to answer the following questions:

- ☐ What is the students' experience of life in the case study school?
- ☐ Do students feel cared for in the school setting?
- ☐ Can the experience of being consulted through student voice research have a transformative impact for student participants and schools?

4.4 Research approach and methods

This was a mixed methods case study approach, in the researcher's work place. The proposed setting provided the advantage of the researcher having an existing intimate knowledge of and familiarity with the DEIS programme. There was a significant amount of data in existence and available, primarily around the breadth of interventions on offer in the particular school, and in terms of statistics in relation to the targets set in the school's DEIS plan. What was not available is what the researcher sought to discover – the students' personal engagement with and experience of school. The use of the familiar setting allowed the process to be what Mertens (2010), refers to as interactive and empowering. The research was carried out using mixed methodologies including an information gathering phase to include document review and an exploration of how student voice was already collected in the school. That initial period was followed by a pilot study with a small group of 6th year students. The final phase involved focus groups across several year groups. This field research was designed to run over a school year from September to May.

4.5 Theoretical framework – constructivist, critical and transformative

The research used a multi-faceted framework, based on constructivist theory but with an eye to critical theory and a transformative paradigm. Mertens (2005, p.3) suggests that transformative paradigm “provides a useful umbrella to explore the philosophical assumptions and guide methodological choices for the approaches to evaluation that have been labelled critical theory, feminist, participatory inclusive, human rights based, democratic, empowerment, or responsive”.

This study had an interpretative epistemology, seeking knowledge based on the personal experience of the participants. Constructivism is an approach that assumes there is no single, objective reality because reality for an individual is constructed by his or her interpretations (Kim and Merriam 2011). This research was more than constructive and interpretive. It was exploratory and adopted a critical stance that took into account the power dynamics that exist in schools, since it is necessary to be explicit about the social, political, cultural, economic, ethnic, gender, and disability values that define realities (Mertens 2005). The 2015 ESRI review of DEIS acknowledged that scope exists for this type of exploration. Constructivist paradigm is most useful for this form of inquiry as the study was to be grounded in the experiences of the participants. Little is known or asked of the students in current research on DEIS schools although Campion’s (2019) student voice work in three DEIS primary schools is a welcome addition. Students’ perceptions and understandings were being sought here so as to add to existing

knowledge. More importantly, this research sought to enhance the experiences of the students in the case study school by hearing about their reality.

4.5.1 A possible contrasting approach - positivism

Positivism comes from a more traditional, scientific philosophy. It is concerned with objective reality and the testing of hypotheses (Burke-Johnson & Omwuegbuzie 2004, Kim & Merriam 2011). The researcher is the outsider looking in and is concerned with measuring and codifying facts. Given that measurement, percentages and performativity seem to lie at the heart of current DEIS evaluation, this was not deemed the appropriate paradigm for this study. Current analysis revolves around setting targets and examining percentage increases and decreases. For example, on an issue not related directly to students - parental participation - the focus is often on how many parents attended the annual parent teacher meetings, rather than to what extent they engaged with the school on an ongoing basis in relation to their child. Quantity, templates, accountability and many other economy-driven terms have become the language of DEIS. The researcher was committed to taking a different approach.

Undertaking a positivist approach would not have facilitated the researcher's belief that no two students experience their school and what it offers, in this instance through the DEIS programme, in the same way, let alone 420. Positivism does not take account of the individual's experience or of the social and relational aspects of constructing knowledge.

4.5.2 The role of the researcher

The role of the researcher also varies in terms of constructivism and positivism. Constructivists recognise that reality is socially constructed and acknowledge that they operate within that social constructionism (Mertens, 2007). On the contrary, in positivist thinking, researchers should eliminate their biases, remain detached and uninvolved with the objects of the study and test or empirically justify their stated hypotheses (Burke-Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004). The same authors point to the superiority of constructivism and relativism in educational research since it is concerned with multiple-constructed realities. A positivist model of inquiry would not fit in this instance, as it would fail to explore the research problem. In addition, the impact of the positivist approach is all that this study was trying to negate. The researcher was not seeking to test a hypothesis. Much of the research around DEIS does just that. The constructivist paradigm was the correct setting as students' experience of a DEIS school is created from myriad positions and can be understood from myriad perspectives. Participants brought their prior knowledge and experience to the setting. The interrelations of various participants was also a factor. For example, a student in 6th year, who had been in the school for 5 or 6 years, would have an entirely different experience to a 1st year student. Critics who believe that positivism is the correct framework in which to carry out research refuse to acknowledge that the conduct of fully objective and value-free research is a myth (Burke-Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004).

As author, I was interested in marginalization, social justice, power and empowerment and sought to look at these issues through the lens of student voice, in the

context of a school that serves students perceived to be disadvantaged. There is an interrelatedness of various theories in the framework that was adopted – social justice, inclusion, power and voice – so that the role of critical theory is also essential to the setting. Constructivist theory is intertwined with critical theory given that issues such as cultural capital, the hidden curriculum and socialization permeate all decision-making in education and are very striking in the context of a DEIS school in particular. In addition, the author hoped that the final phase of the research would allow students to introduce their own thinking to all aspects of school life, thus making the research transformative in nature. According to Mertens (2005, p.4) the transformative paradigm has “a conscious awareness that certain individuals occupy a position of greater power and that individuals with other characteristics may be associated with a higher likelihood of exclusion from decisions about the definition of the research problem, questions, and other methodological aspects of the inquiry”. It would seem that current evaluations of DEIS do just that, failing to consult with students in any in-depth manner on those issues which are at the heart of what DEIS avows to address – retention, attendance, progression etc.

4.6 Research approach adopted

Tashakkori & Teddlie (2003) believe research designs are important because they provide road maps for how to rigorously conduct studies to best meet certain objectives. Hammersley (1992) suggests the research process is more like finding one’s way through a maze, while Donna Mertens (2005) concludes that the world of research should be seen as trying to understand the world through a prism. What is apparent is the complexity of

the process. Hammersley (1992, p.197) suggests that “we must not see research methodology in terms of competing traditions, but rather as involving a complex set of assumptions and arguments, some of them in conflict, and a range of strategies and techniques that have advantages and disadvantages for particular goals and in particular circumstances”.

4.6.1 Case study approach

This study was carried out using a case study approach. This allowed a close up view of the participants and their experiences. Robert Yin (1994, p.3) suggests that “the distinctive need for case studies arises out of the desire to understand complex social phenomena”. He contends that the emphasis on an holistic focus and on real- life, contemporary events can be exploratory, descriptive and explanatory. He also suggests that the case study contributes uniquely to our knowledge of individual, organizational and political phenomena, which allows us to cover contextual conditions in an all-encompassing method (1994). This emphasis seems warranted in any study of students’ experiences. Case study research does not seek to make predictions but to elicit the knowledge the participants have. The case study used a mixed methods design, which allowed for the application of a range of tools. In the initial stage, quantitative methods allowed the researcher to gain an understanding of the context as it is lived by the students at present. This was followed by qualitative research to explore further how the students experience school life. This combination of research tools allowed for better understanding and laid the foundations for transformative work in the future.

4.6.2 What of action research?

According to Kim and Merriam (2011), action research is site-specific, designed to address a specific problem or issue within a specific setting, such as a classroom, a workplace, a program, or an organization. It invites the participants into the research process, thus engaging dialogical practice. Action researchers are often seen to interfere with the world in reaction to a perceived need for change (O'Hanlon, 2003). An action research process, with the researcher taking a role as active participant was considered, but discounted. There is much to suggest that an action research approach and student voice research can be complementary, and action research is often used for emancipatory and critical purposes. However, it was felt in this instance that action research was not the route to take, although many of the values are similar. The dual role of researcher and practitioner was not compatible with the aim of this research, which was to give the student participants a voice they are lacking. The researcher is in a leadership position in the school and wished to stay out of the immediacy of the data since she hoped the participants would generate ideas, and that those ideas would be their own. A research approach where the researcher designs something 'to do' to the participants was not appropriate.

4.6.3 The case for mixed methods

Traditionally, quantitative methods have been associated with positivist research, while qualitative research is the normal methodology of constructivists. Burke-Johnson & Onwuegbuzie (2004, p.15) suggest that the decision to opt for the mixed methods approach "offers great promise for practising researchers who would like to see

methodologists describe and develop techniques that are closer to what researchers actually use in practice” and that it is a more useful methodological stance in today’s increasingly complex and dynamic world. Donna Mertens (2007) concurs, suggesting that mixed methods provide a strategy for addressing the diverse needs of community members. The members of a DEIS school community come from culturally and socio-economically diverse situations and the population includes students with a range of abilities and disabilities, as well as students from various cultures and ethnic backgrounds, including international students and members of the Travelling community. When followed up with a qualitative interview process, those who wish to say more can do so. The use of mixed methodologies was not without question. Creswell et al., (2003) point to the challenge caused by the little guidance that exists on how to use transformative vision to guide the methods used. Another challenge they pose is whether a qualitative philosophical perspective, such as the existence of multiple realities, can be combined with a quantitative study that uses a closed-ended survey to gather data and restrict the perspectives of the participants (2003, p.186). Ultimately, this was not the method used in this study but it provided the researcher with food for thought in relation to using the existing surveys as part of the research.

The use of a sequential mix of quantitative data and qualitative data, with qualitative to the fore, allowed the context of the school, the DEIS programme within the school, and the level of participation of students in the current context to be assessed, before exploring in more depth their experiences, and seeking their ideas for change. It

was most suitable in this instance since the nature of transformative mixed research methodology is such that in both perspectives and outcomes, it is dedicated to promoting change at levels ranging from the personal to the political (Creswell et al, 2003).

4.7 Research Setting

The case in this research is one school. St. Catherine's (not its real name) is a mainstream urban, all-girls voluntary secondary school, with a student population of 420 approximately. There are 60 staff members including administrative and maintenance staff, teachers, special needs assistants and other support staff. St. Catherine's offers Junior Cycle, Junior Certificate Schools Programme, an optional Transition Year Programme, Leaving Certificate, Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme and ASDAN Certification. The school has a thriving special educational needs department for students with additional needs such as Down Syndrome, Autistic Spectrum Disorder (ASD), mild and moderate general learning difficulties, students with emotional behavioural difficulties and other who have language specific disorders, mild physical difficulties and students with a hearing or visual impairment. The school places a strong emphasis on inclusion and has been awarded a Yellow Flag in recognition of its efforts to be inclusive of all cultures and ethnicities and efforts to challenge racism and discrimination.

St. Catherine's is designated a DEIS (Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools) school, whose students come from some of the most socio-economically disadvantaged communities in the country, according to the Pobal Index. The Pobal

Deprivation Index measures the extent to which specific communities are socio-economically and educationally disadvantaged. It assesses the following: Lone parent ratio; Proportion of population with primary school education only; Proportion with third level education; Proportion living in local authority rented accommodation; Unemployment rates of males and females. A review of the most up-to-date Pobal Index (2016) indicates that for the areas which the school serves unemployment remains significantly higher than the national average. Transition to third level education remains low and completion of secondary education is not guaranteed. There are still a proportion of households where the highest level of education achieved is primary level. Due to these socio-economic conditions, education is not always a priority for families although parents are generally supportive of the efforts of the school. In order to not identify the specific school or students, excerpts from the Pobal Index are not included as an appendix.

As a result of its designation as a DEIS school, St. Catherine's benefits from additional supports for students. These include the appointment of a Home-School Liaison Coordinator (HSCL), membership of the School Completion Programme (SCP) in a cluster with three other local schools and additional funding. It operates a 'Young Carer's Group' in co-operation with SCP and a local youth club. In addition, the school board of management funds a Student Support Officer, with specific responsibility for students who may struggle to participate in and benefit from the education system. That person also has specific responsibility for liaising with students and parents from the

Travelling Community. The school receives funding from the Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection (DEASP) to operate a Breakfast Club and to provide healthy lunches in the school canteen under the School Meals Programme.

As a DEIS school, St. Catherine's is required to draw up an action plan every three years, setting targets in the following areas: Literacy, Numeracy, Attendance, Retention, Attainment, Transition (from primary to post-primary, from Junior Cycle to Senior Cycle and from second level to college or the workplace) and Partnership with parents and Partnership with others. A range of interventions are in place in the case study school, as in all DEIS schools. These interventions include a daily breakfast club, subsidised healthy lunches, homework club, school-paid after-school study, individual learning support, mentoring programmes and a week-long summer project, among others. Some of those are derived from the School Completion Programme in place in the school, and other school-developed supports on all students. The school has a Student Council, Young Carers group, Diversity Committee, Wellbeing Committee and Green Committee. External agencies, charities and third-level institutions offer further supports and opportunities to students. Links include university access programmes, work placements, funding of 'grinds' and IT equipment through the St. Vincent de Paul charity.

Parents are generally supportive of the efforts of the school and ambitious for their children. The involvement of parents is enhanced by the efforts of the Home School Community Liaison teacher who acts as a point of contact and support to parents. She

also organises events and classes for parents such as ‘Helping your child with Maths’, Computers and Fitness for Fun.

4.8 Research Design

The study used existing quantitative data such as the review of the last 3 year DEIS plan and current DEIS planning documents to set the context. The second phase of the work was a pilot study. Finally, phase three involved a set of semi-structured focus groups with students from 3rd year to 6th year. The extension of an invitation to be involved to all students in those year groups was essential since it was important that the views of a diverse range of children are sought and that participation is not just afforded to the articulate and literate (Flutter & Rudduck, 2004, p. 137) as cited in Lundy (2007).

4.8.1 Existing methods of gathering student voice

4.8.1.1 Classroom based

Significant efforts have been made in recent years to gather student voice in the classroom and apply student voice approaches to teaching and learning. Many of the efforts have been linked to strategies such as Assessment for Learning (AfL). Methods used have included the use of exit tickets, self-review and peer review. The school’s involvement in Forbairt has enhanced such efforts. Forbairt is a year-long programme for which schools can apply. It is run by the Professional Services Development for Teachers team. (PDST). The school submits a proposal for an action research project that will aid the school’s development planning and school improvement plan, build leadership, as

well as afford the school team involved the opportunity to engage with other schools through Action Learning Communities. The case study school has been involved in three Forbairt projects to date. Each has had an element of student voice in its design, albeit limited. The work undertaken was a peer teaching project for 2nd year Maths students, an exploration of the preferred note-taking and revision techniques of 1st and 5th year students and a project on peer feedback undertaken by 2nd year students of Art and their teachers.

Gathering student voice on issues related directly to the classroom and learning has also increased with the introduction of the Junior Cycle programme and teachers have received significant training in strategies that gather student feedback on learning and understanding.

4.8.1.2 School-wide

The work of the various student-led committees and the Student Council also supports the promotion of student voice initiatives. On a wider scale, the school distributes an end-of-year questionnaire to 1st and 2nd years. This focuses on what they enjoyed about the year, the subjects they found challenging or easy and the extra-curricular or co-curricular activities and events in which they were involved. A more extensive survey for 3rd years is administered to review their experiences and involvement in the Junior Cycle programme as a whole (Appendix 4). This survey also gathers information about their involvement in clubs and activities outside school. The

document is used to prepare each student's Junior Cycle Profile of Achievement (JCPA), which takes account of Other Areas of Learning (OAL) in addition to academic progress.

In Transition Year (TY), which is optional, student voice is gathered at the start and end of the programme. Group interviews are conducted at the start to allow the students to explore why they are undertaking and what they hope to get from the year, as well as discussing any fears they may have about the year. During the following May, the students meet their form teachers and the programme co-ordinator again to review how the year went for them, what they enjoyed most and least. This TY review is used to help the team construct the programme for the following year, maintaining and cutting modules, courses and events as per the recommendations of the students and within the constraints of DES guidelines.

A brief Exit Survey is administered to all 6th year students before graduation. This asks them what they have enjoyed most and least about their experience over the 5 or 6 years. It also asks what changes they might like to see in the school in the future.

4.9 Pilot Study

The pilot section of this research study was carried out with a small group of 6th year students during the school year prior to that of the full research project. An initial intention was to use photo-elicitation as a starting point for focus group discussions. In the pilot study, this method was used. 6th year students (four in total) were supplied with a digital camera each and asked to take photos over a two-day period. Their photos were to symbolise aspects of school life that were significant for them and what mattered to

them about school. The participants included a member of the school's Student Leadership Team and a student who had struggled in terms of behaviour, attendance, personal and family issues. The contrast in images taken by those two participants was striking. The prefect included photos of her badge, a pile of her school books, her favourite classroom and her school journal – very symbolic images of a school organisation – along with a group photo of her friends. The photos taken by her classmate, whose relationship with school was more difficult, involved far more people. They included not just her friends but the office staff she met each morning as she signed in late. She also included her favourite teachers and photos of her in class in her favourite subject, as well as a photo of the stage, where she loved to be as part of the school choir.

Despite the contrasting choices made by the students, certain themes emerged. The importance of friendship was apparent, even in this very small scale pilot. Each student took at least one picture of friends and a place where shared experiences with friends were positive. Care for others and being cared for by others was also apparent. The prefect had a mentoring role to younger students and was proud of that role, hence the picture of the badge. The student who found school and its systems most challenging hoped to train as a Special Needs Assistant after school. She had great interest in the welfare of students with additional needs and took on an informal mentoring role with them. Place also featured. The students took pictures of locations within the school that symbolised their engagement – a link to a favourite subject or teacher, a happy memory of an event with friends, a place where they had experienced success.

4.9.1 Visual Data

The respondent-generated photographs gave great insight into the lives of the students and what mattered to them. Ultimately, the use of photo-elicitation was discounted from the design of the full study. The taking of photographs would have required a great degree of checking for permission, which would have been time-consuming and difficult to arrange. The value of the photos as research tools would have been dissipated as the participants would have had to seek the permission of anyone they wished to be in their photo and the spontaneity of their choices would have been restricted. A particular photo might have to be withdrawn or edited before focus group discussions took place, depending on permission being granted or not.

The pilot and the possibility of using photographs did have an influence on the final research design. The first question of the focus group discussions was based on the idea of taking a photo that summed up the school experience and what school meant to each participant.

4.10 Focus groups participants

There were two further changes from the initial planning of the research in relation to the 'who' and 'how' of the focus groups. My initial plan had been to involve students of all years in mixed groups, divided into juniors and seniors. On reflection, I felt that mixing the groups might mean students were more reluctant to talk openly as they would not know each other. I also decided to conduct the research with students from 3rd year up as I felt they would be less influenced by the position I held in the school

and had more experience of the organisation. The existing end-of-year surveys carried out with 1st and 2nd year students provide them with a way of informing us about their experiences, albeit limited.

The participants for this study were students from 3rd year to 6th year in the case study school. The participants remained in groups according to their year. I spoke to all students from 3rd to 6th year at their weekly assemblies and asked them to consider participating. They were reassured that participation was entirely voluntary and that everyone was welcome to participate. The details and purpose of the study were outlined at those assemblies and an initial sign-up sheet made available to students. Students were reassured that there was no commitment necessary at that stage and that signing up meant only that they would receive consent forms and further details, which they and their parents could discuss. The consent and participation forms were distributed to those students who had signed up over the following two weeks.

4.11 Ethical considerations

Informed consent was obtained from all participants and, where they were under 18, from their parents, in writing. Each participant received a letter outlining the research, its purpose and a copy of the consent form for their records. All research material - transcripts, notes and recordings – was stored at the researcher's home so that confidentiality could be ensured. It was essential that students involved in this research understood its purpose and that they felt this research was not just about telling the

researcher about their experiences but telling their story so that they could be involved in real change, by helping design the plans and programmes in their own school.

I obtained permission to carry out the research from the case study school's Board of Management. All parents of students who expressed initial interest in being part of the study received a cover letter detailing the research study and consent forms for the focus group participants (Appendices 5 & 6). Student volunteers provided parental permission and their own assent (Appendix 7) to be part of the study. Students were reassured that they could opt out of the study at any time without any consequence. This was particularly important due to my position of leadership within the case study school. Ethical approval was received from the Ethics Committee of Trinity College (Appendix 8).

4.12 Data Collection

Following the pilot study, I conducted focus group discussions with a total of 42 students, representing 10% of the student cohort, to gain deeper insight into their understanding of their experiences in school.

The pilot study, along with the initial literature review informed the focus group questions. The focus group structure allowed the participants to feel more comfortable, chat more easily and engage more readily than in a one-to-one interview setting with me. Each focus group discussion was scheduled to take place over two class periods, thus allowing 80 minutes for the session. In general, the discussions lasted between 50 and 60 minutes. The exception to this was the first focus group, where the participants were quieter and gave shorter responses. This could also have occurred due to the timing. It

was the beginning of the day and I, as researcher, may have underestimated the impact of that on the participants.

The time allocation set aside for the focus groups was ideal as it allowed for good discussion through the semi-structured questions, without taking students from class for too long. The space used was in the building called the Parents' Room, which is also used for the Breakfast Club. It is set up as a relaxing space, with facilities for making tea and coffee and having refreshments. It is on the school campus but away from the main building so provided a safe and confidential venue for our discussions. It was important that students felt their voices were being heard in that safe, welcoming setting. The semi-structured interview schedule (Appendix 9) consisted of open-ended questions that focused on how each student experienced school and on their descriptions of their experience of care or otherwise while in school. Finally, the focus turned to any changes that they might wish to see or to implement themselves. The findings and analysis of these focus group discussions are outlined in more detail in chapters five and six. The makeup of the focus groups is outlined below with a brief description. All names were changed during the initial write-up of the interviews to protect the anonymity of the participants. Ultimately, when presenting the findings, I decided to refer to the students merely by their year group to further protect them. The location of this study in the researcher's own school meant this was essential for the participant's trust.

4.12.1 Focus Groups Summary

Focus Group 1 was a group of 6th year students. This session turned out to be the shortest. Although the students knew each other, they were not close friends and conversation did not flow freely. The random construction of the group meant that this group had members with more reserved personalities than in other sessions.

Focus Group 2 involved 5th year students. The members of the group were chatty, ambitious and attended after-school study regularly. All wished to pursue third level education. Each member of this focus group was eligible for university access programmes because of family income levels or other family or socio-economic factors. Four of the five were participating in a pre-university mentoring programme through access. The fifth student had given her place to another student. DEIS was mentioned unprompted during this session. The participants discussed the inequalities they perceived in the education system and the supports they received because the school was a DEIS school.

Focus Group 3 was the second of the 5th year groups. These students were very involved in aspects of school life outside the classroom including sport, music and art. They each expressed a desire to continue to third level education. Two of the students came from international backgrounds.

Focus Group 4 was the first of the 4th year groups. They were comfortable in each other's company and discussion flowed freely. This group was made up 7 students and included a student with special educational needs who had completed Junior Cycle in a special

class. Another of the participants had additional needs but had been in mainstream for Junior Cycle, accessing learning support at languages time.

Focus Group 5 involved the second of the 4th year groups. This group included one student whose parents had limited English and a student who was under the care of Tusla and the Health Service Executive, although she remained at home. She was a young carer for both a parent and her sibling.

Focus Group 6 - Transition Year Group 3 was made up of 6 participants. They included a student who had been homeless at a time earlier in the year and had slept in the car. Both she and her mother experienced mental health issues and were living with relatives at the time of the group interview. Two of the group had been diagnosed with specific learning difficulties and were in receipt of learning support. This group was very vocal about the changes they wished to see in senior cycle and the type of learning and curriculum they would enjoy.

Focus Group 7 - 6th Years Group 2 comprised 6 of the girls preparing for Leaving Certificate and included the then Head Girl and Deputy Head Girl. The participants were very involved with the broader aspects of school life and had varying academic abilities, with two of them receiving additional support for their additional learning needs.

Focus Group 8 - 3rd Years Group. Unfortunately, on the scheduled day for this focus group, only 3 of the 5 students who had signed up were in school. It was decided to proceed anyway as the month of May is extremely busy in school and there could be no

guarantee that all 5 students would be present on a given day. The 3 participants were happy to do that and the discussion flowed readily even with the smaller number.

4.12.2 Thematic analysis

Each of the focus group discussions was recorded using a digital voice recorder. I made the decision to transcribe the recordings myself. I wanted to authentically present the student voice and to listen in an authentic way. Transcribing the recordings meant that I had to listen on several occasions to ensure the accuracy of the transcription, revisiting recordings where I wanted to be sure of a word used by a participant. By immersing myself in those recordings, the voice of the participants could be transcribed authentically.

I did not use computer software to analyse the data as I felt that personal immersion in the process was more in keeping with the qualitative, site-specific nature of this study. The transcripts were analysed initially for broad themes related to the literature. The constant comparative method outlined by Miles and Huberman (1994) was the right fit for this study. It involves the going over and over data to see which themes emerge and make interconnections between themes and subthemes. I repeatedly went over the data to examine which themes and sub-themes were emerging. Many of them were interconnected, much in the way all life and activity of a school is interconnected. Immersing myself in the data allowed me to present an authentic account of what the participants had said and allow their voice to be heard. The themes and subthemes that emerged will be presented and analysed in chapters 5 and 6.

4.13 Reflexivity and the role of the researcher

Research entails careful consideration of the phenomenon under study as well as the ways a researcher's own assumptions and behaviour may be impacting the inquiry (Watt, 2007). A researcher's philosophical stance cannot be separated from her or his research methods and research questions, and one's philosophical perspective is intimately linked to the manner in which a research study is constructed and carried out. One's perspective on reality and the nature of knowledge leads to raising certain questions and not others (Kim & Merriam, 2011). Reflexivity is the process by which the observations we make are dependent upon our prior understandings. It is very important, irrespective of the theoretical framework, methods used or indeed the research question explored. It is essential that the values of the researcher are acknowledged in the process. The positionality of the researcher will influence the research approach and we must acknowledge that everything about the researcher will affect the work – age, gender, belief, views, personal and professional experience and politics. There is no “position-less” place in the work of the researcher and that must be acknowledged. Opie (2004, p17) emphasises the importance of researcher positionality and suggests that ‘...where the researcher is coming from is the most significant factor influencing the choice of methodologies and procedures’. Burke- Johnson & Onwuegbuzie refer to the value-laden aspects of inquiry and point out that “values affect what we choose to investigate, what we see, and how we interpret what we see” (2004, p.16). The researcher cannot be detached from her own assumptions and presuppositions about the topic being studied (Hammersley 1992). The conceptual lens through which the research is carried out is

formed by those beliefs, experience and knowledge. That influences the contextualised framework within which research is to be conducted.

4.13.1 Being the insider

Robson 2002, as cited in Rooney (2005) contends that ‘...it is not surprising that insider research has been the cause of much debate and scrutiny’. One clear advantage for insider research is that often a researcher goes in, gets the research but gives nothing back, neither feedback, nor the possibility of a transformative experience that might benefit the research participant or the organisation in which the research was carried out. Osler (p.26) suggests that ‘one-off research encounters with young people risk not providing a proper context in which they can respond in accordance with their own views and engage on their own terms with the research process’. The ethical questions associated with carrying out research in one’s own place of work include consideration of issues that are relational and power laden. Use of the familiar setting also poses the challenge of coming to the work with an open and unbiased view.

Another challenge in setting the research at the heart of one’s own school community is that in raising students’ expectations of being listened to, the researcher must then act on what has been heard in an authentic and truly collaborative manner. I had to be conscious throughout the process of my dual position as researcher and as the leader of the case study school. I sought to reassure the participants in each focus group interview that there were no right answers, that they could leave the process at any stage and that their anonymity was guaranteed. I also had to be conscious throughout that being the insider

with my prior and context-specific knowledge meant that personal and professional biases would exist and that I must acknowledge them.

4.14 Conclusion

By definition, students who attend DEIS schools often do not have the cultural capital to mediate schooling to their best advantage. The research undertaken aimed to be transformative in nature and to take account of issues such as hegemony, power and social justice by using student voice as a vehicle for change. By choosing to locate the study in that philosophical framework, the author acknowledges that research does not necessarily serve the needs of those who have traditionally been excluded from positions of power in the research world. It is possible, however, that through choosing an appropriate theoretical framework, suitable research methods and remaining reflexive throughout the process, “the role of the researcher can be reframed as one who recognizes inequalities and injustices in society and strives to challenge the status quo” (Mertens, 2005).

The next chapter presents the main findings around the themes that arose in the focus group discussions and seeks to answer the research questions on students’ experiences in the case study school, in particular their experience of care and the affective elements of education seen through a lens of student voice.

Chapter 5 - Findings

5.1 Introduction

This chapter presents the themes that arose during the focus group discussions in the case study school. Students were presented with the opportunity to discuss their experience of the school. When analysing the research findings three key themes emerged. These were (a) sense of belonging and community, (b) relationships with teachers and others and (c) recognition and identity. Transcript excerpts are used to illustrate the findings and are presented verbatim. They demonstrate that those key themes and many subthemes are interconnected. Discussion around relationships and communications with others influenced all of the students' experiences and permeated all of the focus groups, crossing all themes and subthemes. The themes and subthemes were identified through thematic analysis. By transcribing all recordings by hand, I felt I could better reflect the authentic voice of the participants.

The starting point for each discussion was the question that developed from the original pilot project – 'If you were to take one photo of what school means to you, what would it be and why?' That question captured the essence of what students believed was important and presented themes and subthemes that would recur throughout the focus group discussions. Those themes may be broadly defined as recognition and identity, sense of belonging and relationships with subthemes presented in the relevant sections. The subthemes included place, events and activities and people. Subthemes such as the

nature of the school as a Catholic school and a DEIS school featured less frequently but were important to those students who recognised their impact on their school experience.

The discussions also afforded the respondents the opportunity to talk about what they liked about school, their experiences of care and what made them feel uncared for in the classroom and wider school setting. All participants were invited to talk about changes they would make or like to see both in the school and in the wider education system and this will be dealt with in later in this chapter.

5.2 Sense of belonging and community

For the participants in this study, their sense of belonging was derived from the place itself and specific rooms within that place. It was also developed through their involvement in the many activities and events that marked the school year, as well as the daily routines they shared with friends and other in the school community. That sense of shared experiences was crucial for them.

5.2.1 A welcoming space

In each of the focus groups, the initial question in relation to the photograph saw students mention aspects of the physical building itself. They clearly identified things that for them help create community and make them feel welcomed. These included the bright environment and the physical space. The impact of a colourful and welcoming place was emphasised by junior students as a factor in their decision to enrol in the school as illustrated by the following comments:

It's not intimidating. I remember before 1st year, I remember going to another school and saying 'This looks like a prison and it does!' Here, it's real colourful. Like I came in, I thought 'It's real colourful. It's nicer'.

(3rd Year) When you walk in you're 'Ah, this is a bit of colour instead of just dull walls'.

(3rd Year) The environment, like how you feel when you come in to school. It's really positive and you feel, I don't know, at ease. (5th Year)

The walls of the foyer and corridors are adorned with photos of students, samples of their work and artwork, including a large display area for pottery and clay creations as well as trophies and prizes won by students which was noted by the following student comments:

I think I'd take a picture of the foyer because I think it's the most welcoming part of the school. (5th Year)

Down the hall with all the photos spread out. (5th Year)

I love the Art in the school, it's a big part. (5th Year)

For several of the students, the presence of photographs in which they featured, as well as Art work and projects that students produced also enhanced their school experience and sense of belonging. One group of 5th year students made particular reference to the foyer since the photos and displays capture many of the activities outside of the classroom at which they and others excel – sports, the school musical or choir performances, participation in various committees or charity fundraisers. For one 5th Year student, the importance of recognising people's talents extended to a classroom: 'I'd take a photo of the Art room. I don't do Art but it's nice to go in there. The paintings show everyone's skills.' Pictures in the foyer and on corridors, along with the displays of

work appeared to help the young people feel valued and to enhance their experience of school through happy memories.

For the senior students, any sense of being self-conscious was overcome by their belief that having a record of their activities or work on show meant they were important to the fabric of the school. They noted:

When you see photos of yourself you feel proud. Everyone's going to be looking. (5th Year)

The foyer. You see everything there, where everything goes on, all the photos and everything to represent the school and show us. (5th Year)

The photos also allow students to relate the place to the people. Participants spoke of friends, classmates and specific group events where they gathered together.

5.2.2 The daily routine

The day to day sense of place mattered to younger students and was related to the fact that the location allowed them to be with friends. They outlined why:

Probably a classroom because you're in there every day. First thing you think of. (4th Year)

I'd probably take a picture of everyone down by the lockers first thing in the morning because we're all a bit sleepy but we have a bit of a laugh. (4th Year)

All my friends at the benches and the lockers. (3rd Year)

For several students, specific memories or experiences of a location were what enhanced their lives in school. The role of specific classrooms in creating community was also important for students. These included particular subject rooms because a student had

flourished there or enjoyed a subject very much. They described that sense of connection as follows:

Probably the Art room because I like doing Art. (5th Year)

I would take a picture of the Music room because Music was my favourite Junior Cert subject.

(4th Year)

I would take a picture of the PE hall as it has loads of memories – things you enjoy.

(4th Year)

I like the Parents' Room because when you go out there you feel it's real comfortable.

(6th Year)

The room referred to as the Parents' Room is a block built construction slightly away from the main school building beside the football pitch. It serves many purposes. There is a Maths classroom. That building is also host to meetings for parents and other meetings organised by the Home School Liaison Co-ordinator. There is also a small office for the School Completion Co-ordinator (SCP) of the local cluster and in recent years a small storage area was converted into a multi-sensory space for students with special educational or additional needs.

The Breakfast Club is housed in another part of the building, serving upwards of 80 students each morning before class starts. It runs from 8 a.m. each morning and was initially set up on a volunteer basis by one teacher who sourced funding for the food through the Department of Family and Social Affairs school meals programme. Funding for the food is still sourced from that programme. The club is now staffed by one paid employee, funded through the Schools Completion Programme. She is assisted each

morning by volunteers from the teaching staff, as well as the School Completion Programme Co-ordinator and the school-employed Student Support Officer. Students from all year groups attend and it is frequently the case that students who get involved in 1st year continue to attend throughout their time in the school.

Students were recently involved in fundraising to refurbish the venue. Funding from the Kellogg's company was received through the Community Foundation for Ireland Philanthropic fund. The room was repainted in colours chosen by the students and new furniture and curtains, which they also chose, were purchased.

The daily club was seen as a positive aspect of school life in all of the groups because it provides a space to make and to meet friends and to relax. It is warm and welcoming and the friendly and relaxing atmosphere includes music each morning and raffles for attendees at Christmas and Easter. Regular participants also enjoy a trip out of school twice a year – at Christmas and the end of the school year. Its impact was summed up by a senior girl who said: 'You make friends, socialize. It's really good for 1st years, for anyone really' (6th Year). Nearby is the school's poly tunnel and garden, as well as a former outside basketball court that has seating for lunch and even classes outside when Irish weather permits. For a variety of reasons, that area of the school was one which 6th year students valued.

The outside seating. It's real nice and I love being out there in summer. (6th Year)

Even the pitch – everyone comes together. (6th Year)

Other participants mentioned a room or location because it was linked with a particular teacher to whom they felt an affinity. This was especially true of three 3rd year girls, whose time with their junior cycle form teacher in a specific base room was drawing to a close as their first three years of secondary school ended. They explained it as follows:

Specifically, the Parents' Room because that's where most of my classes were and where I enjoyed the most and Ms. B's me favourite teacher and she's there. I like Maths. (3rd Year)

Room 20 because my form class is there. I feel more comfortable around them and my form teacher is there and I loved her. (3rd Year)

Probably Room 12 because that's my form class. (3rd Year)

Four students in the senior years mentioned the local convenience store (Spar) as the likely subject of their photograph. Only 5th and 6th year students are permitted to go out for lunch. 5th years saw it as a privilege and a sign that their growing maturity was being acknowledged. They suggested it for their photo because: 'the Spar cause you get to go out. You have freedom'. The novelty had worn off for one of the Leaving Certificate girls 'Maybe the Spar, but we haven't gone there in ages'. For two Transition Year students the 'Spar' was an issue of contention. Transition Year (TY) is not compulsory although most girls progress to 4th Year after Junior Certificate but only 5th and 6th years go out. They outlined their disapproval: 'See about the lunches, about going out. The people who were in 3rd year with us last year they're allowed out for lunch but we're not. We're all the same age.' 'Why is 4th years not allowed out?' For other participants, lunchtime in school and the canteen were worthy of a photograph 'and I think lunch. Lunch is the best time because I think everyone has their best memories at lunchtime.' (3rd Year student).

For 6th years it was the food itself that warranted mention ‘pasta on a Thursday. We’re coming back for that!’

5.2.3 School Size

According to students, another aspect of building community was the size of the school – both physically and in terms of student numbers. Size featured in the discussions of all age groups. Of the 42 students interviewed, the majority perceived the school to be small and saw that as a positive feature, allowing them to know people and be known. They outlined their thoughts as follows:

‘I feel like it’s a small enough number so that everyone knows each other even if they don’t know each other very well’ (4th Year)

‘The size is actually why I chose the school, because it’s small. You get to know everyone better. (6th Year)

‘You don’t get lost in crowds and crowds of people the way you would in other bigger schools. It’s nice to know everyone. (4th Year)

The relatively small physical size was also seen as positive, allowing students to navigate successfully around the building and to feel comfortable in their surroundings.

‘We’ve got a little system, a little square, first years if you get lost, just go left!’ (5th Year)

‘It’s just right. Not too small where you feel cramped or too big where you feel overwhelmed’ (5th Year)

5.2.4 Uniform

One 4th year student suggested that her photograph would be of the school uniform, which prompted a discussion among her fellow participants about whether a school uniform was a good thing for students.

I like the uniform. If we didn't have one, everyone would be getting judged. (4th Year)

The uniform is a good idea to stop fights and stuff but sometimes you think you'd rather wear your own clothes. (4th Year)

While there was broad agreement about its merits, some participants felt that the notion of uniform might be broadened and students given more freedom, particularly in relation to trousers. The tradition has been and current practice is that the girls wear skirts and change in and out of tracksuits for PE classes. This was noted in the following student comments:

I don't mind it. I just wish we had more choice. (4th Year)

Trousers. It would be good if we had a choice. (4th Year)

The tracksuit, you know when it's cold in the morning, if we could wear the tracksuit. (4th Year)

A more detailed discussion around uniform took place at the end of the focus group among the 4th year group with the participants deciding to adopt the issue of trousers as their Young Social Innovators (YSI) project for the year. They went on to carry out surveys with students, staff and parents to assess the desire for change regarding uniform.

One of the more unusual suggestions for a photo to capture school life was the staffroom since 'teachers will be talking about how their students are doing'. (5th Year)

In two of the focus groups, one of 5th years, the other 6th years, the impact of being in a Catholic school and a CEIST school was brought up, with participants in each group equating the level of care they experienced and the inclusivity they perceived in the school to the fact that there was a religious tradition and ethos. One senior student

summed it up as follows: ‘In other schools people who are weak or have SEN might be put down the back but because we’re a Catholic school and CEIST, we have to be encouraged. Teachers have expectations of us’.

The issue of inclusivity also arose in the other 6th year group as something that was important with one student explaining it as follows: ‘The school includes special needs students. They’re not kept away. They feel part of it. (6th Year). The theme of inclusion will be further explored in findings around people and relationships in a later section.

5.2.5 DEIS status

Only one of the focus groups brought up the school’s status as a DEIS school. This group included some of the most academically ambitious 5th years, all aiming to make applications for university places through the Central Applications Office (CAO). Four of these students were participants in Dublin City University’s (DCU) UFirst programme and a fifth had given her place to another student whom she felt would benefit more. The programme runs through 5th and 6th year and students attend the university on approximately 8 occasions each year. Students are mentored by existing DCU access students and engage in preparatory classes and sessions to enhance their self-belief and reinforce 3rd level education as something they can achieve. Participants also benefit from additional supports such as evening and holiday classes in their Leaving Certificate subjects. These supports extend to all students in the exam years due to the school’s DEIS status and its links with the university. Other supports and projects include UniTY for Transition Year students, campus visits for 1st and 2nd years and the annual DCU Access

Achievement Awards for 3rd years, where students are nominated for recognition in Academics, Cultural and Artistic Activities, Sports, Community and Special Nomination. All of these supports were acknowledged as being available because of DEIS and were welcomed by the group, two of whom explained it as follows:

I think sometimes you're better being in a DEIS school. I think you receive more support. Like the way we have the UFirst Programme and the HEAR scheme. I think of all the things I do in DCU and I wouldn't if I wasn't in this school. I got that opportunity. It's just brilliant. (5th Year)

DCU Achievement Awards etc. keeps you motivated – 'cause we don't have a lot of money but I want to do well. It's good when you're recognised by a university because I went to an interview the other day and she was real impressed that DCU recognised me. (5th Year)

5.2.6 Events, activities and experiences

Students in the case study school spoke warmly of events, activities and experiences they valued. There are four or five key events during the year when the whole school community comes together, which include a number of liturgical events such as the Annual Opening of the School Year/Founder's Day Mass and the annual Christmas Carol service. While the school has a Catholic ethos and tradition, students did not cite any of the religious-themed events except in the context of providing music at those events. Other events involve sporting or musical activities and it was these that featured strongly in feedback from students. They included the annual 5K run which takes place in the local park each March, as well as Sports Day and the Awards Ceremony each May.

The school musical and musical performances were also highlighted. For students, the importance of the shared experience, the coming together, was paramount.

5.2.7 Sports Day

Of all the events, Sports Day, which takes place each May, featured across all year groups as the most important for students. It is a significant day for several reasons. It is the last Friday that 6th Year students attend in advance of their graduation from school and the last Friday of Transition Year. All students are involved irrespective of sporting ability, as are all teachers, special needs assistants, canteen, caretaking staff, principal and deputy principal. In addition, members of the parents' association attend. There is a DJ playing music, the SNAs prepare food for everyone and mid-way through the event an ice-cream van arrives. The event finishes with a 6th Year versus staff soccer match and the whole-school participating in a rendition of 'Rock the Boat'. Students perceived that the day adds to 'the sense of community. Everyone comes together and everyone enjoys it'. (4th Year) Students across the year groups mentioned the impact it has on all members of the school including the staff: 'I like the way the whole school community comes together, talk to each other, the music. Even the teachers are different on Sports Day'. (5th Year)

'I'd take a picture of everyone on Sports Day because it brings everyone in the school together'. (5th Year)

'Sports Day. It's always a very enjoyable day'. (5th Year)

Third year students echoed the feelings of their older peers, with one girl confirming it as one of her favourite school events as follows:

'I think Sports Day, Sports Day and the 5K. Getting involved. There's always fun'.

5.2.8 Awards Day

One of the 5th Year focus groups felt that the annual Awards Ceremony was their highlight event. 'We all get together and your work gets recognised. All different types of work'. This emphasis on celebrating a range of abilities and talents was highly valued by the group and one of the girls, a student who is very able academically, outlined why she valued the ceremony so much:

'It's important that all types of things are recognised and it's not all about academics. It's important that you get recognised for being on different committees and doing different things. Things that will be good on your CV. Not everyone's skills are in one area so it's nice to be recognised for your talents. You mightn't be good at sports or academics but you might be good at Art or Music.'

Her peers in the group felt that the recognition could be further expanded:

'Maybe the people that struggle in school and still come in. Some people do dread awards day 'cause they don't get an award. Maybe 'most improved' – like you could have a bad first half of the year but really try the second half'. (5th Year)

Recognition of progress and achievement in all subject areas was important to the group.

When asked if they thought a prize in each subject at the ceremony might be too much there was consensus that it would not be, although one of the girls acknowledged the difficulty that might arise due to the length of the event:

'I know you can't go through every class or subject but maybe have smaller scale awards in subjects, maybe at assembly' (5th Year)

Another 5th year participant recalled her enjoyment of previous recognition:

'In 1st year when we used to get Business Student of the Month – that was good'.

The school uses postcards home as a tool to recognise a range of positive aspects of student life including progress, improved attendance, participation in activities and contribution to the school community among others. The 5th year girls felt that this might provide an avenue for the recognition of student excellence in all subjects and for all class groups. The Awards Ceremony was on the mind of one 6th Year girl in a wistful way: ‘I never get an award’. Unknown to the student, she had been nominated for two.

5.2.9 Music

Just as the Art adorning the walls and shelves of the foyer and corridors was significant for several students, quite a few mentioned music and their involvement in musical events or performances. These included the school musical and the annual end-of-year concert. The musical, which is produced bi-annually, is open to all students regardless of musical or acting experience. Students are encouraged to get involved and there are opportunities for all girls to be on stage regardless of ability. That sense of togetherness and a focus on fun was highlighted by students including two 4th Years, both of whom have been involved in two musicals during their time in the school. They outlined the importance of such shows as follows:

‘I’d probably take a picture of one of those big group activities we do together like maybe the school musical cause that’s usually a great fun time’.

‘The stage – the show’.

For this second girl her involvement was particularly striking as she is from a cultural and ethnic background where the study of or participation in music is not usually welcomed.

One student was happy that she could be involved in musical activities although not studying the subject:

'I like the way we had a chance to go on the Emmanuel trip this year even though we weren't doing Music. You get to go on that Music trip'.

A student with additional learning needs spoke of her enjoyment of music-related activities, explaining that Zumba and 'Song School' were the things she liked most about school. 'Song School' is a Transition Year workshop that offers students the opportunity to write and perform their own songs while working in a group with their friends.

The end-of-year 'May Melodies' show is performed by the girls in 3rd and 6th year who study Music. The evening allows them to showcase the pieces they have prepared for the state examinations, either as soloists or with friends. The school choir also performs. 6th year students who were preparing to leave school spoke of their enjoyment of those performances and their desire to return to see the shows even when they had left school.

Younger students also spoke of the importance of music and musical events with some 2nd and 3rd years referring to the after-school ukulele and violin classes they enjoyed. These classes are provided free of charge by one of the Music teachers who also coordinates the school's Erasmus Programme. The girls talked about the opportunities they had had to perform for the whole school and for parents, both at carol services and the May concerts. They had also performed for a wider audience including students and teachers from Scotland and Spain during an Erasmus event.

5.2.10 Sam and Brendan

In addition, for the past three years the school has welcomed the Sam Maguire Cup and Brendan Martin Cup, along with some of the All-Ireland Gaelic football winning men and women from the Dublin teams. Students, some accompanied by parents and staff, some accompanied by their own young children, gather in the study hall and one of the PE teachers interviews the players. The girls and adults then get an opportunity to get photographs with the cups and the players. This extra coming together of the entire school community has been a welcome addition for all and several students mentioned it.

5.2.10 The 'Lock-in'

For the 6th year students, who were approaching the end of their time in school, a long sought-after sleepover or 'lock-in' had just taken place. Three of the girls had organised the sleepover for charity and prepared a night of activities, games, karaoke and a movie for their peers. Many staff had attended and stayed the night including teachers, SNAs, one of the secretaries and both the principal and the deputy principal. 6th years spoke of the value they placed on that coming together and their delight that the staff had been willing to give up their free time and spend that time with students to ensure that it happened. They were also grateful for the trust placed in them to lead the event and to stay in the building overnight. For two of them it would be their 'best memory ever'.

5.2.12 Conclusion

It was apparent in all of the focus group discussions that the girls valued those moments in school that they could share not only with friends but with their teachers and other members of the staff. The girls associated those days with fun, enjoyment and

positivity. They sensed that things were different on those days when they all came together and senior students, in particular, acknowledged that such days allowed them to build stronger relationships with each other and with the staff of the school and to enhance the sense of community that they valued.

5.3 Relationships

We have a relationship with school that has meaning. They don't just treat us like robots. (5th Year student)

In each of the focus groups, the theme of relationships featured strongly. The perspectives of the students interviewed as part of the focus group provided rich data on the importance of people and relationships. Friends and classmates and the adults that students encountered were identified as the key factor in enjoying positive feelings about school. Subthemes included the importance of form classes and form teachers as well as school specific student supports such as the 'Check and Connect' mentoring programme for 6th Years. Those subthemes are presented in the next section of this chapter.

5.3.1 Friends and other students

Friends featured strongly in each group, either as the subject of their preferred photo or in the general discussion about school. For many of the 42 interviewees, friendship and memories created with classmates were the most important aspect of school. This issue permeated each focus group and was true for the participants irrespective of their academic record or attendance rate. They spoke about coming together with friends for the many events outlined in the previous section and also of

valuing other student's abilities and talents, describing the importance of friendship as follows:

Friends in school. It makes it most enjoyable (3rd Year)

My friends because if I wasn't in school I wouldn't have made the friends that I've made so you know that's what I'd take a picture of (4th Year)

One slight variation was that 6th year students spoke in terms of the year group, while younger students frequently spoke of form classes, particularly at junior level.

The year. My friends because they make school. They are school. It's so fun with them, that's what makes school good. (6th Year)

One student who was heavily involved in sport felt her favourite photograph would be a team picture.

5.3.2 The importance of form classes

The importance of form classes in creating a sense of belonging came through the discussions with 3rd and 4th year students. Junior classes have a base room or home room in which most of their non-specialist classes take place. Their lockers are also housed there. They are together throughout the 3 years for all subjects except modern foreign language and two option subjects although there is some movement for Irish, English and Maths in 2nd and 3rd year. Form classes are named depending on a particular theme each year and the class group keeps that name throughout junior cycle. Themes have included authors, composers, artists, and famous Irish sportswomen. 3rd years linked their enjoyment of school very much to the sense of belonging they felt as part of the form group and linked the place – the base room - and the people, both students and adults.

Three of the 3rd years specifically nominated their form class – room and people – as the subject of their photograph, although none of the three were in the same form class.

'I feel more comfortable around them'. 'Your class is all around you'.

I think it's very good in 1st year (being in a form class) because you're going in and you don't know what to expect and you mightn't be with your friends.

You'll know that these people are the same people you'll be with for a few years. (3rd Year)

At the end of 3rd year, most students enrol in Transition Year, which remains optional in the case study school. In the past few years, numbers opting for TY have risen and most students choose to do the programme at the end of junior cycle. In practical terms, this means that the form classes that existed in the first 3 years of secondary school are no longer together. New form classes are created in 4th and 5th Year. They are not named but coded, e.g. 4.1, 4.2 etc. and do not have a base room due to restrictions of space. Students spoke about experiencing a sense of loss at that change, most notably 3rd and 4th years (TY) as it was a current issue for them. 3rd years were approaching the end of their time together as the Junior Certificate examinations were drawing near. Those students recognised that current form classes would not exist in TY. One student expressed it as 'growing up with these people and when you split up you'll be sad to see everyone go because they're the ones you grow up with since 1st to 3rd year'. (4th Year)

Moving on from their original form groups was a topic that came up strongly for one of the 4th year focus groups also. They expressed regret that they were no longer in their junior form classes. Each of the group of 7 students spoke of missing and being bothered

by not having a base room. 'Instead of standing around lockers, you could sit and have a chat before school starts. Students also spoke of missing the people who had shared their base room and been in their form class.

'I think it would be nice to mix up the 4th year classes more because I haven't seen many of my class from junior. I don't even know who's in 4th or 5th. It's just compared to 1st and 2nd – we were all so close. Especially 3rd year. We were all so close upstairs.'

It's really strange at first. We were all so close and we had our lockers and break beside each other. And this year I hardly see half of them. It's strange.

For one of the group, the transition had been even greater. She had been a member of the special educational needs resource class during junior cycle, a class with only 6 members.

She discussed how she felt about the change:

Since 1st to 3rd year, it's been hard because there have been bumps in the road in our class and all that. I kinda miss it but going into the class in 4th year was a really big thing for me ...I kind of miss the girls that have been in my class. It's just really hard to take in that I'm in the bigger class and some girls, I haven't really known before.

The TY students also recognised that TY is about being open to change and new experiences and were glad of the opportunity to have made new friends. 'It's good as well because I wouldn't have talked to any of them and now I'm so close to all them...'

Three of the 5th year students in one of the focus groups also discussed the change of form classes, two of them in terms of loss.

It was nice being altogether, people taking to each other. I actually miss our form class.

It was mad. We used to drive each other crazy when we were in there. Now we miss each other.

The third student saw it as a more positive experience.

There is the same atmosphere as 3rd year but on a bigger scale. The whole year is together. That's a good thing.

6th years, whose time in secondary school was drawing to a close spoke in terms of the memories they had as part of a specific junior form class – often of incidents or events, many of them funny and most of which had gone on unknown to staff. They gave examples, two of which are presented below:

N was our form class. Remember in 3rd year, bringing in spice bags to the school. That was so good. And Ms. X (form teacher of N) gave us the ice creams.

I'll never forget the day Y had the jumper over her head. We could have made a documentary out of her. The human pinball.

5.3.3 Adults – teachers and others

The role of teachers and other adult members of the school community was significant across all year groups. The people they encountered every day and the relationships they enjoyed with those people had by far the most significant impact on the student experience in the case study school. There was reference in each focus group to the importance of those adults, primarily teachers but also Special Needs Assistants, the office staff and the staff in the canteen, the caretaker and the staff member whose specific role is student support.

Terms such as respect, support, encouragement, help, permeated the conversations and the importance of the positive relationships were felt particularly strongly by senior students. The 5th and 6th years made strong links between the interactions they enjoyed with staff and their sense of wellbeing. Sub-themes that arose included acknowledgment and recognition, building relationships in and out of the classroom, being offered help

and encouragement and the teacher having high expectations of them. These will be presented in the next section, along with the findings related to student perceptions of the role of form teachers, adult mentors and the school- appointed Student Support Officer.

5.3.4 The role of form teachers

Younger students referred to the positive influence of their teachers, in particular their form teachers. The school operates a pastoral care system in which form teachers stay with the group from 1st year to 3rd year. Form teachers take the class for Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE), Civic, Social and Political Education (CSPE) and at least one other subject, allowing a significant level of contact and interaction.

Year Heads stay with the same group through 1st to 3rd year, before moving on with those students who go on into 5th year. The consistency of having the same year head and form teacher allows for a deeper understanding of student needs, backgrounds and personalities, along with their strengths and areas that might prove challenging for them. The relationship with form teachers was particularly important to the girls and they were vocal on the impact and influence of their respective form teachers.

Ms. Z was always real caring. She was always there for you if you needed help or anything. She'd come over to you. If you were stuck on anything, she'd help you as best she could. (3rd Year)

Ms. X was always there for you. If you needed help she'd say 'Come up and talk to me after school or come up to me in the staff room' (3rd Year)

5.3.5 Senior students

Senior students, those from Transition Year upwards, tended to be more reflective of the impact of the positive relationships they enjoyed with adults in the case study school. Those adults were primarily teachers but the students also mentioned support staff and others. The role of the form teacher was not as significant for seniors due to the changed nature of form class set up. At senior cycle the nature of the curriculum and timetabling means that form groups come together primarily for Religious Education (RE) and Careers class. In practice, the whole year group is often brought together during those classes to hear guest speakers, participate in workshops or participate in activities such as charity events or graduation preparations (6th year). To mitigate against the lack of frequent contact, form teachers are created through subject choice. For example, all 5th year students who chose Home Economics (HE) are placed in the same RE/Careers class, with the HE teacher as their form teacher. The same happens with other options e.g. Business and Biology. Form teachers also work with the Guidance Counsellors and the form groups at Careers class time in 5th and 6th years. This allows for increased contact and improved relationships and for the creation of a class spirit and sense of belonging.

5.3.5 The role of the guidance counsellors

The school has three qualified guidance counsellors, each taking responsibility for a whole year group from 1st year onwards. This allows them to build strong connections with students, particularly those for whom life circumstances are challenging. They serve on the school's Care Team. This working group meets weekly, chaired by the principal, and includes all Year Heads, the guidance counsellors, two of

the special educational needs team, Home School Community Co-ordinator (HSCL) whose particular role is to liaise with parents and the School Completion Co-ordinator. The meeting focuses on those students whose home or school life may be difficult and those who may be suffering from physical or mental health issues. Each week a list of students is placed on red or amber for particular care due to those issues. The guidance counsellors link in with each of them to offer support and individual counselling in some instances or a more informal contact where appropriate.

Senior students, who had forged strong connections with the guidance team, were particularly mindful of their importance in making school a safe and welcoming place for them, although all focus groups referred to their positive impact on school life.

Two students described that impact as follows:

I think having it that if you ever feel you need to, you can go to Ms C or someone else.
(6th Year)

Ms. K sees when you're not ok and she makes sure you're ok and if you're stressed she says it'll be fine (5th Year)

One of the counsellors was on extended leave during the time the interviews were conducted. A 5th year pupil, whose home circumstances were particularly difficult and who experienced mental health issues, recognised how difficult she found that counsellor's absence: 'Even on a Tuesday if I didn't have Ms. K she'd try to find me and be like 'are you OK?' Now that I don't have that, I'm not doing so well'.

5.3.6 Check and Connect – 6th year mentoring

In 6th year the school support system is enhanced by the school-designed ‘Check and Connect’ mentoring programme was introduced to the school a number of years ago. The notion of ‘one good adult’ is highly valued by the school. The ‘Check and Connect’ programme operates for 6th years whereby they choose an adult member of staff as their mentor and point of contact throughout what can be a stressful year. Adults come from across the school and from a range of roles and opt in to the programme, as do the students. Over the years, the mentors have included many of the teaching staff, the school secretary, the School Completion Programme co-ordinator, the Home-School Liaison Co-ordinator, the Breakfast Club manager and both the Principal and Deputy Principal. During the time it has operated, only one Leaving Certificate student has opted out of participation. Mentors provide advice, support and a listening ear that is valued by students. 6th year students interviewed valued its impact. They recognised that having a free choice of mentor acknowledged their centrality in the process and showed that they were included and trusted with the decision. It was really important to them that they could pick someone who was a good fit for them as outlined:

Picking your own person is good because you know you’re comfortable with that person and you’ll speak to that person. (6th Year)

4th and 5th year students looked forward to being involved in the programme and saw its value as expressed here:

I can’t wait to choose my mentor. (5th Year)

I think it makes school life a lot easier if you like one of your teachers and you actually trust them because if you didn’t you wouldn’t really feel at home in some ways. (4th Year)

Another Transition Year pupil perceptively recognised that aligning the personalities of teacher and student could be very beneficial.

Everyone has different personalities so you'd like someone you have some relation to. Some people might have a strong personality so if they went with someone with a strong personality. Maybe they're kind of like you when they were younger and be a bit more relatable. (4th Year)

5.3.7 Student Support Officer

The school employs a Student Support Officer to meet the care needs and practical needs of the most vulnerable members of the student body. She supports students from the Travelling Community, students who may have difficult family circumstances, students who may be homeless, have suffered a bereavement or be in the role of a young carer, among others. The support is not restricted to a particular group, however, and all students are aware they can call to the office for help at any time. Support includes the provision of uniforms, school supplies such as stationery, calculators etc., hygiene products and lunch passes. She has a very significant role in administering the Paired Reading Scheme with the Junior Certificate Schools Programme Co-ordinator (JCSP) as well as the school's book rental scheme to ensure that every child receives books in preparation for the academic year. She also assists in the school canteen each day, ensuring that no student goes without lunch. Her role extends to looking after unwell students where necessary. The relationship that she builds with students is multi-faceted and allows her to get to know them and their non-curricular needs very well. Students appreciate that relationship, with a group of 5th years describing her as 'lovely for talking

to' and someone who 'always looks out for us. It doesn't matter what you need, she'll help you'.

5.4 Recognition and identity

5.4.1 Recognition and the link to attendance and participation

Students described the variety of ways in which the adults they encountered created a positive and welcoming atmosphere. For all of the students interviewed, the level of welcome they received through informal greetings and acknowledgement was a school-wide influence on their enjoyment and participation. The morning welcome provided by the caretaker and other support staff was highlighted.

B, the caretaker, will be singing. He's in good humour. He always says hello. (5th Year)

*Staff saying 'Hiya, Morning'. M**, the ladies in the office. It has you in a better mindset for work. (6th Year)*

Even S (SNA) will be asking if we are alright, not just the students in the special class. (5th Year)

For one group of 4th years, for whom punctuality is an issue, their experience of the first point of contact, the office staff, encouraged them and ensured they came to school, even if they were late as they described below:

If people were like 'Why are you late?' and you already have the stress of being late on top, you'd say 'Oh, I won't be here then'. (4th Year)

If you're going into the office to sign in and they just have you sign in. They're not asking you 'Why were you late?' It doesn't make you feel like you're being judged or anything. (4th Year)

That sense of being welcomed irrespective of being late was shared by the 5th Year student with the worst time-keeping record in the school, although she attended school eventually each day.

The people in the office, even if you come in late they say Hi. They have a chat. It brightens up your day when they say 'Good Morning' to you. (5th Year)

5.4.2 Paying attention

The notion of the adults taking notice and paying attention was voiced in each of the focus groups and seen as something that showed that the adult members of the school community valued and recognised the worth of students. It allowed them to see that their identity was valued as more than just a student in a given subject. This recognition could be as simple as a hello on the corridor. Being acknowledged had meaning for students.

People here say Hi. They ask you how you are. (6th Year)

When you're walking down the corridor, they say Hi and 'have a good day' and all. They're real positive. (5th Year)

One of the most reserved students interviewed also valued this informal acknowledgement.

When you pass a teacher in the hall, they always smile and say hi. Even if they don't really know you, they always smile, which is nice. (5th Year)

Another 5th Year student, who has additional needs and whose first language is not English, talked about the positive impact of these informal encounters.

When class finishes and I'm stressed because I have all the books in my hand and the teacher walks by and says 'Hi D', even if I don't know that teacher and it's surprising but nice. (5th Year)

One third year girl felt valued by teachers noticing if she was unhappy, looked unwell or was waiting at the office to be collected early, stating:

Even if you look down, they'll be 'Are you ok?' Or even if you're going home, they'll ask 'What's wrong? Are you ok?' Even if you're getting asked 50 times, you're glad that they care, that they asked. (3rd Year)

Acknowledgement and paying attention extended to staff noticing and checking up on absences from school, as outlined by these senior students:

When a teacher notices if I'm not there. Like today, I walked by Ms. M and she asked me how I was 'cause I wasn't in the other day. It was nice she noticed. It's paying attention to you. (5th Year)

You want to feel important. You don't want to be walking around school feeling that nobody cares. There's some schools where if you left no one would notice, whereas people would notice in this school. (5th Year)

It's nice to know that a teacher will check up on you and have a conversation with you (6th Year)

The importance of teachers and others knowing a student's name was an issue for several of the 5th and 6th year participants.

She knows all of us. I think it makes it so personal. It makes you more involved and it makes you feel so important or something. (6th Year)

I think it can be just a simple Hi. And knowing your name as well. (5th Year)

They were not content when that did not happen either in class or in their wider school experience.

I didn't like primary at all. Even our principal didn't know my name like. (5th Year)

For one of the 5th year participants, the failure to learn her name was perceived as being uncared for, the teacher not caring enough to take the time or make the effort to do so.

There's a teacher and she still doesn't know my name from September. I'm 'C's friend or the girl beside ...

Interviewer: Have you ever said it?

Yes. Everybody tells her every day – 'that's not her name Miss'.

For a student with an unusual surname, the issue was not failure to know her name but to pronounce it correctly and such incidences had become the norm.

I've had the wrong name said to me for years. (5th Year)

In the case of one of the 5th years, the failure to pay attention was not just a failure to learn the correct name or pronunciation but perceived by the student as a conscious exclusion by the teacher as one 5th year explained:

There is a teacher who ignores me. It's a thing that really hurts my feelings. Sometimes in class I give an answer and she doesn't listen and then another student says the same answer and I'm saying in my head 'but I gave that answer'. I'm not going to shout out, 'hey, that's my answer' and be like a baby but ...

Students also spoke of what should be recognised that isn't, with 5th years making the following suggestions: 'Maybe the people that struggle in school and still come in'. 'Maybe 'most improved' – like you could have a first bad half of the year but really try the second half.

5.4.3 Dialogue and Communication

Students consistently referred to being listened to, to needing attention and to receiving that attention, being acknowledged. That attention was felt strongly in the day to day acknowledgements on the corridors and in classrooms, as well as in connections made when teachers and others went out of their way to help students who might be struggling with work.

When you ask a question, they'll indulge it and actually answer it. (5th Year)

Ms. C tells us her opinion but it's an open discussion. (5th Year)

I need human contact. Communication is key for me. (5th Year)

The girls recognised the additional efforts teachers made to help with their academic progression both during and at the end of class, and in other ways such as offering early morning classes and during breaks from school. They were conscious that teachers were giving up their own time and saw that as evidence of care. Students also appreciated when teachers were approachable in relation to school work outside of class or when a student was having difficulty understanding a topic. Several of the participants outlined what that meant to them:

Extra little things. If you're struggling with a topic and they stay back to help you. They don't actually have to do that because they're not getting paid but they do anyway because they care. (5th Year)

The teachers are willing to come in at weekends and after school and stuff. (5th Year)

If they see you stuck, they come down to you. They'll just help and understand it as well if you're stuck. They're like 'Do you need any help?' They're approachable. (3rd Year)

You're not afraid to go up to them after class and be like 'I'm stuck on this. Can you help me?' They say 'Yeah, grand. Most of them will say grand and they do it with you. (3rd Year)

The ability to ask questions without being fearful and a teacher taking the time to explain material were highly valued by all age groups with 4th year students in one focus group explaining that for them it was the key to building relationships. Two of the students have specific learning difficulties and attend additional learning support classes.

Make sure they (students) understand what they're doing. Don't make them be afraid if they get something wrong. Or like you know, don't make them think they're like stupid for getting it wrong. Show them that it's ok to get stuff wrong.

I think it's about not being afraid to ask the teacher for help and if somebody gets it wrong they're not afraid to admit it.

Creating a classroom environment that was relaxing and allowed for fun and having a laugh while learning was important to a number of the students. This type of atmosphere could be created by 'having little conversations; asking about your weekend or how life is going outside of the classroom' as well as 'not being serious 100% of the time'.

I enjoy the banter with the teachers. Ms. M always talks to us. (5th Year)

In Music, everything is laid back but you still get the work done. It's welcoming. People believe in you. They know you can and you will do it, and they'll help you. (6th Year)

By contrast, the impact on learning and student engagement when the teacher was in a 'bad mood' had a significant impact on learning, according to one 4th Year – 'if someone's cranky you're going to be 'Oh why would I bother with that person?' Her views were echoed by a 5th year girl.

I think the teachers either make or break the school environment because if you go into a class you really like and your teacher is in a bad mood, it's just going to put you in a bad mood and it will affect your work and stuff. (5th Year)

The possible impact of having poor relationships with teachers was outlined by other participants, including an academic and highly motivated senior who explained:

I think for me personally, if I don't like the teacher, if I don't get on well, I don't do so well in that class – it's so much harder to work. You have to separate yourself. I find that really frustrating because the teacher's the one that's supposed to be getting you through the Leaving Cert. It's really hard when you like the subject but don't get on with the teacher. (5th Year)

5.4.4 Confirming and Recognition

The focus group participants cited instances of feeling affirmed by teachers and a sense of being encouraged to be their best. Encouragement and support from teachers resulted in positive academic outcomes and the desire to work harder and do better. This included encouraging students to attempt or remain in higher level classes at Junior and Leaving Certificate, as described below:

Even if you're doing bad, they keep on pushing you. Sometimes they get you out of your comfort zone, which kind of helps. (4th Year)

Like in the mocks in Irish, I failed, but she said 'keep it up – you can do it' and I did. (5th Year)

Especially if it's a really hard subject. I'm thinking like of one subject and if it wasn't for that teacher, I definitely wouldn't be able to do it, you know. (4th Year)

For one girl, the support extended to encouraging her to stay in school.

They encourage you to go on and keep on doing it. I think to make the person want to come to school is more important. (5th Year)

Support and encouragement also came through recognition of non-academic talents and skills also and a deeper affirmation of the student as a whole, as one senior student outlined:

Some people may not be school smart but they could be really good at sports. You want them to care about your grades, but you really want them to care about you. (5th Year)

What teachers, Year Heads and the Principal write on student reports was also seen as significant by older students, as described here:.

Comments on reports really matter. I look at that more than the grades. That's what gives you the boost. (5th Year)

The person needs to know the teacher knows them. If there isn't a positive comment you might just drop down. In Maths I got 39% in Higher Level but she said I was an enthusiastic student and that helped so much. (5th Year)

Affirmation and confirmation was particularly significant for three students whose family dynamics were difficult or perhaps unsupportive of their efforts to stay in school.

The teachers actually want you to do well compared to maybe other people in your life who don't. (5th Year)

It's supportive ... you feel supported when you come in – like if you're struggling you can look to all these people for help. It doesn't feel like 'those are the teachers and these are the students. It feels like a community. (5th Year)

You feel more important. They actually care about you. (6th Year)

5.4.5 Non-curricular dialogue

Participants recognised and were grateful for help that staff might offer with issues outside the classroom and perhaps outside of school. Variations were not evident across year groups although senior students were more likely to acknowledge the importance of non-curricular help and a deeper connection to the adults in the school through relationships that included teachers asking about and sometimes helping with non-school related issues.

They all care about you. Not just your school work but yourself as well. (6th Year)

They're with you every single day so it's a bit weird if you go into a class and they don't talk about it (your life outside the subject). (4th Year)

Having a good relationship. If you have a teacher to help you emotionally, you relax more and do better. (6th Year)

They also acknowledged the impact that more in-depth conversations or checking on the students was important to them.

'It makes you more engaged when you're studying because they're interested in your subjects and everything'. (5th Year)

One 4th year student acknowledged the relationship she had with some of her teachers and contrasted that with how she thought her father's experience of school might have been, as outlined below:

Like a lot of the teachers say if you need someone to talk to you can talk to me, which is like a really, really nice thing to hear. I doubt that my Dad had one of those teachers that said that, so it's nice.

Another 4th year felt that teachers asking about issues outside school mattered because 'it shows that they care about you and support you and just want you to be back being yourself again' and students across the focus groups spoke of the positive impact of caring about the whole person as outlined below:

It's really important for the teacher to understand where they're coming from you know. Because depending on what's going on at home it could be something that might make them (the student) act a certain way. So to be not really harsh on them if they do act out and try to see it from their point of view. (4th Year)

They don't just want you to learn – they care about other things. They're nice to you and they help you with other things outside of school and outside activities. (5th Year)

The importance of getting the right balance between care and intrusion was outlined by three 5th years in one of the interviews in relation to a substitute teacher. They explained the dilemma and the discomfort:

There's a fine line between a relationship and a teacher caring about you and something completely inappropriate too. Another sub we had used to sit on our table and call us pet and sweetie – pretending to be one of us.

I got stressed out because I didn't know a verb and she was like 'Is there something wrong at home?' I didn't even know her 5 minutes. Sweet but too personal.

5.4.6 Relational caring and Reciprocity – the impact on learning

Students made the link between feeling and being cared-for and the desire to acknowledge that in return. As a result of teachers attending to their needs, they were motivated to work harder and live up to the belief the teacher had in them. They explained that need to reciprocate as follows:

When you have the encouragement here, it kind of motivates you to stay and do the study. (5th Year)

I literally have the biggest fear of letting people down so when there's a personal relationship, when someone cares about me, I have to work harder, try harder. (5th Year)

It makes you want to work because it's not that you want to impress the teacher but it's you don't want to let them down. (4th Year)

You want to do good for the teacher and for yourself as well. You want to put more work in because of them. (4th Year)

The relationship between feeling cared for by teachers and making academic progress or striving for success was identified, particularly by senior students.

I am an academic person and I love to sit down and study but if teachers aren't there to support you and help you and see if you're doing alright, it's just not going to work. I need emotional support. (5th Year)

If a teacher doesn't care about you, it's not that you don't want to learn from them, but it just doesn't seem as important because you know that teacher doesn't really care, but a teacher who cares, you know they want you to do well. (4th Year)

Support goes a long way. I was really bad at Maths last year, really bad. When I got my Junior Cert back I was so happy I passed ordinary Maths but the teacher that I had she just kept encouraging me and gave me extra classes.

That's what really helped because I knew she cared. (4th Year)

Participants also recognised that being cared for by a teacher did not mean being treated more favourably or given an easier time. Rather, they understood that a teacher having high expectations of them was confirmation that they were cared for. Several of them highlighted that belief and explained it as follows:

They can see behind – they can see what you're capable of and they push you towards that. (4th Year)

She pushes me and gives me extra work to work on. (4th Year)

Teachers have expectations of us. (5th Year)

If a teacher encourages you to come to school, you relate to that person. (5th Year)

The impact and importance of the personal relationships enjoyed by students with both peers and the adults in the case study school was in evidence in all of the focus group interviews. The next section looks at the way in which participants saw that care was being modelled in the school through inclusivity and their recognition that they experienced changing and growing relationships as they went through school.

5.5 An inclusive place

Students pointed to the inclusive aspects of the school with reference to the Diversity Committee activities, the open enrolment of students of all races, religions and abilities and the integration of students with special educational needs. For one of the 5th Years, this had special importance to her and her family.

My cousin is in the SEN class and my nanny will be asking is my cousin ok but I told her all the SNAs are great and all the school loves the girls in the class.

Some schools don't take students with special needs.

Two other interviewees agreed with her, seeing the value of this inclusion and recognising that 'it's the local school' and 'mixing is a good thing for everyone'.

5.6 The impact of age – students and teachers

Students recognised the changing nature of their relationships with teachers as they got older and moved from junior to senior cycle. Leaving Certificate students explained their understanding of that changing relationship as the following exchange between three 6th years shows: 'I think they respect you more'. 'And talk to you like an adult'. 'And they're more open in 6th year'.

6th years were not the only students to notice this, with both 5th and 4th years also recognising the changing nature of their relationships.

It's different. We have a better bond with teachers. They have more respect for you.

They talk to you like an adult. Also because we've changed. They're seeing you mature. (5th Year)

The impact of the age of the teachers rather than the students arose in two of the discussion groups. The 6th years were forthright in their belief that the age of their teachers had an impact on relationships. S., a student who enjoyed very positive relationships with all of her teachers regardless of their age felt strongly. 'I think that's why young teachers are important. They can relate to you. If the gap is too big, if people are too old. Like my Granda is 70 and the older people were educated different. Mine never got to Leaving Cert.' One of the 5th year groups discussed the positive role that a

student teacher and former pupil of the school had on them, as did 6th years. For the 6th Years the impact of their History teacher, who was also a former pupil, was significant and positive too.

5.7 Suggestions for change

The final question posed to the participants in each of the focus group interviews was what changes they would like to see and what suggestions they had for improving the student experience in the case study school. The suggestions made were primarily organizational or curriculum related. Practical and physical changes to the fabric of the building were suggested such as painting each classroom a different colour, having base rooms for all class groups, longer lunchtimes, longer classes and moving some of the lockers to allow easier access to them and create more space on the corridor.

Transition Year students felt that it would be nice to have a room for 6th years to go for a bit if they were stressed. They reflected on their own experience of finding Junior Cycle stressful, with one student suggesting that:

'...even 3rd year was extremely stressful so for 6th years I wonder what they're like right now. Maybe it would be nice for them to get out for a bit and forget about it for a while 'cause that really does help. Maybe yoga or mindfulness or tea'.

5.7.1 A different menu

Making changes to the canteen menu featured in several of the focus groups. The school has its own canteen with two local women, the parents of past pupils, employed to produce a range of sandwiches, rolls and wraps each day, as well as one hot option a

day. The hot options include soup, pasta and chicken curry, by far the most popular lunch option with students in all age groups. The school achieved the Healthy Heart School Award in 2019 and there are healthy snacks on sale, although Wednesday has been designated treat day and chocolate is permitted. Several students suggested the introduction of a broader menu to the school canteen. There was divergence on this suggestion. For some, a broader choice in the canteen meant more healthy options like fruit and salad. For others, it meant the introduction of chicken goujons and pizza. One 4th year was keen on a balanced diet of ‘more chocolate, nicer crisps and fruit pots’.

5.7.2 Curricular change

Some of the 5th year research participants had been involved in the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment’s (NCCA) review of senior cycle education. They and the 6th year students felt strongly that the Leaving Certificate warranted change. In the interviews for this research, they were asked to focus on specific changes to the school’s current timetable and curriculum that they would like to see. For some students, this meant introducing new subjects, for others change would involve dropping certain subjects.

Several students wanted to see the introduction of Physical Education (PE) as a Leaving Certificate option in the school. An application had been made to be a pilot school for its introduction but had not been successful. Others believed that Computer Science or Coding would be worth introducing.

The introduction of more practical subjects was sought by a number of students, some of whom expressed their desire for subjects like Woodwork and Engineering and ‘what the boys’ schools have’. The suggestion that Technical Graphics be introduced met with a mixed response in several groups. Students get to experience the subject in Transition Year and many of the interviewees said they had enjoyed it and would have liked to continue with it for Leaving Certificate. ‘It shouldn’t be just one year ‘cause you’re getting into it and it’s over’. However, some students had found it challenging and were resistant to its introduction.

In several instances, the suggestions at senior cycle related to having more choice or dropping subjects, most frequently Religious Education (RE). Students take RE, which focuses on World Religions, as a Junior Cycle examination subject in the case study school. There was no dissent from students in 3rd or 4th year regarding the course or having to do this. Senior students pursue a non-exam RE course over 5th and 6th year. This must total 2 hours per week according to the school’s trustees and is timetabled as a single 40 minute class plus a double class per week. The double class is often used to bring the whole year group together, particularly in 6th year, for preparing various liturgical events such as the Christmas carol service and the graduation Mass and ceremony. It is also used for wellbeing-related activities such as meditation and mindfulness, as well as guest speakers on issues relating to social justice. Several students felt that one double class per week at senior cycle would be enough, although they recognised the position of the school as a Catholic school under the trusteeship of CEIST.

I know it's because we're a Catholic school but if you don't want to do religion, you shouldn't have to. (5th Year)

I think double Religion is enough. We should turn the single RE into a study class. (5th Year)

The school also offers Leaving Certificate RE as an optional examination subject. Take up of the option is low but where 6 or more students wish to study RE, the class runs so as to enhance student opportunities for success and progression to 3rd level. Where a student takes RE for Leaving Certificate, she must also attend the non-exam classes. The 5th year students who were taking both formats of RE also felt that the time given to the non-exam dimension of the subject should be reduced, with the time being allocated to 'core' subjects primarily Maths, other exam subjects or as a study period.

Two students also felt they would prefer to study alternatives to Modern Foreign Languages and questioned why some universities insisted on a third language as one of the minimum requirements. Several girls mentioned Irish as a subject they would prefer not to study, although one group of 5th years questioned the usefulness of what is taught on the Leaving Certificate Irish course, rather than whether learning the language itself was worthwhile. One of the group described her disenchantment with the material on the course:

I don't think it's a bad subject. I would love to be fluent at Irish but ... 20 sraith pictiúirs, having to learn a poem in Irish, how's that going to help us at all. What's that about like?

The introduction of a more useful 'Life Skills' type subject was a suggestion made by another 5th year student as outlined below:

Schools should have a class that teaches people how to do things in life. Not theory. It'd be cool if you could do a class on how to buy a house, how to do your taxes, change a lightbulb, change a tyre. Life skills I suppose.

The introduction of more aspects of the Transition Year programme to 5th and 6th year was mooted by some, while a 4th year student felt that there was potential to include TY-type activities on an ongoing but extra-curricular basis for students with shared interests, irrespective of year group. She had given what this might involve some detailed thought:

Have some of the stuff you have for TY but have it as options for the rest of the school 'cause you have a lot of options to go out and do stuff, do trips, learn more about certain things. Maybe just trips to certain places, like if someone wants to learn more about History, you could have History trips or Lego League – that was really fun.

Removing the single period Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE) module at senior cycle to give a study period on the timetable was a desired change for some. The module is timetabled throughout 5th and 6th year with students taking 10 weeks each of Choir, Fitness and Health Education including the optional Bodyrights Programme. The Bodyrights Programme was designed by the Dublin Rape Crisis Centre on relationship and sexuality issues such as consent and sexual violence. It is delivered by two trained members of staff.

Other students wanted more SPHE related time, particularly at senior cycle, with one student suggesting that Careers might not be weekly in 5th year and that time be given over to Health Education. She believed that the school should 'Maybe incorporate Health into Careers. We don't need talks about CAO until 6th Year'.

These students valued the role that the modules played in helping reduce their stress, especially during the Leaving Certificate year.

5.8 Conclusion

This chapter has presented the findings of the study as expressed in the focus group discussions held with the 42 participants. The students' voices reflected the complexity of schools and classrooms and those students' experiences of school life. There was not one singular voice, which was representative of all students, but a myriad of voices that expressed shared themes and thoughts on issues such as their sense of belonging and sense of identity and the positive relationships they enjoyed – formal and informal, in classrooms, on corridors, during activities and at events. Sub- themes included feeling comfortable and secure in asking questions or asking for help and feeling that teachers had high expectations of them academically but also saw them as more than just their academic ability. Students reflected on the impact of a wide range of aspects of school life, from the colour of paint on the walls to the school's DEIS designation. There was recognition by the students of the importance of aspects of the hidden curriculum in schools and an understanding of what was valued by the school. They articulated where there was shared understanding and shared values between school and student and were also keen to discuss those curricular and non- curricular issues that were less positive for them.

The next chapter examines these findings in the light of existing research on care, identity and relationships in schools. It looks at how the school's designation as DEIS affects the experience of the student participants.

Chapter 6 - Discussion

”It matters how we greet them, how we treat them, how we engage them both inside and outside the classroom and how we teach them.” Bass (2018)

6.1 Introduction

The purpose of this research was to elicit student views so as to understand better how they construct their reality within a DEIS context, particularly in terms of care. This chapter reflects on the findings of this study in the light of existing research.

Three key themes emerged from the focus group discussions. As with existing research, they are interwoven. Each has, at its core, the affective elements of education and school engagement. They can be identified as having a sense of belonging, being recognised as an individual by other members of the school community, thus having an identity, and enjoying positive relationships. The findings tie in with a social justice perspective of education and the themes are consistent with existing literature on care in education and student voice.

There is acceptance in a broad range of literature that care in education is multi-dimensional. Theorists may use slightly different terminology but there is much overlap and interconnectedness. There are many interpretations of what an ethic of care model

might look like for schools. While Noddings's work (1982, 1985, 2005, 2020, 2017) is extensive and to the forefront of the research, work by Tosalt (2009), Tronto (1993, 2001), Wentzel (1997), Bass (2018) and others has explored similar themes. This research was examined in light of that work.

6.2 Elements of caring

Noddings's Theory of Care (1992) refers to the concepts of modelling, dialogue, practice and confirmation. Tronto (1993) expressed care as four basic qualities of the carer - attentive, responsible, competent and responsive. Wentzel (1997) attributed the dimensions of caring as follows: modelling, democratic communications, expectations, rule setting and nurturing. Tosalt (2009) has outlined a model of care that is presented as interpersonal caring; academic caring and fairness caring. Finally, Bass (2018) outlines a view of caring in schools as valuing students individually, offering them engaging instruction and extra academic support, along with treating all students fairly. In exploring the conversations in the context of care theory, it was evident that Noddings's contention that care involves modelling, dialogue, practice and confirmation permeated the student experience, even if they did not use that specific terminology.

6.3 Sense of belonging

Students from each of the focus groups described school in terms of place, space, events and activities, all with the overarching theme of feeling welcome, connected and having a sense of belonging. The participants recognised that feeling that there was a positive school climate in which they belonged was essential for them to engage in and

enjoy school life, echoing Kroth & Keeler's (2009) contention that positive school climate has a positive influence on educational outcomes. The atmosphere in the school, classroom climate and whole school values have an impact on a student sense of belonging, from feeling comfortable asking questions to being recognised on the corridor (Smyth, 2017). The participants in this study saw friendships as central to their sense that they have a place in the community, concurring with Downes (2017) in relation to affective engagement. They spoke of bright colours, photos of themselves and their peers, artwork on the walls, rooms and spaces that triggered positive memories, events that brought everyone together, formal and informal interactions that made them feel connected. The participants saw this as essential to their engagement and involvement in school. This echoed the findings of Smyth, McCoy & Kingston (2015) that feeling a sense of belonging has critical implications, not just for academic progress, but for student wellbeing and mental health.

Noddings (2017) suggests that a positive climate, built on care is essential for students to flourish and comprises friendship, community and education that teaches people to be more caring, kind, fair and just. Collier (2006) contends that caring behaviours are based within a complex series of interactional relationships, propounding the notion of schools as an extended family. The young people in this study recognised that. They valued routine, celebration of all and the familiar and familial structure of the form teacher/base class system.

6.4 Identity and Recognition

This research acknowledges the importance of valuing all students, seeing their differences as strengths (Ryan 2008). The respondents wanted to be acknowledged as individuals and have their needs recognised, what Noddings (1982) refers to as ‘paying attention’. This ‘noticing’ extended across school life, in and out of the classroom - how a student was feeling, whether they needed additional help, asking how the match or the weekend had gone. Across the age groups, this study concurred with existing research. Students spoke about teachers and the adults they encountered ‘noticing’ them, remembering if they had been absent, approaching them if they looked unwell or upset, wanting the best for them. This recognition by participants echoed what Gholami & Tirri (2012) refer to as ‘awareness’ – knowing the student’s personal problems, needs and capabilities. The link between knowing the students, their needs and their identity is linked by Noddings (2017) to spotting the better self and is essential for students to progress in all aspects of school life and beyond. Noddings contends that we cannot know what students need and how to help them reach their better self if we don’t enter into dialogue with them and pay attention to them. Paying attention in this instance is about recognising the students and their potential, helping them grow as people and not just acquire knowledge. The participants in this study acknowledged that adults paying attention to them in school had an impact on their attendance and participation. This link was clearly understood by the students in each focus group. Recognition and affirmation took the form of adults knowing their names, including the spellings and pronunciation.

It included taking the time to have conversations inside and outside the classroom, not always solely about academic matters.

6.5 Identity and progress

Garza, Ryser and Lee's (2009) study suggests that caring enhances the student's potential, validates student worth, fosters positive engagement and allows for individualised academic success. The senior students in this study wanted to be recognised as individuals and placed considerable emphasis on the notion of individualised progress and recognition. They acknowledged that there might be students who were better than them in a particular subject but wanted recognition of their own efforts. They wanted their identity as a learner acknowledged. This desire to be treated as unique extended outside academics. Participants in this study understood that teachers might have to treat students differently because of factors outside the classroom or outside school.

Participants appreciated the teacher getting to know them, knowing about their interests, asking how they are, helping with non-academic difficulties, noticing when their work has disimproved. Swabey, Pullen, Getenet & Dowden (2018) outline the type of attention needed by students as listening to them, being emotionally supportive, positively managing behaviour and planning for differentiated needs. That recognition of the lived experiences of students ties in with this study and is in line with the participants' interpretation of what caring looks like in schools.

6.5 Relationships – Care from Teachers

Relationships between students and the adults they encounter on a daily basis, primarily teachers, were at the heart of this research. The findings show commonalities with existing research, which supports the benefits of positive teacher student relationships. The link between relationships, care and achievement has been acknowledged in previous Irish studies including Baker et al. (2006) and Flynn (2013), as well as internationally. Tosolt's (2009) U.S. study on middle school students' perceptions of caring teacher behaviours finds that positive teacher-student relationships are created by very simple measures including smiling, greetings and acknowledging. The importance of care in ensuring student success are mirrored in this research. For the participants, caring and positive relationships included help with academics, helping a student after school, recognising that each student is unique, listening to the student, having high expectations and asking about how life was going. Students who have caring relationships with teachers are found to be more academically successful and display greater pro-social behaviour (Zakrzewski, 2012). Positive relationships have a large impact on academic results as students who enjoy positive relationships are more likely to follow instructions, ask for help and be generally better engaged in learning with better academic outcomes. (Swabey et al, 2018).

Bass (2018) acknowledges the role that additional academic support plays in allowing teacher-student relationships to build and students to flourish. This was echoed by the participants. Irrespective of age, they spoke of having positive

relationships with teachers who were willing to explain, give extra help in or after class, and outside of the traditional school day.

The participants acknowledged the relationship between feeling cared for and performing well because of the recognized relationship they had with the teacher (Kruger, 2013). Noddings (2012) writes of relationships helping to maximise student learning and being the difference between failing and succeeding. The findings of this study concur. Participants spoke of the impact their teachers had on their progress because of the positive relationship that existed. Students spoke of wanting to do well for the teacher, not wanting to let them down because they had given so much to the relationship. This sense that because you know the teacher cares you want to do better for them was apparent across age groups and concurs with Collier (2006) who found that this reciprocal caring could have a positive outcome on learning and academic success as it encouraged students to aim for excellence. Narinasamy's (2018) paper on the Malaysian school system also acknowledges the role of the caring teacher-student relationship has as a prerequisite for cognitive growth and development.

The contrasting experience of 'careless education' undermines learning (Ellerbock and Kiefer 2014). This was echoed in the findings of this study. Students who felt that the teacher did not care for them or about them and their progress were less likely to feel motivated or make an effort. This was true among all participants, irrespective of age or academic ability. More capable students and students who got on well with teachers recognised that there could be issues for their less able or non-conformist peers if they did not get on with the teacher or found school challenging. This concurs with the work of several researchers including Gay (2000) and

Noddings (2012). Only one student spoke of trying to overcome a poor relationship with a teacher by working harder.

Students were conscious that, for them, not caring could include the teacher who did not prepare well, the teacher who did not motivate them or the teacher who would not take the time to explain if students were struggling. This was in line with the findings of previous Irish studies by Lynch & Lodge (2002), O'Brien & Flynn (2009) and Lynch (2009). The notion of 'care-less' education (Lynch, 2016) has deeper implications. Noddings (1992) suggests that the work of the school is to develop young people who are caring, tolerant and understanding. That cannot happen if it is not what students experience in their day-to-day encounters.

6.6 Relationships – Care from other adults

Much of the research on the impact of care and positive relationships focuses on the teacher-student relationship. This research brought to light the recognition by the participants that care could be provided by all adults in the school community and that many of them had experienced this. They valued the formal care provided by the Student Support Officer, whose role in caring was a very practical one. They equally valued the informal displays of caring by non-teaching staff members who checked in on them, knew their name or simply said hello. The participants in this study spoke not only of the impact of their teachers on their sense of belonging and identity. The role of non-teaching adults was to the fore and echoes the findings of Hachey (2012) in relation to

school librarians and their role in caring and improving learning by doing so. Hachey points to strong evidence that interpersonal relationships are important in improved thinking and learning. Caring connections in schools lead to students feeling socially connected. That sense of belonging leads to investment in the school community, thus leading to investment in themselves and their studies.

In their study of the influence of caring leadership Van der Vyver et al. (2014) examine the way in which the modelling of school leaders can influence the way teachers care for students. That study acknowledges the many ways in which it is possible for non-teachers, particularly school leaders, to care and to create a climate of care. Its findings are echoed in what the participants in this study valued: including everyone, maintaining the building well, showing interest in students, knowing their names and acknowledging students and their efforts.

6.7 Is care ‘soft’?

Lynch (2016) refers to care as love, not sentimental love but love where people are really interested in you. She outlines care as trust, integrity, solidarity, looking after students who need the most help. Noddings (1995) also counters the perception of care as ‘soft’, suggesting that there caring is not synonymous with being soft or weak.

The participants in this study also dismissed the notion that care equated with the adult being ‘soft’. They recognised that feeling cared for and enjoying school were not mutually exclusive. Students saw that teachers could care in myriad ways and that in some instances the caring was exhibited by the ‘tough love’ of a committed teacher who

had high expectations. They recognised that those teachers who pushed them to achieve to the best of their abilities could be equally caring. What mattered was the existing relationship. Holding students accountable and demonstrating compassion are not incompatible notions once care is at the heart of the relationship. Without care and a sense of belonging, learning won't take place, certainly not to the optimal benefit for each student.

The importance of the affective elements of schooling go beyond ensuring academic success. This research supports the findings that a student's decision to remain in school, to attend at all, is influenced by caring teachers and staff and positive relationships. The link between care and students' experience of school is all the more important in DEIS schools, which serve the most disadvantaged communities. External factors such as poverty, peer pressure and lack of family experience of education means that students need schools to be places where they feel welcome and safe, where they are accepted, have a sense of belonging and a unique identity.

6.8 Relationships – trust, reciprocity and the identity of the carer

Reciprocal relationships were recognised by all research participants. This echoes the work of Noddings (1992) and Wentzel (1997) among others. They contend that for genuine caring to take place the relationship must be reciprocal and the cared for must acknowledge that activity. This was particularly clear in discussions around the 'Check and Connect' mentoring programme. Students value the programme and recognise that individuals would benefit from different mentors depending on their own needs and

interests. There was evidence that they recognised the various qualities in the adult mentors and chose appropriately for their needs. Participants appreciated that they got to choose their own mentors. The free choice offered to 6th year students was highly valued by them. Students appreciated the recognition that they were best placed to know what their own needs were. Being trusted to choose a mentor who would meet the student's individual needs was very important and there was an understanding among the participants that they got something from the relationship that was specific to them. Taken further, acknowledging that students are producers of unique knowledge about themselves and their experiences (Mitra 2005) also means recognising their voice in decisions that concern them.

The participants in this research acknowledged the value of mutual trust, identifying it as a central component in creating a relationship with staff. It enhanced their feelings of being connected to school. Senior students in the case study school placed high value on the trust afforded them to choose a mentor who would meet their individual needs. They welcomed this acknowledgement that they understood best their needs and also the identities and uniqueness of staff. They knew and understood who could bring what they needed to the mentor-mentee relationship. Students recognised their own lived experiences and in a reciprocal way the teacher's lived experiences. Students recognised and acknowledged the qualities in staff members that they needed in order to progress and succeed.

Participants also recognized that the role of the carer and their perception of that role could take on different qualities depending on the age of the adult care-giver, and the age of the cared-for. There was a difference in how focus groups of different ages perceived the caring teacher or adult. In 3rd year, the group described caring adults in terms of carrying out a ‘mammy’ role – looking after them like a parent. Two older participants also referred to the carer in these terms. This echoes existing research that outlines the strong association between the concept of care and that of mothering (Gilligan, 1982). It also reflects the contention by Lynch (2016) that care is highly gendered and frequently perceived as maternal. Younger students perceived caring in maternal terms with form teachers, in particular, seen as mother figures. There are currently no male teachers who are year heads, although two of the Transition Year form teachers are male. The role of Year Head is a post of responsibility at the level of Assistant Principal 1. Staff apply for the position through a competitive interview process as vacancies arise. The role of form teacher is a voluntary position.

However, it was apparent that a change occurred as students got older. Older respondents described caring adults in terms of their mentoring role, role in giving careers advice and role in ‘getting them through the Leaving Certificate exam’. They felt they were perceived by teachers and others as more mature. They had developed a more equal relationship with adults. The role of carer had changed to that of mentor and senior students valued that interpretation of care. They referred to the length of time teachers knew them and their shared history. This acknowledgement that care is not instant but is

built through the relationships we form over time concurs with Noddings' (2015) suggestion that the culture of care we build together enriches both individual and community life. It takes the concepts of identity and reciprocity further and provides scope for further study.

Senior students also identified the value of having teachers who were closer to their own age as they felt they could relate to those adults more readily and that younger teachers would understand their needs and issues. This is an area that warrants further study since students are influenced by their teachers not only as instructors but far more deeply by them as persons (Noddings, 2015).

6.9 DEIS status and the notion of meritocracy

DEIS status is granted to those schools who serve students perceived to be among the most socio-economically and educationally disadvantaged in the country. The students in this study, who represented 10% of the school cohort with a range of abilities and disabilities and various life situations, seldom spoke of feeling disadvantaged. In fact, the issue of wealth and privilege arose in one group only and this in relation to the opportunities afforded that group through DEIS-related programmes to compensate for the advantages students in other schools might have because of better finances. That group refuted the notion of a 'meritocratic' education system and the suggestion that the existing Leaving Certificate offers a level playing field. They were particularly aware that this was not the case in their experience or perception. These findings echoed the work of Kathleen Lynch (2019). All participants made reference to aspects of school life

and student experiences that are enhanced as a result of attending a DEIS school, including opportunities that do not exist for those attending non-DEIS school. Supports through the School Completion Programme (SCP – a programme offered in DEIS schools, which targets those students most likely to drop out) and other means help facilitate the building of community.

The focus groups referred to aspects of schooling that might possibly not exist without DEIS status, e.g. the Breakfast Club and Homework Club, without making a direct connection with the DEIS programme. Senior students made a clear link between the supports they received because of the DEIS status of the school in relation to pathways to further education. They also recognised that the system was not equal or equitable (Lynch, 2019). This concurs with Lynch's (2019) belief that school may provide the same opportunities to each student but there are hidden aspects of schooling that school itself cannot provide, e.g. opportunities for cultural experiences, money for extra-curricular activities – all of the things that enhance the life chances of the already privileged.

Existing research points to the conflict between education for its own sake and education for the economic good. The participants in this research study did not focus on this aspect of schooling and no participant openly equated education to economic prosperity in their discussions. Students spoke about the importance they placed on respecting the intelligences of all learners and discussed the changes they wished to see in terms of curriculum and assessment. As with Lynch's assertion that we need to reframe

what is defined as valuable knowledge, they made reference to what they felt would be useful to learn.

6.10 Conclusion

This chapter explored the findings of the research carried out in the case study school in light of existing research on the affective elements of education, particularly care, identity and relationships. The school's status as one of the country's second- level DEIS schools remained a contextual factor, although it was not a primary consideration for most of the participants.

Chapter seven draws conclusions and implications from the research findings. It also looks at the limitations of this study, outlines its contribution to existing theory and explores what future research might be warranted or possible.

Chapter 7 – Conclusion

7.1 Introduction

This research study set out to address the implications of the following questions:

- ☐ What is the students' experience of life in the case study school?
- ☐ Do students feel cared for in the school setting?
- ☐ Can the experience of being consulted through student voice research have a transformative impact for student participants and schools?

The main findings in this study suggest that student experiences of care, affective engagement and a sense of belonging are linked strongly to success in school, not just academic but in terms of their wellbeing, positive sense of identity and self-worth. Students in the case study school concurred that care in its many guises is essential to a sense of belonging, progress and achievement. The positive relationships they create with adults and their peers are at the heart of their school experience. These findings support existing research on the importance of the affective elements of education, relationships and listening to student voice in schools.

7.2 Contribution to literature

This research contributes to the existing literature on DEIS schools by placing the voice of students, often marginalised and rarely heard, to the forefront of the study. It places their lived experiences above statistics and SMART targets, moving away from what Lynch (2019) calls 'murder by mathematics' and placing high value on the students' interpretations of their own experiences. Studies on student voice have been carried out in the Irish second-level setting but the location of this study in the school leader's own

school meant that the findings could lead to immediate change to meet the needs of the students in the case study school. This opens up possibilities for similar studies to be replicated in all schools, not just those serving students perceived as disadvantaged.

7.3 Limitations

The number of participants was limited to 42, which represented 10% of the student cohort. 1st and 2nd year students were not included in the focus group. This study was limited to those students from 3rd year up so that they had built up experience in the school. There was also a sense that older students would be less likely to give responses they felt the researcher might want to hear.

The study did not focus on specific or separate cohorts of students such as those with special educational or additional needs or those from a multi-cultural background. There was representation of the diverse nature of the students in the school across the focus groups. However, one group that was not represented was the students who are members of the Travelling Community as none of those students volunteered to participate.

The decision to focus the research in just one case study school was a deliberate one as the purpose of the study was to build on my own knowledge in a way that would benefit my professional work and the school community of which I am a member. It was not intended that the findings of the study would be generalized for all schools or globally applicable. The very essence of the research was that it was context specific, designed to hear the voices of students in that specific setting, to improve their school experience and enhance my professional ability to meet their needs as school leader.

Student voice was at the heart of the work since it was about what mattered to them about school; what kept them motivated, engaged and in school. It recognised that students are the experts in their own worlds and acknowledged that it is crucial we hear their experiences. Nonetheless, the findings do offer some basis for recommendations that might be adaptable on a wider scale.

7.4 Implications and Recommendations

The findings of this study indicate that school leaders must look at the additional roles students could undertake in all matters to do with school life. It also requires schools to look at how voice might be gathered and interpreted in more than a tokenistic way. The research suggests that turning student voice into a mainstay of school life on a deeper level than currently exists is essential, not just in DEIS schools. It provides the challenge of looking at how student voice can be used as an integral part of planning for the future of the school, from the design of the uniform to the design and delivery of the curriculum, or at least some aspects of it. Placing trust in students and allowing their voice to be heard allows them to learn better as they are more engaged (Cook-Sather 2003). It has the potential to teach young people about things, far deeper than academics, which will benefit society including democracy and active citizenship (Fullan 2005). It allows them to develop vital skills and abilities (Cook-Sather 2002). The modelling that Nel Noddings advocates so strongly as a by-product of care is further developed and its impact deepened when students see that their voice is valued.

7.4.1 School specific

Within the case study school, there remains a need for a broader and more formalised gathering of student voice. The existing end-of-year review questionnaires carried out with 1st, 2nd and 3rd years should be expanded to all year groups, with a time set aside in May of each school year to allow students to complete the survey. The use of Google forms would make the administration and analysis of the forms less time-consuming. There is potential for Form Teachers, the Year Heads or the Care Team to be involved in this aspect of gathering student voice since they are involved directly with the day-to-day lives of students.

Focus group interviews should be considered for use with identifiable groups within the school community such as the Student Council, Student Leadership Team, Diversity, Green and Wellbeing committees. This method of engaging students could work well for students from specific groups whose voices are under-represented in general such as the Traveller students, the Young Carers and students with additional needs. This will allow for more qualitative, nuanced and authentic engagement with students. A long-term goal should be to introduce wider use of focus group discussions at different times in the year and on specific issues.

The participants in the focus groups had ideas and suggestions on changes they would like to see in school including changes to the curriculum. They were not all feasible but certainly provide a starting point for a board of studies made up of students and staff to work from in planning the timetable for the next academic year.

7.4.1 Training for teachers and leaders

There are modules on social justice and inclusion offered on teacher training courses. The findings of this research suggest that there is further need to include training on care in schools. This should be considered for all teachers and school staff. If we are to consider Nodding's assertion that caring is a way of being, a way of engaging rather than a personality trait, we must ask if it is then possible to create a more caring school environment through training for the adults. This should extend to courses for those who aspire to leadership positions in schools, as well as those in pre- service training. We need the preparation of teachers and educators who will act from a philosophical rather than an economic stance.

Teacher education can contribute to social transformation and greater justice in other ways. The prioritization of encouraging students who have been educated in DEIS schools to consider teacher training, thus modelling and being role models, would allow for their experience to be shared with students who come after them. In this way the focus can switch from the deficit model thinking often associated with discussions around DEIS schools to one which highlights possibility and recognises the values and principles of community, social justice, equality and equity present in our schools.

7.4.2 Curriculum

Schools must reflect on whether there is space for what Nel Noddings calls the curriculum with caring in mind, where relationships allow for teachable moments and incidental learning instead of learning by rote and for the exam. The improved and

expanded focus on wellbeing in post-primary school, as well as the recognition that the Leaving Certificate final examination must change, may allow for the development of schools that allow everyone to develop at their own pace and learn what is of interest to and needed by them. Existing research suggests that teachers and students can create a more equal society by working together and caring for each other. Such a relationship has the power to allow transformative education to take place, education which is emancipatory (Freire 1992, Giroux 1997, Shor 1992).

What we value in our education system needs to be challenged. We need to ask students about their experiences of systemic and in-school practices and their impact on student engagement and student life. Care for the individual and their welfare and a desire to meet their needs can only happen if we genuinely listen to what matters to students and act on what we hear. If the changes to Senior Cycle that seem imminent are to result in real change, developing a model of student voice through which young people can have authentic input into curriculum design is essential. Allowing students to share their unique knowledge can take conversations about education out of the realm of economy driven dialogue and be transformative for all in the school community.

7.4.3 DEIS Inspections

There is an implication for the inspectorate in how it gains its picture of life in a school during visits carried out during DEIS and whole school inspections. Broader measures of what constitutes success in schools and the recognition of factors outside the numerically measurable should be assigned equal importance to the SMART targets and

measurable outcomes. This should acknowledge the student's experience and involve a recognition of broader intelligences as well as aspects of school life such as creativity and contribution to community. A reinvented inspection model should recognise the importance of community, connectedness and schools as places of growth and humanity.

In an era of accountability, we also need to ensure that schools are measuring their progress in cultivating an environment that nurtures. The students in this research study understood the importance of their academics and perceived care as offering academic support, paying them attention and meeting their personal needs. In a whole school approach to holistic child development the focus cannot be solely on the academic. Students in this study recognised that. They appreciated the recognition of other facets of an individual in the case study school, e.g. creativity, contribution to the community, sporting or musical ability among others.

There is a clear difference between what students are looking for in their experience of school and what the inspectorate assesses and measures. Without care and a sense of belonging, learning will not take place at its optimal level or with maximum benefit for each student, whatever their starting point. Students could see this and it is incumbent on adults to recognise it too. The findings of this study dismiss the notion that accountability and care are mutually exclusive. Academic proficiency and preparation for the world of work are not the only viable or valuable aspects or purpose of schooling. There are signs of more awareness of this with the review of senior cycle that is currently underway.

7.5 Future Research

Telling the story of students' experience from their own perspective has huge potential for future research. Although there is a growing body of research on DEIS policy and schools, particularly at primary level, the emphasis is generally on the quantitative. The affective dimensions of schooling are overlooked in favour of the measurable – attendance, numeracy and literacy, examination attainment. There is scope for further research on all students' lived experience in school, not just those students in DEIS schools. There is potential for every school to undertake similar research in its own setting to see how better to meet the needs of its students. The methodology could be used in any school to build trust, gain a deeper understanding of the experiences of students and bring about change that will improve the affective and academic experience of students.

There is evidence of where this study has already led to change in the research setting. Students from the Young Social Innovators group and the Diversity Committee, some of whom were research participants, have gone on to design, distribute and analyse a schoolwide survey regarding the uniform and the wearing of trousers. They have also drawn up a range of possible designs. Members of the committee have presented their findings to the whole staff.

The work of the Wellbeing Committee is completely managed by students from 5th and 6th Year. This group has already carried out its own research with students and presented its findings to the whole staff and at a CAMHS symposium for teachers from

10 schools. Support in its truest form comes from two teachers who are available for advice and guidance but allow the students to lead. This model is evidence of what is possible and points the way forward for the case study school and others.

Work is already underway to review Senior Cycle. There is scope for all schools to engage in research with their own students about their vision for a remodelled Leaving Certificate.

7.6 Final Reflections

What drew me to the professional doctorate was the fact that any research undertaken would have an impact on the day-to-day lives of the most important people in our school community, the students. It would allow me to build my professional capacity while staying true to my personal beliefs and values. My personal and life experiences lay at the heart of this research journey. My parents adopted me from one of the now infamous Mother and Baby homes in the late 1960s. They were hard working, working class people who had not had the opportunity to go to second-level school, both starting work at 14. Despite that, they had complete belief in the power of education and the possibilities it offered. They also had unshakeable commitment to equality and social justice, which I share to this day. I have never lost that belief in the transformative power of education. I had teachers who believed in my ability and a secondary school principal who persuaded my mother not to take a job as a cleaner in the school so that I, or maybe the school, wouldn't be embarrassed. I'm sure at the time I was glad, probably relieved. I look back on that now through a different lens.

In many ways, this research journey has provided me with more questions than answers. The process has caused me to reflect on how difficult it is as a school leader to balance what is morally desirable with the practical and logistical realities of school. How can I as a school leader promote the notion of education as if people mattered while hoping that our Leaving Certificate results compare well with our nearest non- DEIS neighbour because we compete for the same students?

As a school leader, I cannot ignore the parameters in which our school operates. The circulars from the DES, the guidelines from the social inclusion unit on how to spend the DEIS grant, the demands from parents who want their children to feature on league tables are just some of our realities, as are the parents whose focus cannot be on education but survival and the persistent and appalling socio-economic conditions and trauma that many of our students experience. How do we mediate the contrasting demands in schools - the desire to allow students to grow holistically and develop at their own pace in a way which best suits their abilities and is essential for all to flourish, with an examination system that pits students against each other in a supposedly meritocratic race for points. We continue to reward good memory while not valuing the role that the personality and interests of students could play in developing a system that would allow each person to grow and to achieve.

Another question I needed to answer was whether or not a school leader can be a researcher in their own setting? Not only is it possible, I would suggest it is essential that school leaders consistently examine their own practice and the systems in place in each

school by consulting with the students whose lives are so affected by them. The leader needs to remain transparent, recognise their own position of power and their personal and professional biases. Being conscious of my own biases needed to be with me throughout this process – bias against the methods employed by the DES inspectorate when they have visited our schools and bias towards a social justice perspective of what school should and could be like. My conscious and unconscious biases were challenged when we had a DEIS inspection while this study was ongoing. Yes, there was still a lot of looking for and at figures but the inspectors were also willing to listen to how we were supporting and meeting the needs of our students in more holistic and human ways.

The feedback from the students is at the heart of this work. I started out on this journey believing that the impact of power and the hidden curriculum on our students was key to their experience and that challenging inequalities in those areas was what students in our DEIS school needed most. During the research journey, I realised that in the past my own thinking or actions have been based on the deficit-model – trying to fix things, do things for or to others. Ultimately, the conversations with our students have led me to believe that being listened to, feeling trusted, feeling cared-for and being shown how to care for others is the essence of what student wellbeing and self- worth is about. Without care and trust, learning cannot take place. All attempts at assessing and analysing success in school or the effectiveness of work on the DEIS themes will be meaningless.

The research process has made me question how we can make sure we listen to every student, even those who don't want to speak. That remains a challenge. Another

challenge is ensuring that our students feel listened to even when we don't agree with them or cannot deliver what they want. It has also left me convinced that placing trust in students is rewarded with energy, commitment and meaningful change.

As I write this reflection, our schools and our nation are coming out of a pandemic unimaginable when I started this research journey, except perhaps in a science-fiction novel or film. The 6th and 5th year students who participated in this study have lived through Calculated Grades and Accredited Grades. Perhaps we are now in the eye of a perfect post-Covid storm where the lure of multi-national corporations is not so attractive, where the caring professions are more valued and where there is widespread recognition that student mental health and wellbeing must take priority. The acknowledgement that the established Leaving Certificate is no longer fit for purpose, if it ever was, is part of that storm. By continuing to listen to the voices of our students, maybe the perfect storm will lead us to a golden sky, where schools are primarily focused on education with the heart in mind.

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APPENDIX 1

Defining DEIS Themes

Attendance

Attendance is fundamental to students' progress and attainment in school. When dealing with this theme, schools need to look at patterns of full-day absences, part-day absences, late arrival at school, and the rate of suspensions.

Retention

The theme of retention focuses on the importance of keeping children in school, identifying those at risk of early leaving, and taking action to reduce or eliminate factors that cause students to drop out.

Progression (Transitions)

Progression is very closely linked to attendance and retention. It puts a spotlight on the key moves from one stage of education to the next: from primary to post-primary; from junior cycle to senior cycle; and from post-primary to continuing education and the world of work.

Examination Attainment

Examination attainment focuses on attainment in the certificate examinations, and also includes target-setting, strategies and monitoring of progress with regard to students' outcomes in school-based assessments and examinations.

Partnership with parents and others

The DEIS action plan supports schools to develop partnerships with parents and with the community. Schools are also expected to develop links with other schools and colleges, for example in transfer programmes from post-primary school to third level colleges.

(Looking at Action Planning for Post Primary Schools 2015, P.5)

APPENDIX 2

Supports provided under the DEIS School Support Programme 2017

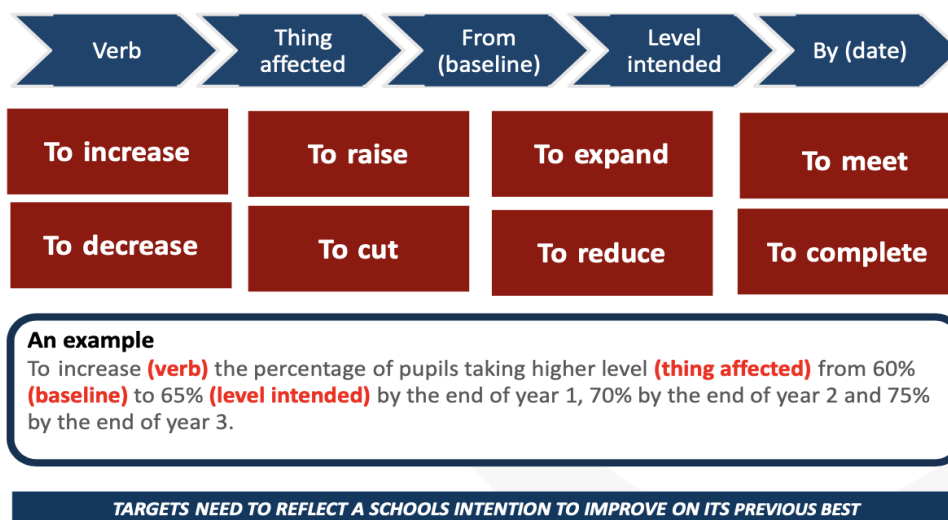
Resources for DEIS Post Primary schools

- ☐ Additional grant aid based on level of disadvantage.
- ☐ Enhanced guidance allocation of 1.25 of the Pupil Teacher Ratio (non-DEIS allocation is 0.5).
- ☐ Enhanced rate of funding under the School Books Grant Scheme.
- ☐ Access to Home School Community Liaison (HSCL) services.
- ☐ Priority access to Schools Meals Programme.
- ☐ Access to range of supports under School Completion Programme.
- ☐ Access to Junior Certificate Schools Programme.
- ☐ Access to Leaving Certificate Applied Programme.
- ☐ Priority access to Centre for School Leadership.
- ☐ Priority access to a range of professional development supports.
- ☐ Expansion of NEPS provision in DEIS schools.
- ☐ Roll out of Friends Programme to all DEIS schools.

APPENDIX 3

S.M.A.R.T. TARGET Setting

Formula and Language of Targets



TARGETS are student focused, evidence based, have baseline data and a measure of where it is going.

- S - SPECIFIC
- M - MEASURABLE
- A - ACHIEVABLE
- R - REALISTIC
- T - TIMED

TARGETS can be informed by

- Teacher
- Student
- Parent

DEIS schools should use the self-evaluation process to ensure that their action plans for improvement have a robust evidence base, and are clearly targeted at students requiring specific interventions and supports.

(Circular 40/2016)

APPENDIX 4

[Junior Cycle Self Reflection 2020](#)

3rd Year 2020 - JC reflection

1. Name: *

2. What were the best things about your first 3 years in *? *

3. During the 3 years I enjoyed taking part in the following activities: *

4. These activities made me feel ... *

5. What I am best at is: *

6. The subject I enjoyed most was:

7. The most difficult subject at JC for me was: *

7. The thing I am most proud of during my 3 years of Junior Cycle is: *

8. During the rest of my time in ***, I aim to: ***

9. My dream for the future is: *

10. To help us keep a record of everything you have done in school throughout JC, complete the following form. Tick all the boxes that apply. *

- ☐ I received only good/positive notes in my journal
- ☐ I have not missed any days from school
- ☐ I was always on time for school
- ☐ I played basketball
- ☐ I played Gaelic
- ☐ I played soccer
- ☐ I took part in Sports Day

- ☐ I improved my beep score in PE
- ☐ I was a member of the school choir
- ☐ I sang or played in school concerts
- ☐ I participated in the school musical
- ☐ I was Class Prefect or Vice Prefect
- ☐ I was a member of the Student Council
- ☐ I was a member of the Green Schools Committee
- ☐ I was a member of the Diversity Committee
- ☐ I took part in Maths Week activities
- ☐ I took part in Science Week activities
- ☐ I took part in Seachtain na Gaeilge activities
- ☐ I took part in Accelerated Reader, Drop Everything and Read and Paired Reading
- ☐ I completed all my CBAs
- ☐ I completed all project work
- ☐ I went on school trips
- ☐ I attended Homework Club
- ☐ I attended after-school study until school closed in March

11. Tell us about any volunteering you did in or outside of school in the last 3 years. *



12. Tell us if have a hobby or interest outside school or the name of a club you attend. *

13. If there is something that you did that we left out, please write it down here. *

Never submit passwords through Google Forms.

Submit

APPENDIX 5

PARENTAL/GUARDIAN INFORMATION SHEET

Dear Parent/Guardian,

I am conducting research on student experiences in our school as part of my studies for a doctorate in education in Trinity College. The research will be conducted in two phases, which are outlined below:

Stage 1: volunteers will take photos of symbols and images of what school means to them. These photos will then be used as a starting point for the students to discuss their experiences of school. I wish to emphasise that none of the photos will be used in the thesis.

Stage 2: students will be asked to volunteer if they are interested in taking part in focus group interviews in relation to their life in school.

All information that is obtained during this study will be treated with respect and any written, photographic and recorded material will be destroyed 13 months after my thesis has been completed. The students and the school will not be named in the thesis. The information your daughter gives will be presented anonymously, which means her name will not appear anywhere in the thesis.

Your daughter's participation in the research is completely voluntary. You have the right to withdraw your daughter at any time and she has the right to stop participating at any time.

Please feel free to contact me by telephone or email at any stage if you would like further information or if you have any questions about the study.

My contact details are as follows: Telephone: 01-8480888, e-mail: dwyerpa@tcd.ie

I will operate within the ethical guidelines of the School of Education in Trinity College, a copy of which are available to you on request.

If you are happy for your daughter to be involved in the design stage by becoming a member of the focus group, please complete the attached permission slip. In the event that there are more volunteers than required for the initial stage, participants will be chosen at random.

Yours truly,

Patricia Dwyer

APPENDIX 6

Dear Parent/Guardian,

As you are aware I am conducting a student voice research project on student experiences in our school. Your daughter has expressed an interest in being interviewed as part of the study. The focus group interview will be recorded on a digital audio recorder for accuracy and transparency.

Participation is completely voluntary. Your daughter may withdraw from the research at any time.

If you would be happy for your daughter to participate in an audio recorded focus group interview, please fill out the permission slip below.

Yours truly,

Patricia Dwyer

Permission Slip – Student Voice Research Project

Name of Student:

I give permission for (name of student) _____ to participate in Stage 2 of the student voice research project.

I understand this involves her being interviewed as part of a group of students by the researcher about her experiences of school.

I know that the interview will be audio recorded for accuracy and transparency.

I understand that her participation is entirely voluntary.

I know she can withdraw from the research at any time.

Parent/Guardian signature: _____

Date: _____

APPENDIX 7

CONSENT FORM – STUDENTS – STAGE 2

Dear Student,

I am working towards my doctorate in education degree in Trinity College. As I explained at assembly, I am carrying out a research project on student voice. The purpose of my project is to hear more about student experiences in our school and to learn what is important to you about your life in school.

You have already completed a questionnaire and have indicated that you would be interested in doing a focus group interview with me.

If you are still interested in participating, please fill out the consent form below and also ask your parent or guardian to complete the attached form. If you have any questions, please come and ask me.

Thank you for taking the time to listen and to read the information.

Yours truly,

Patricia Dwyer

INFORMED CONSENT FORM FOR STUDENTS – STAGE 2

I am volunteering to take part in the research project on student voice and students' experience of life in our school.

Yes ☐ No ☐ please tick

I know that it is OK to stop taking part in this research at any time and that I do not have to say why.

I understand that the interview will be recorded on a digital audio recorder.

I understand that all the audio recordings will be stored securely.

I know that the researcher might include things I say in her thesis and I give my permission for her to do so.

I understand that she will not use my name and any quotes she uses will be anonymous.

Signed: _____ Date: _____

APPENDIX 8

Phdrsrch <PHDRSRCH@tcd.ie>

20 December 2016 at 12:27

To: Patricia Dwyer <DWYERPA@tcd.ie> Cc: Paula Flynn <Paula.M.Flynn@tcd.ie>

Approval Patricia Dwyer D. Ed. 16th December 2016

Dear Patricia,

The School of Education's Ethics Committee has received and considered your application for approval of your D.Ed. research project.

It is the decision of the Committee that no additional information is needed regarding your application. Therefore, approval is granted for your research, on the condition that it is carried out as indicated on your application. Should there be a change in the design of your research project, you will need to re-apply again for approval from the School of Education's Ethics Committee.

You are required to include a copy of this letter as an appendix to your thesis.

If you have any queries regarding this decision, please contact the Chair of the School of Education's Ethics Committee and Director of Research, Dr Stephen James Minton (mintonst@tcd.ie).

We wish you all the very best with your research project.

Kind regards,

Fiona McKibben

Research Officer at the School of Education on behalf of Professor Stephen James Minton Director of Research

3088 School of Education Arts Building

Trinity College Dublin, the University of Dublin Dublin 2, Ireland.

Tel | + 353 1 8963583

3088 Scoil an Oideachais

Coláiste na Tríonóide, Baile Átha Cliath, Ollscoil Átha Cliath Baile Átha Cliath 2, Éire.

APPENDIX 9

FOCUS GROUP SCHEDULE – STUDENTS’ EXPERIENCES OF SCHOOL AND THE IMPACT OF CARE

Introduction and explaining the purpose of the focus group

Thank you for agreeing to take part today. A focus group is a group discussion, with some questions to act as prompts along the way. As I explained at assembly and when I distributed the consent forms, I am carrying out some research in Trinity College about students’ experience of school and whether or not care is an important part of school life for them.

Guidelines and further information

I will ask a series of questions about your experience of this school. You do not have to answer any question you feel uncomfortable with or get involved in the discussion if you do not wish to.

The audio recorder is here only to make transcription of what you say possible. There is a second recorder as back-up. Only people involved in transcribing the recordings will hear them.

There are no right or wrong answers – the purpose of this discussion is to get your opinion on how school is for you. Have you got any questions?

Participants’ introduction

I am going to ask each of you to say your first name, your age and what year you are in. This information will not be revealed when the research is written up. Nothing you say will be identified publicly and no real names will be published. Each person will be assigned a pseudonym during transcription. The confirmation of your year group is only to make transcription and analysis easier. To protect the confidentiality of the other people involved in this focus group, please do not talk about what we discuss here today with anyone else.

Opening question

This first question is designed to start off our discussion.

- (i) If you were to take one photo of what school means to you, good or bad, what would it be of?
Why?

Focus group questions/prompts

- (ii) Tell me one thing you like about school.
- (iii) How do you like the size of this school?
- (iv) Do you feel this is a caring school community? If so, why?
- (v) Does it matter? Why?

- (vi) How do staff here show caring behaviour?
- (vii) Does feeling cared for help you learn better? Why?
- (viii) Describe something adults in school do that shows they care about you?
- (ix) Describe something teachers and others do that shows they do not care about you?
- (x) Does having a good relationship with a teacher help your learning in that subject? Why?
- (xi) Is it important for a teacher or other adult in school to care about non-academic matters? Why?
- (xii) Should adults in school care about a student's wellbeing as well as their academics? Why?
- (xiii) What one thing would you change about the school?

Closing comments and thanks

Is there anything else anyone would like to say?

I want to thank you for agreeing to be part of this research and for coming along today. You can decide to opt out at any time. Just a reminder, your identity will remain confidential. I will be calling for volunteers for the next part of the research later in the year and I hope you will consider being involved.