Inequality in Higher Education: a study of class barriers

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ABSTRACT   *This paper is based on a study conducted among four groups of people who have direct experience of how social-class position affects students' access to, and participation in, higher education. Intensive interviews were undertaken with 122 people deliberately chosen from a range of counties, schools and higher educational institutions in Ireland. Interviews were undertaken with 40 low-income working-class second-level students, 40 others at third level, 10 community workers who were both activists and parents in working-class communities, 16 teachers and school principals including four from feepaying schools, and 16 second-level students from fee-paying secondary schools.*

The aim of the study was to examine the barriers experienced by low-income working-class students in accessing and succeeding in higher education. The study also set out to identify strategies for change as seen from the perspectives of the different groups, and to examine the ways in which more privileged students were able to maintain their educational advantage.

Working within a broadly structuralist framework, the study identified three principal barriers facing working-class students: economic, social and cultural, and educational. Our findings are in general concurrence, therefore, with those of Gambetta. However, our research suggests that while economic barriers are of prime importance, cultural and educational barriers are also of great significance. The three sets of barriers were also found to be highly interactive.

The research challenges the view of both resistance and rational action theorists as to the value of structuralist analysis. It argues for a dynamic view of structures as sets of institutions and social relations which are visible, accountable and open to transformation. It is suggested that the dynamic role of the state, and its collective and individual actors, in creating and maintaining inequality, needs to be more systematically addressed, especially in strongly (State) centralised education systems. Through the clarification of how the State and other education mediators create inequalities, it is possible to identify both the actors and the contexts where resistance is possible.

Introduction

One of the most enduring theoretical models purporting to explain social-class related inequalities in education is structuralism. Within the structuralist paradigm, there are two dominant traditions, namely Marxism and Functionalism. Traditional Marxists work

from a strong model of economic determinism in which education is represented largely as a highly dependent system within capitalist societies. The role of education in reproducing class inequality is seen as one of structural inevitability (Althusser, 1972; Bowles & Gintis, 1976). Functionalists working out of a Durkheimian model of educational choice also interpret class outcomes in education in a highly deterministic manner (Davis & Moore, 1945; Parsons, 1961; Dreeben, 1968). The language of selection and allocation for a stratified labour market replaces the language of reproduction but the class outcomes are deemed to be the same. In one sense, what divides the Marxists from the more conservatively-oriented functionalists is their normative evaluations of particular outcomes. What functionalists deem to be inevitable, and even necessary, for the maintenance of social order in society, Marxists interpret as an injustice which has to be overcome.

The economic determinists are but one strand within structuralism. Bourdieu & Passeron (1977) and Apple (1979, 1982) exemplify a different explanatory tradition within neo-Marxism, namely one which emphasises the role of culture in structural determinations. Bernstein (1973, 1977) also attempted to explore the role of culture, especially through integrating macrocosmic and microcosmic models of explanation.

Structuralists claim, therefore, that people are 'pushed' into certain educational positions. Whether they know that they are being pushed, or whether they are pushed without knowing who or what is doing the pushing, is an open question. In either model, the assumption is that they do not 'choose' in a free and meaningful sense of that term (Gambetta, 1987).

Responses to Structuralism: rational action theory and resistance theory

Structuralist interpretations have been challenged from a number of perspectives. One of the most persistent criticisms has been the failure of structuralists to recognise the dynamic nature of the education process itself, and the role which microprocesses play in mediating educational outcomes (Mehan, 1992). Rational action theory and resistance theory represent two contemporary, and very separate, responses to structuralism, both in terms of their intellectual origin and in terms of their political assumptions. Because of the difference in the ways in which they challenge structuralist explanations, it is worthwhile examining some of their basic premises about why social-class inequality persists and how it should be explained.

Rational Action Theory

Working out of a liberal political perspective, Goldthorpe (1996) rejects structuralist explanations and opts instead for the use of rational action theory (RAT) to explain educational inequalities in education. He claims that one of the major challenges facing sociology is to explain the macrosociological realities of persisting social-class inequality in education. He calls for the use of microsociological analysis and, in particular, for the use of RAT to explain the persistence of class inequality in education. He suggests that 'all social phenomena can and should be explained as resulting from the action and interaction of individuals' (Goldthorpe, 1996, p. 485) and that class inequality in education persists because of the rational action of particular individuals across social classes. Working on the theoretical framework developed by Boudon (1974), he concludes that it is the 'secondary effects' of social class, based on an evaluation of the

projected future costs and benefits of education, that patterns choices. The conclusion which he reaches, based on his interpretation of RAT, is that working-class people have lower levels of educational attainment than middle-class people because working-class families perceive the risk and opportunity costs of postcompulsory and higher education to be too high relative to their resources. They need greater assurance of success if they are to take the educational risk. Ongoing educational choices are rational responses to the opportunities and constraints operating for the different classes.

Scope and limitations of RAT for explaining class inequalities in education. While RAT is valuable as a stimulus for generating research on the microprocesses of educational life, and while such work illuminates some of the procedures whereby aggregate outcomes (inequalities) occur, RAT does not provide a comprehensive framework for understanding inequality as it lacks a convincing conceptual framework for interpreting the generative causes of differences in choices.

RAT, as presented in the sociology of education, is a mediating explanatory model rather than a foundational one. It operates out of a weak notion of rationality which helps explain the presenting problem as to why people behave the way they do, but does not explain what it is that conditions their choices in a particular way. Neither does it explain which options are more open, and/or more acceptable to particular groups than others, and why. The model does not explore the way structures, particularly in terms of state action, might explain particular social-class actions.

RAT also seems to take preference as a constant in the framing of educational choices. Yet, as the work of Gambetta (1987) shows, preferences are not fixed: they can be changed by the experience of schooling itself. A good or a bad school performance can alter students' educational and occupational preferences, especially among working-class students. Evidence from Irish data on the difference in rates of transfer to higher education for different socio-economic groups, lends support to the claim that preferences are constantly being negotiated [1].

Class differences in education are not the result of some set of preconceived preferences, therefore; rather, they are the by-product of an ongoing set of negotiations between agents and structures. The neat dichotomy which is drawn between intentions and structures in RAT may serve as a useful conceptual devise but it ignores the dialectical interface between intentions and institutional practices in everyday life. Intentions and social structures are presented as binary opposites without recognition of the multiple ways in which they are dialectically related.

RAT is also a non-transformative explanatory paradigm. It is based on traditional positivist assumptions about the role of research in society with all the colonising and managerialist outcomes such an approach entails. From the perspective of those working out of a transformative critical perspective on inequality, this is an important limitation, as the research itself can often reinforce the inequalities it documents by colonising the life world of marginalised others and leaving them without a voice, or with a greatly weakened voice. (Heron, 1981; Reason & Rowan, 1988; Lather, 1991; Oliver, 1992; Lynch, 1998, forthcoming).

Resistance Theorists

Within neo-Marxism, structuralism has been criticised for its reproductive effects on educational thought. (Willis, 1977; McRobbie, 1978). Resistance theorists have noted

how economic determinism can contribute to reproducing the consciousness it abhors by presenting social outcomes from education as fixed and inevitable. Working out of a praxis-oriented view of knowledge, and drawing heavily on the 'education as conscientisation' model of Paulo Friere (1972), they have challenged deterministic models of explanation through the concepts of critical pedagogy, radical democracy and transformative education (Giroux, 1983, 1992; McLaren, 1995). Resistance theorists and poststructuralists attempt to marry an analytical and transformative dimension to educational theory which will help guide action for change. It is assumed that critical pedagogy can operate as a form of cultural politics which will facilitate class-inspired social transformation (Fagan, 1995). Teachers and 'cultural workers' are defined as agents of transformation. Feminists working out of a similar resistance model also assume a transformative role for critical education for women (Weiler, 1988; Lather, 1991).

The work of resistance theorists and poststructuralists has identified spaces and places for challenging unequal social relations through education. It has enabled people to see beyond the limits of structures and to identify modes of thinking and analysing which can facilitate change. It has offered hope for change which is important in itself.

Limitations of resistance theories.   One of the limitations of resistance theory is its failure to analyse the social relations of its own theorising. Resistance theorists assume a level of political interest and engagement among working-class people which is far from proven in contemporary welfare capitalist states such as Ireland (Inglis & Bassett, 1988). Also, there is very little evidence from the research and theory in this tradition of an ongoing dialogue with working-class people themselves. Although it may be entirely inadvertent, much of the resistance theory reads as a discourse written about people who are marginalised rather than with them. It reads as if it were written above and beyond those about whom it speaks. It does not appear to have taken account of the substantive critiques emanating from within numerous branches of the social sciences about the intellectual and ethical limitations of research and theory which involves neither dialogue nor co-operation with the research subjects (especially where these are marginalised groups) (Reinhartz, 1979; Reason & Rowan, 1981; Lather, 1991, Oliver, 1992; Humphries & Truman, 1994). As most of resistance theory is written by middle-class people about how to enable working-class people to resist and change class structures in an educational setting, these critiques are especially relevant.

Although the many challenges which a truly dialogical (partnership) research would present are only beginning to be addressed, what appears to be happening is that the debate about dialogue, partnership and the ethical accountability of research is taking place primarily in the empirical research field. Sociological and educational theorising does not appear to be held ethically accountable to the same degree. This has to be contested, not least because theories about inequality often frame empirical research questions in the first place.

One of the other weaknesses of resistance theory as an explanatory (as opposed to a transformative) theory, is that it has failed to keep a balance between the explanatory and transformative dimension of its theorising (Davies, 1995). The work is replete with references to cultural practices which offer scope for transformative action, but there are relatively few concepts which deepen our understanding of how to realise change—the precise counterfactual proposals that Sayer (1995) claims are necessary to guide action—are missing in much of critical thought.

Empirical Research and Policy Perspectives on Social Class: the influence of liberalism

Reviews of empirical research on equality in education indicate that the equality empiricists have dominated the debate about the relationship between social class and/or socio-economic groups and educational opportunity (Karabel & Halsey, 1977; Hurn, 1978; Trent *et al.*, 1985; Blackledge & Hunt, 1985; Arnot & Barton, 1992; Torres & Rivera, 1994; Pink & Noblit, 1995). Working within a liberal political perspective and a broadly functionalist sociological tradition, the solution to social-class related inequality is defined in terms of the promotion of greater *equality of opportunity* to move (upwards) within a class-stratified society. The work of Sewell *et al.* (1976), Halsey *et al.* (1980), Eckland & Alexander (1980), Mare (1981), Dronkers (1983), Jonsson (1987), Gambetta (1987), McPherson & Willms (1987), Clancy (1988, 1995), Blossfeld (1993) and Euriat & Thelot (1995) exemplify this tradition in a range of different countries. The work of these equality empiricists within education is paralleled by the work of stratification theorists who documented patterns of social mobility (among white men especially) (Goldthorpe 1980; Whelan & Whelan, 1984; Ganzeboom *et al.*, 1989; Raftery & Hout, 1993).

Equality objectives are defined basically in three different ways within this literature. The minimalist conception is one where equality is defined in terms of *equalising access* to different levels of education for relatively disadvantaged groups within a stratified society and educational system. Moving from this, certain researchers focus on *equal participation*. Equality of participation is assessed, not so much in terms of the quality of educational experience available to students, but rather in terms of movement up to a given stage of the educational or social ladder.

Equality empiricists have, therefore, implicitly endorsed the meritocratic model of education. They assume that success should be measured on the basis of achieved rather than ascribed qualities—ability and effort—rather than social class, family connections, gender, race, or other irrelevant attributes. Equality is measured in terms of how far any given disadvantaged group has progressed in accessing a hitherto inaccessible 'educational good' and, in particular, by examining what proportion of the disadvantaged group have accessed a particular education sector or position relative to their proportion in the general population and/or relative to some appropriate comparator group. Equality is deemed to be promoted if social-class inequalities/advantages in education are proportionately distributed across different classes; the closer the participation or success ratio is to one, the greater the equality achieved. The criterion for measuring equality is essentially proportionate representation for the target group at given stages of education, or in terms of given outcomes. As lengthy participation in second-level education has become almost universal in Western countries, proportionate access to different levels and types of higher education have become the most common measure for assessing social-class related (more often socio-economic) inequality in education.

In so far as equality empiricists focus on differences between social groups in terms of educational *attainment*, they move from a weaker to a stronger conception of equality; from a concern with equality of access and participation to *equality of outcome*. Studies which focus on levels of performance (measured in terms of years of schooling completed, grades attained, job obtained, etc.) highlight the fact that equalising formal rights to education, or achieving proportionate patterns of participation, does not equate with equal rates of success or outcomes for disadvantaged groups. Data documenting high drop-out rates, poor academic performance or poor employment opportunities show the limits of weaker notions of equality, in particular conceptions of equality which focus on equal access.

The liberal model of equality which informs the work of the equality empiricists has made an important contribution to educational thought as it provides a clear map of how educationally stratified our society is, in terms of social class, socio-economic and other terms, over time. It lays down the empirical (generally, but not always, statistical) floor on which other analyses can build. Without such work, it would be very difficult to have a clear profile of what progress (or lack of it) is taking place in educational opportunities for various groups vis-à-vis more advantaged groups.

From an equality perspective, the most serious limitation of the liberal model is that it implicitly endorses hierarchy and stratification, even though this may be unintentional. It focuses research and policy attention on mechanisms for distributing inequalities/ privileges between groups; it does not challenge the institutionally and structurally grounded hierarchies and inequalities that necessitate redistribution in the first place (Lynch, 1995; Baker, 1998).

From a purely analytical perspective, one of the limitations of studies documenting patterns of association between social classes and particular educational and occupational outcomes, is that there is very little attention given to the views of the research subjects on the social mobility process itself. The perspective of the research subject on the entire process is largely ignored. Even though studies such as that by Gambetta's (1987) do attempt to explore the reasons why young people from particular social classes take different educational routes, conclusions are based largely on correlational studies rather than on intensive investigation of individual plans and experiences.

Conceptual Framework for the Study

Rational choice theorists and poststructuralists in the neo-Marxist tradition are at one in their rejection of structuralist explanations of social-class inequality, albeit from different standpoints. For poststructuralists 'once the structural story is told, we have conclusions but no solutions' (Fagan, 1995, p. 121). For liberals, the problem with structuralism is its failure to provide theoretical and intellectual frameworks which would explain 'macro-social regularities in the class stratification systems of modern societies' (Goldthorpe, 1996, p. 454).

What both rational action theorists and resistance theorists fail to recognise is the dynamic nature of structures themselves. This dynamism stems from the active role played by collective agents within structures. These collective actors are highly visible at the State level within the education sector and work actively to determine the form and substance of the educational institution itself (Lynch, 1990). In addition, poststructuralists fail to recognise that structure and agency are not binary opposites. Whether the actor is an individual or a collective body, in either case, it operates in a dialectical relationship within a given structure. While choices and intentions are developed in structurally loaded contexts, they nonetheless act back on these contexts and can, at times, redefine them, especially when they work through the channel of collective agency. As Gambetta (1987) has observed, it is not really possible to dissociate structure from choice:

> Educational decisions are the joint result of three main processes: what one can do, of what one wants to do and, indirectly, of the conditions that shape one's preferences and intentions. They are the result partly of causality and partly of intentionality. (pp. 170–171)

In attempting to understand why only a very small number of young working-class students do not transfer to higher education, and why when those who do transfer face

difficulties in participating equally with others, we adopt a broadly structuralist approach to the analysis. It is, however, a structuralism which is oriented towards transformation of those institutions and systems which precipitate inequalities in the first place. Our hypothesis is that structures are fundamentally dynamic entities working in and through collective and individual agents. By identifying the relevant contexts and partners to educational decisions at the structural level, it is possible to locate strategies for action and change. The identification and naming of those collective agents and procedures within the decision-making machinery of the State which are responsible for particular structural outcomes, focuses public attention on the actors with the capacity to alter inegalitarian practices and on the practices which must be altered. The public naming and challenging of those collective bodies which are powerful partners in education, and which thereby play a key role in the perpetuation or reduction of educational inequality is an important procedure for the mobilisation of resistance in a small society where the agents are visible and known [2]. Ireland is a relatively small country with a highly centralised decision-making system. Over the past 20 years, a corporatist strategy to policy-making has been developed at the central government level through the Social Partnerships, and at local and regional levels. While the operation of these partnerships raises many questions about equality in power sharing (Lynam, 1997), nonetheless, the partnerships represent an important attempt to develop a more participatory democratic system of planning (Sabel, 1996). The partners to particular decisions are quite visible, therefore, as indeed are the absent voices at particular tables. The visibility of the partners focuses attention on the processes which must be changed, and the role that particular groups play in either defending or challenging these practices.

The State working in and through various collective agents, both individually and corporatively, plays a central role in managing the educational relations within which inequality is produced and reproduced (see Coolahan, 1994). The State is a dynamic agent, however, which is constantly negotiating and recreating the conditions for the operation of unequal relations in education. It operates as a mediator between students and their educational choices by specifying a range of institutional (educational and cultural) and economic conditions within which choices are framed. It creates and redirects polices on wealth, income, welfare, taxation, education, health, etc., which have a direct bearing on the opportunities and constraints operating for students in the educational site. These systems impact differentially, most notably between social classes but also within them (e.g. between welfare recipients and low paid workers). Moreover, the State [3], controls the organisation of schooling, in terms of curricula, examinations, teacher appointments, and the relationship between schools and higher education colleges. The dynamic agents within the State have, therefore, a direct impact on educational outcomes, including the constraints and opportunities which operate for students within the educational system.

Rather than accepting the dichotomy between agency and structure which both resistance theory and RAT suppose, we are arguing for a dynamic view of structures, regarding them as created and maintained by a variety of individual and collective agents acting and reacting within and through the state system. In centrally controlled education systems, such as those in Ireland, the principal site for the collective agents to influence structures in education is the State. By identifying the particularities of structural constraints (their precise economic, educational and cultural character) in particular, this research indicates clearly the areas in which transformative action is possible and necessary. It identifies spaces and places where changes can be targeted and fought for.

As a result of collective compromises, negotiations and confrontations within the State,

a number of class-specific constraints operate within the educational site. We propose that there are three crucial constraints which operate for low-income working-class students in particular, while not denying the fact that these constraints can and do take gender, ethnic, religious, and other specific forms. Our hypotheses as to the nature of class-specific constraints are broadly in line with those of Gambetta (1987), although we do not suppose the same level of influence (or lack of it) to different constraints that he does. First, there are *economic constraints* which are independent of education in terms of origin, but which impact directly on educational decisions; second, there are *institutional constraints* specific to the education system itself, arising from the nature of schooling and the way in which educational systems are organised: third, there are *cultural constraints* which arise due to conflicts in cultural practices between the lifeworld of the students and the organisational culture of schools as social institutions.

The Study

The aim of this study was to complement the many large-scale statistical studies undertaken in Ireland and elsewhere documenting patterns of inequality in education. It was an attempt to look inside the 'black box' of educational transition from second-level to higher education through a series of interviews with a range of actors who are central to the whole process of selection and allocation It set out to listen to, and document, the views of key participants in the education process (Lynch & O'Riordan, 1996).

The study documents and analyses the perspectives of those most directly affected by disadvantage, namely low-income working-class students who are attending college and those who are in the leaving certificate classes in second-level schools. In addition, it explores the viewpoints of those with a knowledge of the difficulties encountered at school level—principals, teachers and guidance counsellors—and community workers who are working and living within marginalised working-class communities. The community workers not only present a local perspective on the issues, they also present a parental perspective.

Although most research on educational disadvantage focuses on the groups who experience the disadvantage, inevitably the disadvantage of some is matched by the advantages of others. The two are causally related. Consequently, to fully understand social-class-related disadvantage, it is necessary to explore how privilege operates. Given the time and resources available for this study, it was not possible to fully explore the perspectives and privileges of more advantaged groups. However, we did include a small group in the study from fee-paying second-level schools [4] and some of their teachers.

Intensive interviews were undertaken with 122 people (56 second-level students, 40 of whom were from low-income working-class backgrounds, 40 working-class third-level students, 16 school personnel, and 10 community workers). Of those interviewed, 50% in each group were women. The respondents were selected on a deliberate basis to represent a range of different experiences within a given group. The 10 community activists were from five different counties; the teachers and second-level students were from a range of different schools across seven counties, while the third-level students were drawn from five separate higher education institutions. Within the third-level group, a small number of disabled, traveller, lone parent, and older students were included in order to identify the way in which their particular needs were being addressed.

The study presents an analysis of the issues using the language and voices of the people themselves. It documents and analyses the evidence provided by those who have had direct experience of how social-class disadvantage operates.

The study was also strongly influenced by transformative and change-related consider-ations, not least of which was a desire of many of those involved in planning the study to change university admissions' policies in relation to working-class students. The research was set in the context of a national debate about reserving places for working-class students (outside the highly competitive 'Points' Admission system). It was designed to feed into the work of the University Equality Committee set up in University College Dublin to explore ways of improving working-class rates of participation which had been especially low, even by national standards. It was also intended that it would inform the wider national debate on equalising access to higher education for working-class students.

While it would be untrue to say that the research was co-operatively designed and planned in the strong sense of that term, the design of the study was monitored throughout by a series of consultations which took place with representatives of community groups, teachers and students, as part of the work of the Equality Committee. The decision to canvass a range of perspectives on the barriers to equal access and participation was one that was strongly endorsed by the community representatives and teachers who were consulted about the research. Community activists were also strongly of the view that it was time to undertake intensive qualitative research to unpack the black box behind the statistics which have repeatedly shown working-class students to be disadvantaged in education (Clancy, 1982, 1988, 1995; Higher Education Authority, 1995; Kellaghan *et al.*, 1995). The questions which were addressed in the interviews were also designed in consultation with representatives of students and community activists in working-class areas. Unfortunately, relatively little consultation took place after the compilation of data due to time and budgetary constraints. The study was made available to the various groups and/or their representatives when it was completed.

The focus of this paper is primarily on barriers to equality of access and participation rather than on the transformative dimension, although the two are inevitably interwoven. There was a widespread belief that little was known about barriers to entry in higher education, and that there was a need to unpack the 'mystery' of persistent inequality by engaging a range of different perspectives. There was an especially strong view from the working-class community sector, representatives of whom we consulted about the study, that there was a need to challenge the 'cultural deficit' model of educational choice. Documenting how class-specific experiences influenced educational actions was regarded as an elementary step towards understanding transformation.

Each interviewee was invited, however, to outline the kinds of strategies that should be introduced to realise change. Although the focus of this paper is not on these *per se*, owing to space constraints, they did form an important part of the main report (Lynch & O'Riordan, 1996). A number of the interviewees' policy recommendations have been implemented in our own university, notably the reserving of places for low-income working-class students, and the appointment of an Equality Officer to liaise with designated disadvantaged schools in breaking down cultural barriers between working-class communities and university.

Barriers to Equality of Access and Participation in Higher Education

Introduction

This study is framed within a distributive model of social justice, while recognising the importance of a difference model (Young, 1990). We are not suggesting that the

distributive model is the only, or indeed the most important, model (Connell, 1993). However, a distributive framework underpins much of the thinking within working-class communities themselves and within the wider policy arena in Ireland (O'Neill, 1992; Government of Ireland, 1997). There is a widespread belief that education is basically a social 'good' and that equality of access, participation and outcome within it are all desirable. The espousal of a distributive model does not deny the importance of the wider issues of equality of respect and status, or more fundamental questions relating to equality of condition (for a discussion on these issues, see Equality Studies Centre, 1995).

The study focuses on just two distributive issues: equality of access and participation. It does not address wider and deeper equality objectives, notably equality of outcome or condition, although these are clearly higher value objectives in the sense that they are more stringent measures of equality. However, as it is impossible to have equality of outcome without equality of access and participation, it was deemed necessary at this time to focus on the more basic issues.

What is evident from the data is the remarkable level of agreement among the different participants as to the precise barriers encountered by low-income working-class students in entering and succeeding in higher education. The research shows that all four groups regarded economic barriers as the over-riding obstacle to equality of opportunity defined in terms of equality of access and participation. Social and cultural barriers were also deemed to be very important as were educational constraints. Although there are significant differences of interpretation across the four groups as to the nature of particular barriers, most notably between community activists and teachers, these will not be the primary subject of discussion here. The focus will be on the general patterns identified, rather than inter-group differences.

The Impact of Economic Constraints on Access and Participation

Making Ends Meet: establishing priorities

Relative poverty was regarded as the principal barrier to equality of access and participation for low-income working-class students. This view was shared across all groups. The effects of poverty were regarded as multifarious. Even the first step of getting the money for an application form for higher education was a barrier for some:

> Having the money for a COA [Central Applications Office] form can be a lot of money to ask for at home. (*TLS21*) [6]

In low-income households, day-to-day survival, 'making ends meet', had to take precedence over optional goods, including higher education. Households with limited means regarded expenditure on higher education for one child as a 'luxury' which could only be bought at the expense of other family members. The view that '*Money is the bottom line on everything*' was widely shared among community workers, and by students and teachers.

Community workers were especially adamant about economic barriers to access and participation.

> Going to college is not possible financially for working class students ...
> Because people are living where day-to-day issues are number one, college is
> not a primary consideration. (*COMM10*)
> The cost of keeping a student [in college] is not on. (*COMM8*)

What is notable, however, is that community activists were keenly aware of the role that

structural (State-managed) conditions and systems played in perpetuating the inequalities across groups. The causes of poverty were linked closely to unemployment, especially.

> There is such high unemployment that financially it would not be feasible [for students to college ... the costs would be way beyond what a poor family could afford. Many of the families in this area are quite large and they have a lot to contend with ... getting money together to send their kids to school. They do not even think that they would be able to afford to send their children on to college. (*COMM1*)

The development of short-term, low-paid Community Employment Schemes, and the lack of security and low pay which characterised much of the unskilled work available, was also seen as problematic:

Maintaining Relative Advantage: the role of the private education market

While the direct effects of poverty in marginalised working-class communities was very visible to community activists, what was most visible to teachers were the relative advantages of middle-class students. Of the 16 teachers and school principals interviewed, 13 believed that the working-class students were economically disadvantaged compared with middle-class students and that this affected both their performance and, consequently, their rate of progression to higher education.

> Middle class [parents] have greater income to support kids at home. This helps motivate their kids more. Working class kids have not got the financial motivation to expect much educationally. (*TE10*)

Teachers were especially keenly aware of the relative performance advantage which could be gained in the private education market by those who could afford it:

> Middle class students can tap parents for various things. Students from working class backgrounds wouldn't be able to go on tour to the continent [like] middle class people, nor can they go to Leeson St. [the location of a well known private 'grind' (tutorial) school which offers intensive preparation for public examinations at a fee]. (*TE7*)

Three out of the four school personnel working in fee-paying schools also considered working-class students to be seriously financially disadvantaged in education.

> At a basic level, poorer kids cannot afford grinds. Here [a fee-paying school] most students are getting grinds. Many working class families cannot participate in that. (*TE15*)

Three of the 13 teachers who named economic inequalities as a serious barrier qualified their opinions by suggesting that good familial support, part-time work and ability could eliminate access and participation barriers for working-class students. In effect, they claimed that if working-class students made extra money and/or if they were good academically, they could compete on equal terms with those who did not have to work part-time, or who were not as capable academically.

Grinds: students' views.   As noted above, not only do certain working-class students not stay on in school as long as middle-class students, those who do stay on do not perform as well at the leaving certificate level (Higher Education Authority, 1995, Table 12). A number of the students interviewed were keenly aware of how the private-market systems

in education, notably grinds (private tutoring) and voluntary financial contributions [7], advantage certain students. Working-class students who had got into third level education were especially aware of this:

> If there is a problem at school, financially well-off parents get their children grinds. The working class student has to survive on the minimum. (*TLS6*)
> There are a lot of weekend courses in Irish which would help me get an honour but I cannot go because of financial difficulties at home. (*SLS34 [DIS]*)
> Middle class parents and students have more money to spend on schools. (*TLS5*)

Of the 33 students in disadvantaged schools who were not taking grinds, almost one in four (eight) had never heard of grinds, while seven others said they knew of them but could not afford them. The remaining 18 believed they did not need grinds.

A Place to Study

Lack of adequate resources for study were identified by 15 of the 16 school personnel as major barriers facing working-class students:

> If the living conditions are such that students have no place quiet to study or they have to mind their younger brothers and sisters a lot, as is the case in many families, these students' academic attainment is less than students who do not have these handicaps. (*TE10*)
> Some students in winter are studying with gloves on and no heat ... [they] sit with the TV because it is warm. There is no option. (*TE11*)

It was not only teachers who noted the issue of accommodation, one in five of the 40 second-level students said they lacked a proper place to work:

> I share a room with three girls. I cannot study there; it is too noisy. (*SLS12 [DIS]*)
> I am the eldest of six. It is hard. I have to go to the library and stay back after school if I want to study. (*SLS9 [DIS]*)

All the students in the fee-paying schools, however, had all the necessary supports for study.

Pressure to Leave

Of the 40 low-income second-level students interviewed, 16 (40%) had seriously considered leaving school early. The financial strain of staying on in school was the main concern of six of these 16 students:

> I wanted to work and get money, we haven't got it at home. (*SLS20 [DIS]*)
> I've had financial set backs, if I wanted to get grinds I have no money for them.
> I have an idea I won't have money to go to college. (*SLS11 [DIS]*)

The pressure on students from low-income families to contribute financially to the budget at home was another recurring theme in the interviews with teachers from disadvantaged schools:

> Often students leave because they do not have the £40 for the Junior Certificate. There is pressure from home to leave school rather than be an expense. (*TE1*)

Seven of the 10 community activists also believed that pressures to contribute to the family incomes were considerable once a student reached working age:

> Taking part in the education system is a huge financial strain on families so the quicker the child gets out of the system the less pressure on the family budget. Books, materials etc. are very costly. Then there is the wholly social thing of buses, after schools' activities ... they all cost money. (*COMM6*)
>
> They feel they should get a job a.s.a.p. and contribute at home thereby taking the pressure off their families. (*COMM1*)

The pressure to leave was particularly emphasised by students in the Dublin working-class schools.

The Need to Work

Just under half of the disadvantaged second-level students worked part-time. This work was not regarded as optional. Of those who worked, 11 said that their work had a negative effect on their studies for the leaving certificate. For some it meant missing school because they were too tired:

> Sometimes I have to work late on Sunday nights and I might not go to school the next day because I am too tired. (*SLS33 [DIS]*)

Teachers also regarded participation in part-time work as an equality barrier at the leaving certificate stage, especially.

> An awful lot of them have part-time time jobs. It's the only way to be at school therefore they are doubly disadvantaged. The work makes them tired. They often do 22–28 hours part-time work a week. (*TE6*)
>
> There is pressure to get a job a.s.a.p. and get out: part-time jobs in final year is a big problem here. (*TE7*)

Participants in the fee-paying schools said money would not be a consideration for their students when thinking about going to college.

Students from low-income families who got into college often had to work to maintain themselves. Of the 40 third-level students whom we interviewed, 23 were working and three actually had full-time jobs. As one of the students put it:

> If I was not working, I wouldn't be able to go to college. (*TLS17*)

Almost half of the students who worked, however, said that their work interfered with their performance in college:

> Part-time work affects my studies. I work as a barman and I often have to work until 2 a.m. in the morning so I cannot study. (*TLS11*)
>
> If I had not got a part-time job I could not afford college. My course work suffers however and I honestly believe I would have got a lot better grades had I not being working. (*TLS20*)

Almost all of the students who were not working were relying on their families to support them while in college.

Being Able to Dream: aspirations and ambitions

The way in which students' ambitions and aspirations for the future were influenced by the economic and social conditions in which they lived was a recurrent theme from all

the interviewees. Economic and cultural constraints were regarded as highly interdependent.

> Good financial circumstances help you dream. For working class kids the dream is not there ... the working class lifestyle does not lend itself well to [the] challenge of doing well in education. If a family is in poverty they just have to cope. (*COMM10*)

Many of the community activists referred to the fact that the families in their areas were pre-occupied with paying bills and making ends meet. They often did not have the time, money, or energy to encourage educational ambitions:

> People think not in terms of college but rather about where their next meal is coming from. (*COMM7*)

All but one of the school personnel reported that the adverse financial circumstances of students' homes impacted negatively on students' educational expectations and performance.

> ... sights are lowered; the attitude is that you will never get there [college] anyway. One person I know got offered a course but could not afford it. (*TE9*)

The Grant: 'there's no way you can survive on it' (TLS11)

The maintenance grant [8] which students got for college was neither adequate to cover the direct costs of participation, nor the opportunity costs from loss of earnings. The issue of grants evoked a totally negative response from all interviewees. First, it was clear that grant rate was so low that it denied students who got to college a chance to have equal participation with others:

> The grant pays for my rent and I am supposed to live on fresh air. (*TLS14*)
> When I get the grant I am okay for two weeks then I have to scrounge for money. (*TLS18*)

The grant was also perceived as being administered in a manner which exacerbated the more basic inequalities:

> At the start of the year you have to wait for the grant to be paid in. It's no joke.
> I can barely keep my head above water and I am borrowing left, right and centre. (*TLS17*)
> I am often hungry and am too proud to ask for help. The grant is always late and insufficient. (*TLS28*)

There was much criticism about the lack of consideration by grant authorities for regional variations in the cost of living.

> In England, your grant is allocated according to where you are going to college. In Carlow, accommodation will cost you £14–£17 [a week], here [in Dublin] accommodation costs £45 a week. Grant authorities do not take into consideration that you are living in Dublin. This is very unfair. (*TLS14*)

Community workers regarded the low level of grant aid as a huge barrier to equal participation for those students who got to college:

> The grants are not satisfactory at all. As it is people cannot make ends meet never mind say extending the ends and then trying to make them meet. It is a joke. (*COMM1*)
> You need an iron will to get by if relying on the grant. Some people I know

on it go to VDP [Vincent de Paul, a charity] as well. It's demoralising. (*COMM9*)

Teachers believed that poor grant provision put extra pressures on low-income families.

It puts financial strain on parents already under a lot of pressure. (*TE5*)
The grant is inadequate because the books are so costly, everything is so costly in college. The grant does not equal the costs by a long shot. (*TE6*)

Concluding Comments

Tight budgeting meant there was a lack of discretionary, and often necessary, spending on education. Young people were not in a position to avail of the many educational benefits which can be bought in the private market outside of the publicly-funded education service. Lack of resources impacted on performance: students simply did not have the resources to achieve the 'points' (grade point average in their Leaving Certificate) necessary to attain entry to higher education in an open competitive system. They were not in a position to buy the extra educational resources or services which could make a difference. These included grinds, education-related resources such as reference material and computers, and educationally relevant travel, especially in the language area. Most of these services could be purchased in the private education market by more advantaged families: this enabled them to maintain their relative advantage in the competition for places in higher education.

Poverty also affected students' study directly: firstly, because they had to supplement the family income through work, thereby leaving less time for study; and secondly, because they often lacked the basic accommodation and facilities for study. Community activists, teachers, and second- and third-level students each pointed out that if low-income students were to access higher education they would have to work to supplement the family income once they were beyond the compulsory school-leaving age. This limited their time for study and had the paradoxical affect of making them less educationally competitive for the very goal (access to higher education) that they were working towards in the first place.

Insecure and low incomes also impacted negatively on peoples' personal hopes and aspirations through creating a sense of inferiority and of social exclusion. Community activists (all but one of whom were parents in working-class areas) were especially vocal on this issue. It was their view that the effects of poverty on educational aspirations were direct and immediate. In particular, they claimed that poverty created cultures in which people lacked 'a sense of ownership' of powerful institutions in society, including higher education. This lack of a sense of belonging lowered people's hopes and aspirations for themselves and their children.

The social exclusion emanating from poverty also created information gaps as people were often unaware of how the education itself functioned, either in terms of accessing higher education or in terms of financial entitlements if one attended.

Social and Cultural Barriers

While the primary barriers facing low-income students in accessing and succeeding within college were economic, these were compounded by a series of inter-related obstacles which were social, cultural and educational.

The 'Class Difference' Perspective

There was considerable variability among the participants as to how they interpreted the nature and operation of social and cultural constraints on low-income students. There was a general belief among the community workers that one of the major barriers which working-class students confront in education is the fact that their social and cultural background is not valued in schools, or indeed elsewhere in society:

> The affirmations given by society to a working class child and a middle class child are different from the time they were born. (*COMM3*)

Community activists believed that this devaluation of working-class ways of thinking and being was reflected in the way in which people relate to working-class people, and in the way in which school curricula ignore working class 'culture, values and mores' (*COMM4*). They held this institutionalised devaluation of working-class culture to be, in part, responsible for the lower educational self-esteem which working-class students experienced *vis-à-vis* their middle-class peers. They regarded this negative evaluation of working-class culture as a major contributory factor in lowering people's aspirations and expectations for higher education.

The 'Cultural Deficit' View of Teachers

Most teachers believed that a major barrier to equality of access was the fact that many parents in working-class areas had a negative experience of education themselves. They claimed that people did not value education like middle-class people:

> The do not dream of educational success for their kids as they did not have success in education. (*TE11*)
> It's a cultural thing, [they] have no confidence, few role models. (*TE2*)

Moreover, the teachers believed that class-specific cultural values permeated different schools, thereby influencing educational outcomes. A number regarded schools in low-income working-class areas as having a cultural climate which was not conducive to educational success. (Interestingly, they saw the students as the creators of that cultural climate rather than the teachers.) By contrast, the experiences of middle-class children were seen as compatible with the ethos of schools. As one teacher, who had taught in different types of schools, pointed out:

> Parents of students in this school [a fee paying school] have higher expectations; they understand what is expected from their kids. (*TE15*)
> Some working class parents are not supportive of the school; [there is a] 'them and us' mentality whereas middle class parents are more supportive. (*TE14*)
> Many [working class parents] are anti-schooling or afraid of schooling or not knowing. (*TE12*)

One teacher suggested that the barriers arose because:

> Working class parents are intimidated by teachers. (*TE1*)

Teachers believed that middle-class parents and themselves shared the same cultural and educational expectations. Teachers, in the Dublin schools especially, saw working-class parents and their children as being hostile or indifferent to education. Class polarisations outside school were transferred to the educational site. Whether teachers should or could

be proactive in overcoming such divides was not considered by school personnel. Teachers expressed a sense of powerlessness about the dynamics of class relations and related educational expectations in the school.

Information Barriers

For second-level students, one of the major social and cultural barriers identified was the sense of education, and particularly higher education, as being remote and alien from the lives of their families. Second-level students noted repeatedly that they knew very little about college life. Not knowing what to expect created fears and anxieties which exacerbated practical difficulties:

> I am worried about everything. I am worried about walking in and not being able to do the work. I am worried about getting a part-time job and having to live on my own. (*SLS18 [DIS]*)

Two of the second-level students interviewed said they knew nothing about universities at all. The question of applying to one therefore did not arise.

> I do not know what universities are about. (*SLS21 [DIS]*)

Those who had succeeded in getting into college also spoke of their lack of information about college life at the time of entry:

> You do not hear much about college if you are working class. And it is hard to get information about college and when you get there you do not know what they are talking about. (*TLS33*)

Mature students felt that there were information barriers which were particularly problematic for them.

> For mature [working class] students, how do they make a first step to even finding out about the college? You can only get CAO forms from career guidance teachers. (*TLS2*)

Isolation and the Fear of Isolation

Second-level students expressed a range of fears and anxieties about going to college. They believed that college was a very different and unfamiliar place, and they feared isolation:

> It's so big [college]. There are so many people. I'll know nobody. (*SLS31 [DIS]*)
> I am worried about not being able to fit in with rich, brainy and moneyed students I would be struggling. Students might put you down and I might feel left out. (*SLS16 [DIS]*)
> I am afraid that I won't do well in college and that I won't make friends. (*SLS14 [DIS]*)

Seven of the 40 third-level students interviewed had difficulties making friends in college. The major reasons for this, in their view, were the size of the colleges and the fact that the class background and life experiences of many students were very different to their own working-class background.

> I did not make friends in college until I was in fourth year. I could not mix. Our sense of humours were too different. We were on a different level. Everything you discuss is college, college, college! (*TLS33*)

> When I went to college, I was up from the country, and most of the people in my class were from Dublin and they seemed to know the college and the city. It took me a long time to form friendships. (*TLS28*)

Of the third-level students, 14 (35%) said they were lonely while at college. This feeling was particularly acute for people when they entered.

> When I started college I found it difficult to make friends. I'd walk into the lecture hall and there would be a sea of faces. I did not know anybody. I had to rely on notice boards, orientation days and trying to pick up a person to talk to. (*TLS35*)
> I used to feel totally lonely in my first year of college. I was very shy. (*TLS28*)

Being an Outsider, not Having a Sense of Ownership

There was a perception among a minority of the second-level students that higher education, but most especially the universities, were beyond their reach, either because students did not believe in their own abilities:

> I always think that college students are so bright. I do not think that I am that bright, so college is like a dream to me. (*SLS45*)

or, in a small number of cases, because they knew nothing about universities:

> I do not know anything about universities. I never even thought of it [applying to a university]. (*SLS21*)

Over one-third of the 40 students who were within higher education (10 of whom were in universities) felt like outsiders because of their class origins:

> In first year I was very conscious of the fact that I spoke a lot differently to people; it was blatant, in the tutorials especially, as I am the only person from the city. It had no repercussions but I felt my differences shone. This difference can prevent you exploring ideas in a tutorial setting. (*TLS33*)
> Sometimes I feel kind of inferior because wealthier students seem more sure of themselves. It's as if they've been here before, done it all, know everyone. It is quite intimidating. (*TLS27*)

The fact that middle-class students had a bigger network of friends from their school and neighbourhood than working-class students further highlighted working-class students' relative social and cultural separateness from middle-class institutions, particularly its educational institutions.

> There is not a single person from my own area [in college]. I have two friends who grew up in the same area as me. They had the potential to go to college but they did not have the chance because they just could not afford it. (*TLS28*)

Five of the 40 participants said they had not settled into college. Only one of these was in first year. The reasons that the students said they had not settled was because of the culture clash they experienced between home and college. Two of those interviewed considered dropping out because they felt so different from everyone else.

> In first year I hated college. I felt everyone was different to me. I wanted to speak really well. I had to make myself be positive and stick with it. (*TLS27*)

Living Between Two Worlds

While 70% of the second-level students in the more disadvantaged schools had friends who left school early, only a quarter of these said that this created problems for them; what they envied was the money and freedom their friends had.

> I see my friends working and they seem to be earning good money while I am slogging away at school. I would like to have the freedom their earnings give them but I do not. (*SLS16 [DIS]*)

While only a small minority (five) of higher education students felt that their attendance at college alienated them from their school friends, those who expressed views on it felt the alienation strongly. For one interviewee, this was one of the biggest problems she encountered.

> If you go down to the local for a pint, you get the impression that they are waiting to see if you are going to inflict your views on them. For example, I was in the pub last week and this guy was talking to a girl about the divorce referendum. I knew this girl from school. Anyway the guy was arguing with her about the benefits of divorce, and she said he was getting as bad as me thinking he knew all the answers. I had not spoken to this girl in ten years and yet she presumed to know me and my views! When you go to college you get a label, a tag. (*TLS33*)

> Another interviewee explained how his friends from home no longer associate with him because he is a college student.

> Some of them think that I am snobby because I am doing law so they don't talk to me. (*TLS32*)

A third interviewee explained how his former friends from school were disinterested in his life at college because it was a world from which they felt excluded:

> A lot do not go to college in poor areas so they do not want to know about a different world. (*TLS4*).

While three of the 10 community activists stated that neighbourhood influences could have a potentially damaging effect on students' ambitions, eight of the activists said, however, that the majority of the people in their communities valued education highly:

> Most parents want their children to be educated even though they have had negative experiences. A lot of young parents and single parents particularly, are enthusiastic about supporting their kids. (*COMM9*)
> Education is seen as very important. The communities' attitudes are a reflection of Irish society which thinks education is important for children as a passport to a secure future and personal development. (*COMM1*)

There was a belief, however, that there were gender differences in attitudes to education. Most of the activists stated that the young males in their communities had the most negative attitude towards education.

Teachers adhered most strongly to the view that the peer group had a negative effect on educational ambitions. A 'cultural deficit' perspective informed their view of working-

class peer-group culture. Eight of the 12 teachers in the more disadvantaged schools expressed such opinions. In their view,

> There would be a lot of alienation and ostracism [if they went to college]. (*TE11*)
> The third-level student can become 'a fish out of water' in the community and at college. (*TE10*)

Educational Constraints

Middle-class Culture of Schools and Colleges: 'staff are from middle-class backgrounds' (COMM1)

Community activists perceived educational institutions as being inflexible and unresponsive to the needs of working-class students. They claimed that the ethos of schools and colleges was predominantly middle class, noting that the curriculum did not reflect *'working class lifestyle, culture, values* [or] *mores*' (*COMM10*), while teachers often did not understand working-class students:

> Staff are from middle class backgrounds. They have no first hand knowledge of the problems of students ... it's a bit of a self-fulfilling prophecy; the expectation for working class students is lower. (*COMM1*)

There was also a belief that the culture of higher education colleges was very different to what students were familiar with, and that no real effort was made to accommodate differences:

> It goes back to the curriculum ... there is no reflection of working class peoples' lives in college other than in studies like this one. (*COMM3*)
> You'd almost have to learn a whole new language as well as the course, and you'd have to learn a whole new way of looking and analysing things. (*COMM8*)
> The university has a sink or swim attitude. (*COMM9*)

Community workers believed that teachers did not care enough about working-class children. The educational system was regarded as ineffectual:

> If I go into the local community school some children I see have definite remedial problems; remedial classes do not work. These kids are not picked up along the way. Kids are lost in the whole thing. (*COMM9*)
> Education is not meeting the needs of working class people ... [it is] too dictatorial ... overcrowded ... teachers have no expectations educationally. There is no real support from the education system with confidence barriers; the teacher–pupil ratio is too high. *(COMM8)*

Cultural Deficit Views: them and us

Teachers were also aware of cultural differences between themselves and students in working-class areas; the sense of difference was most acute in the larger urban areas where teachers and students were generally strangers to one another outside of school. Of the 16 teachers interviewed, 12 believed there was a culture clash between themselves and working-class students. Two teachers said they did not experience such conflict; both of these were working in schools in a small town with a large rural intake. The teachers varied in how they interpreted the effects of these differences. While most interpreted differences in terms of cultural deficit:

Children have no concept of study, of organisation. Their priorities are so different. They've no money for books yet they have money to socialise. They do not understand how hard they need to work; they think that three-to-four hours a night might kill them; they do an hour. (*TE14*)

Working class parents are anxious that their kids do better than they did, but they are not realistic about how important it is to motivate kids. (*TE10*)

others were aware that negative views were structurally related to the limited probability for success:

In the working class culture there is an ethos that you will never get there; you've no chance so why make the effort? (*TE6*)

Working class kids have different expectations; they've no money. (TE15)

Schools Make a Difference: relative advantage and disadvantage

Second-level students in disadvantaged schools felt that the quality of the schooling they experienced was not equal to that in other schools. The school was seen as a vital mediator in the education process. In students' eyes, it could make a crucial difference between getting a good grade in the leaving certificate and dropping out. They listed a range of areas in which they felt that their own schools were lacking compared with other schools.

Subject choices and facilities.   Some noted the differences in subject choices and facilities:

[In some schools] there is a better choice of subjects. If a class is full in this school you are put into another subject. (*SLS28 [DIS]*)

There are more facilities in other schools than there are here. People give more time to posher schools. (*SLS8 [DIS]*)

Other students expressed the view that certain schools had a higher transfer rate to college than theirs. They believed that this created a better climate for learning compared with their own school. Students were also aware of the intensity of the competition for higher education places:

When I went to the higher options exhibition I saw thousands there and a small number of courses. I became very worried about the competition [for college places]. (*SLS9 [DIS]*)

Learning climates.   These were also regarded as being quite different across schools. Students in three of the five more disadvantaged schools claimed that regular disruptions in class due to disciplinary problems were an important obstacle to learning. This problem was particularly acute for students in some of the city schools:

Discipline is a major problem in this school. Classes are taken up with correcting students and dealing with general discipline problems. (*SLS13 [DIS]*)

There are disruptions in at least three classes every day. It is very off-putting. (*SLS15 [DIS]*)

Turnover rate among teachers.   The high turnover rate among teachers in the disadvantaged schools was another serious difficulty for some students.

Teachers take regular breaks; this upsets my study. (*SLS1 [DIS]*)

I have had about six maths teachers in two years. (*SLS14 [DIS]*)

Teacher Expectations

Eight of the 10 community activists believed that middle-class teachers were either lacking in understanding of working-class students, or lacking commitment to their education:

> School staff are not aware of the problems of students. Students here come from a highly dependent social welfare community. Staff are from middle class backgrounds. They have no first hand knowledge of the problems of students. The values of the school staff are different. It is a bit of a self-fulfilling prophecy, the expectation for working class students is lower. (*COMM1*).
> Teachers have no expectations educationally [for working class students]. (*COMM8*)
> The quality of teaching in working class areas is poor. For example in one place I know there is streaming of classes into the top and low classes. The good teachers are given to the top groups. I think teachers are not committed; teacher–pupil relations are confrontational ... (*COMM10*)

Third-level students also stated that they felt that teacher expectations were lower for working-class students and that this was an important barrier to success, especially as the family may rely so much on the teachers' opinions.

> Teachers do not expect the working class to go on to college. (*TLS7*)
> Teachers' attitudes display favouritism towards wealthier parents. (*TLS5*)

The importance of the teachers was noted, especially when

> You haven't got the money or tradition of going to college behind you. (*TLS6*)

The Role of Lecturers in College

Students who were within college also felt that support from lecturers and tutors was important. They were more reliant on this than students whose families were able to guide and support them. A minority of students believed that there were barriers to communication with lecturers in college, either because they were too busy or tutorial groups were too big,

> They do not have time to talk with the students. They are just too busy. (*TLS28*)
> The whole purpose of having a tutor is to have someone who you can discuss things with; when there are 34 in a tutorial group this is very difficult. (*TLS4*)

or because of social-class differences between lecturers and students:

> One of the reasons I could not go to the lecturers when I needed help was the difference between working class and middle class peoples' problems and life experiences. If I went up to tell them that my sister had died I know the question 'how' would come up. I do not want to tell them she died of a drug overdose. I wonder how they would react to this. (*TLS33*)

Resource Differences Across Schools: extra-curricular issues

Teachers believed that the lack of material resources in certain schools had a serious impact on the quality of education students received. They drew attention especially to the differences in the provision for extracurricular activities. Teachers believed that

involvement in extracurricular activities were very valuable for the student's all-round development, especially in building confidence:

> It gives them an opportunity to take on a different role, to be with teachers in a less formal situation. Extra-curricular activities also have an intrinsic value; they build up confidence and are the main reason why some people go to school. (*TE2*)
>
> Extra-curricular activities help to develop students' confidence which, in turn, helps them to be more confident when doing their homework. (*TE10*)

A number of students in the disadvantaged schools said that working-class students participate in extra-curricular activities inside school to a significantly lesser degree than middle-class students. (They noted, however, that they participated more in community-run activities.) One of the reasons given for the lack of involvement in extracurricular activities was lack of resources within the schools themselves.

> Working class schools do not provide extra-curricular activities as they are lacking in staff; they are lacking in facilities and lacking in the money to pay teachers. (*TE16*)

Teachers believed, however, that the lack of involvement in extracurricular activities was a lost opportunity as it weakened student's identification with the school, and meant that teachers and students did not have the opportunity to get to know one another in less formal and more convivial settings. When students were not identifying with the school either academically or in terms of sport, drama, music etc., it was easier to leave.

The Quality of Educational Facilities in College

Working-class students from low-income families who were in college had to rely heavily on college facilities such as libraries, computers, photocopying, crèches, etc. If college facilities were overcrowded, they suffered, as they could not opt to buy the services outside of college. Students believed that they could not participate in college on equal terms with other students because of the poor college facilities:

> In this college you have to queue for literally everything: phones, food, books everything. It's exasperating. (*TLS28*)
>
> The library is dreadful. I cannot get the books. It is not somewhere you can concentrate in that, well, it is so packed. (*TLS30*)
>
> The library facilities could be a lot better especially nearer the exams. You would not get a seat in the library and it is very hard to get out the books you want. (*TLS29*)

The lack of access to computers and to computer assistants was also identified as a problem for some college students, as were housing and counselling services.

> Computer access is very bad here. It is limited. (*TLS11*)
>
> Computer staff are unhelpful. They cannot understand that you cannot do it [computing]. (*TLS30*)
>
> We had no counselling service up until last year when a guy committed suicide. [If a counselling service had been in place then] it might have made the difference. (*TLS20*)
>
> The accommodation officer is not very helpful. She is focused on first years. There is not enough housing for students. (*TLS35*)

Within-class Differences: gender, disability, ethnic and age issues

The focus of this study was on cross-class difference. Of those interviewed, 50% were women. The main gender-specific barriers identified by those women was the lack of adequate child-care support in the colleges. This was an issue primarily for lone parents.

The other gender-related theme which emerged was related to peer-group culture. Some, but not all, community workers and teachers believed that the peer-group culture among working-class men was more hostile to prolonged participation in education than that among women. If anything, there was a view that women were subject to less peer pressure to leave education early.

As the study was not primarily focused on gender differences, it is possible, that other gender-specific barriers to access and participation may exist which did not emerge. Against that, it must be noted that girls' participation and success rates in education are better than those of boys, and that there is no significant gender difference in access rates to higher education within middle or working class groups (Clancy, 1995, pp. 56–57). On balance, it seems that gender-specific barriers to entry are not an over-riding consideration at the school-leaving age, although women do experience a series of barriers at the mature-student stage (Lynch, 1996).

Among the 40 third-level students interviewed were a small number who were Travellers, disabled, lone parents and mature students. Each of these groups faced particular barriers which compounded class barriers.

The two women who were single parents were in different colleges; they both had difficulties with the college crèche. One of the students was in a college where the crèche was not subsidised. This created major problems for her:

> I cried my eyes out to think I was not entitled to anything [subsidy] for the crèche. I am a single parent and am going to college. Others the same as me with children who are working get their crèche facilities paid for but I get no support. (*TLS22*)

The other student complained of the sexist attitudes of other students in a male-dominated college:

> The majority of people in the college are males. It can be quite intimidating. Sometimes guys make snide remarks about me being a single mother. They hurt. (*TLS22*)

One of the disabled students found the size of the university to be especially problematic owing to his mobility impairments. The lack of grant aid for specialised equipment was also an issue.

> I need so much equipment to get through my studies [and] there is no grant to buy specialised equipment. It costs £1,000 to buy a Braille and Speak. *(TLS26)*

For the Traveller interviewed, the barriers to college entry were predominantly cultural. Colleges were perceived to be the preserve of settled people:

> The impression of what college is about is one that is associated with settled country people only. Travelling people do not see college as an opportunity open to them. (*TLS34*)

The mature students interviewed had a number of problems, many of these stemmed from the fact that the colleges had little experience of working with mature students and accommodating their different needs. One student felt he '*was treated like an idiot*' (*TLS2*) as a mature student.

Overall, however, there was a high level of consensus about the importance of social-class-specific barriers *per se*.

Information is Crucial: 'I don't know what to expect' (SLS17 [DIS])

The inaccessibility of information about college life led to the development of great anxieties and, ungrounded fears. The anxieties and fears about the unknown world of college were barriers to access in and of themselves.

> I am worried I won't be able to handle it. I do not know what to expect in terms of study, getting to know people, passing subjects ... (*SLS17 [DIS]*)

Of the second-level students interviewed, 17 (43%) said they did not know how to apply for a college course. The lack of access to accurate information regarding college was particularly acute for students in one Dublin school, where none of the eight senior students said they had heard of CAO (Central Applications Office) forms, grinds or the points system. Students in a secondary school in the West of Ireland held a number of misconceptions about college, including the belief that you had to pass first-year college examinations at your first sitting. Their unfounded fear of being 'thrown out of college' at the end of one year made college appear like a daunting proposition. Other students complained about the lack of clear guidance when selecting Leaving Certificate subjects.

> I did not do the subjects I should have done for the college course I want to do because of the lack of clear career guidance in this school. (*SLS36 [DIS]*)

All of the participants in the fee-paying schools were clear on the application process for college and knew that the option of repeating examinations existed. Concerns about the class-based information gap was also noted as an important educational constraint by community activists.

> In the working class there is a complete ignorance about college. Parents do not understand how they might find ways to get kids to college. (*COMM2*)
> People do not understand the education system, the points system, methods of teaching and the inflexibility of school rules. (*COMM10*)
> There are so many courses; ordinary people would get confused by the way the limited information was presented. (*COMM6*)

While teachers also identified lack of guidance and information as an access barrier, they attributed more importance to the limitations of current modes of assessment and the differences in the social backgrounds of teachers and students. The Leaving Certificate examination, with its heavy reliance on written terminal examinations, was regarded as unfair on all students, but especially to working-class students: moreover, teachers pointed out that '*the education system can be manipulated as people get grinds*' (*TE7*).

Conclusion

The purpose of this research was to develop a deeper understanding of the barriers facing students from low-income working-class backgrounds in entering and participating successfully within higher education. The study tried to present an understanding of disadvantage from the perspective of those most directly affected by it, including second- and third-level students from low-income working-class households, community workers (who were also parents) and teachers. A small group of students and teachers in

fee-paying secondary schools were also interviewed for comparative purposes. In total, 122 people were interviewed for the study.

Economic, Cultural and Educational Constraints

Our findings lend general support to Gambetta's (1987) thesis regarding the nature of the specific constraints operating for working-class students. Economic, social and cultural, and educational constraints were identified as the principal barriers to equality of access and participation in higher education. Our data, from each of the groups, suggests, however, that economic constraints were of greater significance than either educational or cultural constraints. While Gambetta suggests that cultural constraints [9] were of little significance, this was not our finding. Social and cultural barriers were deemed to be of considerable significance, as were education-specific constraints.

Differences in Interpretation

Not surprisingly, perhaps, different hypotheses were presented across the groups about the way in which constraints operated. Most tension existed between teachers and the other three groups, particularly between teachers and community workers on issues of culture; teachers drew heavily on a cultural deficit model to explain working-class alienation from schooling; community activists saw the problem as one of cultural difference. As the teachers were the only exclusively middle-class group, this is not unexpected; yet the differences between teachers and others show how particular processes and practices can be accorded different interpretations depending on the positionality of the 'theorist'. In particular, differences in class position led to differences in the interpretation of educational attitudes, values and practices. What teachers perceived as a 'choice' for parents (e.g. encouraging students to study long hours, or not to work part-time) was not construed as a 'real' choice by working-class students or community workers. Equally, while working-class students and community workers held teachers accountable for the low expectations and poor learning climates in some schools, teachers held these to be the by-products of working-class disinterest or alienation. What was 'true' was contested from both sides. This suggests that any change-related strategy needs to address differences of interpretation as to the causes of inequality.

The Relational Nature of Inequality

The study also highlights the relational nature of educational inequality. It shows how class inequalities operate through a series of social, economic, political and cultural relationships. The educational disadvantage of any given person or group can really only be fully understood in terms of the advantage of others. The financial, cultural and educational experiences of working-class students need not, in and of themselves, create educational inequality; what creates the inequality is the fact that others have differential access to resources, income, wealth and power which enable them to avail of the opportunities presented in education in a relatively more successful manner. Moreover, relatively privileged groups are represented, either directly, or indirectly on various official bodies which make decisions about curricula and assessment, grants, etc., so they can define the nature and terms of educational opportunities in the first place [10]. In a market situation in which educational success is defined in relative terms, those with

superior access to valued resources, and those whose own class are the definers of what is culturally and educationally valuable in the first instance, are strongly positioned to be the major beneficiaries of educational investment.

The data suggests that one of the principal mechanisms through which middle-class families maintained their relative educational advantage was through the private education market, notably through the use of grinds (private tuition), educationally-relevant travel, summer colleges, socially-exclusive schooling, and other educational supports. The extra services available to middle-class students not only boosted their examination performance, they also gave a competitive confidence boost; the students in the fee-paying schools were open in admitting that their were advantaged in such a system, as were their teachers.

Schools Making a Difference and Differences between Schools

Differences in the quality of schooling across the communities was also deemed to be important in mediating the effects of social class on educational decisions. Many working-class students and community activists did not think that the quality of schooling in their areas was comparable to that available in 'posher' schools. Because working-class students and their families often had little or no experience or knowledge of higher education, they were heavily reliant on the guidance and supports that schools and colleges offered. They were more exclusively reliant on the public education services than middle-class students. When teacher expectations were low, when college facilities were poor, or when information was not provided through the school, working-class families often had nowhere else to turn. Middle-class parents and students, however, turned to family networks and the private education market in the event of poor schooling.

Working-class students, and community activists, were very much aware of the mediating role played by school in charting their educational future. They looked to the school for guidance and support in a way that middle-class families did not. This finding concurs to some extent with that of Gambetta (1987). He found that working-class parents were more strongly influenced in their educational decisions by the school's report of the young person's capabilities, than were middle-class parents.

The Middle-class Culture of Schools and Colleges: them and us

The dominant role of middle-class personnel (teachers, inspectors, etc.) in defining the nature of the curricula and the organisation of school life was also seen as a barrier to equality. Working-class students and their parents felt excluded from decision-making about education practices and processes. They also believed that schools and colleges did not respect or reflect working-class culture and lifestyles. Some of the community workers spoke of how people felt afraid of schools and teachers. The sense of being an outsider, of being treated as inferior, created tensions around learning in schools. Teachers represented 'them', the 'Other', the dominant group.

Our data also show, however, that a number of teachers worked within a 'them and us' model in their relations with working-class students and their parents. They spoke about students and their families in terms which indicated a strong belief in the 'deficits' of working-class culture. The divisions between the lifeworlds of the students and those of their teachers led to disruptions and disharmony in the classrooms. A number of second-level students reported that disciplinary-related disruptions were a significant barrier to learning in their schools.

Cultural discontinuities were also experienced by working-class students within higher education, as they felt their class backgrounds were neither reflected nor affirmed within the colleges. They experienced themselves often as outsiders in an insiders' world, where other students '*appeared to have been there before, done it all, known everyone*'.

The sense of discontinuity between community, home and college, was exacerbated considerably by the lack of accessible, accurate information about higher education. Almost all the second and third-level students spoke about their anticipatory anxieties and fears about going to college as a barrier in itself. The failure of the State and its educational agencies to address the information problem was noted by a number of those interviewed.

Economic Barriers

While cultural and educational barriers were regarded as seriously restricting educational options, economic barriers were seen as virtually insurmountable by many of those interviewed. Lack of economic security and poverty within families, combined with the failure of the State to compensate for these through an adequate maintenance grant scheme, child care support, disabled student support, etc., had both a direct and indirect effect on educational decisions.

First of all, limited economic resources dictated spending priorities in the households; day-to-day survival, 'putting food on the table', 'making ends meet', took precedence over optional goods, including higher education. For some, the costs were prohibitive. The maintenance grant was neither adequate to cover the direct costs of participation, nor the opportunity costs from loss of earnings. One in four of the 40 low-income third-level students interviewed said they considered dropping out of college as 'trying to survive in College is unbelievable'.

Economic constraints also affected students' learning: firstly, because they had to supplement the family income (or to co-fund themselves) through work; and secondly, because they often lacked the basic accommodation and facilities for study. The limited time and facilities for study had the paradoxical effect of making students less education-ally competitive for the very goal that they were working towards in the first place. Those who were in college who were working felt that they could not achieve as high a grade as they wished because they had to work. Moreover, neither second- nor third-level students were in a position to buy the extra educational resources or services which could make a difference. These included grinds, education-related resources such as reference material and computers, and educationally relevant travel, especially in the language area. Some, if not all, of these services could be purchased by more advantaged families, and this enabled them to maintain their relative advantage in the competition for places in higher education.

While the education effects of economic marginality are visible, some of the more indirect social and psychological effects are less so. Our research shows, however, that having a low and unpredictable income, and inadequate maintenance, actually depresses ambitions among students from low-income backgrounds, as they feel that college is not a realistic option no matter how hard they may work. Having low levels of maintenance and support, therefore, does not just affect those who are in college, it influences the plans and priorities of students (and their families) while they are still in second-level education.

The economic, cultural and educational practices which constrain low-income working-class students' opportunities for higher education cannot be regarded as discrete

entities. They operate in a complex set of interactive ways with one another and are experienced by the students, their families and teachers as a highly integrated set of barriers to equal access and participation.

The State and the Issue of Change

In a number of the comments made by students and community activists, there was an implied and, sometimes, explicit criticism of State taxation and economic policies which advantaged some groups so clearly at the cost of others. There was widespread agreement across both working- and middle-class interviewees that two major financial barriers adversely affected the access and participation of working-class students in higher education. First, in terms of equality of access, it was claimed that working-class students could not compete for 'points' (grade point average in the Leaving Certificate) as they lacked the resources to gain a competitive advantage. Second, it was clear that once students entered higher education, or anticipated entry at the end of second level, the low level of the maintenance grant was a major disincentive to seek college entry; if one attended college, poor grant aid put pressure on students to work part-time, borrow, make demands on their families, etc., in order to survive. The strain of competing demands led to poorer performance and pressure to drop out.

When we asked the interviewees to suggest strategies for change and ways of overcoming inequalities, it was clear that the State was seen as having primary responsibility for economic inequality, while other agents within the State, such as the teachers, the universities and colleges of higher education, were regarded as having important roles to play in relation to cultural and educational barriers, both singularly and in conjunction with the State. The stories that people told indicate that policy initiatives designed to reduce economic, cultural or educational inequalities can be effective if sensitively, strategically and systematically implemented and resourced [11].

It is clear from the data that greater financial supports had to be given (whether in welfare supports, tax provisions, realistic grant aid, etc.) to low-income families if their children were to stay and be successful in education after the compulsory school-leaving age. In particular, there was a consensus that substantial grant aid (designed to meet the economic cost of attending college) is necessary to make higher education a realistic option for low-income individuals and families. It was widely believed that such grant aid would have the anticipatory effect of raising aspirations and maybe even performance. A minority of community activists noted the importance of promoting greater economic equality in society to achieve greater educational equality. They believed that these economic barriers had to be addressed at the State level.

The data suggests strongly that making accurate information about higher education widely accessible and available in working-class communities would also significantly reduce the misconceptions and anxieties that persist about college life, while the development of a closer liaison between schools in marginalised communities and the higher education colleges could help break down information and fear barriers. The State and the higher education institutions, liaising with the local schools and education bodies, were regarded as having responsibilities in this area.

There were also a number of recommendations about ways in which colleges, curricula, texts, and schools could be more inclusive of working-class students and their culture. Real partnerships between working-class communities and various organisations (state education agencies, schools, colleges, etc.) at national, regional and local level were

seen as a mechanism for overcoming the information and cultural difference barriers which were so daunting for many students.

Promoting positive learning climates in predominantly working-class schools, through the better resourcing of facilities and teachers, as well as through the educational support services, was also named as an important initiative. There were also recommendations about reviewing the selection procedures for higher education (the Points System) and the introduction of reserved places for disadvantaged working-class students [12].

Lack of Class Consciousness

While students, community workers and teachers were all aware of the different social classes in society and their relative positions in terms of educational advantage, class awareness did not translate into class consciousness in the active sense of that term, except to a limited degree among community activists. When asked about the strategies and actions which should be adopted to promote equality for working-class groups, most interviewees focused on moderate reforms to offset the worse effects of class-related inequalities, such as higher grant aid, more information, and in a small number of cases, a call for reserved places. Only among a few community activists was there any reference to the desirability of a radical restructuring and equalising of the economic relations in society. This is an important finding as it demonstrates the extent to which people accept inequality of condition, in terms of wealth and income especially. The meritocratic ideology seem to have been fairly well internalised. While a few community activists did query the rights of more privileged groups in society to their wealth and incomes, this was not a dominant theme. The target of criticism was the State, the colleges, schools and teachers. The State was seen to be the agent of inequality rather than the holders of superior wealth and income. This demonstrates the extent to which people looked to the State to be a fair referee between the classes, rather than querying the class system and its endemic inequalities in itself.

Concluding Comments

Our data identifies a number of ways in which economic, cultural and educational institutions interact to promote inequality through a series of procedures and processes in families, communities, schools and colleges. Structures do not operate as a system of abstract rules dictating behaviour in a robot-like manner; rather, they are mediated by collectivities and individuals in families, peer groups, communities, classrooms, schools and colleges. Structures specify the general parameters within which decisions are made, but the latter are, in turn, negotiated and changed depending on institutional responses to particular actions. Working-class students do not 'give up' on the education system in some predetermined manner. Rather, they negotiate and inhabit the education system with an eye to the opportunities which are open and those which are not. Teachers (and lecturers) are seen as agents who can open or close doors; but so too are the government, the administrative authorities in the colleges, civil servants and other mediators of education services within the State. These structural agents are not invisible; they can be named and targeted for action, especially in a State such as Ireland which has a highly centralised and corporatist system of governance. Resistance is not therefore an issue simply for committed teachers or cultural workers; rather, it is a series of challenges which can be initiated at several different levels within the education and State system. It is a challenge which can be taken up by working-class community groups collectively

(through such bodies as the Community Workers Co-operative, or through political parties) or individually. The challenge to resist can be taken to the State through both conventional party politics, and also through the corporate decision-makers and authorities which advise the government on education matters, or which manage and plan policies at national, regional and local levels. The dialogue which has been undertaken in this research shows that there are multiple sites for action for resistance, ranging from State institutional systems to individual practices in classrooms.

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NOTES

[1] An analysis of the patterns of entry to higher education among school leavers (over a 3-year period) shows that students from middle-class backgrounds are more likely to transfer to higher education with a modest Leaving Certificate (the Irish equivalent of A-levels or baccalaureate) result than working-class students. The transfer rate to higher education among high-performing working-class students does not vary that greatly however, from high-performing middle-class students (Higher Education Authority, 1995, p. 116). What this suggests is that middle-class students are likely to transfer to higher education even if they only reach the minimum qualification for entry. Working-class students only exercise the same probability of entry when their leaving certificate performance is at a high level.

[2] In Ireland, the powerful partners include teacher unions, university and higher education colleges, civil servants, politicians, school authorities, the churches, vocational education committees, and various official advisory and decision-making education agencies. While some of these groups play a central role in the perpetuation of the economic inequalities underpinning educational inequality, others play key roles in the cultural and educational sites *per se*. Although parent bodies have increased power in education in recent years, due to lack of resources and mobilisation, they are not yet as powerful as other named agencies. This may well change over time, and there is a likelihood that parent bodies will be middle-class dominated, as seems to have been happening to date. (This observation has been made by a number of commentators within the parent movement, see Cluskey, 1996.)

[3] There are a whole series of State-maintained and controlled bodies operating as advisors and managers of the education process, such as the Higher Education Authority, the National Council for Educational Awards, the National Council for Vocational Awards, the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, the School Inspectorate, the Teacher Registration Council, etc.

[4] These represent a very small minority of Irish second-level schools (circa 6%), but most are prestigious. Apart from a small number of scholarship students, they are attended by the upper middle classes and a small upper class.

[5] In late 1997, a pressure group was set up called 'The Working Class Access Network'. It comprises working-class activists and educationalists working together to pressurise for greater class equality in education. The research contributed towards the setting up of this group with the support of the Higher Education Equality Unit (a body of the Higher Education Authority).

[6] The system used for identifying respondents was as follows: *COMM* refers to a community worker, and the number given is their confidential ID code. *TE* refers to a teacher, *SLS* a second-level student and *TLS* a third-level student. DIS refers to students in more disadvantaged schools and FP to students in fee-paying schools.

[7] Almost 60% of second-level schools in Ireland are owned by the churches, mostly the Roman Catholic Church, but funded almost entirely by the State. Many (a recent survey by the Association of Secondary Teachers of Ireland suggests 80%) seek a voluntary financial contribution from the parents.

[8] The maximum maintenance grant for a student living away from home was £1625 in 1997–98, while the maximum rate for those living at home (defined as living within 15 miles of college) was £647. Estimates of the full maintenance costs suggest they are up to three times the grant allocation.

[9] As Gambetta's measure of culture was not especially sensitive, namely the number of years parents spent in school, his failure to establish a link between culture and educational disadvantage may be related to the nature of the measure used.

[10] It is no accident that working-class community groups (or, indeed, women's groups or other groups

representing disabled people, Travellers, etc.) are not defined as partners in education. They are not powerful agents within the education site. They are not represented on bodies such as the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, or policy-related bodies, such as the Points Commission (appointed in 1997), set up to review access and selection procedures for higher education. They have been written out of the Education Bill No. 2 (1997) in terms of the named partners. The Bill effectively endorses the following groups as partners: the patrons (notably the Churches, the Vocational Education Committees and the Department of Education), national associations of parents, teacher unions, and school management organisations.

[11] A complete analysis of the strategies for change identified in the study would require a paper in itself. We merely summarise here some of the key strategies identified.

[12] Some of the recommendations are now being acted upon, notably the cultural and educational recommendations, although often in a minimalist rather than a maximalist fashion. A commission has been set up to review the Points selection system. A number of colleges are in the process of introducing a very limited reserved places policy (including our own), or some variant of it, while university and community partnerships are being developed in a small number of colleges. On the economic side, however, there has been no change.

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