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Alleviating Educational Disadvantage through Localised Policy Intervention: Lessons for Success

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Abstract

Educational disadvantage, recognised as a factor in determining a child's life-chances, manifests itself in the form of resistance to and disengagement from school, resulting in the inability of marginalised students to derive full benefit from the education system (McKeown & Clarke, 2004; Kellaghan, 2001; Education Act, 1998). Although inclusion of the 'student voice' is becoming more common in the decision-making process in schools, students from lower socio-economic backgrounds have limited opportunities to participate in processes of education reform in their schools.

Engaging students experiencing marginalisation as active participants in an intervention such as the Student Engagement Programme (SEP), which is designed and adapted through understanding the students' social contextualisation, is a process that requires examining their everyday lived experiences and determining how these experiences have contributed and continue to contribute to the students' personal and educational development.

This research examined the process of engaging marginalised students as they participated in the SEP, and then assessed the resulting outcomes for the students and the school.

The research is informed by two theories: critical theory, which supports the framework of action research, where through collective participation a 'grassroots' agenda for change and development can be established, and Bourdieuian Cultural Reproduction Theory, which scaffolds the aims of SEP, where, through a student-focused inquiry and student participation in the programme, students can develop their skills in academic areas and build their skills and capacity for dealing with socially related difficulties.

The principal findings from this research are that, for localised initiatives to help alleviate educational disadvantage and thus enable better outcomes and life-chances of the students, the programme must actively include the 'student voice' through exploring the process of the students' engagement and the outcomes of their engagement.

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AR	Action Research
BTC	Breaking The Cycle
CAO	Central Applications Office
DARE	Disability Access Route to Education
DAS	Disadvantaged Area Scheme
DAT	Differential Aptitude Test
DES	Department of Education and Skills
DEIS	Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Disadvantaged Schools
FETAC	Further Education Training Awards Council
FPYC	Future-Proof Your Career
HEA	Higher Education Authority
HEAR	Higher Education Access Route
HSCL	Home School Community Liaison
JCSP	Junior Certificate Support Programme
LCA	Leaving Certificate Applied
LCVP	Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme
MLL	Management Leadership Learning
NAPS	National Anti-Poverty Strategy
NFQ	National Framework of Qualifications
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
PIRLS	Progress in International Reading Literacy Study
PISA	Programme for International Student Assessment – OECD
PTR	Pupil Teacher Ratio
SCP	School Completion Programme
SEP	Student Engagement Programme
SER	School Effectiveness Research
SIR	School Improvement Research
SSE	School Self-Evaluation
TIMSS	Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study
VTOS	Vocational Training Opportunities Scheme
WSE	Whole School Evaluation

Chapter 1: Introduction

The term 'life-chances' has long been recognised as referring to a child's ability to engage fully in their schooling, and their future ability to participate as competent adults in the social, economic and political life of society (Field, 2010; Levin, 1975). Research indicates that a child's life-chances are shaped by their class and status (Goldson, 2011; McKeown & Clarke, 2004; DES, 2005; Archer, 2001), but governments seek through educational policy structures such as Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Disadvantaged Schools (DEIS), in Ireland; No Child Left Behind, in the US, and Every Child Matters, in the UK, to assist schools in bridging the gap between home and school (Sternheimer 2010; Smyth, 2012). Educational disadvantage manifests itself in the form of marginalisation and causes a child to develop a resistance to or to disengage from their schooling. Research by the Children's Rights Alliance in 2010, the Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI) (2010) and Department of Education and Skills (DES) (2006) has shown that students experiencing educational disadvantage are more likely to leave school early, be unemployed, be in low-paid employment, be dependent on the social welfare system and be less likely to be 'active citizens' and become involved in life-long learning.

To alleviate the disadvantage experienced by many Irish students, in 2005 the Irish Government implemented the DEIS (Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Disadvantaged Schools) Action Plan which focuses on addressing the educational needs of children and young people from disadvantaged communities, from pre-school through second-level education.

The programme, which is at the centre of this thesis, is based in a school where 70% of the students in 2005 were classified as educationally disadvantaged by the Department of Education and Skills; the school was thus given DEIS status. For the purpose of this thesis this school is named as Glenmore Community School.

Over the past 13 years, I have worked on many educational training initiatives to alleviate educational disadvantage experienced by students from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds.

Through this practitioner-based research project and through the School Completion Programme (SCP) strand of the DEIS Action Plan, which aims to have a positive impact on retention for young people at risk of early school-leaving, I was able to assist Glenmore Community School in creating the Student Engagement Programme (SEP) in 2009. As Deputy Principal in the school, I was driven by the desire to enable students to engage better in their education and in doing so improve their life-chances. Through practitioner-

based research I hoped to build on the Master's qualification and thesis attained in 2008, which I will discuss in more detail later. The SEP programme's primary purpose was to reconnect our disadvantaged students both socially and academically with their school through using a student-centred approach. This was made possible by giving marginalised students a voice, and enabling them to create their own pathway to better life-chances. Conscious of the directives of the DEIS Action Plan to locally devise "plans and supports that specifically target the needs of the students at risk of early school leaving" (DEIS, 2005), the SEP from the start was bottom-up and inclusive in design.

The SEP incorporates the practice of helping students to understand their own social context, and assist them in determining both the academic and personal skills needed to improve their situation, and gaining access to the necessary programmes and resources to assist in making the change possible. Therefore, the programme places the student at its centre and all supports are focused on alleviating their educational disadvantage.

The aim of the research questions is to determine how we can alleviate the marginalisation and educational disadvantage being experienced by the students, whether there is an intervention that would increase the life-chances of children in a disadvantaged school, and investigate (a) the impact of a localised policy intervention on increasing the life-chances of children from disadvantaged backgrounds within the school community, (b) the conditions that enable this intervention and (c) the factors that promote its success, and are transferable to other interventions. I hoped that during my research I would not just find answers to my research questions but that I would formulate an approach to empirical research which would reflect the advances that have been made in emancipatory theory-building. A key aim has been to empower those of my students who were experiencing educational disadvantage. I also hoped that, by understanding the reproduction of social inequality in my school, and by gaining insights into the various issues, I would be part of a movement of transformation within a localised context, and be able to create a programme to address the needs of my students, and determine the factors and conditions that have the potential for transformation, and be transferable to other educational institutions where students experience disadvantage.

In particular, the focus of the study is to change the students' perception of themselves, their school, the SEP, their aspirations regarding further and third-level education; it also focuses on the effect of such an intervention on the whole school, on its effectiveness and improvement. Using an action research methodology, the study focuses on students participating in the SEP between 2009 and 2012. This research is based on four years of the programme since 2009 while I was Deputy Principal in the school.

However, prior to talking about these four years, it is important to establish the context for the research. Taking due cognisance of a critical theory perspective on knowledge and its lack of neutrality, in the following section I will first outline how my own biography informed my motivation for and approach to this research study. Likewise, my background contributed to my understanding of the phenomenon of educational disadvantage and thus also informed the initial development of the intervention programme.

1.1 My Background and its Impact on the Student Engagement Programme: the Early Years

There is a strong emphasis in research on quantitative data, replicability, objective measurements, etc (Hughes, 2006). However, researchers are human individuals who are influenced by their context, background and life experiences; to their work they bring their own particular experience, their way of seeing and interpreting reality. As Usher states:

> "As researchers we all have an individual trajectory which shapes the research we do, the questions we ask and the way we do it. But as researchers we are also socio-culturally located, we have a social autobiography, and this has an equally, if not more important, part to play in shaping our research and directing the kinds of reflexive questions which need to be asked but rarely are." (Robin, 1996a, p.32)

Through the process of thinking about my past, I have discovered the extent to which my experience affects my approach to the subject of my research, and indeed my motivation. Thinking and reflecting about my childhood and my early adulthood has been not only an exercise in self-revelation; it has revealed to me why the subject of my research is important to me, and has even transformed my understanding of crucial aspects of the research. I have discovered that my life is riddled with events which when analysed create solid links with my motivation to initiate this project in the school.

1.2 Personal Background

Both my parents returned home to Ireland after spending many years abroad in the early 1960s. They were self-starters who had developed an American ethos of hard work. Having established a private residential secretarial school on their return, they transferred to their children a regime of hard work which revolved around the needs of the family business. Most of my early adult life was spent working in the business; school for me and my siblings was secondary to the needs of the family business, thus resulting in poor attendance at school. As a consequence, my learning was affected because of poor attendance and resulted in disengagement from school and poor results. In the early

years of my secondary education, I became a victim to bullying, which further isolated me from engaging in school life. On completion of secondary school, my feelings about this were mixed, but primarily I knew that I was not happy and had a sense of loss from not having attained any significant academic qualification. It was not until some years later after I got married that I confronted this sense of loss over missed opportunity, and my husband gave me both the psychological and financial support to return to further education. With his support and guidance, over the following years I qualified with a BSc (Honours) in Applied Accounting, from there progressed to an H. Diploma in Educational Management and finally qualified with an M.Sc in Education. The most lasting memory of this time was, during my first lecture, having a feeling that I had 'arrived'. I was excited, overwhelmed and privileged to have this opportunity. It was the first time that I felt a sense of understanding life's pathway through educational progression. It was through education that I felt a great sense of personal achievement and it gave me an insight into this 'new world' and a desire to become part of it. As a result, I had a strong desire to help others less fortunate, by assisting them in securing a better future for themselves through education. With my new-found confidence and sense of purpose, I applied for a job with Roscommon VEC, was successful and left the family business. The position I applied for with Roscommon VEC gave me the opportunity of working on many training initiatives related to alleviating the educational disadvantage being experienced by socio-economically disadvantaged students in the Roscommon region, such as Youthreach, the Vocational Opportunities Training Scheme (VTOS), Traveller Training, and Basic Adult Literacy. Working in these distinctive yet similar fields gave me a great insight into the difficulties that people of all walks of life face, and showed me how returning to education can be a liberating experience.

Most significant to this research and to my future position in Glenmore Community School was my time spent at Youthreach, a programme funded under the National Development Plan, a joint initiative between two government departments – the Department of Education & Skills and the Department of Enterprise, Trade & Employment. It is directed at unemployed young school-leavers between the ages of 15 and 20 years. It offers participants the opportunity to return to education and pursue an educational training programme such as the Junior Certificate (JCSP), Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA), FETAC Level 1–5 and general modular programmes. It was during my time at Youthreach and working directly with youth from disadvantaged backgrounds that I gained a greater understanding into the obstacles facing disadvantaged youth who have left or been excluded from the educational system for a period, and who, unlike myself and the adults I taught while working in the Vocational Training and Opportunities Scheme (VTOS), did

not have the benefits of the 'university of life' to anchor them to the need for a complete education and the life-currency of educational qualifications. From my experience of working in adult education, there is no disputing that most adults who are given the opportunity of returning to education are the most pleasurable people to teach, in that they have a great respect for the classroom and the teacher. I found that the adults who participated in VTOS had left school before having attained any formal qualifications. As a consequence, they were only able to attain 'unskilled' work and lower-paid employment. Having this personal life experience with regard to qualification attainment, they were very aware of the personal and economic benefits of having a recognised qualification to enhance their life-chances. Moving from the world of adult education into teaching disadvantaged youth was a challenge. No personal intuition, experience, insights or training could have prepared me for the diverse happenings of a typical day. My first day in Youthreach formed the template of a typical day when working with disadvantaged adolescents. I was unsure of what my teaching post would involve outside of teaching my subjects of business and information technology, and the only insight I had in advance was being told at the job interview that "the students who attend our Youthreach centre are somewhat challenging, lack initiative and are not normally motivated within the world of academia". I was also told: "We need a role model for these children, someone who can relate to the experiences of these young people, is not daunted by challenging situations, gives a hundred per cent of themselves at all times and looks beyond the physical situation that may present itself, and sees the person. Are you such a person?" "Of course I am," I replied without hesitation. I look back now and smile at my naivety. I was so delighted at getting the opportunity of working with young people and believed that having experienced marginalisation as an adolescent I could truly make a difference to the lives of these young people.

On my first day at Youthreach, I made an early start to ensure that I arrived at the centre on time, clothed in my interview suit with briefcase in hand and full of enthusiasm. Staff assembled at 9am before class commenced at 9.30am. I was introduced to the staff and given my timetable for the week. We were all briefed on the different activities organised for the day; suspended students, students returning and students of general concern. On completion of the briefing, I remember one staff member welcoming me to the centre and asking me what group I had first. I looked down at my timetable and replied "3S". With a look of empathic horror she replied, "If you survive that group I'll make the coffee at break, good luck!"

On the first bell, I made my way up the stairs to my classroom. I was greeted by a rather boisterous group of students coming out of the kitchen, having just participated in the

breakfast club provided by the centre. There was a lot of chatting and 'slagging' going on and then silence as they watched me ascend to the top of the stairs. One of the students said, "Oh, Jaysus not another suit, let's see how long this one will last!" The students noisily entered the classroom; as they took their seats I was asked "So what shit are we doing today then?" Horrified at the lack of respect, I felt like I was having some 'out-of-body experience', standing there demanding quiet and not one person listening. As the noise level rose and the students became livelier, I considered making a quick exit. Then one very commanding male student at the back stood up and said, "Lads, would ye shut the f… up and listen to what your wan has to say." Silence descended and the class commenced. I remember thinking of the power of one student voice. Having received a reprieve I realised that I needed to connect with these students and that the last thing that was going to work was a 'dictatorship'. I survived that day but knew that to make any progress with my students I would need to educate myself on how to work effectively with disadvantaged students.

By upskilling myself over the next couple of months, by reading the writings of Freire, Bourdieu, Fielding, etc, and attending many seminars for teachers working in the area of educational disadvantage, I developed a greater understanding of the difficulties that these young people faced on a daily basis and of the need for a non-judgemental working relationship with them. Working in Youthreach often necessitated working with students one-to-one. During this time, one of the most remarkable findings that arose from my working in this field was the power of "the Human Moment", "an authentic psychological encounter" (Hallowell, 1998) that can happen only when two people share the same physical and emotional space. The recognition of the essence of this "Human Moment" during my time at Youthreach allowed me the opportunity of getting to know my students at a more personal level. Understanding that my work at the Youthreach centre would be greatly enhanced by establishing "the Human Moment" through a more contact-based approach helped remove some of the barriers that disadvantaged students experienced in the educational environment and made for a better school experience for both the students and myself.

I witnessed many students who had come from deprived and even quite violent backgrounds graduate from the centre and move on to the next phase of their lives, whether it was employment, PLC or tertiary education. After about five years working in Youthreach, when taking a weekend break with my family at Kilronan Castle and sitting in the restaurant, I heard a familiar voice. There standing in all his finery was one of my past students, John McDermott, a young man from Dublin's inner city, who had been fostered by a family near the Youthreach centre. Walking over, I warmly greeted him and he said,

"Jaysus, if it isn't Mrs Lohan, well how the heck are you? It's great to see you, will you have a drink?" He went on to tell me how he had worked for two years in a hotel after finishing the Leaving Certificate Applied programme at Youthreach; he had moved to Galway, worked part-time in Jury's Hotel, done a PLC course in Hotel and Catering, linked to the Galway/Mayo Institute of Technology (GMIT), and completed his Bachelor of Arts (Hons) in Hotel Management. "See Mrs Lohan, you were right education can open doors – saying that, Mrs Lohan, I haven't stopped opening doors for people since I started in the hotel business!" This was the young man who had taken a personal stand all those years ago on my first day at the Youthreach centre, who had assisted me in my moment of need, and whom I had sought to nurture throughout his time at Youthreach. He had taken my advice and encouragement and made a good life for himself. This feeling of having 'made a difference', not just through my teaching of the curriculum but also through personal engagement, gave me a great sense of self-worth and fulfilment.

In early 2004 an opportunity of a transfer became available through my former Youthreach coordinator (now principal of Glenmore Community School), who had left the centre six months previously. With a young family, I had wanted to get employment nearer to home. The principal explained that a position for Post Leaving Certificate (PLC) Coordinator of the Business and Secretarial Studies Programme would become available in a couple of months and, given my experience in this area, I would have a great chance of securing the position. Excited at the possibility of a new challenge, and of working in my home town, I applied for the job. During the interview the school was described by the then CEO as "very much your rural secondary school in the west of Ireland". He added that, although the school was co-educational, the vast majority of students were boys, most coming from an agricultural background. He said they were looking for someone who knew Roscommon town and its people well and would work alongside the principal in revamping the PLC section and assisting with recruitment for the incoming first-years.

I secured the job as a teacher of Business with Information Technology in October 2004. I sat with the principal after the interview and asked him to expand on the information given to me by the CEO during the interview. He said the enrolment for incoming first-years the previous September had been seven students, with four students for the PLC, while total enrolment had declined from 204 in 1998 to 76 in 2004. Results attained in the Junior and Leaving Certificate were below the national standard, with no expectation or apparent desire for improvement among the teaching staff. Subject options were limited and centred on a technical curriculum; outside of the practical subjects, students were not encouraged to select higher-level in the core subjects and neither the students nor their parents saw education as a means to increasing their life-chances. Overall, student

progression records showed that 90% of sixth-year students from the school did not progress to third-level education because of drop-out, poor results, the seeking of unskilled employment or entry into the trades (DEIS Statistics, 2004-2005). As a consequence of all these factors, student and teacher morale was low. Frank said, "I know you think Youthreach was a challenging environment to work in, but I can guarantee that, although the dynamics are somewhat different, this school is on its knees, and will need a very systematic approach and a strong commitment by all of us working in management to foster a vision of collegiality and student-centred teaching and learning to get it back on its feet."

As part of the school improvement initiative, it was decided by the Board of Management that the name of the school needed to be changed, so that the community would recognise that the school was now operating under new management. Its name was changed from Glenmore Vocational School to Glenmore Community School. In 2005, as a means to alleviate the educational disadvantage and marginalisation being experienced by students attending the school, the principal applied for and successfully met the selection criteria for the Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS) Action Plan for Educational Inclusion. With additional supports and funding received, new subjects such as Art, German, History and Geography were made available to junior-cycle students, and core subjects at both junior and senior cycle were made available at foundation, ordinary and higher levels. However, at a management meeting in 2006, it was noted that "even with the name change and the change in the curriculum over the last year, the school appears to still remain in the perception of the local community [as encapsulating] all that is vocational education even though the curriculum is now the same as the other two voluntary secondary schools in the town ... even with the additional funding for students experiencing difficulty there is no great improvement in results, what more can we do to improve the school to achieve an increase in enrolment and grades?" (Minutes of Meeting, 2006).

Berryman (1999) describes autobiography as a series of paradoxes: fact and fiction, private and communal, lessons and lies. But I found that writing my own critical autobiography entailed taking a personal risk. It provoked an anxiety that I had not experienced since my days in school. Such writing, as Tenni, Smyth and Boucher (2003: p.6) outlined, is underpinned by "both the need for awareness of self and paradoxically, the search for greater self-awareness". They add: "The willingness to see, confront and discover oneself in one's practice and to learn from this is at the core of this work and central to the creation of good data." However, the question still remained for me on completion of my autobiography: did it meet the criteria of 'objectivity', 'validity' and

'reliability', or what Foucault (1991) describes as the "regime of truth". I believe that my autobiography is honest, yet, as Sikes and Gale (2006:33) observe: "No story of a life or an aspect of a life can be anything other than an interpretation, a re-presentation." However, as Jean Clandinin and Michael Connelly so succinctly put it:

> … stories are the closest we can come to experience as we and others tell our experience. A story has a sense of being full, a sense of coming out of a personal and social history … Experience … is the stories people live. People live stories and in the telling of them reaffirm them, modify them, and create new ones (Clandinin & Connelly, 1994: 415, cited in Sikes & Gale, 2006:33).

The increased self-awareness that the writing of my autobiography produced made me appreciate my own experience as a student and the difficulties that I experienced. This has been fundamental in shaping my research and my approach to it. Through understanding the consequences of the academic encouragement, self-esteem and parental involvement during my schooling as a child and my experience of an educational system that rarely values the individual *per se*, I realised in a profound way the need to take a holistic view of the student, to cherish each unique individual, and to support them in the fundamental decisions that they make as children but that have a direct effect on their life-chances in adulthood. The words of Foucault define the ideal that I have now developed as a researcher:

> "The work of an intellectual is not to mould the political will of others; it is, through the analyses that he does in his own field, to re-examine evidence and assumptions, to shake up habitual ways of working and thinking, to dissipate conventional familiarities, to re-evaluate rules and institutions and to participate in the formation of a political will (where he has his role as citizen to play)" (Foucault, 1989, p. 11).

A review of our DEIS statistics in 2007, to determine our overall school performance, showed that the school had experienced a rise in enrolment, to 133 students. However, in terms of educational outcomes for students, there had been no significant improvement in the areas of literacy and numeracy, attendance, retention and behaviour. The principal and I agreed that the school had reached a plateau and that we would need expertise in understanding and finding solutions to the remaining social and cultural problems facing the school. I registered on the PhD programme with NUI, Galway in 2007. This presented me with the opportunity to develop the school further; for the purpose of my research, I was permitted to use Glenmore Community School as a case study. Through discussion with my supervisor, it was decided that my research was to focus on the needs of the students. If I can mentor effectively those children who are entrusted to my care, whether

it be as a member of a management team in a school, as a teacher or as their mentor, so that they realise fully the value of a good education and, if they do not wish to avail of the opportunity of education today but have the confidence and knowledge that they can return to education tomorrow, then my work is complete and this research has meaning.

1.3   Identifying the Issues: the Research Context

Before any intervention could be designed to enhance the teaching and learning experience of the students, it was important to gain an understanding of the research context in an effort to determine why so many of the students who attended Glenmore Community School were not performing to the best of their ability. School completion and performance is recognised universally as a factor that determines the life-chances of a student and especially those from educationally disadvantaged backgrounds (Teese, 2006). Educational disadvantage shows itself in many different forms, from disengagement within the classroom, behavioural issues at school and the risk of early school-leaving (Smyth & McCoy, 2009). Trowler (2010) identifies student engagement as follows:

> Student engagement is concerned with the interaction between the time, effort and other relevant resources invested by both students and their institutions intended to optimise the student experience and enhance the learning outcomes and development of students and the performance, and reputation of the institution (Trowler, 2010).

Engagement is more than involvement or participation; it involves feelings and sense-making as well as activity (Harper & Quaye, 2009a, p.5). Acting without feeling engaged is mere involvement or even compliance; feeling engaged without acting is dissociation (Trowler, 2010, p.7). Focusing on engagement at a school level, Fredricks, Blumenfeld and Paris (2004, p. 62-63), drawing on Bloom (1956), usefully identify three dimensions to student engagement:

1. **Behavioural engagement**

   Students who are behaviourally engaged typically comply with behavioural norms, such as attendance and involvement, and demonstrate the absence of disruptive or negative behaviour.

2. **Emotional engagement**

Students who engage emotionally experience affective reactions such as interest, enjoyment, or a sense of belonging.

3. Cognitive engagement

Cognitively engaged students are invested in their learning, seek to go beyond the requirements, and relish challenge.

In an attempt to further explain why students at Glenmore Community School were disengaging from school, I focused on their perception of the teaching and learning environment at school. I often asked the students why they had chosen this particular school? The similarity in their answers was revealing:

"This school has more practical subjects, I like them." (Paul, 16 years old, 2008)

"Most people say that this school is a bit of a doss." (Enda, 15 years old, 2008)

"You don't have to work as hard in this school as you do in the others and you still come out ok." (Aileen, 15 years old, 2008)

"It's a bit of crack goin' to this school, the lads and girls are sound, don't know about some of the teachers though." (James, 16 years old, 2008)

"My teacher told me to go to this school 'cos I was better with me hands." (Stephen, 15 years old, 2008).

My initial discussions with the students indicated that they had an awareness of their own level of engagement and did not seem to be encouraged or supported in their learning. This supported the above theory of Harper and Quaye (2009a), whereby the student associates their lack of engagement with the need to feel supported in their learning. This was further supported by my statistical findings where I found a direct comparability between the students' own assessment of their ability and the results of their Differential Aptitude Test (DAT) (see Appendix 1: p. 192). Both qualitative and quantitative School Effectiveness Research carried out by me in 2005–2008 (Lohan, 2008) indicated that, before students enrolled in the school, they had constructed in their own mind what they believed Glenmore Community School was like. They formed this construct based on conversations with past and present students of the school and their parents, and on the community opinion of the school. They decided to attend Glenmore Community School because it met their expectation of what they wanted school to be for them – a place where students were not pressurised to be high achievers. This perception became a

reality when they began their secondary education. The school 'lived up to its reputation' and the cycle of educational disadvantage continued (Lohan, 2008).

The above perceptions and attitudes were also apparent in my conversations with the students prior to the SEP pilot in 2009. A particularly interesting comment was made by one of the students in the SEP at one of our initial meetings during the pilot project:

> "The teachers don't put a lot of pressure on you in the classes like English and Maths probably 'cos they don't want to be there either, though I can't say that about the lads [teachers] in the practical subjects like Wood and Metal, they would keep you working on those projects all day every day if they could. Some teachers don't care whether you do well or not, they will shout about the results of the tests when we get them but you still don't have to do anything about it, the storm always passes and we get back to normal." (Enda, Pilot Project, 24th Sept 2009)

This attitude of some teachers helped to maintain the culture of lack of student engagement and expectation. This construct among the students who registered on the programme may or may not have been entirely accurate, but the students, as individuals and as a collective group, had constructed what they determined as reality: a school where underachievement was accepted, where student and teacher engagement was not expected, where students and teachers could travel a familiar and easy path, where students and teachers were not encouraged or challenged to forge a new path, where the students accepted the limits set by their own self-assessment and that of others. This acceptance of the status quo gave a possible explanation as to why students expressed a high level of satisfaction with life (Appendix 10: p. 238).

Indiscipline among students and the lack of an appropriate discipline system made for further difficulty in the classroom. Students seemed not to trust their teachers and not to want to learn from them or anyone in the school. This lack of student engagement and thus lack of learning and poor grades seemed to contaminate all areas of the school. I remember at the time being somewhat shocked on observing this culture of avoidance of learning by students.

Judging from personal observation and statements made by teachers, many seemed to be tired of having to constantly restart lessons because of poor student attendance. In the staffroom, the conversations, tone of speech and accompanying mannerisms indicated that some teachers did not want to be teaching in this school. On occasion I would ask why certain teachers felt the way they did. The response was wide-ranging and often colourful in language. The following are typical of the responses:

"Students here don't want to learn." (T1, 2008)

"It's always been the same around here." (T2, 2008)

"They come in first year with this attitude of not wanting to do anything and by the time they get to the Leaving Certificate they have as much as left the building." (T3, 2008)

"The type of children that come here don't want to learn." (T4, 2008)

"Sure, when their parents were here they didn't want to learn, and you know what they say – the apple doesn't fall far from the tree." (T5 2008).

My early set of field notes and performance statistics bore out what many of the staff were saying. The staffroom conversations mirrored the school's culture. This not only had a debilitating effect on students and teachers alike but created division among staff. The staffroom was split in two between the older and, in their opinion, wiser, teachers and the new recruits (I being one of these). Our energy and enthusiasm was sucked out of us as soon as it bubbled to the surface. Whenever someone would suggest any form of intervention, they would be left under no illusion as to how the older members of staff viewed the proposed project:

"We tried that here before and it didn't work." (T8, 2008)

"God love your innocence." (T9, 2008)

"Who does that one think she/he is?" (T10, 2008)

There have been many initiatives introduced at national level within the Irish education system in an attempt to alleviate educational disadvantage among the marginalised, but there is little research in the Irish education system that places the student in the centre and as an equal contributor to the process. The primary objective of this research is to prove that an action research strategy, where the student voice is placed at the centre of the research, has the potential to lead to transformation.

I thus established SEP with the support of the School Completion Programme, which targets Senior Cycle students experiencing educational disadvantage. The main aims of this Action Research (AR) project are to:

- Investigate the barriers to student engagement and subsequent achievement;

- Plan and coordinate actions that will bridge the deficit that students are experiencing in the classroom;

- Examine the impact of the SEP, understand the conditions that enabled this intervention, identify the factors that promoted its success, and those that are transferable to other interventions.

In order to accomplish the aims as outlined above, I formulated a series of research questions to establish the following:

- What type of intervention works?

Once the type of intervention was established after the first cycle of the programme, the investigation delved deeper into the following questions:

- How does it work?

- What are the design conditions and factors that will promote its success and that are transferable to other interventions?

Once these questions were established, they became the starting point for the gathering of both qualitative and quantitative data throughout the duration of this research project (see Chapter 5).

As I collected my data through a mix of quantitative and qualitative methods, seeking to understand the students' school and home environment, the areas that needed to be addressed to alleviate their educational disadvantage became apparent. However, at this stage I was at a loss as to how we would successfully address them. I felt that I had taken on a task too great for my personal capabilities, and an element of panic ensued. During this time I continued to do background research in the area of educational disadvantage and to establish the research context through discussion and observations with the students and teachers.

1.4   Turning-Point: Simple Project Inspires New Engagement

It was after a chance conversation with the Art teacher on the possibility of assisting students in resurrecting the school magazine, which had remained out of print for eight years after the retirement of the English teacher, that I gained a fundamental insight into the possibility of engaging students more in the school and in its educational initiatives. Enthused by the project, we discussed at length what we would need to do, and the fundraising and expertise that would be required. Then we mentioned it at a staff meeting;, as we expected, the response was cold, to say the least. I was sitting in the Art Room after that staff meeting, when only two other teachers and one special-needs

assistant had offered to help out, and wondering how we were going to get this magazine published, with the amount of work that would fall on our shoulders, from fundraising to assisting students with writing their articles, especially when there was no assistance from the current English teacher. The Art teacher remarked: "I hope there is a better response from the students than what we got from the teachers!" Feeling that I was just about to walk into a wall, I quoted the famous line from *The Shawshank Redemption:* "Get busy living or get busy dying." We knew that, as professionals, we were dying in our field. Little did I think at the time that the project of the school magazine was to become the catalyst in this research project.

With no Transition Year students, we approached the fifth-year students, mature enough to understand the task at hand and not under the pressure of state exams at the end of the year. Much to our surprise, they were very enthusiastic about the relaunch of the school magazine. I was responsible for raising the €5,000 to have the magazine published; I needed students who could 'sell'. I had worked my entire adolescence in the family business selling, and I felt that I could train these students to sell advertisements in the local community. I picked the strongest personalities, briefed them on good etiquette, and selling and recording techniques, supplied them with student IDs and permission slips, price lists, order slips, receipt books and call-back slips and sent them downtown at lunchtime, each group having a different street to cover and a strong sense of competitiveness. I returned to my classes after lunch and gave little thought after that as to what the outcome might be, only that I hoped no-one would ring up the school and complain, and that the students would return before the end of the last class so that I could record any sales made.

Much to my annoyance, there was no sign of any of the advertising committee at 3.20pm as I waited impatiently in the hall. My upset was not assisted by a comment of one of the more seasoned teachers: "I could have told you that they wouldn't come back, you still don't understand the type of student you're dealing with." My heart sank, but then one of my sales team came rushing through the door saying, "Sorry Ms Lohan, but I'm goin' to miss the bus, have to go, the other lads are on the way up, here's mine, I'll call down to ya in the morning and I'll sort it with ya, 'cos I have to go." He handed me his material and there in all the crumpled sheets were eight order slips, four call-backs, and cash and cheques to the value of €725. At 3.45pm the rest of the group returned, smiling, joking and comparing sales figures. Again, paperwork all over the place – but all sales had been recorded on the appropriate order slips, call-backs completed when no sale had been made, and there was a plastic pocket of cash and cheques.

The money raised on that single afternoon was €3,525. For me, this was one of those rare moments of sheer elation where a little bit of faith had moved a mountain, and results exceeded all expectations. I remember thinking, "O ye of little faith!" The weeks that followed that momentous day created a great sense of achievement among the students. This rippled through the entire student body. The Art teacher, Ms Gannon, was inundated with students requesting guidance and information on how to go about placing an article or entering the art, poetry and essay competitions. Students were coming with photos of their Junior and Leaving Certificate Woodwork, Metalwork, Design Communications graphics, and Art and Home Economics projects for the Project Gallery. The enthusiasm created by the students started to encompass some of the other teachers, who now offered their services to assist with the magazine. We compiled a magnificent magazine that year and covered the entire production cost, with money left over to cover the cost of a launch party for the students and staff. At the launch, students looked at their magazine draped across tables, laughing and discussing its content in groups, and teachers praised the students involved for their great work and outlined how their subject area would enhance the next edition. You could feel the sense of pride in the school that day.

Doing this task together allowed me yet again to witness the phenomenon of the "Human Moment" – and gave me the opportunity to get to know my students on a more personal level and understand the group dynamics in the school. I felt I had been given an insight into the emotional and psychological bonds between the students, and learnt how to converse with them on their level and thus build up trust and an understanding of our collective roles. I had made a connection that I was determined not to lose.

Prior to the school magazine project, I had been looking at my possible research focus for the doctorate very much from a positivist perspective. The positivist approach towards knowledge assumes that all experiences are based on the sensual experiences of the given (positive), and the non-experienceable is not real or at least not recognisable (empiricism). Knowledge exists if 'real' objects with their innate properties and relations are represented (mapped) in the human mind with the same properties and relations (Wyssusek, Schwartz & Kremberg, 2001, p. 190). In my naivety, I thought that, based on my knowledge of our school from my experience of 'being there', working as a teacher in it, it was just a matter of deciding what issue I wished to address in my research, document it (map it), think of possible interventions, apply them and measure the outcome. What I did not realise was that taking a positivist approach to the research would restrict the construction of the knowledge needed to understand what the true issue was, and how it would subsequently be addressed.

The school magazine project initiated a change in how I saw my students, the subjects for my proposed study. From this point on, I saw them as *active* participants capable of changing their own life-path. The burden of my own research alone, finding the answers to my research questions and driving the programme to find possible solutions eased, and a new, energised approach emerged. My approach to the research also changed dramatically. I realised that my inquiry required an examination of the everyday experiences lived by the students at Glenmore Community School and determination of how these experiences contributed to their personal and educational development. To carry out my research successfully, I took a transformative approach as described by Fielding (2004), who proposed that "transformation requires a rupture of the ordinary and this demands as much of teachers as it does of students ... it requires a transformation of what it means to be a student; what it means to be a teacher. In effect, it requires the intermingling and interdependence of both. It requires an explicitly intended and joyfully felt mutuality, a 'radical collegiality" (p.296). Through my interactions and many discussions with the students during our time working on the magazine project, I realised that there are as many realities as there are individuals, and that these realities that both students and teachers construct are particular to the individual. As I discussed with the fifth-year students, who came from varying degrees of socio-economic disadvantage, their feelings about various aspects of the school and their personal life, I found that no two stories were the same.

The students often asked me, as we worked on the magazine tasks, why I had decided to be a teacher. I shared with them my experience of school and family background and said that I hoped that working as a teacher I would enrich the lives of the students I taught. They were amused by my response. One student said: "Of all the schools in the country, you'll certainly have your work cut out here." I discussed with them how I hoped we would design a programme that would assist them and us as teachers in understanding the situation being experienced by them and that together we would find a way to give them the necessary skillsets to engage better in the classroom. Having this time with the students established a connection and a greater understanding of each other. With the subsequent success of the school magazine, a great sense of achievement and empowerment seemed to be the foundation of all future conversations. This created a sense of mutual trust and respect. Having bonded with this group, I asked them if any of them would like to be part of my research team that would design a programme to increase their engagement and success at school. The response was very positive, although they were much concerned with whether they would get 'time out of class'. I explained that I would need to get written permission from the school principal and their

parents before we could commence. Permissions were received from the principal and the parents of the fifth-year students at the end of May 2009. This group would become my initial project/pilot group as they commenced their sixth year at Glenmore Community School in the academic year 2009/2010, the first cycle of the action research project.

1.5   Conclusion

Returning to my experience of school gave me answers to my 'why'. The SEP is the result of my personal experience of schooling and my experience as a teacher working with disadvantaged students. Creating and implementing the SEP over the last couple of years, modifying the programme to meet the needs of the students as we progressed, and having the opportunity to work on a very personal level with my students have given me an in-depth understanding of the students' lived experience and how this can have a dramatic effect on their personal and educational development. My initial, conscious aim was to increase the life-chances of the students in the school. Many of them did indeed reach their potential at this stage, as demonstrated in the similarity between their academic ability as outlined by their DATs results and the subsequent points attained in their Leaving Certificate. But the study evolved into a very enriching and fulfilling experience for me, their mentor.

My understanding in the past was that students are born with a particular ability and go on to being capable of achieving a particular level in tests of their verbal reasoning, numeracy, etc, but I came to believe strongly that the development of the personal capacity is the essential matter: to assist a student in finding just what it is that they want to get ambitious about; creating or developing their understanding; encouraging them to show basic manners when dealing with people, to show respect for themselves, fellow students, teachers, family and others; building their sense of self-worth, of natural justice and of citizenship; helping them to be aware of the natural world around them and to have a sense of humanity. I had also thought that the world revolved around success in the area of academia, but I realise now that this was a shortcoming in my understanding; I still believe that education makes life's journey easier but, in essence, while providing well-planned and well-taught lessons, school needs to be more focused on the person and the needs of the student. I have found that, when the student is celebrated and cherished and discovers the value of education through a sense of their own self-worth and happiness, then, as if by a law of nature, the learning follows and the necessary educational and academic outcome is achieved. This concept is reflected in the words of John F. Kennedy about the goal of education:

> "Let us think of education as the means of developing our greatest abilities, because in each of us there is a private hope and dream which, fulfilled, can be translated into benefit for everyone and greater strength of the nation." – *John F Kennedy*

I began my research with the approach of the positivist's science paradigm. I believed that this would lead to clear identification of what is 'known' about the conditions that enabled my students during their participation on the academic intervention programme, and of the factors that promoted its success and are transferable to other interventions. I found myself attempting scholarly debate with strong arguments as I defined my conceptualisations and expectations of what I believed to be 'worthwhile' research. Taking this positivist stance, I believed that the narrative research that I could offer would uphold the 'objectivity', 'validity' and 'reliability' that is needed at this level of academia. Although the data I was collecting from the students at stage one and two of the SEP had a narrative content, it took on a more 'scientific' form in what I believe was my attempt to uphold objectivity, rationality and logical reasoning in defining the phenomena being observed. I found myself hiding my own contribution – my own personal experience as a student, as a teacher and now as deputy principal – to my research, behind a wealth of quantitative data. I believed, in Wittgenstein's words (1953), that "the limits of my language [were] the limits of my world". However, as I became more involved in my research and through discussions with my supervisor, my research approaches changed and I adopted more qualitative methodologies. It was imperative that, through narrative, I made the relevant connections between the key influences of my own thinking and the quantitative and qualitative data gathered, and developed meaning and sense in the areas being researched.

The conflict that ensued in my movement from a positivist to transformative approach was eased by the statement by Patricia Clough (1992:2) that "all factual representations of reality, even statistical representations, are narratively constructed", since it is through the narrative of the researcher that all representations are explained.

As I advanced in my research, I found, as did St Pierre (1997), that the narrative forms seemed to have a transformative effect on my perception of the SEP. My lack of experience in the area of academic research and possibly my limited self-confidence would not allow me to remove the element of insecurity and engage confidently in the research. But I then embraced the Deleuzian notion of lines of flight, to examine how my students could be released from conventional ways of experiencing school through a "rupture of the ordinary" (Fielding, 2004), by placing the student voice as central in the transformation process.

In the following chapters, I will outline the literature relating to educational disadvantage, the theory of social reproduction, the place of 'at risk' students in the current Irish educational system, ways in which the education system may reproduce educational disadvantage, and policies and practices employed in the past and at present to address the problems of educational disadvantage. Chapter 3 discusses the process of change within an educational context, meaningful student involvement and the concept of the 'student voice', and school improvement and school effectiveness theory. Chapter 4 outlines the Action Research (AR) methodology that was employed in the research, and the data-collection methods used to investigate and address the research questions posed. Chapter 5 provides the setting for the research and gives a detailed account of the SEP in its current form, which has been integrated into the fabric of the school; presents the findings and discusses the outcomes after analysis at each stage of the research process, and finally details how the SEP evolved over the last four years into its present form. Chapter 6 discusses the overall learning from the project in terms of the research questions posed and identifies the conditions present in the school that enabled this intervention, and the factors that promoted its success. It then suggests ways in which these key themes could be transposed to other systems so as to improve the engagement of 'at risk' students and their life-chances.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

2.1   Introduction

Powerful forces, including demographics, globalisation and rapidly evolving technologies, are driving intense social change. The changing workforce and technology needs of a global knowledge economy are dramatically changing the nature of teaching and learning, and demanding broader skills than simply the mastery of scientific and technological discipline (Duderstadt, 2008). Education is central to helping people thrive or survive in a rapidly changing world (Leverett & Thompson, 2009). The content of our school curriculum has been altered with a view to meeting the needs of the economy. However, as noted earlier, many Irish students are suffering educational disadvantage, and are more likely to leave school early, be unemployed, be in low-paid employment, depend on social welfare, and not participate fully in their local community. Children from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds find themselves in an education system that is driven by middle-class values with a focus on amassing points in the Leaving Certificate, and that fails to develop among such children a willingness to learn. Dunne (1995), in his analysis of the Irish education system, referring to Murphy (2007, p. 307), writes:

> In a system where the need for points seems to have replaced the need to learn, the connection between learning and the world to which it refers seems to have become increasingly fractured.

For the purpose of this study I will give an overview of the different concepts of education as defined in the literature and how they have changed over time. Understanding these concepts and their development will highlight the need for schools nationally to focus more on the individual student at local level as they progress through the educational process, rather than focusing primarily on performance in external examinations, which is the current trend. The insights provided by this analysis will demonstrate the need to reform our current curriculum and approaches to teaching and learning, in order to create a better learning experience for all students and help to reduce the disparities between the learning outcomes of students from different socio-economic backgrounds. Throughout this literature review, I will – in the words of Green (1999), "report on the literature that has really made a difference to my thinking" (p.110). As this is an action research project, I adopted an approach similar to that of Green (1999) who advocated that "good action research demands that we show a willingness to step outside of our usual frames of reference, that we question our habitual ways of seeing and that we constantly seek out fresh perspectives on the familiar" (p. 121).

Generally the term education is equated with learning. Learning is understood to be a means by which we gather knowledge, skills and attitudes through a variety of methods such as observation, instruction, study and experience (Bloom, 1956). The concept of education has been understood in different ways; on one hand, education embraces all processes, except the solely genetic, that help to form a person's mind, character and physical capacity (Chantia, 2006). Research shows that, in developing countries, education is a means to alleviate poverty and engineer social change (Van Der Berg, 2008) and that it has a fundamental role to play in the personal and social development of the child. On the other hand, education is seen as assisting the child in maturing and becoming a competent adult (Hayes, 2007).

Society, in general, requires its citizens to speak the same language, obey the same rules and broadly share the same beliefs. This primary function of education has remained constant over time. Little has changed since Brown (1953) noted that, for people to function as active social participants, their society needs stability and commonality. He concluded that:

> Education is the very foundation of good citizenship ... Today it is a principal instrument in awakening the child to cultural values, in preparing him for later professional training and in helping him to adjust normally to his environment (Brown, 1953).

Paters (1984) observed that it is through education that society attempts to direct and accelerate the learning process of its members.

Education belongs to the general process known as enculturation; throughout a person's development, the established culture teaches the individual, through repetition in the form of speech, words and gestures, its accepted norms and values, so that the individual can become an accepted member of the society. Cultural transfer assists in the generation of this stability and commonality. Cultural transmission is inherent in the definition of society. Dewey (1916) described this process best when he stated:

> Society not only continues to exist by transmission, by communication, but it may fairly be said to exist in transmission, in communication. There is more than a verbal tie between the words common, community, and communication. Men live in a community in virtue of the things which they have in common; and communication is the way in which they come to possess things in common. What they must have in common in order to form a community or society are aims, beliefs, aspirations, knowledge – a common understanding – like-mindedness as the sociologists say. Such things cannot be passed physically from one to another, like bricks.

Durkheim (1961), very aware that not all children come into the education system from the same background and leave with the same qualification for specialised positions in society, felt that, through schooling, "all children must learn a common base of knowledge to provide a common foundation that holds people together in society". He also outlined how leaders in each society must understand the needs of its people to develop, and how education's responsibility is to help the child understand the importance of collective life (p.29). Expanding, Durkheim outlined the importance of rules, or discipline, in classrooms. Families, he noted, are less disciplined by nature, but schools mirror adult society and prepare the young for their parts in society. Social change means a change in social structure, in the size of society, in the composition or balance of its parts or in the types of its organisation (Ginsberg, 1958). Social change is influenced by many factors, such as historical, cultural, geographical, biographical, demographical, political, economical and ideological factors (Chantia, 2006). Therefore, education is essential to facilitate social change (Lannelli & Paterson, 2005). Although citizens may speak the same language, different interpretations are taken, rules are broken and altered and at times reinvented to meet individual and group needs, and beliefs are challenged and new knowledge is formed. Educated members of society can use their capabilities for their own benefit, and solve problems, thus creating innovation which generates an opening for social progression and change. At a societal level, education plays the role of maintaining a balance between stability and change. Education can integrate current and future citizens in a united group, and thus supports a society's development as well as social change (Tuomi & Miller, 2011). Societies use their education systems to fulfil important social functions. For the purpose of this study I will focus on the four main areas of education that are seen as facilitating social change:

- **Liberal education**: The development of the person intellectually and socially, with the emphasis on the person reaching their full potential. The Association of American Colleges and Universities views liberal education as "a philosophy of education that empowers individuals with broad knowledge and transferable skills and a stronger sense of values, ethics, and civic engagement". (Humphreys, 2006; Simpson, 1978; Jonathan, 2002)

- **Social education**: Education is used as a vehicle to disseminate norms, customs and ideologies (Baker, 1978; Bisin, 2005) – described by Macionis (2010) as "the means by which social and cultural continuity are attained".

- **Education as an industrial process**: Education serves the economy by producing a trained workforce (Drori, 2006; Friedman, 2005; Noah & Fisher

2013). Tuomi and Miller (2011) identified the educational revolution of the 19th century as having supported the change from family-centric production to manufacturing and industrial organisation.

- **Social change**: The education system has been seen as a means of bringing about social change (Bierstadt, 1957) and can be used for the development of social change in desired directions (Banks, 1968). Finch (1984) refers to the use of education as a vehicle for other types of social policy. Expanding, he explains that education provides a convenient basis for policy for children because of its universal coverage and the acceptance of responsibility for children's welfare, and because it has been easy to justify welfare measures in educational terms (Ballantine & Roberts, 2007).

2.2 Models of Education

To gain an understanding of the student context and the 'vocational' education model in which the students of Glenmore Community School were positioned, I needed to examine and gain insights into the theory behind the practice in each principal model of education. This developed my thinking with regard to understanding the overall position of the school in the light of relevant education theories. These theories are summarised below.

Humanism – Humanism views learning as a personal act to fulfil one's potential. It is based on the approaches to education of humanistic psychologists such as Abraham Maslow and Carl Rogers, with a general focus on the humanistic pedagogies of Rudolf Steiner and Maria Montessori. Humanism sees learning as student-centred and personalised. Effective and cognitive needs are key, and the goal is to develop self-actualised people in a cooperative and supportive environment (Huitt, 2001).

Encyclopaedism – Education is seen to be based in a body of knowledge that people share. The approach is rationalist and focuses on the utility of education (Spicker, 2012). The French educational system is based on the encyclopaedist approach (Peterson, 2003). In the philosophy of French education, the main principles are rationality and universality, and the associated principle of *égalité*, whereby society is transformed in the interests of the majority of its members. The teaching of subjects perceived to encourage the development of the rational faculties, such as mathematics, is encouraged. Universality means that all students study the same curriculum within the same time-frame. The aim of this form of education is to remove social inequalities through education and to give equal opportunity to all (Peterson, 2003). The principle of *laïcité* places

responsibility for young people's social and moral education in the home, while intellectual and academic work remains the responsibility of the school (Pepin Birgit, 1998).

Vocationalism education – There is a continuum of learning experiences that replicate or simulate activities in the workplace and/or develop skills and attributes that employers judge to be of immediate importance for them (Ottewill & Wall, 2000). In Ireland, the Vocational Act 1930 used the expression 'technical education' to refer to education pertaining to trades, manufacturing, commerce and other industrial pursuits, and subjects bearing on or relating to these; it includes education in science and art, as well as physical training. The Act saw technical education as having two main purposes: to train young people for entry to particular employments and to improve the skills of those already employed (Coolahan, 1981, p.99-100).

Naturalism – The purposes of education are found within nature, as naturalism is based on the assumption that nature represents the wholeness of reality. Nature is a total system that contains and explains all existence, including human beings and human nature. Thus the school's most important job as an educational agency is to ensure that the child learns how to preserve his or her physical health and well-being. The French philosopher Rousseau believed that science, art and social institutions corrupt human beings from their natural goodness; he defined education by stating:

> We are born weak, we need strength; helpless, we need aid; foolish, we need reason. All that we lack at birth, all that we need when we come to man's estate, is the gift of education (Rousseau, 2007).

The dominant models were humanistic for those wishing to progress to university, and vocationalist for those wishing to attend an institute of technology or further education colleges, undertake apprenticeships or move directly into employment.

Whatever the model of education that is applied to where a child is placed, children from lower socio-economic backgrounds experience educational disadvantage. In an attempt to understand and to bridge the 'habitus' between home and school, the Coleman Report (commissioned by the US Department of Education) reported on educational equality in the United States, in one of the largest studies in history, involving over 600,000 students and teachers. Titled 'Equality of Educational Opportunity' and commonly referred to as 'the Coleman Report', it is considered to be the most important educational study of the 21st century. Because of Coleman's strong views about "school effects", which to this day fuel many debates, this report was a catalyst in the area of School Effectiveness Research (Kiviat, 2000). The Coleman Report found that "academic achievement was less related to the quality of a student's school, and more related to the social composition

of the school, the student's sense of control of his environment and future, the verbal skills of teachers, and the student's family background (Kiviat, 2000, p.1).

Much of the empirical literature (Borman, 2007; Gamoran & Long, 2006) that has arisen since the Coleman Report has intensely focused on schools and why they fail to provide education equally to all students. Researchers such as Mosteller and Moynihan (1972), Chubb and Moe (1990) and Hanushek (1996) have looked at different pedagogical approaches to classroom practices, school policies, and the monitoring, recording and analysis of attainment levels. The findings have been a catalyst for the implementation and modification of policies and interventions globally. However, in the framework of this study, it is important to review some of the leading theoretical approaches in the sociology of education. Analysis and understanding of the education system at different levels and perspectives gives clarity to the student context and helps to show how the education system assists in the creation of this context. These approaches are outlined below.

2.3   Educational Theories

As with all forms of knowledge, researchers use particular theories to explain and provide an understanding of the larger picture of what influences education. Each of these theoretical standpoints adds to the overall scheme of modern educational practices and as such provides a basis for reviewing our educational system (Erbenwein, 2012). The theories thus provide logical arguments in an attempt to explain how schools function in society. These theoretical paradigms work at both the micro level, which focuses on the student, teachers and parents, and how their responses affect the interaction (Morais, 2002), and on the macro level, which focuses on the institution of education and how it fits into society (Van Wormer, Besthorn & Keefe, 2007). There are four main theoretical perspectives: the symbolic interactionist perspective, the rationalist choice perspective, the functionalist perspective, and the conflict perspective.

2.3.1   *The symbolic interactionist perspective*

The symbolic interactionist perspective, also called symbolic interactionism, focuses on the micro level of social interaction and directs sociologists to focus on symbols and their meaning in everyday lives. They question what these symbols mean, and the interpersonal dynamics of the situation, and assume that individuals socially construct their lives based on their environments (Ballintine & Spade, 2008). This may, for example, present itself within the realm of 'popularity' for a child in school; this is a form of symbolic hierarchy of social power. Students may face inequality at school due to the symbols they

bring from home; through, for example, clothing labels, and ballet classes or music lessons attended. Theorists such as Mead (1934) and Cooley (1962) observed that students who possessed this form of symbolic resource would possess a higher social-class-based language pattern, where valued, and be given greater privilege within the school environment. Eder, Evans and Parker (1995) found that students who exude privilege in the symbols they bring with them are more likely to develop leadership skills and generally feel good about themselves. This theoretical perspective can be traced back to Max Weber who believed that individuals act in accordance with their interpretation of the world.

'Labelling' theory stems from the symbolic interactionist perspective; this refers to students being told whether they are 'good' or 'bad'. If this continues throughout the child's experience in education, it may result in 'a self-fulfilling prophecy' (Rosenthal & Jacobsen, 1968). This perspective has relevance to the students attending Glenmore Community School, who identified 'labelling' and accompanying messages as barriers that prevented them from reaching their full potential.

Critics like Gouldner (1971) of the symbolic interactionist perspective believe that it is too narrow in focus and fails to look at the macro level of social interpretation.

2.3.2 The rational choice perspective

According to rational choice theorists (Lambert, 2006; Dworkin, Saha & Hill, 2003; Dworkin, 2007; Brookover, Erickson & McEvoy, 1996), this theory expands on interactionist theories and assists understanding the decision-making process of students in schools. This theory is based on the assumption that both costs and rewards are involved when making decisions within the school or the classroom.

According to rational choice theory, if the benefits outweigh the costs, a person will make their decision to act in order that they continue to receive the benefit. If the costs are greater than the benefit, the person may decide to seek an alternative course of action. In an educational context, the question is: how does such weighing of costs and benefits influence decisions about educational choices by students, teachers and management throughout the school experience (Ballantine & Spade, 2008)?

When students are faced with the question whether to engage with and remain in second-level school, progress to third-level education or 'drop out', they may be assumed to go through a process of analysing and comparing the benefits associated with remaining in school, such as ability to gain employment, and the level/status of employment that is

achievable, with the costs attributed to continuing in education. This process, whereby the student assesses costs and benefits at a given moment, is described as 'rational choice'.

Rational choice theory, an extension of interactionist theories, is pertinent as we try to determine how decisions are made by students in schools. Rational theory can be viewed at both the micro-level of interpersonal interactions between individuals in small group settings and at the macro-level of the interactions of individuals within larger societal and cultural systems. In this setting, schools as organisations, the processes of teaching and learning, and the interactions within schools and classrooms are viewed as part of larger social contexts (Brookover, Erickson & McEvoy, 1996). This theory was very relevant to the SEP, where students were supported in making informed decisions with regard to the benefit of engaging in school; they could see that the benefit of this engagement would be a pathway to improving their life-chances.

2.3.3 *The functionalist perspective*

According to the functionalist perspective (Durkheim, 1956), also called functionalism, each aspect of society is viewed as interdependent and as contributing to society's functioning as a whole. Education is seen as assisting in the continuous and smooth running of society. The focus is on larger social and cultural systems. Functionalists (Durkheim, 1956, 1962, 1977; Parsons, 1959; Dreeben, 1968; Ballantine, 2001) believe that society is made up of the following parts: education, family, political and economic systems, health and religion. Each part makes a contribution to create a 'functioning society'. Thus schools as organisations, the processes of teaching and learning, and the interactions within schools and classrooms are viewed as part of larger social contexts (Brookover, Erickson & McEvoy, 1996).

Emile Durkheim proposes that social consensus takes either of two forms:

- Mechanical solidarity is a form of social cohesion in which people share the same values and beliefs and carry out similar types of work. An example of this is Amish society.

- Organic solidarity arises when people in a society are interdependent, but have different values and beliefs, and different occupations. An example of this is an industrial society.

In the 1940s and 1950s, two strands of functionalism were in operation. American socialists (Parsons, 1951; Parsons & Bales, 1955) tended to focus on discovering the functions of human behaviour, while their European counterparts (Dreeben, 1968;

Monnet, 1978) focused on the inner workings of social order. American sociologist Robert Merton divided human functions into two types: manifest functions, which he described as intentional and obvious, such as attending church to form part of a religious community, and latent functions, which are unintentional and not obvious. An example Merton used was the 'rain dance', where the latent function gives the members of the group the opportunity to meet regularly and engage in a common activity. However, critics of functionalism (Marx, 1971; Weber, 1958a, 1958b, 1961) believe that members of a society are not encouraged to participate actively in changing their social environment even when this would be more beneficial for the community as a whole. Although this theory does not contribute to this research project, it does provide an information base in order to make a comparison between it and other educational theories.

2.3.4 Conflict theory

Conflict theory stems from the writings of Karl Marx (1818-1883), who was outraged by the social conditions of the exploited workers in the class system. Marx argued that schools are not ideologically and politically neutral entities, and disagreed that they operate in a meritocratic manner, whereby children within the school environment are able to reach their full potential. Marx believed that their position in school is defined by their social position; thus schools privilege some while disadvantaging others. Marx argued that schools maintain inequality by teaching students an ideology that is fundamentally steeped in the interests of the rich. It is through this ideology that students develop 'false consciousness'. For students to believe in this ideology, they are led to believe that their shortcomings are a direct result of their personal inabilities. Students are therefore taught to internalise their lower position in society. Weber, expanding on Marx's theory, argued that conflict in society is not solely based on economic relations but that inequalities and potential conflict are sustained through different distributions of status (prestige, power, the ability to control others), and class (economic relations). Prior to the introduction of the SEP, when students experiencing marginalisation were asked why they were not reaching their full potential, there was great similarity in their answers. All too often they would make the familiar comment of "Sure, it was my own fault, I didn't put a lot of effort in", or similar remarks. Their responses had all the hallmarks of students who, through the discourse they conducted with their teachers and their peers, had developed a sense of false consciousness, as identified by Marx.

Functionalists such as Weinberg (1971) have suggested that "[e]ducation is helpful in solving poverty and creates social mobility". Conflict theorists, however, believe that it is the function of the education system to bring the different social classes together and thus

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promote the emergence of an egalitarian and integrated society (Chantia, 2006, p.268). However, theorists such as Freire (1972) have expressed concerns as to whether the education system in its current form is a capable mechanism for impartial cohesion. In general, these theories on the role of education highlight how we must endeavour as educationalists to support students who are experiencing marginalisation and ensure that they can derive the same benefits from the educational system as their peers.

2.3.5   Educational disadvantage: cultural perspectives

Social capital refers to the resources that students bring to school. It has been argued that social capital, which has been studied by educational theorists for decades, is the result of, first, social relations within families and communities, friendship networks and voluntary associations; secondly, shared values, norms and habits; and thirdly, trust in institutions and generalised trust in other people (Oorschot, Arts & Gelissen, 2006). Social capital does not reside in the individual but is the result of relationships that individuals have with each other. This means that social capital is a resource that people can access through relationships. Social capital is productive; it allows individuals to achieve things not possible when they act alone (Bourdieu, 1981). This concept of social capital was cited by Coleman to explain how schools reproduce social class. It directed my thinking to an extra dimension that I believe my reading of school improvement research literature in isolation would not have led to. It was this continued engagement with the concept of social capital that allowed me to problematise my own practice and research findings.

2.3.6   Cultural reproduction

Expanding on Marx's theory of false consciousness, another branch of conflict theory, called cultural reproduction and resistance theories, argues that people in dominant positions in a capitalistic system can shape those who are subordinate to meet their own personal needs. This form of cultural reproduction, also known as enculturation, has been defined by Bilton (1996) as:

> The mechanism by which continuity of cultural experience is sustained across time. Cultural reproduction often results in social reproduction, or the process of transferring aspects of society (such as class) from generation to generation.

This perspective struck a chord with me in relation to my own biographical perspective and experience as a teacher working with students experiencing marginalisation. It expanded my thinking so that I considered how our school might be perpetuating disadvantage for students who lacked cultural capital in the academic setting.

In the early 1970s, French sociologist and cultural theorist, Pierre Bourdieu, developed the theory of Cultural Capital and Social Reproduction. He believed that education was the main mechanism of cultural reproduction, and that it functioned not just through a curriculum of formal instruction (Bourdieu 1977). He also pioneered the concept of 'habitus', the path a person takes through life. This path, Bourdieu believed, is much influenced by a person's social background and position. Swartz (1997) describes habitus as "a set of deeply internalised master dispositions that generate action". Habitus reproduces inequality because affluent parents strive to ensure that their children retain an advantageous position in society throughout their lives, while parents from a lower socio-economic group are unable to envisage or ensure a higher level of opportunity for their children (Tramonte & Willms, 2009).

Following on from Marx (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977; Bowles & Gintis, 1976), schools were viewed as part of a superstructure along with family, politics, religion, culture and economy, organised around the interests of the dominant capitalist group. Schools were seen to serve the needs of the dominant group, who need workers to manufacture products and services to meet their needs. Schools are a training ground where the dominant group teach students their relative role in society, in the belief that the system in which they operate is fair and based on merit (Ballintine & Spade, 2008).

Supporting this view, Bourdieu and Passeron (1977) defined education as an instrument of cultural reproduction:

> Education transmits the inequality of society from one generation to another, material means of exercising power is no longer legitimate, and education has taken over the function of reproducing social inequality.

Children from a higher socio-economic background are better equipped to function effectively in the education system. Their social environment gives them the cultural knowledge and language skills required to be successful in school (Lamont & Lareau, 1988). To be academically and socially successful at school, children must possess a correct attitude and the correct skills. There are three types of qualification that aid cultural reproduction in education: functional, expressive and instrumental qualifications (Meijnen, 1987). The qualifications pupils attain by studying a set of subjects are functional qualifications. Students from lower socio-economic strata appear to acquire lower qualifications in all subjects where cognitive education targets are important; their achievements are inferior. The differences in achievement between the social classes are visible after only a few months of tuition and have a tendency to increase as the school year progresses (Meijnen, 1987). Weber (1961) wrote of the "tyranny of educational

credentials" concerning the more prestigious jobs. Following Weber, Collins (1979) focused on "credentialism", and described the increasing requirement for qualifications as "credential inflation". Weber believed that schools created the 'insider', whose status and culture are reinforced by their school experience, and the 'outsider', who faces barriers to achieving their full potential in school. Weber's conflict theory is still reflected in our current educational system; a study by Gangl, Müller and Raffe (2003) noted that "young people with higher levels of qualifications are found to have lower unemployment rates, greater access to skilled occupations and higher pay rates".

Culture is not just transmitted through the acquisition of functional qualifications. In addition to the formal curriculum, there are expressive qualifications (Parsons, 1955; Bernstein, 1975). These are customs that children acquire during their formal education. They are also referred to as "the unwritten curriculum" (Dareeben, 1976) or "the hidden curriculum" (Jackson, 1968). This hidden curriculum teaches students the school's customs and the students' role within in the school (Dumais, 2006); as Meijnen wrote, "the school coaches every pupil in the pupil role". These customs include such things as homework being completed at home, submission of a student's own work in a test, talking or impulsive behaviour in the classroom not being permitted, and the teacher always being the one in charge (Meijnen, 1987). There is a direct link between poor expressive qualifications and academic achievement (Meijer 1986). Awareness of the hidden curriculum within the school context was important when designing the SEP, so as to ensure that its components were not restricted to the more tangible needs of the students.

Instrumental qualifications are skills such as information-processing, social skills, creativity, problem-solving skills, etc. These are skills that are not directly attributable to any one single subject but rather to learning conditions. These skills can be used in all subject areas, and are useful not only in school but also for active participation in life outside school: in social relations, at work, in politics and culture. Meijnen (1987) noted that students who possess an inherent ability to problem-solve have a tendency to be very capable in subject areas such as mathematics, language and geography. Instrumental skills aid students not only in their academic studies but also allow them to be active socially in the wider community (Meijers 1987).

Inequality in our education systems means that some groups experience restrictions in several areas of their lives and are thus denied the opportunity to reach their full potential. Equality in education is fundamental, as noted by Baker et al (2004, p. 141):

> ... education is indispensable for the full exercise of people's capabilities, choices and freedoms in an information-driven age.

Bourdieu highlighted two elements necessary for equality in education: cultural capital and habitus. Other kinds of capital are important, such as economic capital and social capital, but, according to Bourdieu, cultural capital is the most valuable in the education system (Bourdieu 1997). Cultural capital exists in three states: the embodied state, the objectified state, and the institutionalised state (Bourdieu, 1986). The 'embodied state' of cultural capital concerns general cultural awareness, and a taste for what is considered 'high art'. The 'objectified state' of cultural capital concerns material objects such as paintings, sculpture, architecture and instruments. These objects require 'embodied cultural capital' to be appreciated fully. 'Institutionalised' cultural capital refers to educational qualifications, such as degrees from universities. It is the first of these, embodied cultural capital, Bourdieu suggests, that is the most visible in the processes that occur in education.

Cultural capital is not evenly distributed throughout society. Families from higher socio-economic groups possess a higher level of cultural capital and families from the lower socio-economic groups may have little or none (Bourdieu 1986). Bourdieu explains that cultural capital is transmitted by the family to children from birth. By the time children from different backgrounds reach school-going age, the differences in the levels of cultural capital they possess are very evident. This early inequality among children continues throughout their lives (Bourdieu, 1977). Schools are value-laden institutions, and because teachers tend to be biased in favour of students who possess a high level of cultural capital, this gives an advantage to children from higher socio-economic groups. Teachers have expectations about pupils based on their social background. When pupils misbehave, a teacher can often conclude that they are not interested in the subject or in learning. The language used by students, their interests, their manners and outward appearance all contribute to the impression formed by the teacher of the students. Academically successful students are considered 'good' pupils by their teachers. This bias is seen in the teaching methods teachers use when working with these students, who are often placed in high-ability learning groups. Teachers are also more likely to work one-to-one with students with higher levels of cultural capital. Communication between teachers and students in this group tends to be more natural and relaxed, with the result that students have a better understanding of what they are required to do and so are more likely to perform better (Bourdieu, 1977).

Bourdieu's habitus, the life-map a child follows throughout life, informs a person's view of social structure. Children quickly understand where they 'fit' in society and what expectations family and the community have of them. This has a direct effect on how children think, the decisions they make, and the actions they take. Like cultural capital,

habitus is an important element in the reproduction of social inequality. This is evident in Glenmore Community School. Students from lower socio-economic groups tend to believe that, because their parents, relations and neighbours did not attend third-level education, they will not do so themselves. This inability to envisage attendance at university is so prevalent among people in lower socio-economic groups that a special admissions scheme, HEAR (Higher Education Access Route), has been introduced by the Irish Government. It is aimed at school-leavers from disadvantaged backgrounds who would otherwise be unable to attend third-level education. The scheme is open to low-income families. Eligible students are also entitled to a reduction in the required points for available university places provided they meet the other minimum entry requirements. The target intake of HEAR students is 5% (HEA, 2008). Since its introduction in 2008, all available places on the scheme have been taken up. The initiative goes some way towards addressing the imbalance in Irish universities by increasing the number of students from lower socio-economic groups attending university.

When children believe that education is of little or no benefit to them, this belief is often reflected in their behaviour in school. It manifests itself in truancy, not doing homework, and disruptive behaviour in class (Kohn & Schooler, 1984). Students from more affluent backgrounds have a habitus that is similar or parallel to that of their teachers. This shared habitus means that teachers view these students as more motivated (Tier, 2002). McLaren, in his study on 'Life in Schools' (1989), found that, as a middle-class white teacher teaching in an inner-city school, where his relations with parents were both volatile and hostile, his "difficulties to communicate and motivate the disadvantaged students from minority groups, public housing, and broken families were due to his dissimilar white, middle class background ... This cultural chasm did not occur while he worked in a suburban school at an earlier time" (Madigan, 2002, p. 123). Parents from lower socio-economic groups often have difficulty in communicating with teachers about their child's progress at school; it is something outside their comfort zone. This can be seen by teachers as a lack of interest in their child's education. More affluent parents do not tend to have this apprehension and often build open lines of communication with teachers and the school (Lareau, 1989). It was important that, in designing the SEP, the parent of the child experiencing the disadvantage was equally supported. We found that supporting the parent to support their child ensured much greater gain for the student from both an academic and social perspective.

Bourdieu (1977) believes that the education system, which may appear to be holistic and inclusive, actually continues and intensifies the inequalities in the system. It is generally accepted that a hidden value system operates within education which favours children

from the higher social classes, and that children from the lower social classes may often, through their habitus, remove themselves from the educational hierarchy (Tramonte & Willms, 2009).

Boudon (1974) proposes a different theory as to the causes of different educational outcomes among the social classes. He distinguishes between 'primary' and 'secondary' effects in the creation of class differentials in educational attainment. He identifies primary effects as "those whether of a genetic or socio-cultural kind, that are expressed via the association between children's class backgrounds and their actual levels of academic performance". He identifies secondary effects as "those that are expressed via the educational choices that children from differing class backgrounds make within the range of choice that their previous performance allows them".

More recently, Goldthorpe (2007), supporting Boudon's theory, stated that "as well as reflecting primary effects, class differentials in educational attainment are also significantly heightened by secondary effects". Goldthorpe's research has shown that children from more advantaged class backgrounds tend on average to take up more ambitious educational choices than do children from more disadvantaged backgrounds, even when their results have proved they are very capable academically. The gaining of insights into the area of subject options assisted the SEP team in implementing a support mechanism for marginalised students when selecting their subjects for the senior-cycle programme.

In their research Jackson et al (2007) applied a method to represent the relationship between primary and secondary effects in analysing class differentials in one crucial transition within the English and Welsh educational system, that which children make at around age 16 and which determines whether or not they will pursue the higher-level qualifications (A-levels) that are usually required for university entry. The study found that class differentials persist in academic performance (based on the results obtained from state examinations). They found that class differentials also persist in transition propensities at all levels of academic performance, though most markedly at intermediate levels. Furthermore, they found that secondary effects are responsible for between a quarter and a half of observed class differentials in the transition in question. Jackson et al (2007) believe that it is a serious oversight by a researcher to ignore Boudon's distinction between primary and secondary effects when carrying out research into the area of class differentials in educational attainment. It is a serious error, they argue, to concentrate attention entirely on class differences in academic performance, whether these are seen as being primarily genetic or – as is more often the case in the sociological literature – primarily socio-cultural in origin. They argue that, over and above differences of this kind,

class differences further occur in the choices that are made by students, in conjunction, perhaps, with parents, teachers and peers, as regards their educational careers; students from less advantaged class backgrounds are less likely to take educationally more ambitious options than students from more advantaged backgrounds, even when their academic performance would make such options feasible for them. In the light of this, we sought to ensure, through the supported learning modules of the SEP, that marginalised students were given the knowledge and confidence to feel able to participate in more cognitive and higher-level subjects.

There are many critical responses to and criticisms of Bourdieuian theory. The Bourdieuian framework offers a paradigm of class analysis within the context of educational disadvantage that can explain inequalities in education (Tzanakis, 2011), and it is supported by many researchers. Bourdieu posits that social class differences in cultural capital and habitus begin in early childhood and accumulate over time. This theory has provided a framework to assist researchers in addressing the issue of persisting social inequalities in educational attainment (Tzanakis, 2012) over time. However, it is not without limitations (Pitman, 2013). In this research process, I found that, like many researchers, I came to disagree with the theory's primary suggestion that a child's educational success is a consequence of their social class, mediated by both parental and children's cultural endowments. Kingston (2001) found that no empirical studies undertaken to date support this association. In more recent research carried out by Dumais (2006), student grades were found to be much more a function of ability, habitus and class. In fact, Irwin (2009) showed that educational expectation among 13-year-olds in England was more associated with their perception of parental emotional support, a measure of parental social (Coleman, 1988) rather than cultural capital.

Bourdieu argued that their father's cultural capital affects the young person's educational attainment. However, in a study carried out by Jaeger and Holm (2003) to measure parental cultural capital as parental education, they found that a father's social class has a much stronger effect than the father's education on an offspring's educational achievement. They found that the offspring's cognitive ability in the model improved its predictive capacity significantly. This improvement was noted when the father's social class and the child's cognitive ability were the sole predicator in the model. The research confirmed the influence of the father's human, not cultural, capital on an offspring's educational attainment.

Van de Werfhorst and Hofstede (2007) found a strong effect of parental cultural capital on primary school performances, net of parental education and social class but not net of

pupil's ability. They found a mediating effect of social class in parental education's effect on school performance after including parental cultural capital in the model. Parental cultural capital was found to offer a limited explanation of how educated parents affect their children's school grades, but the transmission of cultural capital was not fully supported, primarily because the pupil's own cultural capital was not measured in the study, and was associated with grades, net of parental cultural capital. Similarly, parental education was identified during stage one of this research project as a contributory factor to school performance. Mare (1991) and Breen and Jonsson (2000) found that parental cultural capital varied over time and was most significant in an offspring's transition from high school to college. It was also found that the cultural capital of parents and that of their children were largely independent of each other. Therefore, it was observed that the odds of success in educational transition were not dependent on parents' cultural capital. Again, Bourdieu's cultural link between family class-based habitus effects and later educational achievement is unsupported by these empirical studies (Tzanakis, 2011).

During this research process, similarities were found with the research carried out by Dumais (2006), indicating that there are clear class differences in cultural participation rates. However, my findings offered little support for Bourdieu's argument that students with cultural capital are favoured by teachers. In an analysis of research using longitudinal data (Noble & Davies, 2009), it was found that the link with cultural capital was not studied in rigorous quantitative empirical studies. In research by Portes et al (2009), qualitative evidence has repeatedly shown how teachers can positively influence marginalised students. Additionally, there is no evidence indicating that all teachers adopt a prescribed persona, as outlined by Bourdieu, are blindly obedient to a hidden curriculum and are unwilling or unable to tailor the curriculum to address the individual needs of their students. Teachers differ not only in their class background and qualifications, but also in terms of their authority, seniority, experience, gender, ethnicity, networking, marital status, family size and personality (Tzanakis, 2011). This research project would support the findings of Dumais (2002) that it is highly unlikely that, given all these mitigating factors, there would not be differences in the level of care, support and dedication that a teacher gives to their students.

Outside the focus of this study was the area of race and racial minorities; however, research by DiMaggio and Ostrower (1992) and by van Wel, Couwenbergh-Soeterboek, Couwenbergh, ter Bogt and Raaijmakers (2006) does not support Bourdieu's social reproduction theory in the case of ethnic and racial minorities. Both quantitative (Fejgin, 1995) and qualitative (Monkman, Ronald & Theramene, 2005) studies have shown that the type of cultural capital produced and transmitted within minority ethnic families is

unlike that described by Bourdieu. Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital – defined as highbrow cultural participation (Devine-Eller, 2005) – has been found to not apply to ethnic families, especially where there is a strong religious tradition. Additionally, race was found to promote different hierarchies of cultural value, which was not necessarily linked to Bourdieu's concept of "middle class privilege" (Devin-Eller, 2005). With regard to the formation of occupational aspirations, Gupta (1977) observed varying differentials between English and Asian youngsters and between various US ethnic groups. In UK research, both human and social capital appear to play a role, but more research into this is needed (Li, Devine & Heath, 2008). Social and financial rather than cultural capital seems to be important in enclave-linked economic success (Li, Devine & Heath, 2008). Research by Lareau and McNamara Horvat (1999) and Green and Vryonides (2005) indicates that inequalities in social rather than cultural capital are more responsible for social class differentials between ethnic groups. However, educational capital defined as a combination of social and class-relevant cultural capital in the case of ethnic groups (Marjoribanks, 2005) has been found to be directly linked to children's orientations in educational achievement and to facilitate in them a form of selective assimilation that promotes resilience and middle-class standards even if their parents' actual circumstances are below middle class (Portes et al, 2009). Bennett and Silva (2006) argued that, in regard to ethnic groups, family cultural capital assumes distinctive forms that are not directly associated with the class-based concept proposed by Bourdieu, and that these may create inequalities within minority ethnic groups.

In the sociology of education, the debate continues as to whether cultural capital is a useful term, and indeed, whether research should continue to explore this topic (Lareau & Weininger, 2003). There is a general consensus that it would be too soon to abandon Bourdieu's cultural capital argument without further research in the light of both quantitative (Roscigno & Ainsworth-Darnell, 1999) and qualitative (Lareau & McNamara Horvat, 1999) studies that indicate cultural capital and habitus do affect educational outcomes. Research is continuing to explore the concept of habitus, as well as trying to refine the concept of cultural capital as argued by Kingston (2001). Such research may eventually unveil more of the links in the chain between family background and school success, and possibly produce concrete evidence to support to some degree Bourdieu's theory of cultural reproduction. Quantitative evidence has persistently failed to support Bourdieu's social reproduction theory. According to Tzanakis (2011), the participation of students in 'highbrow' culture or middle-class-defined cultural pursuits may be related to social class, but the relationship could be spurious. The association between parental cultural capital and SES and children's educational attainment, as discussed above, has

been shown to be generally weak. The relationship between teachers and cultural capital needs further investigation, although the findings of Portes et al (2009) showed that teachers positively influence students from lower SES backgrounds. None of the above definitively precludes the occurrence of social reproduction. Indeed, it may still occur without the mechanisms identified by Bourdieu. Inequalities in schools may persist even with greater awareness and an inclusive approach to disadvantage. Gender and ethnicity-related inequalities may also persist even when targeted interventions have been put in place to create a non-discriminatory environment (Tzanakis, 2011). As initiatives such as the DEIS: School Completion Programme attempt to alleviate educational disadvantage and address the individual needs of marginalised students, Bourdieu's theory concerning cultural capital is important in giving researchers insights into the contexts in which marginalised students are positioned.

As a practitioner working in the field of educational disadvantage, this literature assisted me as I attempted to determine which kinds of activities and practices give an advantage to students (Dumais, 2006). The theory of cultural and social reproduction provided clarity and guidance as I attempted to investigate the contextual factors that affected students at Glenmore Community School. Moreover, the theory resonates closely with the focus of this study on educational disadvantage in a rural Irish school and the problem of promoting deeper engagement of educationally disadvantaged students in their education, and so overcoming the strong force of 'cultural reproduction' and how it permeates the educational system. The possibility that educational disadvantage is a factor in determining a child's life-chance, and manifests itself as outlined by theorists such as Marx, Bourdieu and Boudon in the form of resistance to and disengagement from school, resulting in an inability to derive full benefit from the educational system, informed this research project. It led to us seeking to engage marginalised students at Glenmore Community School through a student-focused intervention, which created an effective forum for improving their engagement and retention in school, resulting in better educational outcomes and life-chances.

2.4   Educational Disadvantage: the Irish Story

Ireland in the late 1950s suffered poor economic performance and high emigration. Third-level education seemed only within the remit of the elite, with only 8,653 students enrolled in all of Ireland's third-level institutions at the end of the 1950s (Ferriter, 2004). Emigration became the most viable option for thousands of poorly educated people in the hope of a better life.

In the 1960s the appointment of Patrick Hillery as Minister for Education (1959-1965) brought great reform to the education system, including improvements in the provision of and access to education, the appointment of a Commission on Higher Education, and the modification of the scholarship scheme for third-level education (Ferriter, 2004). However, the most powerful change to education policy was made by the new Minister for Education, Donogh O'Malley in 1966 when he announced the introduction of free secondary education for all. Following this, third-level student grants were introduced, which was one of the most fundamental social shifts in the composition of universities as more students from the urban middle classes and rural communities were able to avail of this level of education. In the mid-1990s free third-level education was introduced for all students wishing to participate in third-level education. However, even with Irish education policy placing education within the reach of the majority of its citizens, many young people in Ireland, mainly from low socio-economic backgrounds, are not fully participating, achieving in or benefiting from the educational system.

The term "disadvantage" takes on many guises such as "poor", "marginalised", "at risk", "deprived" and "underprivileged". These terms are more or less interchangeable and there seems to be a general presumption that they mean one and the same thing (Conaty, 2002, p. 19). However, there seems to be a general acceptance of the term "educational disadvantage" (Kellaghan et al, 1995). The Combat Poverty Agency in 2003 referred to educational disadvantage as "a situation whereby individuals in society derive less benefit from the education system than their peers ... most notably in low levels of participation and achievement in the formal education system".

The extent of educational disadvantage in Ireland is reflected in the Department of Education and Skills (DES) figures showing that 81.3% of students sat the Leaving Certificate in 2001. Therefore, 19% did not do so (Government of Ireland, 2010, p. 37).

The wealth of research (Joint Committee on Education and Skills Report, May 2010; the Educational Disadvantage Committee's 2005 Report 'Moving Beyond Educational Disadvantage'; Combat Poverty Agency, 2008, 'Action on Poverty Today; NESF, 2009, 'Child Literacy and Social Inclusion; ESRI, 2009, 'Investing in Education: Combating Educational Disadvantage'; ERSI, 2010, 'No Way Back? The Dynamics of Early School Leaving'; and DES, 2010, 'From Policy to Practice: The Oral Language Challenge for Teachers') in these areas highlights the close link between educational disadvantage and poverty. The National Anti-Poverty Strategy (1997) defined poverty as follows:

> People are living in poverty if their income and resources (material, cultural and social) are so inadequate as to preclude them from having a standard

of living which is acceptable by Irish society generally. As a result of inadequate income and resources people may be excluded and marginalized from participating in activities considered the norm for other people in society.

It further noted that this definition closely links poverty with income but that it was important to note that poverty was also associated with "access to services, resources and outcomes for people who experience poverty and social exclusion".

However, Kellaghan et al (1995: p. 30) noted that educational disadvantage found its roots in the wider context of socio-economic disadvantage and that within this context it is unlikely that the child can derive the full benefits from the education system if the family is just surviving. Conaty (2002, p. 19) further identified the marginalised pupil as "frequently presenting in school with complex social, emotional, health and developmental needs that are barriers to learning. In addition, the marginalised pupils are most likely to be children and teenagers who come from homes where poverty exists to such a degree as to preoccupy the family and to affect its ability to enhance life-chances".

In a global order where advanced skills and numeracy are required for economic, social and political participation, the individual deprived of education is confined to a state of powerlessness, dependence, and lack of control (Baker, Lynch, Cantillon & Walsh, 2004: p. 141). Further entrenching the marginalisation is a family's inability to cope within the normal realms of society. As an experienced teacher I often witnessed this. Conaty (2002, p. 20) believes that such disadvantage "creates the oppression and perpetuates the cycle of disadvantage, early school leaving and educational failure and finds expression in apathy, voicelessness, vandalism, substance misuse, joy-riding, demotivation, low self-image and alienation". The consequence of this disadvantage inevitably is that students find themselves under-achieving, having discipline issues, truanting and leaving school early. This literature allowed me to reflect on the effect of educational disadvantage for our at-risk students and determine the consequences of their marginalisation from both a school and social perspective.

Boldt and Devine (1998) identify educational disadvantage as a limited ability to derive equal benefit from schooling compared to one's peers. They also note that educational disadvantage must be understood at two levels:

- the individual deriving less benefit from education while participating in the formal education system

- the diminished life-chances of the individual who has left formal education without recognised qualifications

Kellaghan (2001) in his paper 'Towards a Definition of Educational Disadvantage' defined educational disadvantage so as not just to explain it but also as a means to give us greater understanding of the precise difficulties children experience when they attend school and the origin of these difficulties. He proposes that:

> … a child may be regarded as being at a disadvantage at school if because of factors in the child's environment conceptualized as economic, cultural and social capital, the competencies and dispositions which he/she brings to school differ from the competencies and dispositions which are valued in schools and which are required to facilitate adaptation to school and school learning (p.5).

The OECD (1992, p.2) defined educational disadvantage as "a complex phenomenon that results from the interaction of deep-seated economic, social, and educational factors".

There are many types of explanations to assist us in understanding the origins of educational disadvantage; although some may be outdated, they still show the evolution of our understanding of educational disadvantage. The definition that, arguably, encompasses the very essence and all aspects of educational disadvantage is the definition of the Demonstration Programme in 1996-1999. It defined educational disadvantage as:

> The complex interaction of factors at home, in school and in the community (including economic, social, cultural and educational factors, which result in a young person deriving less benefit from formal education than their peers. As a result they leave the formal education system with few or no qualifications, putting them at a disadvantage in the labour market, curtailing personal and social development, and leading to poverty and social exclusion. (p. 2)

During the current economic recession, many families are in financial difficulty; there is thus an even greater need for an understanding of educational disadvantage, its causes and effects.

2.5   Explanations of Educational Disadvantage

Over the decades there has been a vast array of studies carried out to attempt to explain educational disadvantage and propose methods to eradicate the problem. Throughout these studies researchers have put forward various explanations for the origins of educational disadvantage.

2.5.1   Pathological explanations

Some researchers argue that inequality is to a large extent related to individual characteristics or behaviour, or even group characteristics. Some believe that intelligence is ultimately genetic and that no amount of education, whether environmental or targeted learning, will make a difference to a child's academic performance (Leathwood, et al, 2008, p.18). Herrnstein and Murray (1994) propose that "from a nexus of genetic and cultural endowment […] Afro-Americans will ultimately achieve less than white Americans". Within the Irish education system, a review of the White Paper on Early Childhood Education 1999 by Deegan (2004, cited in Keogh & White, 2008, p.19) remarked that "models of social pathology are evident in the conceptualisation of children who are disadvantaged, and […] the arguments presented support essentialist and reductionist notions of what happens in highly developed instances of social and economic disadvantage".

2.5.2   Transmitted deprivation

There is a close connection between the pathological explanation of educational disadvantage and that of transmitted deprivation. The term 'cycle of deprivation' suggests that disadvantaged parents may have 'deficient' parenting skills, and as a consequence, their children will be disadvantaged in educational attainment (Joseph, 1972). Najman et al (2004) observed that socio-economic inequalities in children's health and development emerge early and increase over time. Duncan and Brooks-Gunn (1997) noted that, when children are raised in poverty, their early development is affected, leading to greater vulnerability at school entry (Duncan & Brooks-Gunn, 1997), poor cognitive skills (Stipek & Ryan, 1997), less developed social skills (James & Duku, 2007), as well as more emotional and behavioural problems (McLoyd, 1998). These early developmental difficulties have a direct effect on long-term public and social policy issues such as academic achievement (Raver, 2003), employment (Rouse, Brooks-Gunn & McLanahan, 2005), teenage pregnancy, and psychological well-being (Brooks-Gunn, 2003). Regarding educational policy, remediation policies have been the most common for addressing the presumed 'parenting' deficits, but have been found to be costly and not as effective as preventative policies (Carneiro & Heckman, 2003). In more recent research, Kahn and Moore (2010) noted that early intervention aimed at 'at risk' children and their families that applies a comprehensive integrated approach to support child and family, rather than stand-alone models of intervention, can reduce socio-economic disparities in children's capabilities.

2.5.3   *Home-based factors*

Other researchers suggest that material deprivation, such as poor health, lack of resources (books) or even lack of facilities (area to study in), affects educational outcomes. Family size and family environment affect the degree of stimulation a child receives, and thus affects development (Spiker, 2012). Kelleghan (1995, p.3) outlined how home conditions can place a child in a disadvantaged position in school; these conditions include how time and space are organised and used; how parents and children talk to each other and spend their time; the values and rewards that govern parents' and children's choice of activities; and exposure to acute and potentially chronic stresses. The effect on children from homes where the principal language may not be the national language can often be viewed as a form of deprivation (Dooly et al, 2009, p.5). This literature, together with the Bourdieuian cultural reproduction theory, gave a practical insight into the areas that the SEP needed to address in order to bridge the gap between home and school.

2.5.4   *School factors*

The possibility that disadvantage and inequitable outcomes may arise from a school's failure to meet or respond sufficiently to the needs of its pupils is particularly relevant to this study. This may involve a failure to provide adequate resources, a limited curriculum, and low teacher expectations. These problems can be further entrenched by streaming, a restrictive examination system and a high rate of teacher turnover. Studies that demonstrate how low teacher expectations of particular groups lead to low performance by the group include *Pygmalion in the Classroom* (Rosenthal & Jacobs, 1968), but can be found both much earlier (Merton, 1948) and also in more recent studies (Brophy et al, 1974; Good, 1987; Brophy, 1998; Ferguson, 1998). The argument here is that good schools make a difference, and that resources should be directed at enhancing school organisation, resources, and teacher's abilities and attitudes. The classic study by Rutter et al (1979) identified a range of educational practices showing the effect of teacher expectations on particular categories of students, leading to underperformance (Lambrechts et al, 2008; Williams, 2009). The school-based research in this area has also analysed underperformance among ethnic minorities (Williams, 2009), linguistic minorities (Tozzi et al, 2008), children with special education needs (Moreau et al, 2008, p.13), and Roma children (Vrabcova et al, 2008; Cederberg et al, 2008a). This literature was beneficial in assisting the design phase of the SEP. Through the action research approach to the programme we were able to continuously modify the programme to encompass the areas outlined above for the individual student.

2.5.5   Structural views

Structural theories relate educational disadvantage to the structure of society. Because of structural sociological and political factors, it is argued, class disadvantage and poverty are reflected in educational attainment through a combination of home/school factors, including low reservoirs of cultural capital, socio-economic disadvantage, and educational structures designed to maintain inequality (Ross, 2009).

2.5.6   Post-structural explanations

There is a direct link between the structural view of educational disadvantage and the post-structural view. The major post-structural theories include those of Bourdieu (1973), Bourdieu and Passeron (1977), Bowles and Gintis (1976) and Gidden (1984, 1991). Post-structural theorists make central to their argument the concept of discourse as a set of practices and beliefs that produce what they pretend to describe (Ross, 2009). Davis (1993, p.13) explains: "... in post-structural theory the focus is on the way each person actively takes up the discourses through which they and others speak/write the world into existence as if it were their own". Post-structuralist theories also argue that, while gender, social class, ethnicity, etc, are usually categorised as dual, oppositional and fixed, they are fluid and multiple aspects of the self.

2.5.7   Disadvantaged groupings

Ross (2009), p 16) identified seven categories of disadvantage in terms of educational outcomes and performance, as follows:

1. Socio-Economic Disadvantage
2. Minority Ethnic Disadvantage
3. Indigenous Minority Disadvantage
4. Disability Disadvantage
5. Gender Disadvantage
6. Linguistic Minorities Disadvantage
7. Religious Minorities Disadvantage

Ross (1999) emphasised that people in these groups were educationally disadvantaged to varying degrees. For policymakers, the intervention needed would not be target-specific and there would possibly be a low return on the 'investment' made. However, for the purpose of this study, emphasis must be given to the socio-economic disadvantage

grouping, in order to understand the effect on educationally disadvantaged students at Glenmore Community College.

Understanding the interrelation between the effects of socio-economic disadvantage on students at the college and the students' individual learning needs will lead to greater clarity in finding solutions to addressing the educational disadvantage they experience.

2.5.8 *Socio-economic disadvantage*

Ireland has a comparatively high poverty rate by EU standards. There was no reduction of the 'at risk of poverty rate' during the Celtic Tiger period (Whelan & Maître, 2008). Family poverty is a significant marker of educational underachievement (Cederberg et al, 2009). This is a matter of great concern for agencies working to combat poverty, given the negative consequences that poverty can generate, as observed by Millar (2008):

> Evidence of social inequalities in Ireland abounds, from levels of poverty to socio-economic disadvantage in educational attainment ... such economic inequality pervades to other spheres of life and most notably to life itself. (Millar 2008, p.101)

Poverty is often a catalyst and consequence of inequality and is a key characteristic of educational disadvantage. Research into educational disadvantage has documented family poverty as one of the significant markers of underachievement in education. Education's impact on social participation cannot be understated (Johnson, 2009). One of the least disputed claims of recent educational research is that socio-economically disadvantaged children are less likely to experience school success (Montt, 2012). Studies have shown that low-income students enter kindergarten academically behind their more advantaged peers (Lee & Burkan, 2002). Many explanations have been offered for this inequality, ranging from disparities in family, school and neighbourhood resources; the persistent associations between social class and race; and sociocultural disconnects between home and school environments (Duncan & Magnuson, 2005).

One of the fundamental exhibits of educational disadvantage among disadvantaged students is school absenteeism. School attendance is strongly related to students' educational outcomes (Smyth, 1999). Absence rates have a significant impact on educational attainment (Morris & Rutt, 2004), early school-leaving and future life-chances (Smyth & McCoy, 2009). Socio-economically disadvantaged children are more likely to be chronically absent from school (Ready, 2010). Compared to more affluent students, children living in poverty are 25 per cent more likely to miss three or more days of school per month. Overall, students are seen to be particularly at risk of poor attendance if they

come from poorer and low-skilled backgrounds, and live in local-authority housing in inner-city areas (Social Exclusion Unit, 1998). This literature gave insight into the link between poor attendance and educational disadvantage. Throughout the development of the SEP there was an underlying awareness that the programme needed to create within the student a knowledge of the personal benefits of education while providing a supportive environment that would develop a sense of belonging and encourage them to want to come to school.

Exploring teachers' perceptions, Malcolm et al (2003) found that teachers identified the following factors as contributing to absence from school: low parental valuing of education; children serving as carers; domestic violence; long and atypical working hours of parents, and the lack of a school uniform or school equipment (NEWB, 2007). Further studies have identified a link to high levels of part-time work (McCoy & Smyth, 2004); "underlying problems with a psychiatric or emotional disturbance base" (Government of Ireland, 1994); psychological and behavioural problems, and low self-esteem (Malcolm et al, 2003). In addition to family sociodemographic characteristics, there is a direct link between school attendance and the health of a child from a socio-economically disadvantaged background (Romero & Lee, 2008). Low socio-economic status (SES) children are more likely to experience serious health problems (Rothstein, 2004). Research by Bloom and Freeman (2006) shows that these students are three times more likely to be chronically absent from school due to illness or injury than their more affluent counterparts. Studies indicate that children living in socio-economic disadvantage have much higher rates of asthma, heart and kidney disease, epilepsy, digestive problems, vision, dental and hearing disorders (Moonie et al, 2006). It has been found that these ailments are often exacerbated by parental behaviours, including elevated use of tobacco and environmental factors associated with housing (Currie et al, 2007).

Additional to background-related factors, poor attendance may also be caused by school-related factors such as the suitability of the curriculum and its delivery (Kinder et al, 1996). An OFSTED study (1995) in the United Kingdom found that students who are weak readers had a higher rate of absenteeism. Supporting this, a study by the (Irish) Department of Education and Skills (1994) found that students experienced difficulty in 'keeping up' with school work and that learning difficulties were another cause of absenteeism (Dept. of Education, 2003). Awareness of these factors highlighted in the literature led to the SEP being designed to support the student in their learning and instil confidence to perform well in school.

Studies have shown that that there is also a link between attendance and the relationships that students experience during their time at school. First, poor attendance has been linked to the teacher-student relationship, especially if this is not conducted in a respectful or fair manner (Kinder et al 1996). In the Irish context, a study by Smyth et al (2004) identified the impact of positive and negative interaction with teachers on students' perception of school and on attendance. Secondly, relationships among friends and their peers have been shown to have an influence on school attendance. Poor school attendance has been observed as a status-seeking activity or a way of group membership. Non-attendance has been associated with students' experience of bullying or teasing at school by their peers (Kinder et al, 1996). In line with a school's implementation of its discipline policy, for serious misconduct schools will withdraw a student from school through suspension and expulsion. However, statistics show that there has been a small reduction in the number of suspensions in both primary and secondary schools, while expulsions have increased (Millar, 2011). Schools would view the method of exclusion and suspension as a means of restoring order and improving classroom climate, but this practice contributes significantly to non-attendance (Michail, 2011). More recent research has identified other key factors in absenteeism such as the academic ethos and expectational climate in the school, a student's own educational aspirations, parental involvement, and the out-of-school activities offered by the school (Smyth & Byrne, 2010).

Educational qualifications or the lack of them can influence an individual's life-chances (O'Connell et al, 2006). Archer (2001) noted that education is a key means through which inequalities and poverty are perpetuated. This is in spite of the national Anti-Poverty Strategy's objective of ensuring that those living in poverty can "access, participate in and benefit from education of sufficient quality to allow them to move out of poverty and prevent others from becoming poor" (McCoy & Smyth, 2009, p.74).

The following section details the structure of the Irish education system, outlines how it has evolved, and highlights efforts to reduce the level of disadvantage experienced by students. This review of the educational system was essential in this research project in order to determine the type of programme necessary to meet the educational needs of the marginalised students at Glenmore Community School.

2.6   The Education System in Ireland

The Irish secondary education system consists of a three-year junior cycle followed by a two- or three-year senior cycle (DES, 2012). At the end of this, students take a

standardised examination, the Junior Certificate. On completion of this lower secondary-level exam, students have the option of completing a Transition Year. This year offers them the opportunity to experiment with different subject options and work experience without the pressure of examination. On completion of their transition year or directly after the Junior Certificate examination, students undertake a two-year upper secondary-level programme, at the end of which they sit the Leaving Certificate examination. Pupils taking the established Leaving Certificate programme must take at least five subjects, including Irish (DES, 2012). This system of education in Ireland can be characterised as 'general', rather than vocationally specific in nature (Hannon et al, 1996). In 1994, the Department of Education and Skills developed the examination format of the Leaving Certificate, retaining the form of the established Leaving Certificate but introducing two optional formats: the Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme (LCVP), which operates on the same premise as the established Leaving Certificate but with a strong vocational dimension, and the Leaving Certificate Applied Programme, which was developed to meet the needs of students who would not normally progress to the Leaving Certificate programme and/or possibly leave school early. Graduates of the Leaving Certificate Applied are not eligible to apply directly to third-level colleges through the Central Applications Office (CAO) but complete an approved Post-Leaving Certificate Course in a college of further education and become eligible for admission to some third-level courses in the institutes of technology. The Leaving Certificate Applied Programme has a limited uptake, with only 6% of upper secondary students participating in it (DES, 2012). Like the Junior Certificate School Programme (JCSP), the Leaving Certificate Applied Programme (LCAP) emphasises cross-curricular work, tasks and projects, along with personal and social development. It is hoped therefore, in theory at least, that the vast majority (around 94%) of students who complete their upper secondary education are eligible to apply to tertiary education, commencing at Level 6 on the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ). The selection process by which students are accepted on particular courses at third level is based on grades attained in the Leaving Certificate, with 'points' being assigned on the basis of the subject level (higher, ordinary, foundation) taken and the grade achieved. Participation in tertiary education has increased dramatically in recent years, as a consequence of the increasing retention rates at second level, demographic trends and higher transfer rates to third-level education through the linkage of education to other services such as employment, training, area partnership, welfare, youth, school, juvenile liaison, justice, voluntary and community organisations (DES, 2004) together with the current downturn in the Irish economy and the scarcity of job opportunities (TCD, 2008). The OECD (2006) identified a marked difference in employment outcomes by educational level in Ireland; males aged 30-44 without upper secondary qualifications in

Ireland are three times more likely to be unemployed than those with upper secondary qualifications, compared with a ratio of less than two in the US, Italy and Sweden. More recent research by Smyth and McCoy (2009) found that "the level of education achieved is highly predictive of later life-chances, with higher quality employment and pay levels found among those with upper secondary and tertiary qualifications". A further damning statistic is that, according to Kilcommins et al (2004), among the prison population in Ireland, who are "primarily young, male, working-class, drug-dependent and uneducated", 20% of all inmates who enrolled in the prison education system in Mountjoy Prison could neither read nor write (Educational Disadvantage, 2010).

2.6.1 *Decline in standards*

Over the last few decades and recently in the findings of the PISA Report 2009 (outlined in a preliminary report to the Department of Education and Skills) concerning Comparisons of Performance in Ireland between PISA 2000 and PISA 2009, a decline in standards has been identified:

- The decline in **reading standards** – by 31 points, or almost one-third of an international standard deviation since 2000, and 20 points since 2003 – has been considerable. Ireland's ranking in reading literacy dropped from 5th across all participating countries in 2000 to 21st in 2009.

- The decline in **mathematics** (16 points, or one-sixth of an international standard deviation between 2003 and 2009) was smaller. Ireland's ranking here fell from 20th in 2000 to 32nd in 2009.

- Performance in **reading and mathematics** declined across the spectrum of achievement, with fewer students scoring at the highest proficiency levels, and more scoring at the lowest levels.

- In **science**, no difference in achievement was observed between 2006 and 2009. Ireland's ranking (20th) did not change.

- Among OECD countries, Ireland's rankings for reading in 2000 and 2009 were 5th and 17th, respectively; for mathematics for 2003 and 2009 they were 17th and 25th, and in science, they were 14th and 13th, respectively, for 2006 and 2009. In 2009 Ireland's mean score in mathematics was significantly below the OECD country average.

- Although the gender difference in reading in Ireland was similar to the OECD average of about 40 points, the **gender gap** in Ireland increased by 10 points compared to the OECD average of 7 (Cosgrove et al, 2010).

Although the PISA Report 2009 highlights the alarming decline in performance of Irish students, it does not explain it. Cosgrove (2012) of the Educational Research Centre, in her report 'A sea of change: An investigation of trends in performance on PISA at and below the surface', identified the contextual factors for the decline and argued that there are valid explanations for the result:

- Reviews and analyses were applied to avoid inadequacies in the implementation of PISA, including in sampling, printing, data-processing, and test administration.

- Demographic and structural changes have had a significant impact on Irish schools over the past decade, including:

  - An increase in immigrant students since 2000
  - Changes in the distribution of the PISA cohort across grade levels
  - The emergence of a small number of very low-scoring schools (8 schools with a mean PISA reading score >100 points below the national mean)
  - A small decrease in early school-leaving (2.1% to 1.6%)
  - A potential increase in participating students with a special educational need (3.5% in 2009, unknown in 2000)

However, it was observed that these factors were unlikely to account for the extent of the decline in achievement, and did not look at the curriculum and wider economic conditions. It is believed that PISA's measure has imperfections in design (Cosgrove, 2012), the reading models used (LaRoche & Cartwright, 2010), and the time factors of the test (Borghans & Schils, 2011), but all educational researchers are concerned that a large number of students are not achieving the benchmark standard of competence in reading and mathematics.

These findings point to factors that are likely to further compound the problem of disadvantage since a general drop in performance is likely to include disadvantaged students.

2.6.2   *Overview of Ireland's response to educational disadvantage*

In the 1960s, the Investment in Education Report (Department of Education and Science, 1966) highlighted the disparity of educational provision and participation between the social classes. However, during the 1970s and 1980s there was a particular focus on increasing the rate of participation in the education system. This led the Department of Education to implement, in 1984, measures to deal with the problems of disadvantage in urban primary schools, which became known as the Disadvantaged Area Scheme (DAS). To be included in the selection process, schools were asked to supply a set of indicators from the following list:

1. Number of pupils whose families were resident in local-authority housing or non-permanent accommodation

2. Number of pupils whose families held medical cards

3. Number of pupils whose families were in receipt of unemployment benefit or of any assistance under schemes administered by the Department of Social Welfare (now the Department of Social Protection)

These indicators were allocated a set of points used to calculate a total for each school that made an application. The calculation also took into account the pupil-teacher ratio (PTR), adjusting downwards to compensate for favourable ratios. Schools were ranked in order of consideration for inclusion in the scheme based on the outcome of the points total (Disadvantaged Area Scheme Indicators.)

Policy interventions during the 1990s sought to address educational inequality. This can be seen, for example, in the Education Act (1998), which (as discussed above) defined educational disadvantage as "... impediments to education arising from social or economic disadvantage which prevents students deriving appropriate benefit from education in schools" (p. 32). At this time the Educational Disadvantage Committee was established. This led to two fundamental developments in policy: curriculum reform and the targeting of funding to schools most in need of financial assistance.

In policy intervention and curriculum reform, two programmes were set up to meet the needs of students at risk: the Junior Certificate School Programme (JCSP) and the Leaving Certificate Applied Programme (LCA) (as described above).

In 1990, the Home-School Community Liaison (HSCL) scheme was introduced as a subset of DAS and operated on a pilot basis (1990-1993). Defined by Conaty (2002) as one of the most significant interventions made to tackle disadvantage initially in primary

schools, it was later expanded into the post-primary sector to schools linked with their primary school. The scheme involved the provision of a school-based co-ordinator to liaise with parents and the community in primary and second-level schools. A gradual progression of the HSCL was rolled out during 1990-1999, whereby all schools participating in DAS were invited to participate in the scheme.

The selection process at post-primary level involved a variety of selection indicators, such as family background, employment status, medical card possession, accommodation type (local authority house/flat, residence in non-permanent accommodation), lone-parent households, and the number of students from deprived rural backgrounds. An additional indicator was the pupil's attainment. The data-collection was left to the school principal who was required to provide the following: number of first-year students with significant literacy and numeracy difficulties; the number of pupils who dropped out of school at or around the age of 15 with no formal qualifications. A further indicator was an examinations score points adjustment based on how the school performed in the Junior Certificate. The method of calculation was based on four variables: the number of students achieving fewer than four grade Ds; taking foundation-level English; taking foundation-level mathematics, and taking foundation-level Irish. There were two significant differences in the indicators used at post-primary level compared to primary level; at primary level only socio-economic factors were taken as relevant indicators whereas at secondary level both educational and socio-economic factors were taken into consideration. The consequence of this was that there was a higher rate of students being served at post-primary level compared to primary level (24%: 14.9%).

In 1996/97 the Department of Education felt that a more targeted approach was needed towards educational disadvantage at primary level and introduced the Breaking the Cycle (BTC) Scheme to 33 urban and 123 rural schools nationwide. One of the criteria for selection was that only schools that had been previously designated as disadvantaged were eligible to apply under the 'rural' dimension of the scheme. Only rural schools with four or fewer teachers were eligible for inclusion. The indicators for inclusion were based on the home background of the pupils' school and the educational attainment of parents. Different sets of indicators were used in the selection of rural and urban schools, which acknowledged for the first time the relative difference between urban and rural disadvantage. A further refinement of the selection process, to counteract anomalies that had been highlighted in previous selection processes, was the creation of a linkage between high-scoring schools – that is, schools in which the same families were being facilitated.

Following this scheme, in 2000 the Educational Research Centre carried out a survey of disadvantage and found comparable difference in the manifestation of disadvantage between urban and rural areas. The results of this survey were used to assist in the allocation of resources for the Giving Children an Even Break scheme (see below).

Over the last couple of years, there have been eight separate Department of Education schemes to tackle educational disadvantage. Through the different selection criteria, it was found that some schools were only able to avail of one or two of the schemes while other schools were able to avail of more. In 2005, the Department of Education launched its DEIS (Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Disadvantaged Schools) Action Plan, designed to ensure that the most disadvantaged schools benefited from a comprehensive package of supports, while others continued to get support in line with the level of disadvantage among their pupils (Department of Education and Skills, 2012). By 2010 it was hoped that all schemes would be subsumed into the School Support Programme, thus providing a more integrated approach to tackling educational disadvantage, as the "rates of educational underachievement and early school leaving remain much higher for pupils from disadvantaged communities than for other pupils" (DES, 2005, p.8). The schemes that have been integrated into the School Support Programme are:

1. Home School Community Liaison Scheme (provision of co-ordinators who liaise with teachers and parents)

2. School Completion Programme (provides meals, homework clubs, attendance trackers)

3. Support Teachers Project (a support teacher provides art/crafts activities)

4. Early Start Pre-School Scheme (provides grants and in-service training to pre-school teachers)

5. Giving Children an Even Break (provides additional teachers and grants to schools in DEIS)

6. Breaking the Cycle (provides additional funding for materials/local initiatives)

7. Disadvantaged Area Scheme (provides supplementary capitation for running costs, building grants, etc)

8. Literacy and Numeracy Schemes (Library Scheme, Maths Recovery {in-training for maths teachers}, Reading Recovery {no speech or language therapy}, First Steps (training of teachers as tutors)

Primarily, the aim of each social inclusion scheme is the dispersion of additional resources or top-ups to curtail educational disadvantage in classified DEIS schools via a targeted approach and the provision of additional training for teachers (Educational Disadvantage, 2010).

It may be observed that policies in Ireland tend to focus on a deficit model of disadvantage. Many commentators believe that there is a great need to open new lines of discourse in understanding 'the language of poverty', to understand the interrelations between the different groups experiencing educational disadvantage, and to design policy interventions and initiatives to specifically target the individual nature of disadvantage, and foster a more collaborative approach across all sectors in tackling educational disadvantage. Tormey (1991) suggests that educational disadvantage can be usefully described as a series of processes which combine to bring about comparatively low attainment and participation in formal education by working-class children; "recognising educational disadvantage as a series of processes allows us to focus our attention on the models of intervention we currently use". Supporting this, Kellaghan et al (1995) observed that government interventions and funding to tackle disadvantage have been directed not at individuals but at schools; therefore to address educational disadvantage more effectively, future interventions will need to be targeted at individuals and be system-wide, as well as being targeted at schools. Supporting the findings of Kellaghan (1995), more recently Smyth and McCoy (2009) concluded that "schools targeting alone cannot […] address the needs of all children and young people in relevant groups" (p. 58). Byrne & Smyth (2010) found "that early school leaving is not only related to absolute levels of academic achievement but to how such academic difficulties are addressed by the school" (p.174). Again, Smyth and McCoy (2009) stated that "innovative measures to improve the school experiences of these at risk groups are therefore key in achieving equity". They stressed "the crucial importance of providing children and young people with high quality learning environments in which student engagement is fostered at all levels of the education system [and] the need to identify students with learning difficulties as early as possible and put in place the appropriate supports to foster their academic progress" (p.179). Therefore, focus needs to be returned to the education system itself to ensure that focus on disadvantage does not overshadow some of the fundamental problems with our education system and leave such problems unexamined through failure to question whether the same system can suit all (Gilligan, 2007).

A student's socio-economic background can also influence their educational performance. Research by Drudy and Lynch (1993) on differential learning patterns highlights inequality as a primary indicator of performance levels as early as at the beginning of primary

school. Supporting this, Kellaghan (cited in Archer, 2001) found that educational underperformance manifests early for deprived children through literacy difficulties and remains with the student throughout their second-level education. The following table shows the disparity between Leaving Certificate examination results for students from unemployed/manual backgrounds (16-33% achieved honours in four or more subjects) compared with those of students from professional/employer backgrounds (58-62%) (McCoy et al, 2007).

Table 2.1: Leaving Cert exam results by socio-economic background – father's occupation (2006)

	1-3 Honours	4+ Honours
Farmer/agriculture	23.5	50.5
Higher/lower professional	17.2	62.5
Employer/manager	9.3	58.2
Intermediate non-manual	28.7	38.7
Skilled/semi/unskilled manual	30.1	33.6
Unemployed	20.8	16.5
Other/unknown	24.2	20.1
Total	25.0	41.7

Source: McCoy et al, 2007

Clancy (2001) found that students from disadvantaged backgrounds were less likely to have a positive experience of the educational system. These differences could not be directly attributed to intelligence or capabilities, but rather to the inaccessibility of resources; for example, supplementary tuition (grinds) and extra-curricular activities. Research by Baker et al (2004, p.145) indicated that:

> Given the competitive contexts in which educational goods are distributed and the feasibility of using economic capital to buy educationally relevant social and cultural capital, it is evident that those who are best resourced economically are best placed to succeed educationally.

Poor performance is a primary determinant of entry into third-level education, and economic factors play an important role in educational progression. O'Connell et al (2006) highlighted the under-representation of school-leavers from educationally disadvantaged backgrounds in tertiary education. Research by Lynch (2006) highlighted that students entering professional courses such as law, medicine and dentistry were disproportionately from middle and upper-class backgrounds, while there had been little change in participation rates from those from lower socio-economic backgrounds. This reinforces the findings that, despite interventions, economically generated inequality continues to dominate in the inequality of outcomes for those coming from socially disadvantaged backgrounds.
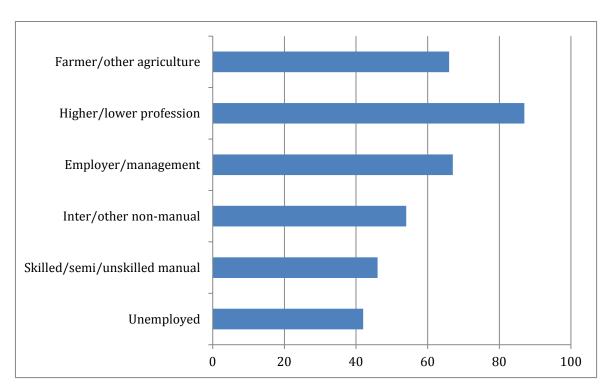
Figure 2.1: Differences in educational advancement rates, by socio-economic groupings

Source: McCoy et al, 2007

The findings outlined above clearly show that the presence of poverty in a socio-economic grouping has a significant impact on access, participation and performance in education. This disparity in educational attainment highlights the continuity of the generational cycle of educational disadvantage and that those from a higher socio-economic background are able to maintain advantage in the education system. Farrell et al (2008, p.41) stated that "the level of education is a strong indicator of a person's socio-economic status". The National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education (2008-2013) notes the under-representation of lower socio-economic groups in higher education and continuing spatial disadvantage, and suggests that "success has been more limited in improving educational outcomes for people from areas where we find concentrations of poverty and disadvantage" (HEA, 2008, p.26).

During the 1960s and into the 1980s, educational policy was more concerned with expanding participation rates than addressing inequalities between the social classes (Smyth & Hannon, 2000). Smyth and Hannon found that, during the 1980s and 1990s, policy intervention focused on the "deficit model" in attempting to reduce educational disadvantage, thus placing the problem under the heading of performance rather than addressing the structural inequalities that were causing the disadvantage and the

widening gap between the social classes. Supporting this, more recently Maxwell and Dorrity (2009) in their study on 'Access to Third Level Education: Challenges for Equality of Opportunity in Post-Celtic Tiger Ireland', also found "the need to move beyond a 'deficit model of disadvantage' to address educational inequality in a framework that challenges the language of disadvantage; the need to recognise the complexities and range of supports required to tackle educational inequality; and the need for more collaborative and interactive consultation processes in representing communities that are persistently marginalised" (p. 1).

In 1991 the OECD 'Review of National Education Policies: Ireland' reported a weakness in planning and decision-making in relation to developing a targeted approach to addressing equity and promoting access to higher education. The White Paper 'Charting our Educational Future' (1995) was the first policy paper to place an emphasis on the evaluation of education policy and practice, and on lifelong learning ideals. The primary aim of this paper was to promote efforts to encourage mature students and non-traditional learners into third-level education. Following this, the Report of the Steering Group on the Future of Higher Education (1995) argued that universities should focus on developing targeted initiatives that would help tackle barriers to participation in higher education of lower socio-economic groups. This report highlighted that students from lower socio-economic backgrounds were more likely to leave school without the Leaving Certificate; achieved lower grades when they did sit the examination, and, even when attaining similar grades to their counterparts, were less likely to progress to third-level education (O'Reilly, 2008).

The Universities Act (1997), the 1998 Education Act and the Report of the High-Level Group on University Equality Policies (2004) further supported the drive to open up access to third level. The Education Act (1998) acknowledged that inequalities in the education system gave rise to the under-representation of people from disadvantaged backgrounds. The Commission on the Points System (1999) identified three key areas where improvement could be made in assisting students to gain access to third-level education: recognition of schools as disadvantaged if they had a high concentration of students from lower socio-economic backgrounds; creation of special-access schemes for disadvantaged students not attending a designated school, and viewing the student as an individual when defining educational disadvantage.

In the late 1990s and early 2000s there was strong emphasis on the promotion of social inclusion and addressing educational disadvantage, as reflected in the National Anti-Poverty Strategy (NAPS) (Government of Ireland, 1997), the amended NAPs (Department

of Social, Community and Family Affairs, 2002) and the National Action Plan Against Poverty and Social Exclusion (2003-2005) (Department of Social, Community and Family Affairs, 2003). Educational disadvantage was viewed as a multi-dimensional problem that required an integrated and holistic approach (MacVeigh, 2006). One of the more recent targeted approaches was the HEA Strategy Statement 2004-2007 and 'Achieving Equity of Access to Higher Education in Ireland: Action Plan 2005-2007', which set out several goals in relation to widening participation in higher education.

2.7   Widening Access to Third Level: New Policies and Initiatives

The 'free fees' initiative was introduced in 1995 to increase the third-level participation rates of students from lower socio-economic backgrounds. The overall number of students attending third-level has increased, but the number of students from lower socio-economic backgrounds has not, compared to other groups. An unacceptably low proportion of the former attend third level, and there is a notable persistence in educational inequalities (MacVeigh, 2006). The many initiatives taken in recent years have failed to remedy this disparity in any significant way.

While participation at third level by those from lower socio-economic groups has increased over time, their participation rates, relative to their counterparts from other groups, remain low, and there is a notable persistence in educational inequalities according to social class (Clancy, 2003; MacVeigh, 2006). There are many reasons why these initiatives have not delivered the required outcome. First, the removal of fees, viewed as a move towards promoting greater access for students from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds, has given rise to investment in second-level education for middle-class families, transferring the inability to compete on the same terms for educational resources from second-level to third-level education (Lynch, 2006); the difference between the two socio-economic groups has been attributed to the cost associated with remaining in education, and specifically to parents being less able to provide the financial assistance required when progressing on to third level (Kirby & Murphy, 2008).

Secondly, an evaluation of access programmes published in 2006 found that access was not to the forefront of the development strategy in many higher-education institutions. It was further found that there was a lack of coordination between access services and other student access support services (HEA, 2012). Thirdly, many of the strategies set down in the White Paper have yet to be fully realised, particularly the recommendation that each third-level institution promote participation by providing financial, educational and cultural

support to students from lower-income backgrounds, and that all designated disadvantaged second-level schools be linked to third-level institutions (Carpenter, 2004).

In 2001, the Action Group on Access set national targets for entry rates by under-represented groups in higher education. These targets were endorsed in the National Access Plan 2005-2007. The targets in relation to full-time student rates have been met, but not those concerning "full-time and part-time students combined". It remains the case that the majority of those who benefit from higher education are from the middle and upper socio-economic groups, while those who fail to benefit from our education system are generally from the lower socio-economic groups and from lower-to-middle-income working families (HEA, 2008). Taking a wider view of this finding, Gillian (2007) highlights the systemic trend whereby successive generations from higher socio-economic groups benefit from higher education. Parallel to this is the finding that the social and economic structural inequalities that contribute to continued education attainment differentials between different socio-economic groups have remained relatively unchallenged (Maxwell & Dorrity, 2009).

To increase the participation rate of students from marginalised backgrounds in third-level education, some third-level bodies have introduced the Higher Education Access Route (HEAR), a third-level admissions scheme that allocates reserved places as well as additional supports to school-leavers from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds (HEA, 2008). Another scheme is the Disability Access Route to Education (DARE), a college and university admissions scheme which offers places on a reduced points basis to school-leavers with disabilities (HEA, 2008). These schemes have increased the number of students with a disability and those from a socio-economically disadvantaged background progressing on to third-level education; over 1,650 third-level places have been allocated through these initiatives, in line with the targets set out in the National Action Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education, 2008-2013 (DARE, 2012). These targets include an entry rate of at least 54% for all socio-economic groups by 2020 and a doubling of the number in third level of students with sensory, physical and multiple disabilities by 2013 (DARE, 2010).

In attempting to address educational disadvantage, researchers and policymakers have argued that the causes of educational disadvantage are societal (HEA, 2008). Therefore, addressing the complexity of educational disadvantage and social exclusion in the educational system at primary, secondary and third level will require joined-up thinking, and coherent and inter-level strategies. It will be necessary for educational institutions, families and the wider community to work in partnership to remove the underlying

discontinuity (HEA, 2008). Localised initiatives tailored to meet the specific needs of a school or a target group will need to be linked to national policy. Such local initiatives, working from the ground upwards, have the potential to promote greater access to and participation in third-level education through incorporating progressive models of learning and curriculum design focused on promoting student engagement as well as whole-school improvement.

2.8 Summary

The above review has examined different models and theories of education, and the ways in which education systems, inadvertently or otherwise, may reproduce educational disadvantage. The literature associated with educational disadvantage made a fundamental contribution to the development of my thinking. As advocated by McAteer (2013), the literature was used as both a planning and a subsequent analytic device. I related my findings back to the initial literature, which allowed me to confirm or disconfirm critical theory and Bourdieuian cultural reproduction theory. Reviewing the Irish educational system and its response to educational disadvantage, as well as various policies and practices applied internationally, and their outcomes, provided insights into the benefits and limitations of these policies for future initiatives. To fully understand the concept of educational disadvantage it is important to review school improvement and student engagement theory, as a means to understanding the different school contexts in which students who are experiencing disadvantage find themselves. This is the subject of the following chapter.

Chapter 3: School Improvement and Student Engagement

3.1 Introduction

Education has been directly affected by the integration of world economics, societies and cultures through political media and communications technology. Globalisation has created an interdependency of societies. There is a greater need for all world economies to have a unity of purpose in the maintenance of a comparable educational framework. With 55% of women and 30% of men illiterate worldwide (World Vision, 2009), there is a universal aim to ensure primary education for all children and the closing of the gender gap in illiteracy. The focus of economies that have implemented strategies over the last few decades to ensure access to education and equity for their citizens has moved from access to education to raising educational standards in primary and second-level schools and ensuring improvement in children's educational attainments, thus ensuring that a higher rate of their population attends third level through more target-specific policy intervention.

Even with the current financial constraints, governments cannot be seen to be neglectful in the area of education. Their educational reforms and student achievement rates are regularly measured by international surveys such as PIRLS (Progress in International Reading Literacy Study), TIMSS (Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study) and PISA (Programme for International Student Assessment – OECD). These international surveys receive worldwide attention and their findings are published in country and comparative league tables. The variance between countries has a direct social, economic and political impact. Based on the work of fellow SER researchers, Sammons (2007) says that governments need to address school failure for the following reasons:

> **Philosophical/ethical** – to promote fairness and improve the quality of life and opportunities for all groups, as well as encourage positive attitudes to learning and promote self-esteem and self-efficacy
>
> **Political** – to promote social cohesion and inclusion and empower young people as active and informed citizens to participate in a successful democracy
>
> **Economic** – to promote future prosperity for individuals and families, prevent the waste of talent, reduce crime and avoid the social and economic burden on Government (Sammons, 2007)

Therefore, it is imperative that governments ensure that they are meeting international benchmark standards and are closing the achievement gap between student groups: girls and boys, students from both low and high SES backgrounds, and students from ethnic minorities (Earl, Watson & Katz, 2003).

The PISA Report 2009 noted a decline among Irish students in the area of literacy and mathematics (as discussed in the previous chapter). Out of 31 OECD countries, Ireland's expenditure in the area of education is ranked as the fourth lowest by Education at a Glance, 2010, an OECD report on national education systems. The report shows that on average OECD countries spend 6.2% of GDP on education. Ireland spends 4.7% on education, a figure that exceeds that of only three countries: the Czech Republic, Italy and Slovakia. The report also shows that Irish spending on education has fallen back significantly since 1995 when the country invested 5.2% of GDP on education (INTO 2010). Now, with the global recession, there is concern about the Irish government maintaining its current level of funding of education, let alone increasing this funding. With the budgetary restrictions imposed by the 'troika', the Department of Education and Science is under pressure to implement economic reforms to ensure it is operating within the new constraints, while through its inspectorate the Department has to ensure it is getting the maximum return on investment.

There is a need, therefore, to ensure that schools can maximise student performance. Stoll and Fink (1998, p.192) described a failing school as follows:

> It is a school in which isolation, self-reliance, blame and loss of faith are dominating norms, and powerfully inhibit improvement. It will often, although not always, be in socially disadvantaged areas where parents are undemanding and teachers explain away failure by blaming inadequate parenting or unprepared children.

Schools do not receive a uniform intake of pupils. There is, as noted by Rutter et al (1979) a "network of interacting influences" that determine the compositional makeup of a school. Some schools enrol students with prior achievements and social advantages, while others predominantly enrol students who lack such advantages, or a greater percentage of children with learning difficulties, and mental or physical disabilities. However, research (Sammons, 2007; Hoyle & Robinson, 2002; Philips, 1997) has shown that schools can "make a difference" (Thrupp, 2001) and, although some schools may enrol a higher number of students from lower socio-economic backgrounds, "every child has a right to the best possible education […] For this to occur, attention must be paid to contextual causes of failure that lie inside and outside of the school" (Stoll & Myres, 1998, p.16) This theory was the origin of my research journey where I was inspired by the concept that our

school could 'make a difference' and was convinced that a targeted intervention, such as the SEP, would bring about a process of change to address the needs of Glenmore Community School students experiencing disadvantage.

3.2   School Effectiveness Research (SER)

Regarding identifying these contextual factors, School Effectiveness Research (SER) is a quantitative, organisation-focused approach which emerged in the 1970s to ascertain whether schools are fulfilling their aims. In principle it accepts that differences in student achievement are largely determined by socio-economic factors (Chapter 2), but strongly supports the findings of Rutter et al (1979) that it *does* matter which school a child attends, countering the view that schools have a limited influence on children.

SER seeks to identify the factors mentioned above and why they vary between schools and countries (Kelly, 2001, p.1). Towards the end of the 1970s, Edmonds (1979), Brookover et al (1979) and Rutter et al (1979) identified a number of school factors that determine effectiveness:

- A balance of able and less able students attending the school
- The presence or absence of reward systems
- The physical environment
- The opportunity for students to take responsibility
- Strong leadership with democratic decision-making

Two areas were not associated with effectiveness: class size and school size.

In the 1980s, the research of Reynolds, Creemers and Scheerens, among others, identified additional school factors that promote a student's educational attainment:

- A high proportion of students in positions of authority
- A low ratio of pupils to teachers
- A safe and orderly school climate
- Evaluation of student progress early and often (Teddlie & Reynolds, 2000)

In the past, SER has commonly adopted a short-term 'input-process-output' framework to determine student progress; by the end of the 1980s, SER adopted a more advanced approach to data collection and analysis, recognising the importance of context, taking a longitudinal perspective, controlling for students and attainment at entry into schools, and

investigating student progress over subsequent years to get a measure of the 'value added' by the school (Teddlie, 1994a; Creemers & Scheerens, 1994). Additionally, multi-level and structural equation modelling was used (Sammons, Thomas & Mortimore, 1996). Researchers became aware of the school improvement movement that was starting to emerge at this time, but SER continued in many countries, including research by the English researchers Mortimore et al (1988), and the American researchers Levine and Lezotte (1990) and Teddlie and Stringfield (1993). Mortimore et al (1998) identified the following characteristics of an effective school:

- Purposeful leadership

- Consistent teaching and structured lessons

- Intellectually challenging places where teaching is focused

- Good communication between students and teachers

- An active parent body

Levine and Lezotte (1990) and Teddlie and Stringfield (1993) supported Mortimore's findings, but also found additional characteristics of an effective school:

- More time spent on tasks

- More encouragement of independent practice

- Fewer interruptions

- Firm discipline

- A friendly atmosphere

The aim of SER is to assess schools over a period ranging between one and several years. It encompasses all students in its research, and not just students from a lower socio-economic background. It not only looks to academic achievement as a method of assessing school effectiveness but also to indicators such as attendance, behaviour, self-esteem, attitudes and motivations/goals.

SER appreciates the need for governments to promote accountability in educational systems. However, it is very critical of the publication of 'league tables' in their raw form, as no attention is given to student intake differences. It is for this reason that SER statistically controls for these intake differences before researchers make any judgement on a school's level of effectiveness (Sammons, 2007).

It has been found that, once the student intake characteristics have been taken into account, on average schools account for about 5% to 18% in achievement differences

(Scheerens & Bosker, 1997). These researchers have shown that schools that 'add value' display similarities, and they argue that the primary function of educational policies is to ensure uniformity in delivery of the curriculum. Government policies such as Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Disadvantaged Schools (DEIS) in Ireland, No Child Left Behind, in the US, and Every Child Matters, in the UK, indicate, on the face of it, that certain governments are making attempts to ensure – or want to be seen as being concerned about the problem – that the life-chances of their citizens, especially those in vulnerable and minority groups, are improved through the provision of additional resources and targeted strategies. However, even those governments that have taken some action in this area have been criticised for their inadequate response.

There is considerable overlap between SER research and that influenced by theoretical developments in other disciplines such as Cultural and Social Reproduction theory, School Organisation theory, and governmental policy and practice (Chapter 3). Thrupp (2001b) and Luyten, Visscher et al (2005) show how these theories can frame and support SER (see Table 3.1) (cited in Hernandez, 2007). Their belief is that, with the interconnection and commonality between the theories, it is vital to keep on evaluating and analysing links that have been tried and tested, and investigate and examine other theories that could contribute to SER and bring about more rapid change (Thrupp, 2001).

Table 3.1: Theoretical developments in other disciplines and the SER

Level of the variables	Groups of variables	Theoretical developments	
States/countries	Level of economic development	Heyneman & Loxley (1976; 1982; 1983)	
School	Socio-economic context	Organisational theories	Environment approach
	Socio-cultural context		
	School management		Structure approach
	Pedagogic practice		Organisational link approach
	School climate		
	Socio-economic and cultural indicators of teachers and head teachers		
Student	Economic capital	Bourdieu's reproduction theory	
	Cultural capital		
	Social Capital	Bourdieu's, Coleman's and Putnam's social capital theories	
	Academic expectations	Boudon's and Goldthorpe's rational choice theory	
	Family economic structure	Bourdieu's, Coleman's, Putnam's, Boudon's and Goldthorpe's theories (see literary review)	
	Non-educational activities		

(Hernandez, 2007, p.8)

3.3 Criticisms of SER

SER has been criticised by a number of researchers on a variety of levels – from philosophical and moral to technical and empirical (Sammons, Thomas & Mortimore (1996). Pring (1995) argued that SER should not be viewed as part of educational research because, in his opinion, its assumption is not educational. More recently, critics have claimed that SER is underpinned by an ideology of social control, has a narrow and mechanistic view of educational outcomes and processes, fosters a culture of 'blaming' schools for failing their students, and downplays the importance of social class as a determinant of student achievement (Slee & Weiner, 2001, cited in Sammons, 2007).

Thrupp (2001), outlining criticisms of SER, summarised as follows: "SER is a socially and politically decontextualised body of literature which, wittingly or unwittingly, has provided support for the inequitable educational reform programs of neo-liberal and managerial governments." Rea and Weiner (1998) support this claim; when describing SER they stated that it pathologises and renders invisible the lived experiences of those studying and teaching in poorer areas. Although SER has its critics, it does support the belief that "schools do make a difference" and the factors outlined above resonate with the case-study school. However, although SER was used as a starting point for this research project, it was found to have limitations in its epistemological approach, in that it restricted the depth to which this research needed to reach. It was decided that School Improvement Research was more suited to the complexity of the school context and to an organically changing programme.

In the first cycle of the Student Engagement Programme (SEP), I adopted a positivist SER approach to my research. I would agree with the above criticisms of SER in that I found its focus to be narrow and mechanical in its approach to educational change that would enhance student outcomes. The SER approach did not enable me to determine why certain educational processes work. I found that this was because it ignored the "values and life experiences of the research participants" (Luyten, 2004). For a researcher searching for a way of alleviating educational disadvantage, it gave no meaning to the data being gathered. Therefore, it was determined that School Improvement Research provided a better strategy for educational change within the context of my school. The reasons for this are outlined below.

3.4   School Improvement Research (SIR)

As outlined, the School Improvement Research approach was adopted to meet the needs of this research; first, the desire to improve the life-chances of students attending a disadvantaged school in the vocational education sector, and, secondly, the concern that educational policy interventions and strategies being implemented to alleviate disadvantage in education were designed on the basis that 'one size fits all', and denied those working in the field of disadvantaged education the opportunity to modify national policy in an attempt to specifically tailor the intervention to meet the needs of the target group in a local context.

At one level, school improvement is a way for schools to achieve organisational development and growth. At another level, it has a moral purpose and is intrinsically linked to the life-chances and achievement of all students (Harris, 2002, p.18).

Hopkins (2001) sees school improvement as a distinct approach to educational change that aims to enhance student outcomes as well as strengthen a school's capacity for managing change. Supporting this, Barth (1990, p.45) defines school improvement as:

> an effort to determine and provide, from within and without, conditions under which the adults and youngsters who inhabit schools will promote and sustain learning among them.

Expanding on this concept, Hargreaves (1994) (whose argument was further developed by Hopkins, 2001) argued that change that takes place as a result of school-improvement practice should not be as a direct consequence of the implementation of policies, but rather that improvements are a result of practice that transforms the learning process to achieve maximum impact on students, teachers and schools.

Therefore, school improvement involves an element of reform and educational change, which can take various forms (Giroux & Schmidt, 2004). These reform efforts can be large-scale or small-scale, centralised or decentralised, externally initiated (by a centralised education body, or through international initiatives), or internally initiated (by a single school, school district or community). Most reform or school improvement efforts follow the agenda of some policy formulated either at the site of change (schools) or externally by policymakers (James, 2008). Not all advocates of school improvement would promote large-scale reform efforts or initiatives that are externally driven (Hopkins, 2001). Dalin et al (1994) state:

> Both local and central initiatives work. An innovative idea that starts locally, nationally or with external donors can succeed, if programmes meet the criteria of national commitment, local capacity building and linkage, in a configuration that makes sense for the particular country (p.252).

This understanding of 'local capacity building and linkage' shaped my thinking as an action researcher. Engagement with this concept guided the research and allowed me to problematise my own practice, by asking better questions. This led to the research focusing on the following set of key principles, which were used as a road map in the development of the SEP. They created 'the linkage' between the individual needs of the students and a whole-school improvement initiative. Supporting this concept of 'linkage', Green (1999) quotes Briggs (1992) in stating that "dynamical systems imply a holism in which everything influences, or potentially influences, everything else – because everything is in some sense constantly interacting with everything else" (p.21).

Hopkins (2001, p.18) summarises the key principles of school improvement and the relevant influences (see Table 3.2).

Table 3.2: The principles of authentic school improvement

Principles of authentic school improvement	Examples of theoretical, research, policy or practical influences on school improvement
Achievement-focused	The moral and social justice responsibility to enhance student learning, and the unrelenting focus on the quality of teaching and learning
Empowering in aspiration	The moral imperative of emancipation, and of increasing individual responsibility, the enhancement of skills and confidence in the tradition of Dewey, Freire & Stenhouse
Research-based and theory-rich	The use of teaching and learning and organisational development strategies with robust empirical support for the developing of a variety of curriculum and teaching programmes or models; and the location of the approach within a philosophical tradition, e.g. Critical Theory
Context-specific	The influence of contemporary school effectiveness research that points to the importance of context specificity and the fallacy of the 'one size fits all' change strategy
Capacity-building in nature	The necessity to ensure sustainability, the nurturing of professional learning communities, and the establishing of local infrastructure and networks
Enquiry-driven	The use of data to energise, inform and direct action; the influence of the 'reflective practitioner' ethic, and a commitment to active implementation
Implementation-oriented	The research on the management of change, in particular the importance of individual meaning, the consistency of classroom effects and the creation of a commitment to active implementation
Interventionist and strategic	The influence of 'Lewinian' Action Research and Organisation Development principles and strategies, and the contemporary emphasis on development planning
Externally supported	The centralisation/decentralisation polarity of most national educational policies places increasing emphasis on networking and external support agencies to facilitate implementation.
Systemic	This relates not just to the need to accept political realities, but also to ensure policy coherence horizontally and vertically, and the use of pressure and support to exploit the creativity and synergies within the system.

Hopkins (2001) does not intend the above table to be understood as a list of discrete projects that schools might undertake, but as an overall approach to putting in place the "enabling conditions" that schools need to establish to improve student learning. Chapman (2005) found that large-scale and externally driven reform can work, provided that a set of conditions, such as those indicated in the categories listed in the table, are in place, and

that the reform effort takes the singular context and cultural capacities of the school into consideration, and does not treat schools as homogeneous.

3.5   Effective School Improvement

School effectiveness research and theory can provide insights and knowledge to be used in school improvement. School improvement is a powerful tool for testing theories. It can also provide new insights and new possibilities for effective school factors and conditions (Creemers et al, 2007). For the purpose of implementing effective change in Glenmore Community College, it was necessary to adapt both the theory of school effectiveness research (SER) and that of school improvement research (SIR) to attain maximum benefit in the changes made in the school. Advocates of both theories have generally taken a righteous stance on the merits of their chosen theory; however, in recent times, there is a tendency to combine the two theories in an attempt to increase school effectiveness (Gray et al, 1999; Macbeath & Mortimore, 2001; Reynolds, Teddlie, Hopkins & Stringfield, 2000).

Originally, the school effectiveness movement linked theory and empirical research relating to educational effectiveness and the improvement of education (Creemers, Stoll & Reezigt, 2007). Creemers and Reezigt (1997) identified intrinsic differences between school effectiveness research, which ultimately is a programme for research, with its focus on theory and explanation, and school improvement research, which is a programme for innovation focusing on change and problem-solving in educational practice.

In the context of the merger between the two paradigms, Creemers et al (2007) saw school effectiveness as involving simple application of school effectiveness knowledge of 'what works' in education, to support school improvement. In the early stages of school improvement, this application of school effectiveness knowledge was seen as simplistic, mechanistic and ineffective. According to school improvement theory, schools have to design and invent their own solutions for specific problems and improvement in general. Nevertheless, researchers such as Creemers and Reezigt (1997) and Reynolds, Hopkins and Stoll (1993) argued for greater linkage between school effectiveness and school improvement, for the common good. In more recent times, there has been cooperation between school effectiveness and school improvement in an attempt to establish strong links between the two paradigms so that each can benefit from the other's strongest points (Creemers et al, 2007).

Applying these two theories in this research project provided a starting point for issues for reflection. As the project progressed, educational practice in Glenmore Community School was examined. This clarified which factors and conditions promoted or indeed hindered

effective school improvement in the school, whereas traditional improvement research often excludes the educational context (Creemers et al, 2007). The analysis resulted in the implementation and modification of those factors and conditions that were deemed important for effective school improvement at the school throughout the action research process.

3.6   Socio-Economically Disadvantaged Schools

The setting for this research is a socio-economically disadvantaged school, so it is imperative to examine school improvement literature relevant to this environment. There is a number of perspectives from which we can understand the dynamics of school improvement in socio-economically disadvantaged schools.

Contingency theory, according to Creemers et al (2000), states that what makes an organisation effective is dependent on situational factors (contingency factors). Both internal and external to the organisation, these factors can be varied and include the complexity of the environment and the age of the organisation. Creemers et al state that one of the most influential factors in relation to a school is its socio-economic context. According to contingency theory, a school must identify what 'best fits' its internal organisation, policies and practices, and the actual contingency factors that arise on a regular basis.

Another theory on improving schools in a socio-economically disadvantaged context is the compensatory model (Teddlie, Stringfield & Reynolds, 2000). It suggests that, because of the problems that face students from disadvantaged backgrounds, schools in disadvantaged areas must compensate for lack of resources in the pupils' homes. Teddlie et al (2000) argue that schools need to go through a two-phase process in order for improvement to happen. First, basic needs, such as an orderly environment and high expectations, need to be met; secondly, structural improvement focused on more systemic and long-term processes are required. The compensatory model also suggests that staff working in low-SES schools need to work harder to get the necessary results.

The most critical of the theoretical perspectives is that of the hypothesis of additivity of school and background factor effects. This theory argues that, after controlling for student background factors, low-SES schools still do worse than those in middle and high SES contexts (Reynolds & Teddlie, 2000). The additivity hypothesis suggests that schools in more difficult circumstances are more likely to be ineffective and to reinforce social

disadvantage. Reasons for this that they outlined include difficulty in the recruitment of quality teachers and the fact that flaws in the school support structure become more apparent in high-stress and pressure situations.

These theories are not mutually compatible, but offer different perspectives when looking at school improvement in socio-economically disadvantaged contexts. The related literature made it possible to understand the difficulties that low-SES schools experience. This helped to ensure that, in this research project, I remained alert to the situational and contextual factors of Glenmore Community School. One of the most significant outcomes of this research project has been the impact of linking the 'student voice' to the 'whole-school vision'. In the following section, I will identify the importance of this when attempting to successfully implement a change initiative in a school.

3.7   The Student Voice

Fullan stated: "Education has a moral purpose ... to make a difference in the lives of students regardless of background, and to help produce citizens who can live and work productively in increasingly dynamic complex societies" (1993, p.4). He expanded by suggesting that "the moral purpose of school should include facilitating critical enculturation, providing access to knowledge, building an effective teacher-student connection, and practicing of good stewardship" (p.8-9). Therefore, at the centre of meaningful change initiatives in schools are students, whose voices have long been silenced (Fletcher, 2005). Through this involvement, the school improvement can be positive and meaningful for everyone involved (Fletcher, 2004). Yet many children from lower socio-economic backgrounds are denied the opportunity of having their voice heard and find themselves placed at risk of failure by school practices. These practices may be described as a form of sorting paradigm whereby some students are placed within a category of high-expectation teaching and learning, leading to careers as professionals, while others are placed in a category of lower-expectation teaching and learning, with less emphasis being placed on promoting their employment potential.

The main driver of the current research was to change what seemed to be the natural progression of students in my school into low-grade employment. As a method of changing this situation, disadvantaged students were given a voice through participation in a student engagement programme (SEP) that students helped to design, implement and modify. This was an attempt to alleviate the educational disadvantage being

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experienced by them and their fellow students, and to improve their well-being and increase their life-chances.

The concept of 'student voice' was defined by Fielding (2008) as the practice of "listening purposefully and respectfully to young people in the context of formal schooling" (2008:2). Johnson et al (2001) use the term 'learner voice': "Learner voice is about considering the perspectives and ideas of learners, respecting what everyone has to say, taking risks, sharing, listening, engaging and working together in partnership". Rudd (2007:8), in his later research, defined 'learner voice' as "empowering learners by providing appropriate ways of listening to their concerns, interests and needs in order to develop educational experiences better suited to those individuals". For the purpose of this thesis, 'learner voice' is an amalgam of these three definitions, which includes empowering students, giving them a voice and giving them some involvement in the life of the school. McAteer (2013) wrote of "the unusually unplanned and serendipitously discovered literature that causes a moment of insight or illumination" (p.91). Learning about this concept of the 'student voice' was such a moment for this researcher, and led to it being applied in a highly active way.

There is a vast amount of evidence (including Fletcher, 2008; Rudduck & Flutter, 2004; Rubin & Silva, 2003; Evans, Forney, Guido, Patton & Renn, 2010) showing the benefits of meaningful student involvement, yet it is also well documented that students are continuously neglected and at times actively denied any role in their school's improvement programmes (Fletcher, 2005). Paulo Freire argued that "learning must be rooted in the experiences that students come from". Many national policies and practices currently being implemented in schools are still neglecting to engage students, either at local or national level, in school improvement initiatives. In the more recent past the new guidelines for School Self-Evaluation (SSE) and the Whole School Evaluation (WSE-MML) do include the 'student voice'.

Fullan (2001) noted that "people think of students as the potential beneficiaries of change. They think of achievement, results, skills, attitudes, and the need for various improvements for the good of the children. They rarely think of students as participants in a process of change" (p.13). This view is supported by Fletcher (2005, p.10): "traditionally, the pupil's role within school has been a passive one". Flutter and Ruddock (2004, p.14) highlighted that pupils are "regarded as consumers or products of educational provision rather than active participants". However, Fletcher argued that, when students are engaged as "active participants" in educational change, they become crucial in the success of school improvement (Fletcher, 2005). Fletcher also argued that "research

shows that when educators work with students in schools – as opposed to working for them – school improvement is positive and meaningful for everyone involved" (Fletcher, 2005). So essentially in the past there has been a tendency not to involve students actively in the process of development and change.

Evidence from the literature suggests that the alternative strategy is better. In both a national and global context, there is much emphasis on the importance of engaging young people in what affects them. These include findings from the biennial (Irish) State of the Nation's Children report and a range of national and international legislative measures and surveys, such as the Educational Welfare Act 2000, the government-funded Growing Up in Ireland longitudinal survey; the establishment of the Department of Children and Youth Affairs, with a mandate to put in place a unified framework of policy, legislation and provision across government in respect of children and young people (Ireland, 2012); the recommendations of the 2009 Report of the Commission to Inquire into Child Abuse (the 'Ryan Report'), including the Children First: National Guidance, and more recently, the insertion of a new article in the Constitution that directly deals with children and their "fundamental rights". In the global context, the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child clearly outlines the need to respect and support the rights and responsibilities of children. Article 12 states that "parties shall assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child". This implies that learners should not just be listened to when they comment on what has been decided for them, but – in the educational context – be active participants in negotiating the form, content and organisation of their education. This emphasis on involving the young person is not just focused on education but extends into health, social services, the environment and the private sector, where young people are seen as consumers in an important new market (Czerniawski, 2009).

Even with our current policies, practice and legislative procedures, our education system is one in which learners have little or no involvement in determining or changing the shape, form and content of their education. It is arguable that high levels of disengagement and disaffection from learning result. Research indicates that there is a need to change this model of provision to a model in which learners are engaged as 'co-designers' of their own educational experience (Rudd et al, 2006).

This type of approach is radical. It ensures an empowering experience for learners, and facilitates a change from formal and traditional methods of consultation, which have in general excluded students, to a new and progressive model wherein learners have

ownership, responsibility and management powers (Rudd, 2007). In this new approach, alternative methods of listening to learners are embraced, and schools will inform, consult, involve, collaborate with and empower their pupils. However, there must be an understanding that learner voice is not a single voice; students do not share the same opinions, and will often prioritise different issues when their views are asked for (Czerniawski et al, 2009).

To move successfully in the direction of a more 'personalised' education system that current legislation is advocating, the main focus must be on "putting the learner at the centre", as "a partner in learning, not just a passive recipient". By fully engaging the learner, Fielding (2004) believes, educational institutions will:

- Become learning organisations with a clearer identity and a distinct ethos of reciprocal learning
- Help to develop an agenda for change with which learners can identity (early learner commitment and focusing change in the right places will save time)
- Develop teaching and learning as a partnership with learners, which will lead to improvements

Rudd (2007) identifies five main benefits of embedding the learner voice in school improvement:

- Deeper engagement with learning
- Improved meta-cognitive skills
- Greater responsibility among both learners and staff
- Making education for learners more democratic, empowering and engaging

Rudd (2007) suggests that education should be reshaped around the needs of the learner, rather than the learner conforming to the system. Failure to engage with learners in the education process risks students' disengagement and disillusion about their educational experiences (Czerniawski, 2009). In contrast, when students have a voice and an influence on decisions and outcomes, they are more likely to participate and to learn through participation (Smyth, 2006). According to research by Fielding (2004), when listened to, the learner feels that their views are taken seriously, which makes them feel more respected; is better placed to see how their views are translated into positive outcomes for their learning and the educational establishment, and is more inclined to reflect and discuss learning, which should help to improve the tools to influence what, where and when they learn. This view is supported by Hargreaves who says the learner

voice is "the most powerful lever" for personalised education. This will require a change in relationships between schools, teachers and learners.

To achieve this vision, the learner voice needs to become embedded and should be a central and fundamental feature of all education institutions (Rudd et al, 2006). There is a need, therefore, to move towards a "new cultural attitude" supported by a range of approaches and methods to bring about personalised education (Rudd et al, 2006; Leadbeater, 2004). Hargreaves says the student voice must not merely be an "add-on" but be viewed as a "gateway to change". He suggests that "student voice" is one of nine "interconnected gateways" for bringing about a more personalised learning and teaching situation. These nine gateways are as follows: curriculum; learning to learn; workforce development; assessment for learning; school organisation and design; new technologies; student voice; advice and guidance; mentoring.

The 'student voice' became central to this research project. It was on it that the design, modification and implementation of all components of the SEP were based.

3.8   Meaningful Student Involvement

'Learner voice' implies not just the development of a range of methods and a culture of regular engagement and co-design around educational practices that empower students as a whole. Questionnaires, interviews, surveys, formal and informal consultation, focus groups, opinion polls, discussion groups and so forth are just a few of the potentially useful methods for gathering the opinions of learners. The more learners can be involved in collecting data, organising themselves and setting the agendas and areas to be explored and discussed, the deeper the level of engagement (Rudd et al, 2006). Ireland is on the verge of embarking on this type of whole-system involvement of students, as part of the School Self-Evaluation (SSE) initiative currently being rolled out in schools (Department of Education and Skills, 2012).

Alfie Kohn, an expert in human behaviour, parenting and education proposes that meaningful student involvement in school decision-making has four distinct outcomes affecting the school climate:

1. **Effects on general well-being.** It's good for all people to experience a sense of control over their lives.

2. **Effects on behaviour and values**. If we want children to take responsibility for their own behaviour, we must first give them responsibility, and plenty of it.

3. **Effects on academic achievement**. Students who feel empowered through self-determination will likely have greater motivation.

4. **Effects on teachers.** Educators who are willing to share power may well find that they benefit directly as one's job becomes a good deal more interesting when it involves collaborating with students to decide what is going to happen.

From these four points, it is clear that there is a whole-school benefit to student involvement in decision-making. This involvement has the added benefit of readying students for a lifetime of participation in their communities and nation (Fletcher, 2005). Therefore, Fletcher (2005) proposes that "meaningful student involvement is the process of engaging students as partners in every facet of school change for the purpose of strengthening their commitment to education, community and democracy" (p.5).

An issue raised in the literature relating to this involvement is the tokenism factor. Cook-Sather (2002) suggests that "instead of allowing adults to tokenize a contrived 'student voice' by inviting one student to a meeting, meaningful student involvement continuously acknowledges the diversity of students by validating and authorizing them to represent their own ideas, opinions, knowledge, and experiences throughout education in order to improve our schools".

To overcome the tokenistic approach commonly adopted in schools, Fletcher (2005) advocates that a "Cycle of Meaningful Student Involvement" be adhered to so that "student participation is transformed from passive, disconnected activities into a process promoting student achievement and school improvement" (p.5). This is a continuous five-step process and can be used to assess current activities, or to plan future programmes. Student participation through the SEP created an environment where it was possible for students to take control of their lives. Through this engagement they were supported to make personal decisions with regard to their academic and personal development.

Figure 3.1: Cycle of Meaningful Student Involvement

1. Listen – The first step, for the ideas, knowledge, experience and opinions of students to be shared with adults.

2. Validate – Students are acknowledged as purposeful and significant partners who can and should hold themselves and their schools accountable.

3. Authorize – Students develop their abilities to meaningfully contribute to school improvement through skill-sharing, action planning and strategic participation.

4. Mobilize – Students and adults take action together as partners in school improvement through a variety of methods.

5. Reflect – Together, adults and students examine what they have learned through creating, implementing, and supporting meaningful student involvement, including the benefits and challenges. Reflections are then used to inform Step 1, Listen.

Individually, these steps may currently be taken in schools, but they are rarely connected with measures for school improvement, and, to an even lesser extent, connected with one another. The connection of all the steps in a cycle, Fletcher argues, is what makes partnerships between students and adults meaningful, effective and sustainable.

Flecher (2005) identifies the elements that are consistently identified in schools where there are high levels of meaningful student involvement, as shown in Table 3.3:
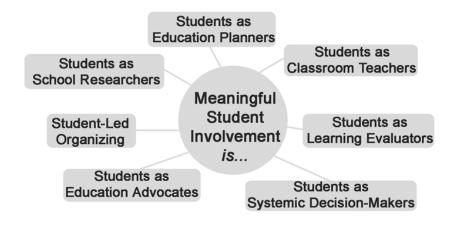
Table 3.3: Elements of meaningful student involvement

School-wide approaches	All students in all grades are engaged in education system-wide planning, research, teaching, evaluation, decision-making, and advocacy.
High levels of student authority	Students' ideas, knowledge, opinions and experience are validated and authorised through adult acknowledgement of students' ability to improve schools.
Interrelated strategies	Students are incorporated into ongoing, sustainable school improvement activities in the form of learning, teaching and leadership in schools.
Sustainable structures of support	Policies and procedures are created and amended to promote meaningful student involvement throughout the school.
Personal commitment	Students and adults acknowledge their mutual investment, dedication and benefit, visible in learning, relationships, practices, policies and school culture.
Strong learning connections	Classroom learning and student involvement are connected by classroom credit, ensuring relevancy for educators and significance to students.

Source: Fletcher, 2005. Meaningful Student Involvement, p.6

To ensure that progress is made in reaching all students, schools need to promote transparent, engaging relationships between adults and students in schools, and involve young people in designing, implementing, assessing, advocating and making decisions about education. When this is done, students become partners, allies and companions in school improvement (Fletcher, 2005). Figure 3.2 outlines what Meaningful Student Involvement is and how it can be incorporated into the daily lives of students:

Figure 3.2: Students as partners in school change

Source: Fletcher (2005)

The added benefit to the student is that "meaningful student involvement promotes academic achievement, supportive learning environments, and lifelong civic engagement" (Fletcher, 2005). Supporting this, as the SEP evolved, students started to show greater self-esteem, self-respect, confidence and competence, more trust in adults, better relationships with peers and teachers, a greater sense of responsibility in taking increased control over aspects of their lives, better social inclusion, better understanding of decision-making processes, and a sense of fun and enjoyment. All of these features were identified in the research as evidence of increased engagement. Students and pupils may also gain practical skills such as public speaking, time management and convening and running meetings (Czerniawski et al, 2009).

3.9   Schools as Learning Organisations – a Possible Answer

School improvement research leads to the development of the context of the school as a learning organisation. Researchers such as Senge et al (2000) argue that solving the problem of educational disadvantage in a learning organisation "means involving everyone in the system in expressing their aspiration, building their awareness, and developing their capabilities together". In a school that is learning, people who traditionally "may have been suspicious of one another – parents and teachers, educators and local business people, administrators and union members, people inside and outside the school walls, students and adults –recognise their common stake in the future of the school system and the things they can learn from one another" (p.5). Therefore, if the student voice is to be encouraged, schools as learning organisations must accommodate it fully. Senge (1990) proposes that we must "destroy the illusion that the world is created of separate, unrelated forces" and then we can begin building "learning organisations", which he defines as: "organisations where people continually expand their capacity to create the results they truly desire, where new and expansive patterns of thinking are nurtured, where collective aspiration is set free, and where people are continually learning how to learn together" (p.3).

Senge (1990) says that a learning organisation is essentially "an organisation that is continually expanding its capacity to create its future" (p.14) and identifies five disciplines for fostering a learning organisation. He believes that each provides a "vital dimension" in building an organisation that can truly "learn", and will enhance its capacity to realise its highest aspirations. These five disciplines are: systems thinking, personal mastery, mental models, shared vision, and team learning.

1. Systems Thinking

Systems thinking can be used as a tool for change agents in educational environments. Senge (1990) observed that "we tend to focus on snapshots of isolated parts of the system, and wonder why our deepest problems never seem to get solved" (p.7). He outlines "a conceptual framework ... to make the full pattern clearer, and to help us see how to change them effectively" (p.7). He proposes that "in any effort to foster schools that learn, changes will make a difference only if they take place at ... three levels" ((2002, p.11):

    (i)   the learning classroom (teachers, students and parents) (p.12)

    (ii)   the learning school (school leaders, principals, superintendents, school board members, and representatives of higher education) (p.14)

    (iii)   the learning community (community members and other lifelong learners) (p.16)

In support of this, Fullan (2001a) describes an educational system as a "living system". He applies four principles to "living systems": equilibrium as the precursor to death, the edge of chaos as a source for new solutions, self-organisation as a source of emergent solutions, and disturbance as a more reliable tool for change than direction (pp.108-109). Fullan (2001a) explains how change is a leader's friend, but it has a split personality; its nonlinear messiness gets change agents into trouble. Expanding on the four principles of a living system, he explains that when a living system is in a state of equilibrium, it is less responsive to change occurring around it. This, he believes, places it at maximum risk. Additionally, when faced with threat, or when galvanised by a compelling opportunity, living things move toward the edge of chaos. This condition evokes higher levels of mutation and experimentation, and fresh new solutions are more likely to be found. He argued that, when this excitation takes place, the various parts of living systems self-organise and new forms and repertoires emerge from the turmoil. Finally, he believes that living systems cannot be directed along a linear path and that unforeseen consequences are inevitable. The challenge for all agents of change is to disturb them in a manner that approximates the desired outcome.

Within this framework, Senge (1990) outlines the laws of systems thinking (p.57), which serve as essential reminders to educational change agents as they embark on change. They include: "the harder you push, the harder the system pushes back" (p.58), "the easy way out usually leads back in" (p.60), "faster is slower" (p.62), and "small changes can produce big results – but the areas of highest leverage are often the least obvious" (p.63). Elaborating on change agents in the context of larger-scale situations, Senge (1990)

identifies system archetypes "where certain patterns of structure recur again and again, suggesting that not all management problems are unique, something that experienced managers know intuitively" (p.94). He outlines these concepts as: limits to growth (p.95), shifting the burden (p.104), reinforcing processes (p.84), balancing processes (p.86), and delays (p.91). At times when looking at the individual context of each student experiencing marginalisation, it was important for me as a practitioner to return and focus on a whole-school approach to the alleviation of educational disadvantage in order to determine the dynamics of relationships and practice within the whole-school setting. Through recognition of student needs, as a community we began to source solutions. The school thus became, as described by Fullan (2001a), a "living system"; this created synergy as the whole-school vision opened up a pathway for the change process to meet the needs of the organisation in a localised context.

2. Personal Mastery

Senge (1990) identified personal mastery as "the discipline of continually clarifying and deepening our personal vision, of focusing our energies, of developing patience, and of seeing reality objectively" (p.7). The primary source of organisational change is individual change. Senge (1990) notes that an organisation's commitment to and capacity for learning can be "no greater than that of its members" and that "small, well-focused actions can sometimes produce significant, enduring improvements". Therefore, the greatest "leverage" that an educational organisation can have is its people. Senge clarifies this in saying that "organisations learn only through individuals who learn. Individual learning does not guarantee organisational learning. But without it no organisational learning occurs" (p.141). Senge suggests that we must start by "clarifying the things that really matter to us, [and] living our lives in the service of our highest aspirations" (p.8). He outlines a number of practices and principles that are vital in our attempt at personal mastery, including personal vision (p.147), holding creative tension between current realities and personal vision (p.150), commitment to the truth, with particular focus on current reality (p.159), and the use of the subconscious (p.161).

Senge (1990) includes systems thinking as a fundamental part of personal mastery. He lists important elements of this as: integrating reason and intuition (p.167), seeing our connectedness to the world (p.169), compassion (p.171), and commitment to the whole (p.171). He often refers to the insights held by the "experienced manager" (e.g. p.94) and how this experience can be used for "effective judgement" (p.95), but indicates that managers need to be self-aware; "people with a high level of personal mastery are acutely aware of their ignorance, their incompetence, their growth areas" (p.142).

From an educational perspective, Senge (2000) sees teachers as "coaches in personal mastery for students" (p.59) and writes that "the epitome of personal mastery in the classroom is helping children to decipher their passions, to explore whether they believe these are possible, and to nurture their courage to delve into it, without judging them right or wrong" (p.111). Using the SEP as a vehicle, whereby the teachers at Glenmore Community School could exercise their 'personal mastery' to assist students experiencing marginalisation, created a more student-focused culture in the school.

3. Mental Models

Senge (1990) explains the concept of mental models in terms of "deeply ingrained assumptions, generalisations, or even pictures or images that influence how we understand the world and how we take action" (p.8). People involved in change effort, and especially those involved in learning such as students and teachers, must possess the ability to question the mental models of themselves and those within their organisation who are driving the change effort. Senge states that "the discipline of working with mental models starts with turning the mirror inward; learning to unearth our internal pictures of the world, to bring them to the surface and hold them rigorously to scrutiny" (p.9). Unexamined mental models can limit people's ability to change; "in any new experience, most people are drawn to take in and remember only the information that reinforces their existing mental models". He adds that "most of our mental models are systematically flawed. They miss critical feedback relationships, misjudge time delays, and often focus on variables that are visible or salient, not necessarily high leverage" (p.203). The challenge of this project was to essentially transform the current mental model of students and promote a new, reconceptualised mental model that would encourage their engagement in school and in their own education. Fullan (1993) believed that organisational change starts with personal learning, stating that "personal purpose and vision are the starting agenda. It comes from within, it gives meaning to work, and it exists independent of the particular organisation or group we happen to be in". Through their participation in the SEP both the teachers and students began to change their current 'mental models' of Glenmore Community School and their life and roles within it.

4. Building Shared Vision

This mental model and generating of meaning is predicated on the creation of 'shared vision' for learning and achievement in school. Shared visions emerge from personal visions [and] organisations intent on building shared visions continually encourage members to develop their personal visions" (Senge, 1990, p.211). This shared vision provides direction and driving power for change, and criteria for steering and choosing for

decision making (Miles ,1987). When shared vision is genuine, people excel and learn, not because they are told to, but because they want to (Senge, 1990).

A starting point is dialogue and the generation of pictures of the future. This dialogue is the basis for the fostering of genuine commitment and enrolment rather than compliance (Senge, 1990). Cultural change in essential at the heart of this process according to Tuohy (2008), who cites Starratt (1993), who argued that examining a school's culture is like "peeling an onion"; as you delve into the operations and structures of the school, new levels of meaning are discovered. At the centre of the onion you find the core beliefs and assumptions. Tuohy highlights what Starratt calls "the myth of education". At the heart of this is what the school regards as good education and good schooling, embracing good teaching and learning, as well as success and failure. Supporting Starratt's assumptions, Tuohy (2008) highlights the consequences where a school has no core vision or myth; regardless of the programmes and policies in place, it can quickly become fragmented, and energy is drained, leading to burnout. However, where a school engages in "reflection on experience" (operations, organisation, programmes) and is linked to its "core set of beliefs", this gives energy to the different actions and thus "a new way of expressing the vision of the school" – a vision that is more coherent and one from which [all members of the school community can benefit]" (p.23). This theory guided me in listening to the 'student voice' and addressing their needs. Through this process, we as a community in practice were able to communicate the vision of the school.

5. Team Learning

Senge (1990) warns that "if people do not share a common vision, and do not share common 'mental models' about the … reality within which they operate, empowering people will only increase organisational stress and the burden of management to maintain coherence and direction". The practice that creates the link between personal learning and shared visions is team learning. Senge says "the discipline of team learning starts with 'dialogue' where the members in the team no longer generate assumptions but participate in genuine 'thinking together'" (p.10). Team learning is a "collective discipline" (p.237) which requires continuous "practice" (p.238). He believes that team learning involves insightfully thinking about complex issues, innovative coordinated action, and dialogue and discussion. More recent literature actively supports developing collaborative work cultures in the development of vision in schools. This reduces the "professional isolation of teachers, allowing for the codification and sharing of successful practices and the provision

of support" (p.85). Some decades ago, Cohen (1988) stressed the potential of working together and that this collaborative process has the effect of "raising morale and enthusiasm, opening the door to experimentation and increased sense of efficacy". In attempting to explain this phenomenon, Peters and Waterman (1982) stated: "Nothing is more enticing than the feeling of being needed, which is the magic that produces high expectation. What's more, if it's your peers that have those high expectations of you, then there's all the more incentive to perform well" (p.240). Fullan (2001b) noted that "professional development is not about workshops and courses; rather, it is at its heart the development of habits or learning that are far more likely to be powerful if they present themselves day after day" (p.253). These habits of successful collaborative cultures, he said, include fostering diversity while trust-building, provoking anxiety and then containing it, engaging in knowledge creation, combining connectedness with open-endedness, and even fusing the spiritual, political and intellectual (Fullan, 1999, p.37). However, Evans, supporting the collaborative development of vision, notes that shared vision statements often fail because of "length, fragmentation, and impracticality – not to mention clichés" (Evans, 1996, p.208). He outlined an organisational dysfunction called "processitis" where the organisation has "a preoccupation with procedure and interaction that affects many self-governing groups" (p.239). Collaboration, Fullan (1993) says, "is not automatically a good thing" (p.82); "unless one understands deeply why and how collaboration functions to make a difference it is of little use" (Fullan, 1999, p.40); without focus and moral purpose, collaboration is little more than what has been called "coblaboration" (co-blab-oration) (Fullan, 2005). This theory of 'team learning' assisted in the creation of a collaborative process within Glenmore Community School to address the needs of the students.

As described by Boldt (2012), the literature studied for this action research project assisted me to "systematically map out the field, identify what is known, not known, or controversial" (p.8). This helped me in clarifying my research questions and establishing the theoretical framework. This research project is informed by two complementary theories: critical theory, which supports the framework of action research (which will be discussed in the next chapter) and Bourdieuian Cultural Reproduction theory, which scaffolds the aims of SEP, as discussed in Chapter 5. However, in order to establish the contextual factors affecting students at Glenmore Community School, it was important to review the role of education in society, and how the educational system works, and consider the relevance of other theoretical perspectives on education such as symbolic interactionist, rational choice, and the functionalist perspective in association with conflict theory.

The literature informs us that educational disadvantage is a complex phenomenon; no one definition can precisely define its nature and characteristics. Understanding the many facets of educational disadvantage and how it permeates all aspects of a child's life allows us to investigate ways to alleviate the disadvantage experienced by students. Reading outside the area of educational disadvantage allowed me to fully appreciate the implications that contextual factors have for students experiencing educational disadvantage. I found that, through my somewhat eclectic approach to the literature, my thinking developed and I developed greater clarity of thought. Green (1999) expresses this point when she states, "I would want to argue that good action research demands that we show a willingness to step outside our usual frames of reference, that we question our habitual ways of seeing and that we constantly seek out fresh perspectives on the familiar" (p. 121).

Evidence indicates that addressing educational disadvantage requires whole-school and external support to accommodate the needs of students. Reviewing the Irish educational system and its role in cultural reproduction allows us to understand how education transmits social inequality from one generation to another. A review of the various explanations of the origins of educational disadvantage and government responses to it has shown that programmes in the past lacked focus in that they did not specifically address the individual needs of students experiencing disadvantage; they were burdened with managerial constraints and did not have the freedom at either the local or system level to develop programmes to address the needs of students; also they lacked flexibility and were not able to adapt to the changing needs of the students over time. During this research project attention was focused on whole-school interventions that are focused on individual students. This placed mainstream curricular interventions such as Junior Certificate Support Programmes (JCSP) and Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA) beyond the focus of the study. Regarding addressing individual needs, more recent School Improvement Research initiatives (Fielding, 2008; Rudd, 2007; Czerniawski, 2009; Smyth, 2006), as discussed, show us that it is vital that the student voice be placed at the centre and aligned with the whole-school vision in order to gain insights into ways of achieving organisational development and growth and ensuring that individual change is intrinsically linked to organisational change. As a consequence, the life-chances of the students are improved through increased participation and engagement in school.

As this research project was based within my own school it would be naive of me to think that I was not at times emotional in my response to the literature under review. My rational thinking at times was affected by my emotional response to the literature under review. This tendency was highlighted by Reason and Torbet (2001) when they observed that "all

knowing is based on the feeling, thinking, attending experiential presence of persons in their world" (p. 7).

As an action researcher aware that action research is theory-generative, rather than theory-testing (McAteer, 2013), I needed to allow the research to evolve and avoid rigid planning. However, engaging with the literature assisted in guiding and shaping the study, design and analysis (McAteer, 2013, p. 92).

Finally, Green (1999) observes, when discussing the appropriateness of the chosen literature within a research project, that decisions on its relevance "can only be made in light of the *use made of it" (p.122)*. In determining the pertinence of literature for this research project, I took note of Green's point (1999):

> "Knowledge about our practice as teachers is something we construct rather than find and it cuts across traditional disciplinary boundaries. It seems to me that action research would be strengthened by encouraging researchers to draw on *any* literature that supports them in seeing their practice with fresh eyes, in challenging the assumptions they bring to their practice, and in helping them to both articulate and critique the values they bring to their practice (p.123).

In the next chapter I will outline the literature that helped to establish the particular methodological approaches of action research, and guided me in my project.

Chapter 4: Methodology

4.1 Introduction

This chapter will look at the methodology used to examine the impact of localised policy intervention to increase the life-chances of children in a disadvantaged vocational secondary school. It uses a transformative paradigm in order to understand the conditions that enabled this intervention and the factors that promoted its success, and that are transferable to other interventions. This inquiry also examines the nature of interpretation and seeks to understand how the inquirer's experience affects understanding of the phenomenon being examined – in this case, the complex phenomenon of the alleviation of educational disadvantage.

First, I hoped not just to find answers to my research questions but that through my research journey I would formulate an approach to empirical research which would reflect the advances made within emancipatory theory-building, and that this project would empower my students experiencing educational disadvantage. Secondly, I hoped to understand what was going on in my school in terms of reproduction of social inequality, and to gain insights into such conditions, so that my findings would assist in the formulation of future interventions aimed at the alleviation of educational disadvantage.

4.2 Action Research

The decision to use Action Research (AR) was motivated by a desire to give students, who were targeted through the School Completion Programme and were experiencing marginalisation and educational disadvantage, a forum to have their voice heard and be change agents in their own life-course. It was also a means to investigate the impact of students as participants in an intervention aimed at overcoming marginalisation and educational disadvantage. Educational academics and researchers would most likely identify SEP as being informed by critical theory. For emancipation to occur, it is important that critical theory use the research methodologies that enable this to happen (Hooley, 2002). Action research contributes greatly to educational reform and offers a framework for critical education research "because it challenges the body-mind divide that has fractured 'Western' conceptions of what it means to be human since the Enlightenment" (Somekh & Zeichner, 2009, p.6). Somekh and Zeichner state that, in the globalised world of the 21st century, and because of "the boundary crossing nature of action research", it is "a particularly well-suited methodology for educational transformation" (2009, p.6). Greenwood and Levin (2000, p.94) believe that action research can provide a means of

"crossing the boundary between academia and society as a basic principle of operation". Appadurai (2001, p.1-20) notes the need to create a "new form of dialogue" between policy-makers, activists and academics, while Rizvi (2006, p.195), expanding on Appadurai's concept of "social imaginary", states that "in all communities there is "a collective sense of agency" that reorders and localises ideas and policies that "travel through time and space" (p.200).

Since its inception, action research has been adopted by many as an approach to educational reform. The fundamental difference of action research as a strategy within the transformative paradigm is that it brings with it "a democratic imperative to challenge oppression and nurture and sustain social justice" (Somekh & Zeichner, 2009, p.6). In the setting of Glenmore Community School, action research as a methodology is, to use the phrase of Somekh and Zeichner (2009, p.6), "grounded in the values and culture of its participant-researchers and as such is flexible to local agency". This gives impetus to action research in that those who may be designated as 'subjects' should participate directly in the research processes and those processes should be applied in ways that are of direct benefit to all participants. Elaborating on the empowering and emancipatory characteristics of action research, McTaggart (1989) listed 16 tenets of Action Research, stating that it:

- Seeks to improve social practice by changing it
- Requires authentic participation
- Is collaborative
- Establishes self-critical communities
- Is a systematic process of learning
- Involves people in theorising about their own practices and values
- Requires people to test their own assumptions, values, ideas and practices in real-life practice
- Requires records to be kept
- Requires participants to look at their own experiences objectively
- Is part of a political process (e.g. towards democracy)
- Involves people in making critical analyses of a situation, research and practice
- Starts small
- Starts in small cycles
- Starts with small groups of people
- Requires and allows participants to build evidential records of practice, theory and reflection

- Requires and allows participants to provide a reasoned justification to others for their work

Kemmis and McTaggart (2000) refined the above by listing three particular attributes of action research as:

- Shared ownership of research projects
- Community-based analysis of social problems
- Orientation towards community action

Winter (1989) suggests that what gives action research its unique flavour is the set of six principles that guide the research, defined as follows:

1.   Reflexive critique

An account of a situation, such as notes, transcripts or official documents, will render implicit claims authoritative, i.e. showing them to be factual and true. Truth in a social setting, however, is relative to the teller. The principle of reflexive critique ensures that people reflect on issues and processes and make explicit the interpretations, biases, assumptions and concerns upon which judgments are made.

2.   Dialectical critique

Reality, particularly social reality, is consensually validated, which is to say it is shared through language. The dialectical method is dialogue between two or more people holding different points of view about a subject, who wish to establish the truth of the matter by dialogue, with reasoned arguments. Dialectics is different from debate, wherein the debaters are committed to their points of view, and seek to win the debate, either by persuading the opponent, proving their argument correct, or proving the opponent's argument incorrect. The key elements to focus attention on are those constituent elements that are unstable, or in opposition to one another. These are the ones that are most likely to create changes.

3.   Collaborative resource

Participants in an action research project are co-researchers. The principle of collaborative resource presupposes that each person's ideas are equally significant as potential resources for creating interpretive categories of analysis, negotiated among the

participants. It strives to avoid the skewing of credibility stemming from the prior status of an idea-holder. It especially makes possible the insights gleaned from noting the contradictions both between many viewpoints and within a single viewpoint.

4. Risk

The change process potentially threatens all previously established ways of doing things, thus creating psychic fears among the practitioners. One of the more prominent fears comes from the risk to ego stemming from open discussion of one's interpretations, ideas and judgments. Initiators of action research will use this principle to allay others' fears and invite participation by pointing out that they, too, will be subject to the same process, and that whatever the outcome, learning will take place.

5. Plural structure

The nature of the research embodies a multiplicity of views, commentaries and critiques, leading to multiple possible actions and interpretations. This plural structure of inquiry requires a plural text for reporting. This means that there will be many accounts made explicit, with commentaries on their contradictions, and a range of options for action presented.

6. Theory, practice, transformation

For action researchers, theory informs practice, and practice refines theory, in a continuous transformation. The two are intertwined aspects of a single change process. It is up to the researchers to make explicit the theoretical justifications for the actions, and to question the bases of those justifications. The ensuing practical applications that follow are subjected to further analysis, in a transformative cycle that continuously alternates emphasis between theory and practice.

Within the remit of the action research project the role of the researcher as facilitator, guide, formulator and summariser of knowledge, and raiser of issues (e.g. the possible consequences of actions, the awareness of structural conditions) (Weiskopf & Laske, 1996, p.132-133) needs to be acknowledged. Not only does the role of the researcher become more defined but, within social change, action research is further defined by its methodology being collective participation and its areas of focus being inequalities of power and grassroots agendas for change and development, e.g. educational inequality, social exclusion, sexism and racism in education, powerlessness in decision-making, student disaffection with a socially reproductive curriculum, elitism in education (Cohen,

Manion & Morrison, 2011). The main foundation for an action research project is that, in the "problem identification", the areas requiring attention are identified by the participants so that, as noted by Cohen et al (2011, p.349), they "are rooted in reality, are authentic, and are 'owned' by the participants and communities themselves". Grundy (1987, p.142) defined action researchers as "people acting and researching on, by, with and for themselves". It is the democratic element in action research that is the key feature of critical theory (Giroux, 1986). Action research is not a just a form of change theory but, as observed by David (2002), addresses fundamental issues of power and power relationships, since, in according power to participants, action research is seen as an empowering activity. Further, Elliott (1991, p.54) observed that "such empowerment has to be at a collective rather than individual level as individuals do not operate in isolation from each other, but they are shaped by organisational and structural forces".
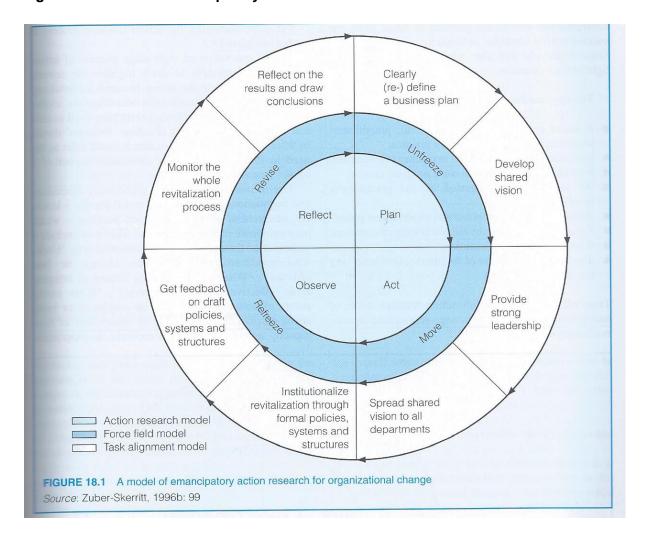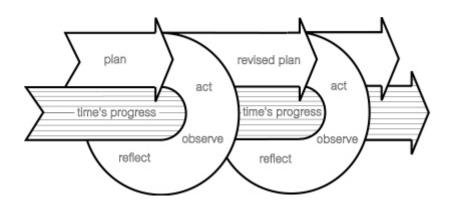
Figure 4.1: Model of emancipatory action research – Zuber-Skerritt

FIGURE 18.1   A model of emancipatory action research for organizational change
Source: Zuber-Skerritt, 1996b: 99

Zuber-Skerritt (1996: 84) sets emancipatory (critical) action research into a cyclical process of: (1) strategic planning, (2) implementing the plan (action), (3) observation, evaluation and self-evaluation, (4) critical and self-critical reflection on the results of (1) to (3), and making decisions for the next cycle of research (see Figure 4.1). She takes the famous work of Lewin (1952) on forcefield analysis and change theory (unfreezing -> moving -> refreezing) and the work of Beer et al (1990) on task alignment, and sets them into an action research sequence that clarifies the steps of action research very usefully (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2011, p.353).

Returning to Kemmis and McTaggart (2000), similarly the action research spiral of planning, acting, observing and reflecting (Figure 4.2) is a fundamental process within the research, as outlined by McTaggart (1989). Habermas's theory of communicative action forms the foundations for action research, where researchers and participants actively engage in a process of sharing an understanding of themselves and their practices as

they are created and constrained within a system structure, and functions, within the social context of life-world processes, as cultural reproduction (Kemmis & McTaggart, 2000). This can be brought about by creating what Habermas (1987) defined as a "public sphere"; the daily conversations of students within the school environment can be defined as the process of opening up "communicative space" (Kemmis, 2001, p.100). These spaces are areas where students come together to share with the researcher "topical concerns, problems and issues" and have a "shared orientation towards mutual understanding and consensus" (p.100). For this research to be authentic, it is vital that it encompass an element of dialectic where participants are required to see things "intersubjectively", where an expressed view is seen from a personal position and that of others (Kemmis, 2001, p.574). The processes are reflexive, and it is through the process of collaboration and mutual learning that the transformation occurs (p.579). It is through this practice that practitioners regard themselves explicitly as engaged in action that makes history. Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2011) defined action research as "an improvement to professional practice at the local, perhaps classroom level, within the capacities of individuals and the situations in which they are working; for the latter, action research is part of a broader agenda of changing education, changing schooling and changing society" (p.350).

Figure 4.2: The Action Research Spiral

A fundamental term used in action research is 'empowerment' – a process of "coming to power" (Lankshear, 1994, p.68). Empowerment concerns taking control over one's life within a just, egalitarian, democratic society (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2011). In the context of action research, Lankshear (1994) defined empowerment as "a process of participation and mastery of discourses, including the ability to critique those discourses".

He observed that "through participation in formal research activities, students have a chance to participate in the discourse of education and develop a critical understanding of its assumptions and processes" (p.59). In this research project, it is the belief of this researcher that using action research as a model to support the SEP provides for communicative spaces where expression, understanding and consensus concerning participant concerns can be achieved in a democratic, empowering and transformative environment.

In summary, a working definition by Bradbury and Reason (2003) best encapsulates the approaches described, although they do stress that there is no "short answer" to the question of "what is action research?" (p.201):

> Action research is a participatory, democratic process concerned with developing practical knowing in the pursuit of worthwhile human purposes, grounded in a participatory worldview. It seeks to reconnect action and reflection, theory and practice, in participation with others, in the pursuit of practical solutions to issues of pressing concern to people. More generally, it grows out of a concern for the flourishing of individuals and their communities. (p.201)

The application of action research to the SEP is informed by the theories of Kemmis (1995, 2000, 2001) and Zuber-Skerritt (1996). Their work on action research formed the basis for this investigation into the issue of educational disadvantage at Glenmore Community School. When selecting an approach for this research, it was necessary to use a method that suited both the environment within which the research was being undertaken and the nature of the research, which took a practitioner-based approach. Action research was most fitting for these purposes in so far as it is "a powerful tool for change and improvement at the local level" (McNiff, 2002a: p.6) and enabled better understanding of current practice in Glenmore Community School, with a view to bringing about improvement in the school.

It was important to ensure that my research was informed by the underpinning philosophies of action research. As outlined in Chapter 5, the project adopted the action research theory of Kemmis and McTaggart (1988), whereby the project became "a form of collective self-reflective enquiry undertaken by participants in social situations in order to improve the rationality and justice of their own social or educational *practices*, as well as their *understandings* of these practices and the *situations* in which these practices are carried out" (Kemmis & McTaggart, 1988, p.1). Ultimately, the project was concerned with transforming people's practices, their understanding of their practices and the conditions under which they practice (Kemmis, 2010). Being guided by the philosophies of action

research throughout the various stages and cycles of the research ensured that I remained on a focused pathway; this assisted me in avoiding what Hutchinson and Whitehouse (1999) identified as "reducing a [project] to a 'qualitative' form of practical problem-solving". The action research approach helped me to understand the needs of the students and the context in which they found themselves. This understanding of the student context thus supported the development of the SEP, which was designed to keep the student voice at the centre of the research process. This process allowed me to develop what Kemmis (2010) defined as "the kind of understanding in which we understand ourselves (individually and collectively), our practices, the situations in which we practice, and the consequences of what we do ... This is not done for the sake of *knowledge* alone; rather ... it is for the sake of history – what happens as the consequences of our actions, individually and collectively, for others and for the world". The action research process also helped me as a practitioner to do what was right for each student, as each student was given a forum to support their own transformation.

Kemmis (2010) stated that "if we want to make a better world through action research, our research needs to change histories", and also that "action research should not just nurture our understanding of our theories; it should help us actually to live well, in our lives and in the collective human history of which we are part" (p. 419). This was one of the philosophies that underpinned the project. Using an action research approach brought about changes in how people related to one another in the practice in which they acted and interacted (Kemmis, 2010). This created a communication between all the stakeholders (students, teachers and parents). The communication that develops through the action research process, according to Kemmis and McTaggart (2005), is "communication that is aimed at reaching intersubjective agreement, mutual understanding and unforced consensus about what to do. It aims to model democratic relations between people in which there is recognition and respect for difference, and in which people strive to reach understanding and agreements on the basis of arguments 'on the table' about issues and states of affairs in the world" (p. 424). This process allowed me to explore "new ways of doing things, new ways of thinking, and new ways of relating to one another and to the world" (Kemmis, 2010). As programme coordinator, I adopted the role of 'steward' of the students and attempted to "contribute to the evolution of professional practice" in Glenmore Community School. Kemmis speaks of the development of a "collective responsibility ... to protect, nurture, support and strengthen the practice for changing times and circumstances not as something fixed and fully sufficient but as something that must always evolve to meet new historical demands in the interests of changing community, society and the good of humankind" (Kemmis, 2010,

p.420). While, through the action research approach, the SEP team and the participating students developed such a "collective responsibility" at the local level and at the level of the individual school, this work is also part of the more general process that Kemmis describes.

However, action research is not without its limitations. It is a very time-consuming process and difficult to construct, as noted by Jong, Young Ok (2009) who observed that "constraint of time may limit the generalizability of the findings". Therefore it is difficult for the researcher to maintain rigour in data-gathering and critique. Again, because action research is a time-consuming process, this can have an effect on the level of funding needed to support the project.

This project was positioned in the local context of Glenmore Community School; therefore the findings of the project may be difficult to generalise to other school environments and practice. Such a restriction can affect the internal and external validity, and lack of generalisability may make changing policy difficult based on the findings. As the research has been carried out in the researcher's own school it is important to have an awareness of researcher bias in the collection and analysis of data. To avoid this it is important that the researcher be very familiar with their own inherent bias and have in-depth knowledge of the research methods used throughout the process. Finally, concerning internal validity, the key question must remain constant throughout the analysis of the data collected; that is, "whether changes in the environment and practice can be attributed to the intervention that has been implemented and not to other possible causes". Therefore, the evidence collected must be free from bias and support the findings.

4.2.1 Data collection

My primary qualitative data was collected through participant observation, focus groups and interviews. In the research design, great care was taken to ensure that data-collection methods were used that would not only provide relevant and rich data but provide a means of data triangulation to ensure reliability and authenticity of the data. The data-collection included the following:

- Initial one-to-one and group discussions, details of which were recorded in field notes and a research diary

- Tests and questionnaires during stage one and stage two to assess student needs and abilities

- Focus groups with participating students to define educational disadvantage and the effects they believe it has on their educational outcomes and to determine the actions needed to alleviate this disadvantage. Focus groups were also used to determine changes in students' understanding of educational matters and their sense of agency in relation to the alleviation of educational disadvantage. Focus groups were needed throughout the programme to collect participating students' reflections on the various components of the programme and to determine where further action was needed.

- Interviews with the SEP team to gather their views, opinions, observations and recommendations with regard to changes in the attitudes and orientations of participating students and to seek their expertise in relation to the delegation of specific roles to the participating students

- Interviews with members of the staff who were not part of the SEP to collect information on their views of the value of the SEP processes, the factors that enabled it and the conditions that promoted its success

- Continuous review and analysis of the participating students' personal reflections, reports and evaluations of the various components of the SEP and their own research into educational disadvantages and processes to alleviate it

As discussed in Chapter 5, the SEP programme developed as part of a two-stage process; during stage one I wished to answer the first part of my overall research question: "Is there an intervention that would increase the life-chances of children in a disadvantaged school"? Once we had determined that we were on a path that would lead to success, we moved to stage two to determine: "What was happening with the project that promoted the better life-chances?" Throughout the SEP cycles we used the following set of research questions to gather the relevant data needed to determine the above.

4.3 SEP Questions

This SEP project addresses the following questions at various stages throughout the four stages of the SEP:

Diagnosing and Defining – Student Profile

1   What is the socio-economic background of students who attend Glenmore Community School?

2   What expectations do the students have about what they will do after they have completed their education at Glenmore Community School?

3   What is the educational ability of students who attend Glenmore Community School?

4   What are the barriers that are preventing them from fulfilling their full potential?

Action – Implementation: the Intervention

1   What areas of school do students think they need support with?

2   What additional classes and workshops do students feel would assist them with engaging in their school work?

3   What type of support can we offer?

Determine – Success of the Intervention

1   In what ways has the SEP affected the participants' attitudes, teaching and learning in the school, knowledge, and sense of agency in their education?

2   In what ways has the SEP affected the educational outcomes and life-chances of students who participated on the programme?

3   What are the effective aspects of the SEP and in what ways can it be improved?

4   What conditions were present in the school at the time of the intervention that enabled its success?

5   What factors of the programme promoted a better school experience?

6   In what ways has SEP implementation and development affected overall school effectiveness and improvement?

4.4   Methods of Data Collection

The following tables outline the data-collection methods used to collect the relevant qualitative and quantitative information pertaining to the SEP questions.

Table 4.1: Diagnosing and Defining – Student Profile

No.	Question	Data Collection Source	
		Qualitative	**Quantitative**
1	What is the socio-economic background of students who attend Glenmore Community School?		Enrolment Forms DEIS Statistics
2	What expectations do the students have about what they will do after they have completed their education at Glenmore Community School?	Focus Group One-to-One Discussion	Career Inventory VARK Questionnaire and FPYC Personal Career Profile FPYC – Future-Proof Your Career: Personal Career Profile Personal Strengths and Wishes Check-List
4	What is the educational ability of students who attend Glenmore Community School?		DATS (Differential Aptitude Tests for Guidance) School Assessment Results Junior Certificate Examination Results DEIS Statistics
2	What are the barriers that are preventing them from fulfilling their full potential?	Focus Group One-to-One Discussion	
5	What are the levels of self-esteem, satisfaction with life and academic self-concept of students at Glenmore Community School?	Focus Group One-to-One Discussion Observation	Coopersmith Self-Esteem Inventory – The School Form (SEI) McCoach's School Attitude Assessment Survey – Revised (SAAS-R)

During Stage 1: Diagnosing and Defining – Initial Conditions, the purpose, function and reason why these tests were used are as follows:

- **Visual, Aural, Read/Write, Kinaesthetic (VARK Questionnaire and FPYC Personal Career Profile)**: **VARK** is a questionnaire that provides a profile of learning preferences (how people wish to take in and give out information). This test was

designed by Fleming and Bonwell (2001) and subsequently used in their research to determine and adapt students' learning by deciphering their sensory modalities: visual, aural, read/write, kinaesthetic or a combination of these. The **Future-Proof Your Career** (**FPYC**) **Career Test** is designed to provide students with information to help them to select correctly a career, providing them through an online questionnaire with a personalised career profile that shows: temperament type, three dominant intelligences, six dominant abilities, knowledge worker status, proficiency in the six key Knowledge Age Skills (2005-2012 FPYC online). These two tests were used to determine how the student prefers to learn so that the teachers can modify their lesson plans to incorporate the needs of the student, and the student can be aware of their own learning style and document such in their Individual Learning Plan, so they engage better with their learning at Glenmore Community School and are given authentic direction on their life path.

- **Personal Strengths and Wishes Check-List**: This was designed by the Pacific Institute (Pacific Institute, 2004) to be completed by students engaged in the PX2 Programme. Students highlight each other's personal strengths and give each other feedback. The wishes check-list is completed privately by students who tick areas of their life they would like to improve. For the purpose of this research the information generated is used by the student to gain a better understanding of themselves, so that they can through their Individual Learning Plan, and with the assistance of the SEP Team, plan their learning and life path.

- **Differential Aptitude Tests for Guidance (DATS)** assesses eight types of ability, or aptitude, which can be related to success in different areas of employment. Its co-standardised tests provide an eight-point profile which portrays an individual's relative strengths and weaknesses. The eight abilities are: verbal reasoning, numerical reasoning, abstract reasoning, perceptual speed and accuracy, mechanical reasoning, space relations, spelling and language usage (Bennett, Seashore & Wesman, 1986). The scores were used to produce a profile showing a student's strengths and weaknesses for the purpose of their Individual Learning Plan, and additional one-to-one or group resource teaching in literacy or numeracy. The information was also used in subject choice selection, course and career choice.

- **The Coopersmith Self-Esteem Inventory – The School Form (SEI):** The purpose of the measure is to measure the level of self-esteem among adolescents. The inventory consists of 58 items, eight of which comprise a life scale. The remaining items are scored on a dichotomous scale ('like me'/'not like me') to provide an overall measure

of self-esteem. Coopersmith (1981) used this test to determine the correlation between higher scores in the inventory test with higher self-esteem.

- **The Student's Attitude towards School:** Given the lack of psychometrically sound instruments to measure academic self-perception, self-motivation and regulation, goal-setting and attitudes towards teachers and school, I adopted an instrument designed and developed by McCoach and Siegle in 2000 to "identify academically able students who underachieve" – McCoach's School Attitude Assessment Survey – Revised (SAAS-R) (McCoach & Siegle, 2003).

The following tables outline the data-collection methods used to collect the relevant qualitative and quantitative information pertaining to the SEP questions.

Table 4.2: Action – Implementation: the Intervention

No.	Question	Data Collection	
		Qualitative	**Quantitative**
1	What areas of school do students think they need support with?	Focus Group One-to-One Discussion Observation	
2	What additional classes and workshops do students feel would assist them with engaging in their school work?	Focus Group One-to-One Discussion Observation	School Assessment Results Junior Certificate Examination Results Personal Profile

Table 4.3: Determine – Success of the Intervention

No.	Question	Data Collection	
		Qualitative	**Quantitative**
1	In what ways has the SEP affected participants' attitudes, teaching and learning in the school, knowledge, sense of agency in their education?	Student Interview Student Focus Group Teacher Interview	School Assessment Results Leaving Certificate Results Attendance Record Discipline and Behaviour Records
2	In what ways has the SEP affected the educational outcomes and life-chances of students who participated in the programme?	Student Interview Student Focus Group Teacher Interview	School Assessment Results Leaving Certificate Results Attendance Record Discipline and Behaviour Records DEIS Statistics: Further Education Progression
3	What are the effective aspects of the SEP and in what ways can it be improved?	Student Interview Focus Group Researcher Observation SEP Team Interview	
4	What conditions were present in the school at the time of the intervention that enabled its success?	Teacher Interview	
5	In what ways has SEP implementation and development affected overall school effectiveness and improvement?	Teacher Interview	

4.5 Participant Observation and the Research Diary

Objectivity in research can be achieved by the researcher being actively involved in the research event, as found by Blake and Masschelien (2003, p.39). Having been involved in the SEP from its inception to the present day, I established a productive working relationship with all participants in the programme, based on patience, understanding,

sensitivity and honesty. This union between the role of the facilitator and the participants gave the programme credibility (Glesne, 1999). In establishing a professional working relationship with the programme participants, I adopted an approach similar to that suggested by Torretta (2004, p.1) when he stated that "to remain effective in making positive, healthy changes with 'at-risk students', programme facilitators must remember to maintain and reinforce healthy boundaries". Therefore, throughout the SEP stages, the SEP team would revisit the role that each of the programme participants played. Through the use of a research diary, I attempted to maintain a reflexive approach and engage in continual critical self-reflection throughout the research process (Ortlipp, 2008), based on my field notes.

Throughout each of the SEP stages, I recorded details such as the interaction of the groups, individual student behaviour, SEP team members' interactions with individuals and groups, and my own experiences, opinions, thoughts and feelings. The research diary is a very informative tool in data-collection; however, Ortlipp (2008) advises that "the goal of the research diary is to provide a research 'trial' of gradually altering methodologies and reshaping analysis". In the area of critical research and observer notes, Carspecken (1996) recommends constructing meaning for behaviour at the time or as near to the time as is possible, and to incorporate observed body language into the diary so as to give more depth, richness and a sense of the complete experience. This helps to mitigate what Denzin (1994) refers to as "the interpretive crisis" (p. 501). The details noted at each stage of the research process allow for better understanding.

4.6   Focus Groups

From the initial stages of my research into educational disadvantage, I found that focus groups provided a good setting for my students, who had difficulty engaging in discourse in more formal settings. Krueger and King (1998) noted that focus-group researchers have argued that this method may be particularly useful in work with severely disadvantaged, hard-to-reach social groups, people who may be uncomfortable with individual interviews but happy to talk with others, particularly others they already know, "in the safe and familiar context of their own turf" (Plaut et al, 1993, p.216). It was through the semi-formal structure of the focus group that I was able to collect valuable data by engaging students in the comfortable and relaxed yet empowering environment of 'solidarity' with their peers. Stewart and Shamdasani (1990, p.16) observed that focus-group interactions "allow respondents to react to and build upon the responses of other group members", creating a "synergistic effect". They suggested that the focus group leads to the production of more elaborated accounts than would be possible through formal interview; that through

agreement and support, one or more focus-group members may enthusiastically extend, elaborate or embroider an initially sketchy account. The focus-group environment allows for a free flow of discussion and debate, and, as noted by Bers (1987, p.26-27), offers researchers an excellent opportunity to hear "the language and vernacular used by respondents", particularly respondents "who may be very different from themselves". Powney (1988) highlights the benefits for research of "listening in on focus group discussions" or "structured eavesdropping", which "promotes familiarity with the way research participants habitually talk, and the particular idioms, terminology, and vocabulary they typically use". In the focus group, Cooper et al (1993) noted, "reduced research control enables focus group participants to follow their own agendas", and to "develop the themes most important to them". A particular benefit of this is to "draw researchers' attention to previously neglected or unnoticed phenomena".

Focus groups were my preferred method of data-collection. They proved to be a fast and low-cost method for collecting data that was rich and true to the experiences of the student participants. Not all focus groups carried out were productive; misunderstandings and bad humour meant that some sessions had to be rescheduled to a 'better day'. As Kitzinger (1994a, p.170-1) noted, focus-group participants do not always agree; "they also misunderstand one another, question one another, try to persuade each other of the justice of their point of view and sometimes they vehemently disagree".

The typical focus group lasted between 40 and 80 minutes, and was normally scheduled over a single or double class period. Although Stewart and Shamdasani (1990) regard 1.5 to two hours as standard, this timeframe did not fit into the schedule of the average school day.

Researchers need to be aware when carrying out focus-group inquiry that 'interviewer effects' pose a problem for data collection. The term 'interviewer effects' refers to measurement error attributable to a specific interview characteristic such as race or gender (Dijkstra, 1983). Although interviewers may not convey personal information, characteristics such as gender, age and race are hard to conceal, according to Davis et al (2010), who stated that "even when visual cues are inaccessible", such cues as the interviewer's name, speech style and voice qualities may enable respondents to form opinions about an interviewer's characteristics and beliefs. Evidence suggests that "interview attitudes, personality and behaviour are predictive of success in contact and cooperating with participants" (Smith *et al.*, 2012, p.265). Davis *et al.* (2010) also observed that even the presence of the interviewer has an effect on how a respondent forms an answer to a question and whether and how a respondent edits his or her answer

before communicating it (Davis *et al.*, 2003). Wilson (1997) said that there is "literally no place for a researcher to hide". Interviewer effects include both bias and variable errors. Hyman *et al.* (1954) argued that "all scientific inquiry is subject to error, and it is far better to be aware of this, to study the sources in an attempt to reduce it, and to estimate the magnitude of such errors in our findings, than to be ignorant of the errors concealed in the data" (Hyman, Cobb & Feldman, 1954, p.4). Therefore, throughout the stages of the focus-group inquiry there needs to be an awareness of the many opportunities for interviewers to contribute to inquiry error (Couper & Droves, 1992). Morgan (1996, p.140) advises that the focus-group moderator needs to be aware of their influence and account for it at the relevant stages of the research process. To account for interviewer effects and to ensure an effective focus group, Newby (2010, p.350-1) advises that "a focus group should be clear on the agenda and the focus, take place in a setting conducive to discussion, have a skilled moderator who can prompt people to speak, promote thinking and reflection, and have detailed records kept". In contrast, Wilson (1997, p.213) advises a minimalist approach where the researcher takes notes but does not intervene in the discussion. In the focus groups, I used an informal style of questioning to initiate the discussion among the participating students. Intervention was made when the discourse lost the focus of the original topic. Overall, I adopted a minimalistic approach to this form of intervention so as to maintain an authentic student voice.

4.6.1 Group dynamics in the focus groups

Cohen *et al.* (2011, p.437) advise an awareness of the dynamics of a group when establishing a focus group. They state that a focus group operates more successfully if composed of relative strangers rather than friends, unless friendship is an important criterion – as it was in the current study, given that disadvantaged students are more at ease and open to discuss social issues when with members of their own peer group (Singaram *et al.*, 2012). Cohen *et al.* (2011, p.437) highlight that at times the group dynamic may lead to non-participation by some members and dominance by others; the number of topics to be covered may be limited by intra-group disagreement and even conflicts may arise; inarticulate members may be denied a voice, and the data may lack overall reliability. This is a view supported by Smithson (200), who observed that "there is a problem of only one voice being heard, particularly if there is a dominant member of the group, and for the group dynamics to suppress dissenting voices or different views on controversial topics, even though the group moderator may try to prevent this". The situation of only one voice being heard often arose during our focus-group sessions; skilful

facilitation and management was needed to ensure equal opportunity for all participants to be heard.

Morgan (1988, p.41-8) believes that several issues need to be addressed in the running of a successful focus group:

- Deciding the number of focus groups for a single topic (one group is insufficient, as the researcher will be unable to know whether the outcome is unique to the behaviour of the group).

- Deciding the size of the group (if too small, intra-group dynamics exert a disproportionate effect; if too large, the group becomes unwieldy and hard to manage; it fragments). Morgan (1998, p.43) suggests between four and 12 people per group, while Fowler (2009, p.117) suggests between six and eight.

- How to allow for people not 'turning up' on the day – Morgan (1998, p.44) suggests the need to over-recruit by as much as 20%.

- Taking extreme care with the sampling, so that every participant is the bearer of the particular characteristic required or that the group has homogeneity of background in the required area, otherwise discussion will lose focus or become unrepresentative – sampling is a major key to the success of focus groups.

- Ensuring that participants have something to say and feel comfortable to say it.

- Chairing the meeting so that a balance is struck between being too directive and veering off the point, i.e. keeping the meeting open-ended but to the point.

Throughout the various stages of my research, the size and composition of the focus groups was very much decided by the SEP based on attendance. While all participants were invited to attend a particular session, among those who did attend a criterion of 'who did not get to participate on a particular topic yet?' or 'who have we not heard from yet?' became normalised to some extent.

The focus groups ranged from five to 12 participants. The ratio of males always exceeded female participants as a direct result of the 30% female student population in the school.

When establishing a questioning strategy for my focus groups, I followed the advice of Morgan (1993) who suggested the need for the moderator to manage the process so that information could be obtained in a reasonable amount of time (60–90 minutes). I also followed as far as possible the advice of Krueger (1994, p.54-55) – to construct a

sequential series of questions that would get the group off to a good start, focus on key questions and provide closure, as follows:

- The group is introduced and begins sharing information after an opening question. Introductory questions start the group off by having them talk about their experience with the general topic of the focus group.

- Transition questions help the group to see the topic more broadly and note how opinions on various aspects may be diverse.

- Key questions (usually five or six) are carefully crafted to get at the essence of the desired information.

- Ending questions prompt the participants to summarise their positions, provide feedback concerning the moderator's interpretation of the group results and seek any information that may have been missed.

Each focus group was recorded using both audio-tape and video. Taking the advice of Mishler (1986), I also recorded using video as he suggested that non-verbal communication gives useful information additional to verbal communication. Recording the non-verbal communication provided much richer data. Although the students had been informed that for transcription purposes I was using an audio-tape recorder and video recorder, they did not seem inhibited by them in their discourse as the equipment was strategically placed out of plain sight. Before we commenced recording, ground rules were established between all participating SEP members in relation to confidentiality. The SEP team would reiterate that 'what is discussed in here stays in here' and that all participants had a right to express their opinion without prejudice and the risk of ridicule.

The initial cycle of the SEP was carried out in September 2009, with eight students identified as being 'at risk' by the School Completion Coordinator. This pilot study was fundamental to the success of the SEP. Because of the small cohort of students involved it allowed each member of the SEP team to have only one student to focus on while we established an effective set of working procedures. This instilled a great sense of trust in the programme as no student felt neglected or isolated. It allowed the SEP team members to develop a good working relationship with their charge and to become conscious of the problems that could arise when having a continual working relationship with a student; they kept notes of how particular situations of vulnerability for either SEP team member or student participant could be avoided. The pilot led to essential changes in the questions being asked of students; for example, the language used needed to be more basic and

clearer, while leading questions and any that, given the particular group dynamic, could cause conflict had to be avoided. Generally, students were very eager to have their voice heard; their contribution to insights from a student's perspective on different topics was profound, and recommendations for amendments to the SEP were warranted and beneficial.

4.7   Interviews

All members of the SEP team and a sample of the school staff were interviewed individually to gain their personal insights into the various components of the SEP. Because of the semi-structured nature of the interviews, staff were relaxed, open and honest in giving their opinions, and each interview lasted between 30 and 60 minutes. The interviews also created an atmosphere of discussion in relation to the SEP outside of the interview; this kept the programme alive among members of staff who were not directly involved in the programme.

Prior to the interview I prepared a common set of key questions (see Appendix 6: p.253) to ensure that my questioning remained focused and that I was able to get answers to my research questions. Maintaining a question base allowed for greater comparability and authenticity when carrying out my analysis.

When asked about the preferred method of recording the interviews, teachers were adamant that, along with notes, only a tape-recorder was to be used. The interviews were transcribed from the audio-recordings and written notes. To ensure accuracy, participating staff members were given a copy of their transcript to read. They made comments, highlighted any areas of inaccuracy and gave additional information if they felt a particular area was incomplete. The SEP team reflected on and discussed the content of the transcripts in an attempt to gain additional insights, as recommended by Drew, Hardman and Hart (1996).

4.8   Student Research Diary and Final Report

Students involved in the SEP maintained a daily learning diary. This was an essential tool in the learning cycle of the programme. Students were given instruction on how to maintain their diary, and the SEP team members would ensure that their charge had ample opportunity to keep their diaries up to date. At the end of the SEP, participating students used the contents of their diary, with the assistance of their facilitator, to give a detailed account of the research they carried out. Their diary documented areas of

educational disadvantage and social injustice that had been discussed, gave personal insights into how they felt these injustices could be seen and dealt with within their local environment. At the end of each SEP year, the SEP team members together with their charge would analyse and take the main findings of the student's diary and summarise these into a final end-of-year report. The SEP team discussed the findings and recommendations made by students. As outlined above, this process is a fundamental part of the Action Research Spiral where these findings would become the basis of Stage 1: Diagnosing and Defining Disadvantage, for the following year.

The team also analysed the final reports to gain insights into the level of empowerment that participating students felt during their participation in the programme and whether they felt their voice was respected and taken seriously.

4.9   Data Analysis

Once the data from the focus groups, interviews and final reports had been collected, the next stage involved analysing them. This involved coding the relevant data to ascertain emerging themes. When analysing the data, especially the data arising in the focus groups and interviews, it was important, as stated by Cohen *et al.* (2011, p.427), "not to atomize and fragment the data as this has the effect of losing the synergy of the whole ... in interviews often the whole is greater than the sum of the parts". When analysing the data accumulated throughout the SEP cycle, I followed the stages defined by Miles and Humberman (1994) for generating meaning from my transcribed and interview data:

- Counting frequencies of occurrence (of ideas, themes, pieces of data, words)

- Noting patterns and themes (Gestalts), which may stem from repeated themes and causes, explanations or constructs

- Seeing plausibility – trying to make sense of data, using informed intuition to research a conclusion

- Clustering – setting items into categories, types, behaviours and classifications

- Making metaphors – using figurative and connotative language rather than literal and denotative language, bringing data to life, thereby reducing data, making patterns, decentring the data, and connecting data with theory

- Splitting variables to elaborate, differentiate and 'unpack' ideas

- Factoring – bringing large numbers of variables under a smaller number of unobserved hypothetical variables

- Identifying and noting relations between variables

- Finding intervening variables

- Building a logical chain of evidence

- Building conceptual/theoretical coherence

Because of the relatively small number of participants (48 students, 7 members of the SEP team, and 6 members of the teaching staff) analysis was carried out manually. However, the data obtained from questionnaires was analysed using SPSS software.

4.10 Research Issues and Limitations

In relation to maintaining an authentic student voice, two main areas need to be considered when carrying out research with students. First, the researcher "must begin by examining the power dynamics between adults and youth where children are a socially disadvantaged and disempowered group not only because of their age but because of their position in society as the 'researched' and never the 'researcher' (Hood, Mayall & Oliver, 1999). Secondly, "a period of observation should precede the interviewing process so that interviewers can identify natural contexts for interviewing and student's own speech routines" (Holstein & Gubrium, 1994). Eder and Fingerson (2003, p.48) identified as one of the key issues for researchers that the language of students needs to remain in its true form in order to maintain their authentic voice and not be reinterpreted into adult language; this can be achieved by "liberal use of direct quotes from interviews" (p.48). Throughout my research I sought to maintain an authentic student voice, by using direct quotes from the student focus groups.

4.10.1 Validity and reliability

Patti Lather (1986, p.63) refers to the fact that "positivism remains the orthodox approach to doing empirical research" and calls for a recognition of the need to cease being apologetic in relation to ideological research, observing that "... as there is no neutral education there is no neutral research" (p.67). To help guard against "researcher biases", which distort "the logic of evidence" (p.67), she proposes four factors:

- **Triangulation**, whereby multiple data sources, methods and schemes contribute to trustworthiness

- **Construct Validity**, involving systematised reflexivity, where there is a "ceaseless confrontation with the experiences of people in their daily lives

- **Face Validity**, involving recycling of findings through correspondents and refining them "... in light of the subjects' reactions

- **Catalytic Validity**, the most "unorthodox" of these factors, as it recognises the transformative possibilities of this process in the need to "... consciously challenge this impact so that respondents gain self-understanding, and ideally, self-determination through research participation" (p.67)

The rigour of action research on which its credibility and validity are founded is inherent in its processes (Lather, 1986). Supporting this, Dick (1999) identified four aspects of action research that can be considered sources of rigour:

- **Participation** – the more informants, the more diversity, and the deeper the level of participation, the richer the data. Because this research was confined to a local context, it was important to ensure that, because of the relatively small number of participants in the SEP, the view of one or two students did not distort the findings. Therefore, to ensure credibility and validity for the purpose of analysis, all year groups were analysed on both an individual and a collective basis.

- **Dialectic analysis** – if the appropriate climate can be developed, deeper understanding and agreement can emerge through conversation, challenging weak or inconsistent data and interpretations. During this research, my role as a member of the teaching staff and SEP coordinator played a vital role in the creation of an environment where students felt safe, respected and able to be truthful without repercussion. This supportive environment allowed for more real data to be gathered that truthfully portrayed the experiences of the students engaged in the programme.

- **Action orientation** – the cyclic method means that plans and assumptions can be tested immediately in action through critical reflection. Because this was an action research project, the cyclic method of the yearly cycles over a four-year period allowed for in-depth reflection at the end of each cycle. As each year moved into the next, appropriate modifications were made to ensure that where it was deemed necessary by the SEP team and the participating students, modifications were made and new approaches tested.

- **Emergent nature** – method, data and interpretation develop simultaneously, increasing understanding, which leads to improved action and improved methodology. Because of the need for in-depth reflection at the end of each year before commencing the next, critical reflection was carried out on the methods used to collect data. The initial data-collection of the project had a more positivist approach; the data-collection methods were more quantitative in nature, but as the project became more established the need for more qualitative data to support the statistical findings became apparent.

4.10.2 Research ethics

When conducting research of any nature it is important to consider the issue of ethics. At every stage it is important that the researcher "strikes a balance between the demands placed on them as professional scientists in pursuit of truth, and their subjects' rights and values potentially threatened by the research" (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2011, p.75). In academic research every method and strategy of research must adhere to a strict code of ethics (Wellington, 2000, p.54). Wellington suggests that every researcher should place ethics "foremost in the planning, conduct and presentation of his/her research" and states that "ethical considerations override all others". This "main criterion for educational research" (p.54) was central to the design and planning of all stages and decisions made in relation to the methods used throughout this research project.

Hopkins (1985, p.134-6), adapting the research of Kemmis and McTaggart (1981), emphasises the absolute necessity of having ethical principles for guidance of action researchers to protect human subjects or participants. The 10 principles he prescribes are:

- *Observe protocol: Take care to ensure that the relevant persons, committees, and authorities have been consulted and informed, and that the necessary permission and approval have been obtained.*

  Throughout this research process, information and permission through presentation and formal letter was circulated to all relevant parties such as VEC committee, school board of management (BoM), staff members and participating students and their parents/guardians.

- *Negotiate with those affected: Not everyone will want to be directly involved; your work should take account of the responsibilities and wishes of others.*

Students determined to be 'at risk', based on the selection criteria of the School Completion Coordinator and their parents, were invited to attend an information evening. Teaching staff and those who wished to become part of the Student Engagement Team were informed of the programme through presentation and letter. On receipt or on completion of the presentation, students and their parents and the staff members were invited to register to participate in the programme. The students and their parents who did not wish to participate in the programme were thanked for their attendance and informed of the other avenues of support available to them during the normal course of the school year. Staff members who did not wish to participate were thanked for their time and informed that they would be informed of the programme's progress at various stages to ensure collective consultation and avoidance of disruption or possible annoyance.

- ***Report progress:*** *Keep the work visible and remain open to suggestions so that unforeseen and unseen ramifications can be taken account of; colleagues must have the opportunity to lodge a protest with you.*

At the standard school staff meetings, the Student Engagement Programme was allocated a small period of time to update staff on the programme's progress and staff were given an opportunity to address any queries or concerns arising. All relevant people – management, teaching staff, SEP team and external module facilitators of the programme – were kept informed on a continual basis, through monthly and annual reports. This process was made possible by all relevant parties completing evaluation and feedback sheets at the end of modules or the programme cycle. Based on the information received reports were compiled. These reports were given to relevant parties prior to staff meetings to give all parties the opportunity to participate in informed discussion on issues arising.

- ***Obtain explicit authorisations:*** *This applies where you wish to observe your professional colleagues and to examine documentation.*

As the majority of the staff members of Glenmore Community School were actively involved in the SEP, permission was initially sought from the CEO of Roscommon VEC, the School Principal and Board of Management and the staff members involved in the programme.

- ***Negotiate accounts of others' points of view*** *(e.g. in accounts of communication): always allow those involved in interviews, meetings and written exchanges to require amendments which enhance fairness, relevance and accuracy.*

On completion of each focus group or one-to-one interview, participants were given the opportunity to review the transcripts and make necessary amendments.

- ***Obtain explicit authorisation before using quotations***

This applied to verbatim transcripts, attributed observations, excerpts of audio and video recordings, judgements, conclusions or recommendations in reports (written or at staff meetings). Prior to using any forms of quotation, permission was sought from the party concerned in writing.

- ***Negotiate reports for various levels of release:*** *Remember that different audiences require different kinds of reports; what is appropriate for an informal verbal report to a faculty meeting may not be appropriate for a staff meeting, a report to council, a journal article, a newspaper, a newsletter to parents; be conservative if you cannot control distribution.*

Through the various stages of the research process, as stated above, reports were generated to ensure that all relevant parties were kept informed of the programme's progress and matters arising. Reports were tailored to specifically meet the information requirements of the various groups concerned and, where felt necessary, reports of a sensitive nature were kept in a secure location with restricted access.

- ***Accept responsibility for maintaining confidentiality***

Because of the sensitive nature of information received during this research, all participating parties received a 'promise of confidentiality' on all forms of correspondence, evaluation/feedback sheets, and at the commencement of interviews or focus-group or observation sessions. Additional efforts were made as follows: any identifiable features were removed from data collected, identifiable information such as date of birth, position, etc were removed, and pseudonyms were used in the event of the need for an identifiable feature being needed in the reporting.

- ***Retain the right to report your work:*** *Provided that those involved are satisfied with the fairness, accuracy and relevance of accounts which pertain to them, and that the accounts do not unnecessarily expose or embarrass those involved, accounts should be subject to veto or be sheltered by confidentiality prohibitions.*

To ensure that participates were confident that confidentiality was being maintained, they were invited to view the research prior to the publishing of the research. Where a

participant was unhappy with any of the content directly associated with them, that section was to be removed prior to publication.

- ***Make your principles of procedure binding and known:*** *All the people involved in your action research project must agree to the principles before the work begins; others must be aware of their rights in the process.*

Throughout the various stages of the research process, all participating members were kept informed of the research plan, the data-gathering methods and the purpose for which the data would be used and reported upon. Participants were informed of their rights throughout.

4.11 Conclusion

Critical theory offers a research paradigm that is empowering and emancipating and one that is consistent with the social justice agenda of interventions similar to the Student Engagement Programme (SEP). Critical theory supports the framework of action research by examining the social processes that create marginalisation and disadvantage; through collective participation a 'grassroots' agenda for change and development can be established. Through the action research process of this project, I endeavoured to help to "make history that transcends individual knowledge and lives", in that "action research should aim not just at achieving knowledge of the world, but achieving a better world" (Kemmis, 2010, p.423). The Bourdieuian cultural reproduction theory scaffolds the aims of SEP, and not only provides a modelling of the processes that create disadvantage but challenges all previously established ways of doing things, while allaying fears by inviting participation. Habermas's theory of communication action forms allowed this research project to create 'public spheres'. Daily conversations between students experiencing disadvantage were encouraged; this opened up 'communicative spaces', resulting in the students developing their skills and capacity for dealing with socially related difficulties. The participative and partnership approach to the collection of both quantitative and qualitative data further assisted in engaging students with the research.

Chapter 5: The Student Engagement Programme (SEP)

5.1 Introduction

In the previous chapter, I outlined the action research methodology that framed the design processes employed and the development of the Student Engagement Programme (SEP). In this chapter, I will describe the SEP itself and explain issues such as the means by which students were selected, the staff members involved and their role on the SEP team. As the programme moves into the mainstream curriculum, the key stages and steps and how they evolved over the research period are also described. The key features of the programme, the personal development workshops, resource tuition and support interventions, are also described. In support of the evolving design and delivery of the programme I will present both the quantitative and qualitative data gathered which determined changes and provided data for the following analysis and discussion chapter.

5.2 The Student Engagement Programme (SEP)

This programme followed a two-stage process:

Throughout this four-year Action Research (AR) project, I worked with 47 fifth- and sixth-year senior-cycle students over three years as they participated in SEP. During the academic year 2009/2010, there was an initial stage when we gathered data to determine the needs of eight 'at risk' sixth-year students attending Glenmore Community School. This data was the baseline evidence data from which the programme's initial design emerged (the second stage).

During this initial stage we tested and reviewed each student, investigated the actual conditions of learning for the students, helped them to define their life circumstances and identify the key factors that related to educational disadvantage that were impacting on their lives. Once we had defined the above, the second stage was to incorporate key features into an intervention (SEP) that would address the difficulties they were experiencing. Based on the initial evidence, it was found that students needed assistance in two main areas: 1) skill development in academic areas, and 2) skill and capacity-building in dealing with socially related difficulties. In the intervention (SEP) to address "skill development in academic areas", we incorporated Literacy and Numeracy Classes, Study Skills, Career Guidance and the Homework Club. To address social difficulties we incorporated the PX2 Personal Development Programme, the Big Brother Big Sister Programme and One-to-One Mentoring Programme.

Throughout year one of SEP we gathered mainly quantitative data from the students to assess the impact of the interventions listed in the previous paragraph. At the end of that first year this data did support a positive answer to the question "Is there an intervention that would increase the life-chances of children in a disadvantaged school"? As we now knew that we were now on a path that could lead to success, we looked again at the project and sought feedback from the students; as a result of an overall very positive response the intervention was widened and made available to 16 sixth-year students for one academic year (2010-2011) and 23 fifth-year students over two academic years (2010-2011 and 2011-2012). In parallel with this growth of the programme, during the next academic year (2010-2011) it was deemed necessary to gather qualitative research data to look deeper into the project's design and process. Specifically, what were the conditions that enabled the intervention and what were the factors that promoted its success were two questions that needed an evidence-based answer. In other words, I was trying to answer "what was happening within the project that promoted the better life-chances?"

In year three the intervention continued with the 23 students who had progressed into their final year of secondary school and with this iteration the same type of data was gathered: quantitative, as supplementary information to support the qualitative findings and for triangulation purposes, and qualitative, to investigate the conditions present at the time of the intervention and the factors that promoted its success. Taking due consideration of the data and feedback from an organisational perspective, on completion of cycle three, the SEP was modified into modular format for cycle four (2012/2013) and formed part of the time-tabled transition year curriculum; there were 24 transition-year students. Additional to this expansion, the Get Smart component of the SEP was made available to all junior-cycle year groups (118 students) and formed part of their timetabled curriculum.

5.2.1 Target cohort and student identification: Year 1

For each of the first two years of SEP, in order to identify the student cohort, I initiated a staff meeting with the school principal and the teaching and learning support staff, and members of the SEP team. At this meeting I gave an overview of the SEP and its purpose and outlined the student selection criteria as defined by the School Completion Programme, as follows:

- Family background as defined on enrolment; medical card, father's and mother's occupation, minority group, etc

- Overall performance in their fifth-year assessment results (Christmas, Easter and summer)

- School attendance and general behaviour/discipline issues

- Students showing signs of isolation or disengagement from school

- Willingness to participate

I requested the staff's assistance and support in the selection of students and implementation of the programme. After much debate and analysis, staff would recommend students they felt would be suitable and benefit from the programme. This process continued until the final cycle, where the programme became part of the timetabled curriculum.

5.2.2 The SEP team

The role of the SEP team is to oversee the SEP in Glenmore Community School. Members of the team offer their assistance on a voluntary basis. The SEP team comprises members of the school staff from specialist departments. Table 5.1 shows the teacher participants (identified by pseudonym) from 2009 to 2013.
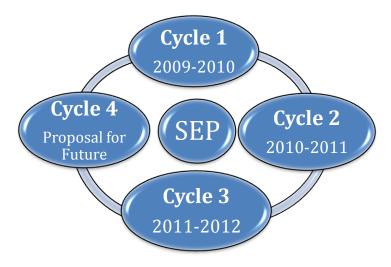
Table 5.1: Student Engagement Programme (SEP) Team 2009–2013

Post	Name	SEP Specialism	Teaching Position
Deputy Principal	Joyce, Jane	Programme Coordinator Programme Design/Modification Programme Scheduling Research Advisor	Business and Resource Teacher
School Principal	Charles, Fred	Research Advisor Research Ethics Programme Design	n/a
School Completion Coordinator	McDonnell, Trisha	Group Dynamics/Conflict Resolution Student Self-Esteem Programme Design	n/a
Home School Liaison Officer	Reynolds, Sinead	Parental Support Student Needs Identification Data Collection and Analyses Report Writing and Presentation	
Career Guidance Counsellor	Finan, Ethna	Student Needs Identification, Career progression One-to-One Counselling	Business and Careers Teacher
Head of Resource	Wallis, Laura	Programme Design to meet Specific Learning Needs of students experiencing difficulties	History, English and Mathematics Resource Teacher
Senior Cycle Year Heads: 5th Year 6th Year	Connaughton, Martha Reynolds, Ethel	Student Mentor Student Mentor	Science/Maths Teacher Science/Maths Teacher
Junior Cycle Year Heads: 1st Year 2nd Year 3rd Year	Marion Moriarty Susan Kelly John Mitchell	Student Mentor Student Mentor Student Mentor	English Teacher Irish Teacher Geography and PE Teacher

5.3   SEP Project Overview

The following is a summary of the whole SEP project cycles and actions:

Figure 5.1: SEP Project Cycles

Cycle 1: **2009-2010: 8 Sixth Year Students (Pilot: 1 Year)**

>   Diagnosing and Defining – Student Profile – Quantitative Data
>   Action Planning – Designing the Intervention
>   Determine Success of Intervention – Quantitative and Qualitative Data
>   Modify SEP Processes: SEP Planning and Coordination

Cycle 2: 2010-2011: 16 Sixth Year Students (Duration: 1 Year)
               23 Fifth Year Students (Duration: 2 Years)

>   Diagnosing and Defining – Student Profile – Quantitative and Qualitative Data
>   Action Planning – Intervention (Modified 1)
>   Determine Success of Intervention - Quantitative and Qualitative Data
>   Modify SEP Processes: SEP Planning and Coordination

Cycle 3: 2011-2012: 23 Sixth Year Students (2nd Year)

>   Diagnosing and Defining – Student Profile – Quantitative and Qualitative Data
>   Intervention (Modified 2)
>   Determine Success of Intervention - Quantitative and Qualitative Data
>   Modify SEP Processes: SEP Planning and Coordination

Cycle 4: Proposal for Future: 24 Transition Year Students: (Duration: 1 Year)
               118 Junior Year Groups (1st, 2nd, 3rd Years - Modular)

>   Diagnosing and Defining – Student Profile – Quantitative and Qualitative Data
>   Intervention (Student Modified Programme 3)
>   Determine Success of Intervention - Quantitative and Qualitative Data
>   Modify SEP Processes: SEP Planning and Coordination

As the programme coordinator I was responsible for the overall coordination of the programme, assisting the SEP team through sourcing resources such as materials, rooms, equipment, etc, supporting participating students and the SEP team as advisor, organising needs analysis actions, providing information, scheduling research and personal development workshops, and sourcing funding for the various programme components. As the programme coordinator I found myself at all times central to the project. My role allowed me to become a participant/observer, which had the added benefit of allowing me the opportunity to build strong working relationships with my colleagues and participating students. This daily contact with participants enabled continuous progression; there was no time lapse between the various stages of the programme and this kept the programme very much alive for the SEP team and student participants. In addition, the research data-gathering processes, particularly interviews and focus groups within each stage and at the end of each year, allowed for open discussion and promotion of immediate responses to arising issues. This created synergy within the project which allowed for authentic blending of the programme with the research.

Although the SEP evolved over four years to become part of the mainstream curriculum, to allow for greater understanding of the programme I will present the SEP 2011/2012 prior to integration into the timetable and, secondly, show how the programme evolved from its inception to its present form.

5.3.1   Student Engagement Programme (SEP) 2011/2012

For each year of SEP there are four sequential stages (Figure 5.2):
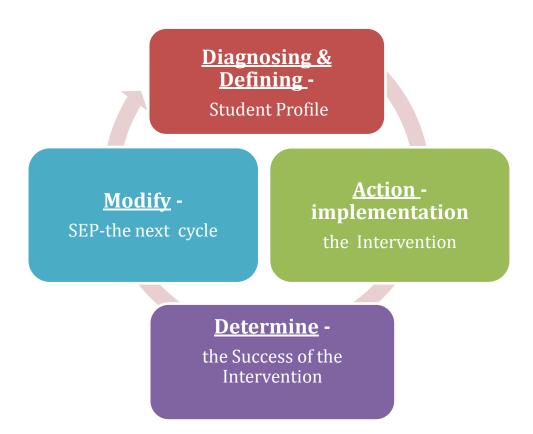
Diagnosing & Defining – Student Profile: the problem of marginalisation and educational disadvantage among students had to be identified and appropriate data collected for a detailed diagnosis.

Action Implementation – Designing/Modification of the Intervention: a collective postulation of several possible solutions, from which a single plan of action (an intervention) emerged and was implemented.

Determine **–** the Success of the Intervention: data on the results of the SEP students and qualitative data from participants and teachers was collected and analysed to determine how successful the actions had been in relation to enhancing the life-chances of the students.

Finally, **Modify** – SEP: the input for the first stage of the following year.

Figure 5.2: The Student Engagement Programme (SEP)

Each individual stage of the SEP incorporates four individual steps (Figure 6.3). The core structure is explained (p.131-135). The four steps are:

Diagnosing and Defining – Student Profile: *Induction and Registration* and *Understanding Self*

Action – Implementation – Design/Modification of the Intervention: *Preparing a Personal Profile and an Individual Learning Plan* and *Programme Participation*

Determine – the Success of the Intervention: *Reflection and Documentation* and *Student Recognition*

Modify – SEP Processes and Elements: *Modifying* and *Planning and Coordination.*

The following is an overview of the framework as the project developed:
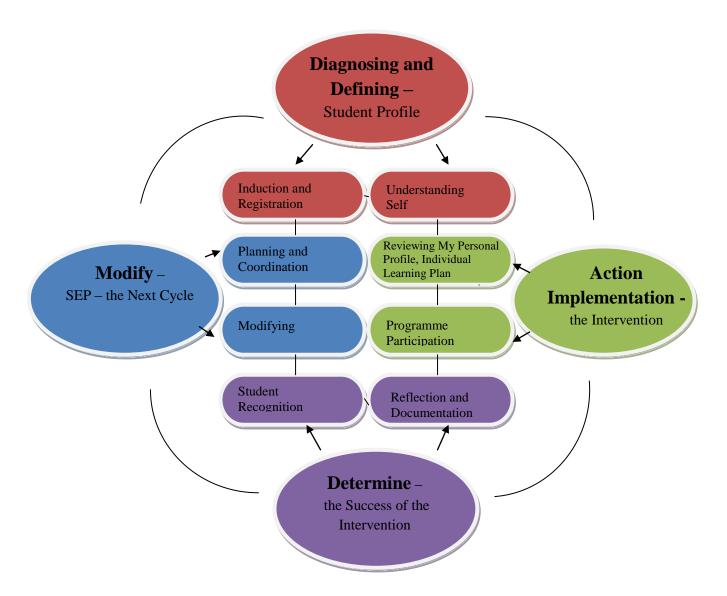
Figure 5.3: The Student Engagement Programme (SEP)

5.3.2 Data collection

Fundamental to any research project are the key research questions, complying with the guidelines set down by Zuber-Skerritt (1996: 84). As outlined in the methodology, embedded into each stage of the cyclical process of this action research process is a set of research questions that assist with (1) strategic planning, (2) the implementation of the plan (action), (3) observation, evaluation and self-evaluation, (4) critical and self-critical reflection on the results of (1) to (3), the outcome of which informs the decision-making process for the next cycle of research. This ensures an accurate continuum of the action research spiral and its progression from one stage or cycle to the next, safeguards the process of collaboration and shared learning, and ensures that transformation occurs. Figure 5.4 summarises the SEP questions used in this project. For each stage and yearly cycle of the SEP project, I will detail below the findings of each of the questions, the analysis and the conclusions drawn.

Figure 5.4: Summary of the SEP Questions – Transformative Paradigm: Action Research (AR)

Diagnosing and Defining – Student Profile	Data Collection	Action Implementation – the Intervention	Data Collection	Determine – the Success of the Intervention	Data Collection	Modify SEP Processes –
1. What is the socio-economic background of students who attend Glenmore Community School? 2. What career expectations do the students hope to take after they have completed their education at Glenmore Community School? 3. What is the educational ability of students who attend Glenmore Community School? 4. What are the barriers that are preventing students from engaging with school?	Data Collection	1. What areas of the school do students think they need support with? 2. What additional classes and workshops do students feel would assist them with engaging in their school work? 3. What supports can we offer?	Data Collection	1. In what ways has the SEP affected participants' attitudes, teaching and learning in the school, knowledge, sense of agency in their education? 2. In what ways has the SEP affected the educational outcomes and life-chances of students who participated in the programme? 3. What are the effective aspects of the SEP and in what ways can it be improved? 4. What conditions were present in the school at the time of the intervention that enabled its success? 5. What programme factors promoted a better school experience? 6. In what ways has SEP implementation and development affected overall school effectiveness and improvement?	Data Collection	Planning and Coordination Data Analysis Claims & Reference

As the project developed over the past four years, its structure became was to meet the needs of the students attending Glenmore Community School. Although the programme remained reflexive in nature, by the end of 2011/2012 it had taken a form that was to be the core design of the programme for subsequent years. In the final year 2012/2013 of this research project, the programme was embedded into the timetable and became the fabric of the curriculum. The core structure of the Student Engagement Programme is as follows:

- **Diagnosing and Defining** – Student Profile

Diagnosing and Defining – Student Profile: This consists of identifying students who are experiencing difficulty at school through marginalisation and defining the barriers that these students face within the Irish educational system (key research questions: p.11). The SEP team through consultation determine students 'at risk' in our school and in conjunction with the participating students review their preliminary needs for the forthcoming academic year. They then decide on possible interventions using this data and data provided by the final step of the previous cycle. Staff are given an account of the proposals for the following year of the intervention programme and, pending the approval of the VEC CEO, principal, Board of Management and teaching staff of the school, the programme progresses to *Induction and Registration,* which targeted students and their parents are invited to attend. The students and their parents attend a presentation on the SEP and the various aspects of the programme such as: the personal development modules PX2/Get Smart workshops, Career Guidance, understanding Educational Disadvantage, and the role students take in the programme.

Should parents register their child on the programme, students move on to the next part of their programme, *Understanding Self*. In this, students are given insights into various topics such as What is Educational Disadvantage? and How to Recognise its Characteristics, the Purpose of Testing, Self-Esteem, Academic Self-Concept, Student Motivation and Student Engagement. In association with the career guidance teacher, students take the following tests to provide supplementary information, to support the findings of their Educational Record and assist the SEP team in formulating their Personal Profile and Individual Learning Plan. It is hoped that these tests can be used in association with their Educational Record to determine whether they may be experiencing

difficulty in any of the areas discussed. The tests are: Differential Aptitude Tests (DATs), Self-Esteem Inventory, Satisfaction with Life Scale, Attitude towards School, VARK (Visual, Aural, Read/Write, Kinaesthetic) Questionnaire, FPYC (Future-Proof Your Career) Personal Career Profile, Personal Strengths and Wishes Checklists, and group and one-to-one discussion. Once the findings of the tests become available, students are shown how to read and interpret them. At this stage students with members of the SEP team prepare a Personal Profile (Appendix 13, p. 265 – 268), which details the student's strengths and weaknesses, and where they feel they may benefit from the personal development workshops or need assistance with more specific skill development in academic areas.

During this process, students are briefed on the supports available that may assist them with the particular areas of difficulty that have come to light through the testing and discussion. The supports include personal development programmes such as PX2/Get Smart, One-to-One Career and Personal Guidance/Counselling, the Big Brother Big Sister Mentoring Programme, the extra tuition available in the areas of Literacy and Numeracy, Study Skills, Evening Study Programme/Homework Club. On completion of this stage, students progress to the next stage of the programme.

- **Action Implementation** – the Intervention
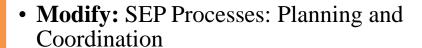
Diagnosing and Defining – Student Profile progresses into **Action Implementation –** designing/modification of the intervention. With the support of their SEP team mentor, the results of the tests are transferred into their personal profile by each of the participating students. Students discuss their needs and requirements either through one-to-one or group discussion with their SEP mentor or other participating students, respectively. From the collective postulation of several possible solutions (as outlined above), a single plan of action (an intervention) emerges to meet the individual needs of the student. The student progresses to *Reviewing My Personal Profile and My Individual Learning Plan* where they meet with the programme coordinator and discuss the content of their action plan; where appropriate, modifications to the original design are made. Once agreement has been attained, a personalised timetable is prepared for each student and they move to *Programme Participation*. This gives them the opportunity to continue as normal with

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their year group, thus reducing differentiation between students. It also allows them to continue as normal with their chosen curriculum but step out at particular intervals to attend personal development workshops or skills development classes. This system allows the SEP to run in tandem with their mainstream curriculum, with minimal disruption.

During their engagement with their individual learning plan over the following months, students receive continual support from fellow participants, their SEP mentor and the SEP team through one-to-one and group meetings, workshop modules and focus-group sessions. Feedback is given by the students at the end of workshops/classes in the form of evaluation sheets and discussion. Students receive feedback on their progress at various stages throughout the year through meetings with the SEP mentor and the SEP coordinator, and receive a progress report with their normal end-of-term and yearly report.

• **Determine** – the Success of the Intervention

Implementation moves into **Determine – the Success of the Intervention**. The SEP team and the students progress into *Reflection and Documentation*: during this process students reflect on, discuss and evaluate the programme and their own personal commitment to the programme through one-to-one and group meetings with members of the SEP team. Throughout this reflection stage students with the assistance of the SEP team give feedback in qualitative form through focus groups. During group sessions students are invited to share their experience of the programme. As noted above, the SEP team prepare individual student reports outlining student performance based on the student's attendance, contribution and performance on their individual learning plan and in school-based assessments; recommendations are made where additional support may be needed. After reflection on, analysis and discussion of each of the student reports, students progress to *Student Recognition* where they attend the annual end-of-year Student Achievements Ceremony, at which their commitment and contribution to the programme are recognised through the presentation of achievement awards. Prior to the awards ceremony, a male and female representative of the student group are invited to give a small presentation to the school on the SEP on the evening of the Student Achievements Ceremony.

- **Modify:** SEP Processes: Planning and Coordination

In this final stage, **Modifying,** at the end of the school year, the SEP team assemble with the participating students and, taking into account the information given to the team by the students on completion of **Determine – the Success of the Intervention**, progress to *Modifying.* During this step the SEP team evaluate the student reports and the student and SEP team module/programme evaluation forms (completed at the end of each stage), together with their personal observations and feedback received from the students, teachers, programme facilitators and the SEP team, to determine possible modifications to next year's SEP. Taking into account the changes deemed necessary, the SEP team progress to the final step, *Planning and Coordination,* where they plan and coordinate next year's SEP. The spiral commences into the next year with **Diagnosing and Defining – Student Profile**. This cycle espouses the spiral element of the action research model. The outcome of **Modify – SEP Processes** is fed back into the programme at **Diagnosing and Defining** – Student Profile to continue a cycle of continuous improvement and relevancy.

Fundamental to this programme is the assistance that participating students receive from the SEP team. However, for effective collaboration to take place throughout each cycle of the programme, it is important that the role of participants be clearly defined, understood and accepted by all participants. Within the SEP team, it is important to recognise the expertise and experiences that individual members have, ensure that all members have the opportunity to contribute fully according to their field of expertise, and to recognise where a member of the SEP team has established a good working relationship or rapport with a student. This leads to a collaborative approach and one in which the SEP team can support shared decision-making, thus respecting the contribution of each team member. From the outset, the participating students are central to the programme.

It is important that, throughout the programme, both students and the SEP team review the aims of the SEP. The development of students through their engagement in the research process and programme is the catalyst, from understanding their experiences throughout the various stages of the SEP to planning actions to support them. For the SEP to operate effectively, it is essential that the programme coordinator be a member of the school staff. The role of the coordinator is to: select the 'at risk' students; coordinate students and the SEP team; instil a sense of empowerment, and effectively lead all

members of the school community in the integration of the programme into the overall planning and actions of the school. It is important that the SEP team understand group dynamics, have strong organisational skills and have the ability to impart personal experience and understanding. Throughout the programme it is also critical that the coordinator have the full support of the VEC CEO, school principal, Board of Management and staff; without this, failure would be imminent. It must be noted that the coordinator's role as 'timetable scheduler' and membership of the School Development Team made it possible to integrate the SEP into the school curriculum, assisted greatly in the creation of individual learning plans and considerably reduced disruption.

5.4   The Development of SEP: 2009 – 2012

In the following sections, I will describe the events that arose during the academic year 2009-2010, introduce the participants, define the principal stages and components that formed the structure of the SEP, and describe the outcome of each stage.

5.5   Cycle 1: 2009/2010

As a means of ensuring that I would correctly address the needs of the students experiencing difficulty at Glenmore Community School, I approached the School Completion Coordinator. We had worked together previously on the development of a mainstream programme for students with special needs called Learning for Life, which was approved by Roscommon VEC and the school principal, and was subsequently integrated into the school curriculum in 2008. I outlined my intentions of creating an intervention to increase the life-chances of students from disadvantaged backgrounds who were experiencing difficulties at school. We had many conversations as to the form that this intervention would take, based on the findings from the DEIS statistics (08/09) of Glenmore Community School which outlined areas of concern:

1.   A high number of students leaving school without having attained a Leaving Certificate qualification

2.   A high number of students with poor literary and numeracy skills

3.   A high level of absenteeism, discipline issues and suspensions

4.   A high level of dissatisfaction among the teachers with regard to student engagement

5.   A low level of parental participation in the school

6.   Poor performance in State Examinations (Junior Certificate and Leaving Certificate) as compared to the national average

7. A low progression rate of students progressing to tertiary education

The School Completion Coordinator proposed that, if I could devise a programme that specifically targeted the students attending Glenmore Community School who were 'at risk' of leaving school early, the school's Completion Programme would be able to make funding and resources available to support the research project.

Together with the School Completion Coordinator, I devised a simple approach to the intervention:

- Outline the aim and purpose of the intervention to all relevant parties
- Seek appropriate permissions
- Invite teachers to become actively involved in the intervention
- Determine the students at risk
- Seek appropriate consent from the parents/guardians of participating students
- Allow the intervention to be emergent and flexible in nature

At the end of April 2009, an application was made and permission sought from the CEO of Roscommon VEC and school principal, through a formal letter and meeting, to pilot the intervention. At the beginning of May 2009, I was given permission by the CEO and school principal to address the staff with regard to piloting the intervention in the school. Staff were given an account of the purpose of the intervention and why it was felt necessary to pilot this intervention with our current 5th year students next year. I outlined the selection criteria that the 5th year students would need to meet in order to be invited to participate in the programme. There was open discussion about the proposed intervention, with staff raising areas of concern or needing clarification on particular aspects of the intervention. Some staff members were quite negative about the intervention, as can be seen in the following quotations from my research diary:

> "There is sweet all that can be done for that type of student." (DM, May 2009)

> "What a waste of money, that money would be better used elsewhere, preferably on something beneficial." (BW, May 2009)

> "Why is money always invested in that gang, why not spend that money on those that want to be here?" (AG, May 2009)

However, the majority of staff felt that there was a definite need for an intervention to address the needs of the students not reaching their potential:

"A school is only as good as how you treat your weakest member. " (FC, May 2009)

"Sure, look we have to do something, as it stands we are just trying to manage those students when they are in and that's has not proven to be very effective, now has it?" (PC, May 2009)

"For the sake of the few good ones we have left, anything to give them a chance, because as it stands unless something is done they will follow the others". (GG, May 2009)

At the close of the staff meeting, staff members interested in getting involved with the intervention were invited to leave their name with me. Over the course of the week, six staff members expressed an interest in participating in the intervention and the SEP team 2009-2010 was formed.

Table 5.2: Student Engagement Programme (SEP) Team 2009–2010

Post	Name	Teaching Position
PLC/FETAC Coordinator/ Deputy Principal	Joyce, Jane	Business and Resource Teacher
School Completion Coordinator	McDonnell, Trisha	n/a
Home School Liaison Officer	Reynolds, Sinead	n/a
School Principal	Charles, Fred	n/a
Career Guidance Counsellor	Finan, Ethna	Business and Careers Teacher
Head of Resource	Wallis, Laura	History, English and Mathematics Resource Teacher

Throughout Cycle 1 there was a total of 14 SEP team and mentor meetings. Initially the SEP team created a set of categories to ***diagnose and define*** the Student Profile to determine the students at risk in our Senior Cycle. As outlined in the structure of the SEP (p.100 - 106), the following data was gathered by the members of the SEP team throughout the various stages of SEP. This supplementary data attained through documentation analysis (school records, DEIS stats, DES returns, etc) and career guidance tests was used in association with the qualitative data in order for the researcher to get a fuller understanding of the student context at Glenmore Community School and

for the purpose of triangulation. A detailed outcome of each category is discussed below and can be viewed in the appendices, as follows:

1. Student Background – (Appendix 1, (p.226: Diagnosing and Defining – Student Profile 2009/2010
2. Career Expectations – (Appendix 1, p. 227: Diagnosing and Defining – Student Profile 2009/2010)
3. Educational Record – Appendix 1, p. 228: Diagnosing and Defining – Student Profile 2009/2010)
4. Engagement with school

1. Student Background

From the Student Background detailed in Appendix 1 (p. 226): Diagnosing and Defining – Student Profile 2009/2010, the table details the background of the eight students out of a group of 27 sixth-years who met the specific criteria of the School Completion Programme and would be eligible to participate in the Student Engagement Programme (SEP). There was a close association found between the background data of these eight eligible students and the characteristics of students experiencing marginalisation, as highlighted by various researchers (Bourdon, 1974; Bourdieu, 1977; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977; Lamont & Lareau, 1988; Meijnen, 1987), whereby students experiencing marginalisation are often from a lower socio-economic background, and often come from lone-parent families, or unskilled families with little or no formal qualifications. Of the eight students, six were from a lone-parent household, three had unemployed parents, four had parents in unskilled employment, and only one parent had attained a Leaving Certificate.

2. Career Expectations

From the Career Inventory carried out by the career guidance counsellor and through discussion, the following student career expectations were documented (Appendix 1: p.226: Diagnosing and Defining – Student Profile 2009/2010) during stage one of the SEP. The students' Career Expectations table shows that prior to their participation on the SEP only one of the eight participating stated that they expected to attend third-level education. This reflected the findings of Lynch (2006), Farrell et al (2008), and the HEA (2008), who observed how students from lower socio-economic groupings perpetuate the continuity of the generation cycle of educational disadvantage.

4. Educational Record

In an attempt to determine the learning needs of the participating students from their school records, and consultation with staff, the following Educational Record table –

(Appendix 1, p.227: Diagnosing and Defining – Student Profile 2009/2010) outlined their educational record. This table assisted in the formation of an individual learning plan for each of the participating students, where areas of concern were highlighted, and gave the SEP team the opportunity to create a more individually focused intervention. The Educational Record table shows how none of the participating students had shown 'very good' performance in their assessment results to date or in their Junior Certificate, with the majority performing in the 'poor' to 'fair' range. Through reviewing additional school records such as a student's psychological report (where available), and in consultation with Head of Resource and teaching staff, it was found that seven students would benefit from numeracy support and four of those students would also benefit from literacy support. Overall, attendance was recognised as a "problem area" for five of the students, with one student having "discipline problems". Additionally, to better determine the overall needs of the students and the target group, the career guidance teacher carried out a DAT for Guidance Test. As discussed earlier (p. 85), although the findings from the following standardised tests provided important information, for the purpose of this research test scores are treated as specialised information and used to supplement other findings in relation to student performance. The findings as highlighted in the DAT for Guidance Results (Pilot Group: 2009/2010) boxplots of the scores on the eight abilities measured by the DAT for Guidance, the Descriptive Statistics of Scores on the DAT for Guidance Table (p. 229) and the DAT Test Individual Result, (p. 230) in relation to Students Educational Aptitude, supported the findings from the target group's educational records. In these, the median scores for all abilities were low, indicating that, on average, the students performed poorly in comparison to the reference population (the entire Glenmore Community sixth-year group). The median score (48.5) for mechanical reasoning was the highest, indicating that, on average, this was the strongest ability of the participating students. Abstract reasoning had the next highest median score (42.0). The median scores for the other abilities were much lower. The median score (12.0) for language usage was the lowest, indicating that, on average, this was the weakest ability of the students. However, the median scores for spelling and educational aptitude were only one point higher, indicating that the students also had poor spelling and educational aptitude. The interquartile ranges for the abilities were wide, indicating a lot of variability across students in scores for the abilities. Verbal reasoning, perceptual speed and accuracy, and educational aptitude had outlying values. Further investigation of the data revealed that the high scores for verbal reasoning and educational aptitude were attained by one student, while a different student attained the high score for perceptual speed and accuracy. The data found in relation to "language usage" supported the theory of researchers (Lamont & Lareau, 1988; Bourdieu, 1977) who observed how children from

higher socio-economic backgrounds are better equipped to function effectively in the education system, in that their social environment gives them the language skills required to be successful in school.

5. Engagement with school

In discussions with the students during their introductory workshop, they identified five barriers that were preventing them from engaging with school:

1. School
2. Home
3. Community
4. Personal
5. Knowledge and skills

1. School

Several students identified the school as being one of the barriers preventing them from engaging in school. Two students identified lack of care for students attending Glenmore Community School:

> "Sure, no one in this place gives a xxxx for you, you're on your own, this is the first time someone around here has asked me a question like this." (Liam).

> "The most of the teachers in this place couldn't care less if I was here or not, actually most of them would probably prefer if I wasn't." (Enda).

Elaborating on the statements from her fellow classmates, one student addressed the general belief within the student community that students did not succeed in life as a direct result of attending Glenmore Community School because of the lack of an academic culture within the school:

> "This school is a barrier, no-one from here really gets on that well, and sure if you look interested in class they call you a 'swot or lick'." (Maureen).

There was a general opinion among the group during our workshop that the group had an inherent dislike of the school and would prefer if they did not have to attend:

> "I just hate this xxxx place, and can't wait to get out of here." (Aine).

2. Home

Some of the students acknowledged the lack of emphasis on educational qualification in their home; three students identified an attitude that unskilled work was viewed as more important than educational attainment:

> "All my 'ol lady wants is for me to get out of school and get a job." (Enda)

> "I don't get much time to do me homework as I'm needed on the farm." (Padraig)

> "My Dad reckons that there's more to be made working than going to school." (Enda)

3. *Community*

Another area that students identified as hindering their engagement in school was the influence that members of their community had on their education and how there was little confidence in the possibility of attaining better life-chances from participation in education:

> "If I said that I was stayin' in to do me homework and couldn't go out, the lads would slag the xxxx off me." (Enda)

> "What's the point in going to school anyway, most of my neighbours did, well at least for a while and sure they aren't working." (Liam)

4. *Personal*

Most worrying from my discussion with the students was their overall lack of confidence in their own academic ability:

> "I'm not that bright, can't see myself getting into college, anyway if I did want to go I wouldn't have a clue how to get there." (Padraig)

> "I would love if someone could make me interested in school, I'm not a bit motivated, I just don't see the point in it all, I don't think school is for people like me, you know those that are a bit thick." (Enda)

5. *Knowledge/skills*

Even at this early stage in our discussions, students were able to identify the areas where they were experiencing difficulty and indicated that, if these areas were addressed, it would assist them in overcoming their difficulties and engaging better in school from both a social and academic perspective:

> "I find maths really hard and there's no one to help me." (Liam)

"There's no-one to help me with my homework when I get stuck and when I try to say to the teacher that I didn't know how to do it I just get the head taken off me, so why bother." (James)

"I hate when I have to read out in class, I'm not a very good reader and the lads always slag me afterwards, it would be great if I could catch up and maybe then I might have a chance." (Sean)

"I haven't a clue how to study." (Maureen)

5.5.1   Diagnosing and Defining – Student Profile 2009/2010 – Outcome

Having profiled our 'at risk' students and determined their educational needs, we used this information to determine the type of intervention we would design to address these needs. We determined the areas that needed to be addressed by our intervention to assist students in engaging better in school, under **Literacy and Numeracy** and **Personal Development**.

I carried out intensive research into the types of personal development and learning support programmes that were being used by other schools, training centres and School Completion Programmes to address the needs of students determined to be at risk. Throughout my research I found various modular programmes but no one programme addressed the specific needs of our students. The SEP team at one of our earlier meetings discussed the content of the following programmes and their ability to meet the needs of our students: STEPS/PX2/Get Smart Personal Development Programme (Appendix 14: PX2 Programme Descriptor, p. 301), One-to-One Counselling, Career Guidance, Big Brother Big Sister (BBBS), Study Skills, Homework Club, and Resource Support in Literacy and Numeracy. However, because of the low levels of educational attainment of some of the students and the many social barriers others believed were preventing them from engaging in school, the SEP team agreed that the intervention needed to be targeted at the *individual* needs of the targeted students, as opposed to a 'one size fits all' approach. Therefore, it was imperative to base the content of each student's intervention on the findings of the testing and discussions. It was recommended that each student be profiled and an individual learning plan designed, and that we make the above programmes available as deemed necessary.

5.5.2   Action Implementation – the Intervention 2009/2010

From discussions with the students, the SEP team and the teaching staff, and the findings of **Diagnosing and Defining** – *the Student Profile*, from Additional Classes and Workshops Table, Appendix 2 (p.231), the Action – Implementation – the Intervention

2009/2010, we determined that, with the exception of one student, all other students would benefit from additional classes in numeracy and four students from additional literacy classes. Through reviewing students' educational records, and in consultation with the teachers and the students, all students registered for two or more of the personal development workshops. From the information gathered, we created individual student profiles and, in association with the Head of Resources, we devised an Individual Learning Plan (Appendix 13, p. 297) for each student which incorporated the additional literacy and numeracy classes or the personal development workshops. Each member of the SEP team was allotted one or two students to mentor and monitor between October and May. Throughout the programme, as SEP Coordinator I was in constant contact with the students, ensuring that they had their appropriate schedule and timetable; answered any queries they had about the programme content or general housekeeping, and allayed any concerns or fears they had. Additionally, once a month the SEP team members would meet and discuss their students' progress and address any issues that had arisen. At the end of each module or workshop students would be asked to evaluate the material covered. All data was retained by the Programme Coordinator.

5.5.3 Determine – the Success of the Intervention 2009/2010 – Outcomes

From the findings detailed in Appendix 3, (p.232) it can be clearly seen that most of the students made significant improvements from an academic perspective, as highlighted in the Results Progression Graphs, Appendix 3 (p.198-199), Determine – the Success of the Intervention 2009/2010 section. Although it would be natural to expect an improvement by a student between their first assessment at Senior Cycle to the result attained by them in their Leaving Certificate, this has not always been the case at Glenmore Community School or indeed nationally (as observed from the DEIS statistics 2006/2007); students from disadvantaged backgrounds traditionally have left school early or been unsuccessful in attaining a Leaving Certificate qualification. Again, this data was used as supplementary information to the students' educational outcomes and for triangulation purposes. Additionally, student feedback in relation to the PX2 personal development programme (Appendix 3, Determine the Success of the Intervention 2009/2010 (p.232), showed they had a high opinion of the programme and the categories/areas where they felt the programme assessed them. The feedback graphs show that the majority of students would recommend the PX2 programme to their peers, found it challenging/motivating, and engaging and interesting. The pilot group found the programme to be very beneficial in supporting them in taking part in exams, further education, seeking employment, fulfilling their career, expanding their comfort zones and controlling their anxiety and stress.

Taking account of all indicators of improvement, and in recognition of the improvements made by two of the SEP participants in relation to classroom engagement, both received the Most Improved Student Award at the Student Awards Ceremony. One of the fundamental parts of the career guidance module was assistance with application to third-level education; all eight students completed a CAO form and/or application for a PLC course. Five were offered a place at third level, two were offered places on a Post Leaving Certificate course, and one was offered an apprenticeship. At the end-of-year staff meeting, further indicators of the programme's performance were identified by staff who commented on the overall improvement of the students participating in the programme in the following areas: discipline; attendance (based on DEIS statistics 2009/2010, attendance increased overall by 7%, while there was an average of 40% improvement for the eight students participating in the SEP); motivation; engagement, and teacher/student relationships, while student enrolment increased by 8%.

5.5.4   Modify – SEP Processes 2009/2010

The information outlined above informed the final stage of cycle 1: **Modify** – *SEP Processes: Planning and Coordination* for the next year 2010/2011. It was decided by the SEP team based on the findings above to make the following modifications to the SEP for cycle two: 2010/2011:

Staff noted the significant improvement in the pilot group and requested that, if possible, the programme be made available to more students at risk in the next year's senior-cycle year groups. The School Completion Coordinator stated that, because the majority of the students in 5th and 6th year would be eligible for funding under the School Completion Programme criteria, funding would be made available to offer the programme to whole groups in senior cycle.

As a result of this and due to the time constraints, it was decided to offer the programme in its amended form to next year's sixth-years over a one-year period and over a two-year period to next year's fifth-years.

Additional to the above modifications, which staff supported, there was a general consensus that the statistical data that had been gathered (as presented above) in relation to the programme outcomes for students needed to be supported by more qualitative data from the students and other members of the school community. The team acknowledged the need for students to have more ownership of the programme; from their discussions with students, they noted that they wanted to be consulted more before they had to do something and their opinion on the benefits of particular modules to be

taken into account. In other words, they wanted to be involved in the initial forward planning.

The SEP team members outlined that, during their one-to-one meetings, data generated from tests such as the DATs test gave a great opening and an element of realism when creating a student profile; they requested that discussion and tests to determine "self-esteem, academic self-concept, satisfaction with life" be introduced as an approach to discussing these areas on a mentoring basis. The SEP team also recommended that students be more involved in creating their own profile and in the selection of the modules forming part of their Individual Learning Plan.

5.5.5   Reflection – (Cycle 1)

In general, staff at Glenmore Community School welcomed the idea of revisiting and addressing the school effectiveness issues that had been identified in 2005. A number of staff had retired in this year, but the new staff members seemed eager to get involved in the SEP. This was a new initiative and we were very much 'feeling our way' in addressing "what type of programme was necessary to meet the needs of the students" and "how effective the components of SEP were in addressing these needs". Staff felt that the programme worked well, mainly because it was not a new curriculum initiative that operated as an alternative educational approach, but in that it supported the curriculum that was already in place. It was felt by myself and the SEP team that the initiative had worked well this year, and that the students had improved with regard to their engagement and academic outcomes, to a small to significant extent.

The school principal at the end-of-year staff meeting said:

> "I would like to thank you all for your continued support and input over the years into the Student Engagement Programme. There is a general consensus among the students, parents and staff that the programme has been a success this year, judging by an improvement in the term assessment results, attendance and overall behaviour of the eight students who participated in the programme, some of which we were aware of from the Student Achievement Awards evening [...] I hope that these improvements will reflected in their Leaving Cert results in August." (FC, Research Journal, p. 23, May 2010)

It was an exhausting year for me. As indicated above, it was a new initiative and the programme lacked a pre-designed plan of action for the students, the SEP team and the teachers to follow. My role was vital in organising, designing, planning and modifying

areas and events as the need arose. I was frustrated and, at times, overwhelmed by my organisational role. This was reflected in two of my journal entries at this time:

> "I am just burdened and restricted by this research approach, and still don't seem to be addressing the full extent of the problems facing the students [...] I'm organising, planning, scheduling, fixing, dealing with student and parent problems [...] sometimes it feels like I'm climbing a steep hill with only little return for all the effort, I need to keep a focus on who I'm doing this for ... the student." (Research Journal, p. 19, Feb 2010)

> "I just feel that I'm dictating what needs to be done next and that I'm operating on the surface and not really getting to engage with the students or indeed with the SEP Team, this whole process seems mechanical." (Research Journal, p. 20, Feb 2010)

Frustrated and somewhat disillusioned, I reflected on the programme outcomes by reviewing the quantitative data and the notes made in my research journal. It was evident that the content of the programme did not fully address the problems that the students were experiencing from an academic perspective. I noted that student engagement in the programme was lacking at times:

> "Where is the enthusiasm that I saw during the school magazine [project] [...] when all of this is about them?" (Research Journal, p. 24, March 2010)

To rectify the situation, I realised that I needed to view my findings through the lens of a researcher and to review the literature in relation to school improvement. In doing this, I realised that the reason the students did not possess the same enthusiasm as when they had participated in the school magazine project was because they did not view the SEP as *their* programme, but as a programme based on the needs of the group and the needs of the school; more specifically, as a programme that neglected to engage them as active participants and did not seek to elicit from them the valuable insights that they could contribute, as individual students experiencing disadvantage. It was decided that, for the research to gain more depth and better address the needs of the students, the programme should reflect the epistemological approach of School Improvement research. Placing the student voice as central to the research initiative and gathering qualitative data would allow for greater student engagement and ignite greater enthusiasm and sense of ownership with regard to the programme. A detailed overview of the research process throughout cycle one of the SEP and the data-collection method at each stage of the yearly cycle can be viewed in Appendix 4 (p.202-209).

5.6   Cycle 2: 2010/2011

In this section, I will describe the cycle of events that arose during the academic year 2010-2011, introduce the participants, and define the principal stages and components that formed the structure of the SEP during that year and the outcome of each stage.

At the commencement of cycle two, the staff discussed and implemented the following modifications to the SEP framework to address the recommendations of Modify – SEP Processes: Planning and Coordination:

- Provide additional testing at Step 2: Understanding Self: Self-Esteem, Academic Self-Concept, Career Profile, Learning Styles

- Show students during the Action Planning stage how to prepare their Personal Profile and Individual Learning Plan, under the guidance of their SEP team mentor, and the relevance of them taking ownership of their programme

- Provide students with the results of their tests, help them to interpret them, and show them how to use these results to assist them and the SEP team members with the compilation of their profile and Individual Learning Plan

- Provide the programme to both the 5th and 6th year students over the one and two-year period

During Cycle 2, 16 SEP team and mentor meetings were held throughout the year. After the modifications were implemented into the SEP framework, the SEP team placed the student as the central driver in diagnosing and defining their profile under the following categories, the outcomes of which are discussed below and can be viewed in the appendices: 1) Student Background (Appendix 5, p.210: Diagnosing and Defining – Student Profile 2010/2011); 2) Career Expectations (Appendix 5, p.212: Diagnosing and Defining – Student Profile 2010/2011); 3) Educational Record (Appendix 5, p.214: Diagnosing and Defining – Student Profile 2010/2011); and 4) the barriers facing them regarding Engaging with School (as outlined in the following section).

On completion, students were assisted in transferring this information into their personal profile for the purpose of creating their own learning plan; they identified the personal development modules and the skills development areas to be incorporated into their learning plan. The information received from the students was then given to the programme coordinator, and one-to-one meetings were held with the students to formalise their learning plan and to address any issues or concerns that they had. An example of the participant's personal profile and learning plan can be viewed in Appendix 13 (p.265: My Profile and My Learning Plan).

1. Student Background

From the Student Background detailed in Appendix 5 (p.243), Diagnosing and Defining – Student Profile 2010/2011 from the 6th year group, the table shows that, of the group population of 22 students, 16 students met the criteria of the School Completion Programme and were deemed eligible to participate in the Student Engagement Programme (SEP). Regarding the background characteristics of the 16 sixth-year students determined as 'at risk', there was a close association again between the data found and the characteristics of students experiencing marginalisation as highlighted by researchers (Bourdon, 1974; Bourdieu, 1977; Bourdieu & Passerson, 1977; Lamont & Lareau, 1988; Meijnen, 1987), where students experiencing marginalisation are often from a lower socio-economic background (lone-parent families, unskilled, little or no formal qualifications). Of the 16 students who met the criteria, seven students were from a one-parent household, four had parents who were unemployed, 12 had parents who were unskilled, and only seven parents had attained a Leaving Certificate or equivalent. Of the background characteristics of the 23 fifth-year students determined to be 'at risk', detailed in Appendix 5 (p.243: Diagnosing and Defining – Student Profile 2010/2011), the table shows similar characteristics to those of the pilot and the 6th year group; although the majority of students were from a two-parent household, nine parents were unemployed, 15 parents were unskilled and only 14 parents had attained the Leaving Certificate or equivalent. Again, the data found further supports the characteristics of students experiencing marginalisation as highlighted by researchers.

2. Career Expectations

From the Career Inventory carried out by the career guidance counsellor and through discussion with the student, career expectations were documented in Career Expectations (Appendix 5, p.243: Diagnosing and Defining – Student Profile 2010/2011) during stage one of SEP. The students' Career Expectations table shows that prior to their participation on the SEP, of the students in the 6th year group, three had no expectation of attending any form of further education, only five expected to attend third-level education, two expected to participate in a Post Leaving Certificate course, and the remaining three expected to go directly into employment. The 5th year group mirrored the expectations of the 6th year group; five students had no expectation of attending any form of further education, 11 expressed an interest in attending third-level education, three expected to participate in a Post Leaving Certificate course and three expected to remain at home on the family farm. Overall the majority of students in the two groups seemed to have only one career expectation on completion of their Leaving Certificate.

3. Educational Record

In an attempt to determine the learning needs of the participating students from their school records, and after consultation with staff, the Educational Record table (Appendix 5, p.243: Diagnosing and Defining – Student Profile 2010/2011) outlined their educational record. This table assisted in the formation of an individual learning plan for each of the participating students, where areas of concern were highlighted, and gave the SEP team the opportunity to create a more individually focused intervention.

The Education Record Table shows again how no student from either the 6th or 5th year group had shown "very good" performance in their assessment results and only one student in the 5th year group had attained "very good" in their Junior Certificate results. Although there seemed to be better results in the 5th year group, with nine students having attained "good" in their assessments with the remaining ranging between "fair" and "poor", 14 students attained "good" in their Junior Certificate, and the remaining ranged between "fair" and "poor". In the 6th year group seven attained a "good" in their assessment results while the remaining ranged between "fair" and "poor"; in their Junior Certificate results six students attained a "good" result with the remaining ranging between "fair" and "poor". By reviewing additional school records such as students' psychological reports (where relevant), and in consultation with Head of Resource and teaching staff, it was found that, in the 6th year group, nine students would benefit from "numeracy" and seven from "literacy" support. In the 5th year group, it was found that 12 would benefit from "numeracy" support and 15 from "literacy" support. Overall "attendance" was recognised as more of a "problem area" for the 6th year group, with 10 students being recognised as having "attendance" problems and four having "discipline" problems. In the 5th year group, 10 were seen as having "attendance" problems and seven "discipline" problems.

The career guidance teacher carried out the DAT test on both groups to gain further insights into student needs and as supplementary information to support the above findings. The findings as highlighted in the DAT for Guidance Results (6th Year Group and 5th Year Group: 2010/2011) boxplots of the scores on the eight abilities measured by the DAT for Guidance, the Descriptive Statistics of Scores on the DAT for Guidance Table (p.215 - 219) and the DAT Test Individual Result, in relation to Students Educational Aptitude, supported the findings from the target groups' education records.

For the 6th year group, the median scores for all abilities were low, indicating that, on average, the students performed poorly in comparison to the reference population. The median score (34.0) for Abstract reasoning was the highest indicating that on average, this was the strongest ability of the students. Perceptual Speed and Accuracy had the

next highest median score (26.0). The median score (9.0) for Language Usage was the lowest, indicating that, on average, this was the weakest ability of the students. The interquartile ranges for Abstract Reasoning (6.0 to 65.0) and Mechanical Reasoning (16.0 to 67.0) were very wide, indicating a lot of variability in the scores for these abilities. Perceptual Speed and Accuracy, Space Relations, Spelling, Language Usage and Educational Aptitude had outlying values. Further investigation of the data revealed that the high scores for Space Relations, Spelling, Language Usage and Educational Aptitude were attained by one student, while a different student attained the high score for Perceptual Speed and Accuracy. The 5th year group also showed low median scores for the abilities. However, the median score for Perceptual Speed and Accuracy of 96.5 was very high, indicating that this was by far the strongest ability of these students. It indicates that half the students had a score that was better than 96.5% of the reference population (i.e. half the students were in the top 5 percentile). Space Relations had the next highest median score (41.0). The median score (9.5) for Language Usage was the lowest, indicating that, on average, this was the weakest ability of the students. The interquartile ranges for Mechanical Reasoning (9.0 to 60.0) and Space Relations (15.3 to 59.5) were very wide, indicating a lot of variability in the scores for these abilities. Verbal Reasoning and Educational Aptitude had outlying values, where the same two students performed much better than the other students. One of those two students also attained high scores for Spelling and Language Usage, while the other student attained the high score for Numerical Reasoning. Perpetual Speed and Accuracy had outlying values, where two students performed much worse than the other students. Again, similarly to the findings from the pilot group, the data found in relation to Language Usage supported the theory of Lamont and Lareau (1988) and Bourdieu (1977) that children from high socio-economic backgrounds are better equipped to function effectively in the education system, in that their social environment gives them the language skills required to be successful in school.

Additional to the qualitative data collected, quantitative data was also collected by the SEP team through the McCoach's School Attitude Assessment Survey – Revised (SAAS-R) to measure concepts related to adolescents' feelings about school. The median scores for all subscales demonstrate that the students had positive feelings about school. Goals valuation and attitudes towards school had the highest median scores (5.75 and 5.40, respectively) indicating that, on average, these were the factors that the students had the most positive attitudes towards. In comparison, the students had a less positive attitude, on average, to academic self-perception, attitudes towards teachers, and motivation/self-regulation. The interquartile range for the motivation/self-regulation subscale was widest,

indicating greatest variability in the students' scores on this subscale. Outlying values were found in the attitudes towards teachers subscale, with three students scoring much lower (i.e. having a less positive attitude towards teachers) than their peers. One of those students also had a much lower score (outlying value) on the goals subscale.

Additionally, data was collected and analysed to determine their levels of Self-Esteem through a Self-Esteem Inventory. The findings show that the majority of females in the study (58%, n=7) had below-average self-esteem, with most of those (n=6) being significantly below average. The majority of males in the study (58%, n=15) had below average self-esteem but there was a more even split between those who were significantly below average (n=8) and those who were somewhat below average (n=7). For those females whose self-esteem was not below average (n=5), most (n=4) had average self-esteem, while only one female had self-esteem somewhat above average. In contrast, for males whose self-esteem was not below average (n=11), there was almost an even split between those who had average self-esteem (n=4), those who had self-esteem somewhat above average (n=3) and those who had self-esteem significantly above average (n=4). In summary, males were more likely to have higher self-esteem than females.

The findings of the McCoach School Attitude Assessment Survey – Revised (SAAS-R) to measure concepts related to adolescents' feelings about school and the findings of the Self-Esteem Inventory support the findings of Malcolm et al (2003), as discussed in the literature review, when identifying the relationship between students from lower socio-economic backgrounds with low self-esteem, and the findings of Smyth et al (2004) who identified the impact of positive and negative interaction with teachers on students' perception of school and on attendance.

4. Engagement with school

Similarly to the findings in cycle one, the students during a focus-group session identified barriers that were preventing them from engaging with school:

1. School
2. Home
3. Community
4. Personal
5. Knowledge and skills

1. School

Supporting the findings from the pilot group, students indicated that they did not feel a sense of belonging in the school:

> "I just don't feel I belong here." (Padraig)

> "School just isn't for me." (Gabriel)

They pointed to a culture among the school community of not placing value on student welfare or academic progression, observing:

> "This school is for people who really want to go into the trades, I don't want to get an apprentice and there doesn't seem to be anything else on offer around here." (Liam)

> "No-one in this school really wants to get on." (Aaron)

> "I don't get any encouragement from the teachers, I think they would prefer if I wasn't here." (Paula)

2. Home

During the focus-group session, there was great awareness among the students of their own socio-economic background and they were quick to link their own situation to our previous discussion on the "characteristics of educational disadvantage":

> "My mother just won't have the money to send me to college and I just couldn't ask her anyway." (Ethan)

> "People like me just don't go to college." (Liam)

> "None of my lot went to college and it would be a bit strange if I went home and told the ol' lad that I was going to be going to third level, I don't think he'd be too impressed." (Paula)

3. *Community*

The students reflected on how going to third-level education would be viewed from a community perspective:

> "I think I would be the only one to even consider going to college from my street." (Amber)

> "All my family, like my aunts, uncles and cousins, live in the same area, and none of them or my family have gone to college, and I don't see myself going either, it just wouldn't fit." (Colm)

4. *Personal*

When discussing college, the students tended to dismiss the possibility of them ever attending:

> "That whole college scene just isn't for me." (Jonathan)

> "I wouldn't last 5 minutes in college, it's hard enough from my mother to get me to school." (Gabriel)

> "I like money too much to be dossing around for a couple of years in college, anyway we are heading back to England so I won't even be applying for anything over here." (Joe)

5. *Knowledge/skills*

With this group there was a greater emphasis on the need for guidance in how to progress to third level and ability to secure financial assistance:

> "… myself and my sister would love to go to college, but with both of us in 6th year and Dad gone I just don't know how we could afford to go and I'm not sure if we would be even eligible to get the grant." (Emmet)

> "I would go to college if I could get the grant but I don't know where to get or even fill in the forms and there wouldn't be anyone I know that could help." (Ethan)

> "I am going to go to college if I can but I don't think I'm eligible for the grant because I come from Brazil and that's not in the European Union." (Marius).

5.6.1 *Action Implementation – the Intervention 2010/2011*

In order to determine the students' individual educational needs, during one of our workshops we gave each of the students a copy of their results for the individual areas tested and assessed. With the support of their mentor they prepared their profile and decided on the areas where they needed assistance, thus creating their learning plan. Students were very engaged in this process and were able to quickly determine their

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areas of weakness and strengths, and their needs in the areas of 1) literacy and numeracy and 2) personal development.

A table detailing the additional classes selected by the 6th and 5th year groups shows the following student/mentor selections based on the information provided to the students on completion of this process (Appendix 7, 6th Year Group, p. 256 and 5th Year Group, p.257). The 6th year table shows how nine students selected additional classes in "literacy" and seven students additional classes in "numeracy". All 6th year students selected two or more personal development workshops. In the 5th year group, 15 students selected additional classes in "literacy" and 12 selected additional classes in "numeracy". All 5th year students selected three or more personal development workshops.

Throughout this process there was great student engagement in the task, and students took great ownership of their profile and learning plan. The SEP team agreed that this student-led approach had created great energy and enthusiasm. On completion of their learning plan, each student attended a one-to-one meeting with the Programme Coordinator to ensure that the appropriate modules were selected and to address any issues or concerns the students had. Once agreement had been reached the programme was scheduled. From reviewing the findings in the previous section, Diagnosing and Defining – the Student Profile, students with the assistance of their mentor and Programme Coordinator designed the Action Plan that would address their individual needs.

5.6.2   *Determine – the Success of the Intervention 2010-2011 – Outcomes*

From the findings detailed in Appendix 8, Determine – The Success of the Intervention 2010 – 2011: Results Progression (p.261), it can be seen that the majority of students (13 from a group of 16) made significant improvements in their academic performance. As noted above, improvement between first assessment at Senior Cycle and the results attained in the Leaving Certificate cannot be assumed at the school. The pilot group was the first year in recent times where the entire 6th year group the Leaving Certificate examination (as observed in our DEIS statistics 2006/2007). This results progression data was used as supplementary information to the students' educational outcomes and for triangulation purposes. Again, similar to the findings of the pilot group, students from the 6th year group, based on the findings as highlighted in Appendix 8 (PX2 (STEPS) Evaluation, p.256) showed that they would highly recommend the PX2 programme to their peers, found the programme challenging/motivation, engaging and interesting. Students

highlighted areas in their lives where they considered PX2 to be useful, from "goal setting" to "getting along with friends and family".

These findings and the increased student engagement, as noted by the members of staff, were reflected in the significant increase in the number of students from disadvantaged backgrounds who received various awards at the end-of-year Students Awards Ceremony. SEP participants received awards in the following areas: Best Attendance Award; Most Improved Student Award; Academic Achievement Award; Class Contribution Award; Good Citizenship Award; Student Leadership Award.

One of the most important aspects of the career guidance module was assisting students with their application to third-level education; as compared with their original career expectation (Appendix 5: Diagnosing and Defining – Student Profile 2010/2011, p. 243), all 16 students completed a CAO form or Further Education Application Form. Six were offered a place at third level, five were offered places on a Post Leaving Certificate course, two were offered apprenticeships and three were offered employment.

5.6.3 Modify – SEP Processes (2010/11)

The information outlined in the previous section feeds into Modify – SEP Process: SEP Planning and Coordination for the following year 2011/2012, and the following modifications were made to the Programme for Cycle 3: 2011/2012.

The SEP team noted that some of the best feedback and interaction with the students was when students were creating their own profile and learning plan, and at the end of the programme when students were asked to give feedback on the programme. It was also noted that the enthusiasm displayed at the end of the programme should be harnessed throughout the programme, giving students a greater sense of ownership of the programme (one "created by students for students") and sense of empowerment. The SEP team discussed how this greater student involvement throughout the programme could be facilitated. It was decided that, considering that the 5th year students had most of the components covered in their first year, time should be made available throughout the year to:

- Involve the former 5th year, now 6th year group in the development and modification of the existing programme so that it would become a fully integrated Transition Year programme
- Decide with the 5th year group the components of the programme to be made available to the Junior Cycle students

The SEP team agreed to implement the above into a structured framework to run in conjunction with this year's programme. As the 5th year group would be continuing with the programme, it was decided that the fifth-years would attend a small presentation on the structure for the forthcoming year, work with their mentor and address any changes that they wished to make to their learning plan for the following year. Any modifications would be given to the Programme Coordinator within a two-week period for scheduling purposes.

5.6.4 Reflection (Year 2)

At the start of cycle two, we immediately adopted the School Improvement Research approach for our investigations and data collection. This new approach brought with it quite a dramatic change to the research project. By setting out to ensure that the student was central to the research process and engaging them as active participants, I was amazed at times by how in tune the students were with their own circumstances, their ability to objectively look at the areas that were highlighted in learning and skills development, and decide what the best course of action for them would be, as noted in my research journal when I stated:

> "[...] and there I was last year figuring out the needs of the students, giving them endless guidance on what their best course of action would be, when all along they had the answer themselves [...] the sheer logic of this outcome has left me bemused." (Research Journal, p. 29, Oct 2010)

During our SEP team meetings we had all become aware of how important it was to have the student as an active participant and that our role was one of guidance and support. It became evident to us how, through their increased engagement, they started to create an enthusiasm and energy of their own, not only among themselves but between the teachers and themselves. I observed the students taking control of their personal situation, making decisions to participate in particular modules, and conversing with their peers about the relevance and need of these modules and how they benefited (or not) as the case arose. Compared to the previous year, the whole climate and culture of the programme changed; students mentored each other, there was a happiness and energy when we gathered in focus groups, workshops, etc. The difference was as between night and day. The 'push' had stopped and the programme had started to become self-driven and organic. I noted, for example, in one of my research journal entries:

> "I couldn't believe it, I had forgotten to announce that all SEP participants should go to the library for one of our focus group sessions today, and I was just about to put it off when I looked outside my office door and they had all

assembled, where one had remembered the detail from our last meeting and informed the group." (Research Journal, p. 34, Nov 2010)

This momentum continued and I seemed to have less of an administrative role and more of a supporting role. Members of the SEP team started to take charge of their mentoree, seeing it as a personal responsibility to support them. I observed conversations in hallways, and additional meetings being scheduled to discuss issues or matters arising. This change in relationships changed the manner in which teachers spoke about the students, from students being viewed in general as uninterested to the teachers having an appreciation and knowledge of the student and their personal circumstances. This became very noticeable during staff meetings; on one such occasion, the "non-compliance with homework" of one of our participating students was being discussed; how the teacher believed that "this student should be encouraged to take foundation level because of their disinterest [sic] in the subject". As noted in my research journal, the student's mentor replied:

> "You have no idea of how hard it is for X to get out to school each day let alone do homework, where that lad is coming from would make you shudder, if he was just given a little bit of encouragement and support [...] he has just enrolled in the homework club, you'll see a remarkable difference, I know I have." (DS, Research Journal, p. 42, Feb 2011)

The participating students who had once been at the periphery of the school had found a pathway into the heart of it. By having an understanding of their individual needs, encouragement, support, compassion and a structured programme of learning to specifically address the areas highlighted, these students began to contribute to the learning in the classroom and the extra-curricular activities taking place in the school. One of the most encouraging comments made by one of the mentors with regard to their mentoree was:

> "I swear I can nearly see him grow before my eyes, he's a different lad now to the one that started at the beginning of the year, this lad will go places."
> (EF, Research Journal, p. 56, May 2011)

Through this participation in all aspects of school life, the once marginalised students had taken control of their situation with the support of the SEP team, become engaged with school, and as a consequence there was noticeable improvement in their engagement with school, attendance, academic achievement and behaviour. At our final meeting for the year, the SEP team decided to maintain this course of purposefully focusing on the student and make a greater attempt next year to promote the partnership element with other members of the staff by examining areas where the SEP modules could offer

greater support to the mainstream curriculum. A detailed overview of the research process throughout cycle two of the SEP and the data-collection method at each stage of the yearly cycle can be viewed in Appendix 9, p.264).

5.7 Cycle 3: 2011/2012

In this section, I will discuss the cycle of events that concluded the two-year programme for the then 5th year students, and outline and address the modifications that were made to the programme for the academic year 2011/2012. Finally, I will outline the proposed programme that was designed at the end of cycle three by the fifth-year students to be integrated into the timetable of our Transition Year and outline the modules to be integrated into the timetable of the Junior Cycle programme for cycle four.

At the commencement of cycle three, students quickly progressed through **Diagnosing and Defining** – *the Student Profile.* As no new students had enrolled for the current 6th year, student profiles remained the same. Moving on to **Action Implementation** – *the Intervention*, the student and the mentor reviewed their profile and learning plan to ensure that it was addressing their learning needs. Students were advised to note any modifications they deemed necessary in their learning plan that they felt would benefit their learning. A follow-up meeting was arranged with the Programme Coordinator to discuss any changes with them before they would be implemented into their timetable and to address any issues or concerns they had. Once the modifications had been made to the learning plans by the students and integrated into their timetable, they progressed to Programme Participation. During this time, the SEP team and the Programme Coordinator met once a month with the students to ensure that they were progressing well in the final stages of their programme and to address problems or concerns they had. Additionally, students were asked to offer some thoughts as to how to develop the programme into a full-time integrated programme for Transition Year students and what modules of the programme they felt should be integrated into the timetable of the Junior Cycle Programme. The students, with members of the SEP team, met for six one-hour focus-group sessions, to discuss the modification of the SEP for next year's Transition Year students and the components of the programme that should be made available to the Junior Cycle year groups.

During these focus-group sessions, the students identified areas where they believed modifications should be implemented in the programme:

1. Duration of the programme
2. Programme content for the Transition Year and Junior Cycle

3. Student Achievement Awards

1. Duration of the programme

Students addressed the issue of programme duration, and stressed the importance of having the programme contained within a one-year time-frame prior to commencement of the senior cycle. This, they believed, would assist students in attaining maximum benefit from the programme as they would have the necessary knowledge to assist them with their studies.

> "It's a good idea not to have the programme anymore at Leaving Cert, 'cos you have more time in Transition Year and you get the whole thing done before you go into 5th year." (Tiernan, 2011)

> "The programme is a bit too much in Leaving Cert and you don't get the benefit of it from the start." (Erin, 2011)

2. Programme content

Transition Year students

Throughout the discussion the focus of the group was on the programme content. Students gave their opinion of the method of module selection. Observations included:

> "More team-building workshops, like the ones we did at the outdoor pursuits centre for Gaisce, that kind of thing would be good." (Sean, 2011)

> "The programme is good as it is in the way you can pick your own modules and leave ones you don't want to do." (Leigh Ann, 2011)

> "You should be given more freedom to pick individual workshops from a programme rather than have to attend workshops you don't find interesting." (George, 2011)

Students addressed the need to make modifications to the content of particular modules. Several students addressed the need for more discussion on the subject of educational disadvantage:

> "There should be more discussion on educational disadvantage and how you would know if you were disadvantaged and what causes disadvantage." (Erin, 2011)

> "We should have debates about educational disadvantage and other social issues." (William, 2011)

> "There needs to be more sharing of things that happen in your life, not personal or anything but just life stuff, maybe if we just got the chance to

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say how our lives are affecting our education and see what we have in common as a group and maybe then as a group we could try to solve these problems." (Cindy, 2011)

There was a great emphasis placed by the group on the benefits of communication between participants and on the need to support this form of communication between the participants and between the participants and their mentors in a variety of situations:

> "We really got to know each other much better when doing stuff from the programme than you would in the classroom when you have to work most of the time on your own and you can't talk." (Kayleigh, 2011)

> "It would be good if students could work with the mentors in a group situation when deciding what modules to put into your learning plan 'cos sometimes it's nice to know what everyone else is doing." (Ryan, 2011)

> "There should be more chatting between the group, not as much one-to-one with the team." (Shane, 2011)

One of our students addressed the benefit of programme participants being trained as facilitators/mentors as a method of continued support for other members of the school community:

> "The students should be shown how to give the workshops, so maybe it could be done like the Big Brother Big Sister programme at lunch times where the group that has finished the programme gives it to the next year and so on." (Elizabeth, 2011)

Additional to the need for advocacy and supported communication, students outlined the benefits of communication between students in other schools with similar backgrounds who were also experiencing difficulty:

> "It would be great to go somewhere and tell others what we discovered about ourselves during this programme 'cos it has really helped us as a group and maybe our experience might be able to help someone experiencing the same problems that we did before the programme." (Gary, 2011)

> "It would be great if there could be an exchange programme for students so that they could experience life in another school and maybe have them come back to this school and compare the difference." (Leigh Ann, 2011)

Students recognised the importance of recognition and suggested that there should be a more personalised approach to student achievement awards:

> "It should be part of the Transition Year graduation evening when your parents can come and see you get an award, then they could really see what it means and how far you have come." (Jason, 2011)

> "It's a real achievement when someone like us gets an award for turning their life around, it's a very personal time and I think it would be nice for the presentation at the end just to be with your classmates." (Kelly, 2011)

Junior Cycle students

There was a general consensus during the discussion with students that particular modules of the SEP should be made available to students on entry into second-level education and that modules should be introduced on a phased basis and reviewed as often as possible with junior students in the hope that the skills learned would become normalised practice for all students by the time they reached senior cycle.

> "Students should do the Study Skills module first thing when they come in to 1st year and this should be refreshed with them as often as possible." (Erin, 2011)

> "The Homework Club should be made available without any charge to everyone in the school as it's a good habit to get into." (Thomas, 2011)

> "Some of the students who come into this school from primary are very immature and it would be a very good idea if they could get a programme like PX2 but more younger version to get their head into secondary school before it's to late and the exams are on top of them." (Karolis, 2011)

5.7.1 Determine – the Success of the Intervention: Outcomes

From the findings detailed in Appendix 10 (p. 238 – p. 240: Results Progression) it can be seen that students maintained their performance, with the majority making significant improvements between their first assessment at Senior Cycle and the results attained in their Leaving Certificate. As discussed previously, it would be a natural expectation that the traditional student would improve their performance between one assessment period and the next, and subsequently in the results attained in their Leaving Certificate. In the past marginalised students who attended Glenmore Community School under-performed or left school early, not having attained a Leaving Certificate (as observed in the DEIS statistics, 2006/2007). The results progression data was used as supplementary information to the students' educational outcomes and for triangulation purposes.

Student feedback to the PX2 programme was very positive, as highlighted in Appendix 8: PX2 (STEPS) Evaluation (p. 241 – p. 245); they indicated that they would highly recommend the PX2 programme to their peers, found the programme

challenging/motivating, engaging and interesting. Students highlighted areas in their lives where they would consider PX2 to be useful from "goal setting" to "getting along with friends and family".

With the support of the career guidance counsellor, all 23 students completed a CAO form and/or application for a PLC course. The outcome can be viewed in Appendix 10 (p. 240: Career Progression); eight students were offered a place at third level, 12 were offered a place on a Post Leaving Certificate course, one was offered an apprenticeship and one student progressed to full-time employment.

At the end of the year the students with the assistance of the Programme Coordinator formulated a structure for the next year's programme for the Transition Year group, which would be given to the principal and the School Completions coordinator to be sanctioned for the forthcoming academic year. The finalised proposal for the SEP can be viewed in Appendix 11 (p.250 – p. 256: Proposal for Future).

In a series of focus groups carried out with both the 5th and 6th year groups on completion of their programmes, students were ask to discuss in what ways the SEP had affected their attitudes, teaching and learning in the school, their knowledge, their sense of agency in their education, their educational outcomes and life-chances. They identified the following:

1.   Attitude

Students highlighted the benefits of the constant monitoring of students as they participated in the programme:

> "Well you got away with nothing, that was good I guess. If you weren't in, the 'Officer' called your house, even my mother had to lie for me one morning. It stopped me just goin' through school, I stepped up and had to decide what I was doing with my life and when I didn't know they all helped me make a couple of choices." (Paul, 6th Year)

> "I liked having people around to chat to and that really gave a damn about you." (Aileen, 6th Year)

There was a remarkable change in the students' attitude to school in comparison to how they diagnosed 'school' at the onset of cycle one and two as being a barrier to their engagement in school.

2.   Teaching and Learning

Students highlighted the benefits that they received from participating in the SEP modules, such as the Study Skills and Homework Club modules. They noted how this helped them with their learning in the classroom and at home:

> "Ya, well when the teacher would say 'study for a test', like a particular chapter, I'd say why bother 'cos I'd never get all of that into my head. Now I know how to break it down into small bits." (Ayo, 5th Year)

> " I could never get me homework done at home with the racket, when I go home now I can relax and not have an argument with my mother over homework." (Paul, 6th Year)

The students noted how, through participation in the various learning and skills development modules and thanks to the study facilities available, they were now able to overcome the sense of hopelessness and isolation they noted as barriers to their engagement in school in cycles one and two .

3. Knowledge

The students discussed at length how increased knowledge and understanding of themselves had benefited them, as where two students discussed the information they had received while participating in the PX2 Personal Development Programme:

> People are always telling me what to do and how I should do it, I hate that, it drives me crazy. But the guy on the PX2 DVD told me that I made the decisions about what I wanted to do with my life. I look at life differently now, people still tell me what to do but in my mind I can't say I always agree with them. I also liked the part about how your mind works and that we sometimes can't see things even though they are staring us straight in the face." (Frederick, 6th Year)

> "I always wondered why I hated changing things, now I know why, I used to think it was because I was just a lazy xxx, but now I know that it's just because I don't like to change. I liked the bit on motivation and little tricks you can play on yourself to get you to do things like homework and study for a test. Can't say that it always works but sometimes it works for jobs at home." (Kelly, 6th Year)

The students were very aware of the personal changes within themselves and how through their participation in the personal development modules of SEP they were able to understand how to take control of their own personal influences and those of their environment, and make informed decisions about the best course of action in relation to

their own needs, thus recognising the community and personal barriers preventing them from engaging in school, as stated in cycle one and two of SEP.

4. Sense of Agency in their Education

One student noted how he had developed an appreciation for the educational opportunity that they received:

> "This was the best year I've had at school, for one who hated school I'm goin' to miss the place, but I'll just have to come back and let everyone know how I'm getting on." (Gabriel, 6th Year)

Some students seemed to have matured and gained a sense of personal freedom of choice in relation to their future after the Leaving Certificate:

> "I think it has changed me a lot, it's made me grow up and stop blaming the world." (Elizabeth, 5th Year)

> "It was good to know where you might like to go after school and how to get there. Definitely has made me think differently about what I'm going to do after the Leaving Certificate next year." (Jason, 5th Year)

The students during their participation in SEP learnt about further education, and viewing school as a 'stepping stone' to a better life-chance. This allowed them to more fully understand the role of school in their educational progression. They came to a richer appreciation of the role of education in creating their future and making a better life for themselves. This led to a sense of contentment and even happiness and removed the former negative attitudes towards the school (as outlined in cycle one and two).

5. Educational Outcomes and Life-Chances

The discussions with students in relation to their educational outcomes and life-chances revealed a complete change between their original life plan and their current plan. This is apparent in several comments, for example:

> "I had never been to a university before and I enjoyed being brought around and having everything explained to us. No-one at home went to college so before the course I wasn't planning on going, I might now." (Tiernan, 5th Year)

The whole area of progression to further education or third level was very topical, with most students willing to share their life plan after their Leaving Certificate:

> "I liked it, it's made me see if I can get into a course in Athlone in Front Office Management and when I have that done I'm going to get a job or

maybe go and visit my cousins in America and get a job over there, who knows." (Leigh Ann, 5th Year)

Yes, I'm going to see if I can get a college place, and who knows after that."
(Paula, 6th Year)

"Yes, I'm goin' to do a childcare course and hopefully open my own crèche."
(Cindy, 5th Year)

This sense of enhanced possibility through increased knowledge, skill and personal confidence in their ability to achieve has shown that it is possible to overcome the barriers that students experience through an individually targeted approach that supports them in removing these barriers.

5.7.2   Reflection (Year 3)

It was one of the most rewarding years of my teaching career. Starting back into the SEP was relatively easy, as the 5th year group moved into their second year of the programme. This made the programme almost seamless. The students who had participated in the programme the previous year seemed to have taken ownership of the programme and stepped into the role of student mentors, where they took on the role of introducing new students to the programme. We encouraged this enthusiasm, and where possible we got the existing students to take on the organising and promotion, initiate discussion, and make themselves available to answer any queries that the new students had. This further reduced my role, leaving me very much to programme scheduling and recording.

There was great understanding among the staff this year of the role of SEP in the school; new staff members were briefed by the existing staff in a couple of minutes when a SEP topic was addressed at a staff meeting, as noted in my research journal; the school principal stated how one of the SEP Personal Development workshops would be moved to the GP room from the library and a new staff member asked "What's the Student Engagement Programme?" The reply from one of her colleagues was:

"Oh, that's a programme we initiated here a couple of years ago to address the needs of some of our students who were having a bit of bother with literacy and numeracy and really just managing in school. It's been a great success." (Research Journal, p. 64, Jan 2012)

This integration of the programme into the curriculum became very evident, with SEP team members, resource support teachers and mainstream teachers scheduling subject department meetings or a meeting to discuss a student who was not managing in a particular subject area. Additionally, I observed increased partnership between subject

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teachers, who would enlist each other's support when planning excursions to various open days, tours and excursions. Parents too had become more involved in school-related activities such as the Parents Association and parent/teacher meetings, as noted in my research journal on the evening of a parent-teacher meeting:

> "Great to see the parents of the SEP participants here, they welcomed the support of our discussion before meeting with the teachers, they said it gave them a confidence and an ability to manage the questions and the responses from the teachers." (Research Journal, p. 67, Jan 2012)

The enthusiasm of the students on the programme, coupled with improved attendance, academic performance and behaviour, changed the culture in the school; the sense of hopelessness and isolation had subsided. The SEP had developed a synergy in the school, creating greater engagement of all students in the school, a calmer and more positive work environment, better working relationships between students and between students and teachers. The SEP had integrated itself into the very fabric of the school, becoming as much a part of it as the mainstream curriculum. The NEWB welfare officer, when looking to enrol a student who was not managing in another school, said to me:

> "I would be grateful if you would consider taking him on in September [...] he's a product of his upbringing, your school has had great success with students like X, I know if he can get in here, he'll make something of himself." (Research Journal, p. 72, May 2012)

A detailed overview of the research process throughout cycle three of SEP and the data-collection method at each stage of the yearly cycle can be viewed in Appendix 11, p.281.

5.8   Teachers Interviews – Views on SEP

As discussed in the previous chapter, students at the end of each of the four yearly cycles of the programme were asked for their feedback to determine modifications to the programme for the subsequent year. To fully research and explore the programme's impact on the school and generalise for future initiatives in Glenmore Community School, it was important to elicit the views of members of staff. Data from the teacher interviews was categorised as follows:

1.   Impact on Student Engagement
2.   The Nature of the Programme
3.   School Context

1. Impact on Student Engagement

Sense of belonging

In identifying the effects that the programme had on students, teachers noted both social and academic effects that became more apparent as the programme established itself. In the area of social changes, teachers observed students now having a greater sense of belonging to the school, as identified by Ms Ryan when she stated:

> … the Student Engagement Programme was initiated a good few years ago and I personally feel that we're reaping the benefits of it, particularly in the last maybe year or two. There seems to be a great sense of belonging as a result. (interview Transcript, E.R. p.1)

As a consequence of this increased sense of belonging, teachers noted an increase in confidence and self-esteem generally among students participating in the programme, and that this new-found confidence seemed to create a sense of competition among them, along with a willingness to take on new challenges. This was reflected in an increase in the uptake of higher-level papers, as noted by our maths and science teachers:

> There seems to be a greater sense of belonging, particularly with the current 5th years, they seem more confident and this seems to have created a little bit of competition amongst the group. They seem to be engaging better than they would have done previously. For example, there's more of them talking about taking the higher-level maths, [which] they would never have done before. They're trying it out. (Interview Transcript, E.R. p.3)

> I think their experience of school was better because, I really feel that the students themselves … the programme really helped their self-esteem and a sense of pride in the school, which the students, you know, previously didn't have. And it allowed them to be more […] proud of their own work plus their friends and the things that were going on in the school, they were proud of them. (Interview Transcript, M.F. p.2)

Purposeful academic engagement

One teacher was particularly impressed by the "huge improvement" which she attributed to the way the programme had led to stronger academic engagement and "healthy" competition among students:

> Really, it's like day and night, as far as I'm concerned in this school, from five years ago to the present day. I see a huge improvement even now in, in academic engagement, it's improving every year. Now there is a peer pressure that was never there before. It's a kind of a peer competition

really, not a pressure. It's, it's a competition, which is healthy. (Interview Transcript, M.C. p.1 and 2)

With the change in student attitudes, there was a noticeable change in the discourse between student and teachers, indicating a new engagement and enthusiasm among students, as observed by Ms Ryan:

> At the beginning of the year, they were asking me, 'Can I try it [higher level maths] out for a while?' Whereas previously, a few years ago, I would have been nearly asking kids, 'Well, will you just try it out for a while and see how it goes?' And you were nearly begging them to do it. Whereas there is definitely more discussion about their homework. There's more discussion about their tests. They're trying to, I suppose, pass each other out and you know, the little bit of competition, which is always a little bit good as well. (Interview Transcript, E.R. p.3)

This new confidence had given students the ability to embrace a future of new educational and career ambition, as observed by the school's Art teacher when she noted the change in students' conversation in the art room:

> And they're all looking to, to go on to further education now, which is the main thing, whereas years ago, they might have been talking about staying on the farm at home or getting, you know, get a job just to make a few pound ... […] I had a class this morning even and I was asking them, it was third years, so they'd be very young, had they any idea what they were going to do after school? And every single one of them around the table said, named out a course they were going to do in college. So it's become an expectation in their mind, which is fabulous because if they have it, there's some chance of them getting it. They're, they're aiming for it, where, and that I think has to come out of the PX programme, has to come out of the, you know, the, the mentoring. (Interview Transcripts, G.G p. 2 and 4)

The teachers remarked on how the change in student attitudes included a new positivity about school, a new sense of purpose in their approach to their academic work, and a new acceptance of responsibility:

> … the students, their whole approach to schooling or coming into school I feel has changed since I started here. They've a much more positive outlook on coming. They enjoy it. They're coming in. They're coming in on time and they have their work done. And I think definitely their engagement with the academic side of things has improved greatly due to the fact that they now see something at the end of their years here ... their whole attitude or outlook has changed. So they're taking an interest in their subjects. They want to get as many points as they can in their exams. They want to do well. There's a much more positive approach to that. (Interview Transcript, G.G p.1)

A similar change in student attitude was noted by another teacher:

> They [the students] seem to, have an idea of why they're in school, why they're here, why they have to be here, rather than before, they came to school because they had to come. It was part of what they had to do. Now, from my way of looking at it, I see that they're here because they want to be and they're more interested in what they're doing. (Interview Transcript, P.B. p1)

Supporting the above findings, the following teacher noted this change specifically in the attitude to and sense of responsibility towards the completion of homework:

> Well, in my opinion, students are more academically engaged in class and with respect to their attitude towards homework. They accept the fact that they have to do homework. They use their homework journals far more effectively than they would have been heretofore. (Interview Transcript, S.E. p.1)

As a collective group, staff noted the distinct improvement among the students who participated in the SEP in relation to discipline and overall attendance. This they attributed to the mentoring and monitoring of students:

> I have to say that I didn't think it would be possible to improve the behaviour of some of our more boisterous students, let alone have them come to school on a regular basis ... the mentors on the programme do not take kindly to misbehaviour and absenteeism, they are very active in discussing and following up misbehaviour and noting absenteeism when a situation arises. It's a long process that students wish to avoid, I think, they think, it's just easier to behave and come in. (Interview Transcript, G.G p.3)

> Students don't need to act out as much in the classroom to get attention, they know they get much better recognition with even small improvements and that they have the same chance as the rest of picking up an award at the end of the year. (Interview Transcript, E.R. p.4)

One of the direct outcomes of the student involvement in the programme was their increased awareness of their educational prospects. Teachers noted that this knowledge was fundamental in students setting goals, becoming more motivated and self-directed in their learning:

> What really helped them was they realised from the programme that they were really at the end of the day responsible for their own progress. And that without their […] effort, any, all the teachers in the world couldn't help them. And they were kind of inspired too, to visualise themselves as moving on to college after their Leaving Certificate. I suppose […] this caused them to set goals that they won't normally have done, along with motivation from the teachers to […] kind of to work as hard as they could themselves to

> attain those goals and to motivate themselves. (Interview Transcript, M.F. p.2 and 3).

> If they had gone into fifth year last year, I don't think they would be as successful as they are. And I actually feel that they're using all of that knowledge of their educational prospects and what education can do for them … (Interview Transcription, E.R. p. 6)

The same teacher noted that the students were not merely taking increased responsibility for their own learning, but becoming active agents in the process:

> They're very settled, very mature class. I have them for the higher-level maths. They're self-correcting. They're self-evaluating. We deal with in class what they have problems with. We don't go over stuff that they already know. They can make the decision. They're making informed decisions about what we need to do in class, they are directing the learning. (Interview Transcription, E.R. p. 6)

The students were also thinking beyond the classroom to their lives ahead, and imagining the kind of career that would be open to them:

> The programme encouraged them to think beyond what they might have felt that they were able to achieve. Think outside the box in terms of careers for themselves. (Interview Transcript, M.C. p. 6)

Relationships

Concerning the general life of the students in school, teachers noted the change in students' relationships with each other and with their teachers and school staff. It appears that their raised self-esteem was associated not only with a healthy competitiveness, but also with an openness to other people's views:

> They're willing to participate in class and they're accepting of their own peers' opinions and accepting where other kids have opinions about certain things. But they're, rather than sort of teasing each other, they're more willing to listen to each other. And that leads on to listening to the teacher as well. They're far more willing to participate in class and engage with new challenges […] both in class and at home when they're doing their homework, or in the formal study that is made available to them in the library ... they're more tuned in, I feel, and focused on their academic work. They take it far more seriously, but they enjoy it at the same time. Like they enjoy school. There's a great atmosphere in the school. They relate very well to each other and to the teachers and to the school management. (Interview Transcript, S.E. p.1)

The extent to which the students' competition was "healthy", as the teachers suggested, is borne out by the observation that they also engaged in mutual encouragement:

> Their interpersonal relationships, even, definitely between themselves, they, they nearly encourage each other to do well. It'd be a healthy kind of competition that'd be going on in the classroom. If one is doing well, the next wants to do just as well, which is a new thing over the last couple of years. (Interview Transcript, G.G. p. 1 and 2)

The improved relationships that students had with the teachers, according to one member of staff, had resulted in a growth of mutual respect:

> When I first started working here, you always heard teachers referred to by nicknames. I don't hear that any more. In the last number of years, I honestly have not heard a nickname being referred to any teacher. They're more respectful of their teachers, but they're more in tune with their teachers too. (Interview Transcript, P.B. p.1 and 2)

This mutual respect and 'being in tune' with teachers, according to the same interviewee, led to the teachers' desire to educate being met by the students' increased desire to learn, in a mutually reinforcing process:

> They're more, they, it's kind of funny because the teachers and the students seem to have got onto the same wavelength. The teachers are here to teach them and the, the students are here to, they're always grasping to know, you know, more. And even I see in the GP room now, they'd be talking about, 'Do you know, we were doing such and such and do you know, but why didn't we ask her that?' And next thing, you'd see them, they're gone because they're going to go down and ask. And on the corridors at break time and lunch time, I would see where the staff might come out of the, the staffroom and next time, you could have a student up asking them something. But it is to do with their education. (Interview Transcript, P.B. p.1 and 2)

2. The Nature of the Programme

The nature of the SEP was also accredited as central to the improved student engagement, attitudes and behaviour. The programme design and the key element of a partnership approach were crucial elements.

1. Programme design

2. Partnership

1. Programme design

The school principal addressed the issue of the disengagement that often happens between teaching and learning in schools. During his interview, the principal articulated clearly the underpinning ethos of the programme:

> When a student is being taught, the information given to them is all too often lost. They can take it down and then they do whatever they do with it, our students have been taught how to take this information rationalise it, organise it, understand it and then when required be able to apply it. But most students have difficulties in these areas. And instead of simply giving the information to a student and saying, 'Now it's your responsibility to rationalise all this information' our student engagement programme has said, 'Yes, it is your responsibility to rationalise the information that you have been given, but we are going to assist you in that rationalisation.' And I think this assistance has given our students an opportunity to engage with the learning in a much more wholesome and holistic way than was previous in this particular school. (Interview Transcript, F.C. page 1 and 3)

> I used to think, what are we going to do with these students to get them to engage in school. When I used the term 'engage' I mean in all areas of school life from the classroom environment, to the home environment, to extra-curricular activities to social address on the corridor. There was so much work needed to be done with some of the students in so many different areas ... for the first time I am starting to see the benefits of the different modules the students participate in on the Student Engagement Programme, they seem to be able to first of all understand why they are there, take the information given, process it and give it back to the teacher in the form required for a class or homework exercise. (Interview Transcript, G.G. p.5)

Supports for learning

Teachers, acknowledged the importance in supporting student engagement and student learning in the classroom of the skills development and personal development modules:

> Firstly, the study skills programme that we've done. Now, that gives them the tools in which to, to organise and rationalise the information. Students sometimes find it very difficult to know how to study, so they open a book, the book could be 100 pages, 200 pages, and it's just a mass of information. The Study Skills programme has allowed them to compartmentalise that information in a systematic and tangible way. And I think that's really, really important for our students. (Interview Transcript, F.C p.3)

Helping students negotiate their complex terrain of everyday life was also a key skill the modules developed:

> ... there's a whole plethora of issues that are associated with students. You know, their life gets in the way of their learning on lots of occasions, so our PX2 programme has allowed an intervention programme here whereby our students begin to understand themselves, and I think that's really important ... the PX2 programme gives them a psychological thought process of getting over these barriers. You know, helps them rationalise problems. It doesn't give specific solutions for every single problem, but it gives them a kind of a suite of tools that they can use to try to tackle the issues as they arise. (Interview Transcript, F.C p. 3 and 4)

Building the basic skills of learning was another focus and support acknowledged by the teachers; for example, a maths teacher said:

> ... the literacy and numeracy modules play a fundamental role in supporting the learning taking place in the classroom. I just found it so difficult when you have a specific curriculum to cover for exams, and especially with the vast changes to the maths curriculum to be able to give sufficient class time to students experiencing difficulty. Some of the students coming into my class hadn't passed ordinary-level maths in the Junior Cert and were now attempting Leaving Cert maths. Thankfully this has changed because they were just in a no-win situation. (Interview Transcript, M.C p.5)

Integrated programme

Student engagement and participation did not happen in isolation for the student. From the start the programme was integrated into the life of the school through its holistic approach. For instance, the SEP team worked closely with career guidance in the support of student development. Teachers identified this integrative approach as creating and adding benefits for both teachers and students during the programme cycles:

> With all of the career guidance that they have been given, particularly during TY and as a result of combined interventions and combined efforts, the mentoring and monitoring by the SEP Team that has gone into them, the students feel that they've got a clearer pathway now. They know exactly where they want to go and that they want to, they know what they have to do in order to achieve that. So I, I feel the combination of all the staff involved and modules together has had a massive impact on student progress across the board. (Interview Transcript, E. R. page 3 and 4)

> The sheer overlap between the facilitator of the PX2 programme getting students to visualise going to third level and then the career guidance counsellor physically putting them on a bus to attend college open days. It's really breaking the cycle for some of the students and giving them a sense of the unknown. (Interview Transcript, M.F p.4)

> With the support the students I am getting through the literacy and numeracy component of the programme, [which] gives me the opportunity to work in tandem with the learning support teacher where we can formulate

a strategy that supports the curriculum and have some chance of the student passing their maths exam. So far we have had good success with this approach, results are getting better. (Interview Transcript, M.C p.4)

The programme created a framework for a whole-staff response and so reduced the previous disjointed response to the needs of the learner. This was acknowledged by the principal who noted the change in the attitude of teachers to their work and their growing sense of responsibility for student progress. There was now a greater sense of being a team among the staff. In essence what emerged was a whole-school response focused on learning to learn:

> Each of the teachers is taking responsibility for this engagement process, as is the management. So we are working as a team, and as the team, our focus is ensuring that the student not only takes on board the information, not only understands the information, but can rationalise and apply it. (Interview Transcript, F.C. p. 2)

A key factor which emerged in the interview with an older member of staff was the fact that the programme was teacher-led and not delivered by external personnel. The competency of the staff facilitating the SEP modules was noted by the following teacher:

> These modules are structured, well delivered, reviewed, and modified and sometimes binned if not working, by very well qualified and experienced teachers in the school. (Interview Transcript, S. E p. 2)

The integrative approach also enhanced students' participation in extra-curricular activities; and this was attributed directly to the SEP programme's recognition and rewards element:

> They all want to take part in extra-curricular [activities] and there's a lot of that, which we didn't have before. They're interested. They want to feel a part of the school community even outside on the sports pitch or a part in the school musical. So, they get the fact that they get recognised by an article in the school news or rewarded at the end of year for their participation or just simply thanked for doing that, is a great, great thing. Well, I think it's all round, it kind of comes together. Even if they're improving or if they're just trying their best, but definitely I think that helps. (Interview Transcript, G.G p.1 and 2)

> But there is an air of achievement and an air of hard work and, and you can see that then in all the different competitions that the school has entered in. And you have the BT competition, you have the musical. And again, this participation in activities outside of the classroom, it gives, you know, this sense of kind of friendship amongst the pupils when they're involved in a musical, involved in a choir, recognised for being good at something ... and

you know when you get recognition it just gives that sense of belonging. (Interview Transcript, M.C p. 3)

2. *Partnership*

The support role for parents, with an emphasis on partnership from the start, in the SEP was a significant factor, as noted by the school principal:

> For a lot of our parents, it's the first time they've had a child in secondary school, and the amount of work that they're having to bring home with them, the amount of learning that needs to be done […] and parents often don't have a grasp of the subject matter. And, and our programme says, 'That's okay. You don't need to have a grasp of that, but what you need to have is a supporting role.' (Interview Transcript, F.C page p.3 and 4)

To support this partnership, an infrastructural support structure was developed in parallel to support communication, particularly with parents:

> And I suppose that's where our e-portal and texting service system comes in, and that's where the lines of communication have been magnificently developed. (Interview Transcript, F.C page p.3 and 4)

Expanding on the area of partnership with parents, the Art teacher noticed a change in attitude to their role in their child's education, from that of a bystander to being an active participant:

> Through the Student Engagement Programme parents are invited into induction evening", parent/teacher meetings and SEP meetings, and they can view at a glance their child's progress on-line. This has caused the parents' minds to change from complacent bystanders to actively and continuously being encouraged to engage with the school. You see it in parent/teachers meetings. They're curious, wondering where their [child] is going to go and the next stage of their child's education, old habits are being changed, which is fantastic for this school. (Interview Transcript, G.G. p. 3)

Communication within the school between staff and between staff and management also improved, and this ensured that any child who was experiencing difficulty was identified early and appropriate structures were put in place:

> It's very important at every staff meeting that we discuss students' progress. And we have a small student, relatively small student body. It's not small enough that we can get round to every single student, but teachers know that they can come to you as the Programme Coordinator and say, 'Well listen, A is not doing this' or 'B is slipping or C' and then we take positive action. The action is taken immediately. It's addressed. The parents are involved. Their school completion programme and the home/school

community liaison officers are also brought in on, on it if need be, and it really is, what we're really doing is we're finding out what the issues are and we're trying to address the issues. We're not trying to put a plaster over a gaping wound that has gone on too long and [,,,] festers and we end up with, with a disaster coming up to an examination. (Interview Transcription, F.C. p. 4)

Therefore the integrated approach with partnership at its core facilitated an open, explicit and coordinated programme design and approach to students with difficulties:

Well, since I came as a teacher, I would see a huge change in so many different areas of the school, and discipline and attendance are definitely very big ones. I would say that because I think the children were mentored, and particularly that group who have just finished their Leaving Cert now, they really turned around and really got results for, for their Leaving Certs that we weren't expecting. (Interview Transcript, M.C p.2 and 3)

3.   School Context

In reviewing the success of the SEP, during the interview process, teachers identified two contextual factors that were present at the time of the intervention:

1. **Staff Engagement**
2. **Management Engagement**

1. *Staff Engagement*

One of the school's senior management team observed how the staff "got behind" the intervention from the onset:

> All members of staff got behind absolutely every aspect of the intervention, adhered to its procedures and guidelines, whether it was releasing kids from class in order that they get their sessions, their one-to-one sessions with their mentor ... it allowed us to focus in on at-risk students, and to give them the care that they needed. (Interview Transcript, E.R p. 4).

She also noted that this created a willingness and collegiality among staff and an increased duty of care to the student and the school, because staff could see that the programme was for the greater good of the student and the school:

> ... the biggest difference really is in staff in that there's a huge willingness by the staff ... but my own experience is that during the intervention, staff have developed a very strong duty of care to the student, become extremely collegial and cooperative ... open to the new intervention ... and they can see that it is for the greater good of the students and for the school. (Interview Transcript, E.R p.5).

The science teacher observed this collegial support and comradeship among staff as embedded strongly in the school culture:

> ... teachers really support each other in the school ... they're very helpful, you can always approach some other member when you have a problem or an issue that you're worried about or, there's a problem maybe with a pupil and you just need to get something sorted. There's always that support and you know that it's there. (Interview Transcript, M.C. P.5)

Noting this new normalised behaviour in working relationships with each other, the school's maths teacher observed:

> ... staff here are extremely united, extremely hardworking ... [they] facilitated the improvements in the school, above and beyond the call of duty ... they're very interested in a very personal way in their school. It's not just a job to them. (Interview Transcript, E.R p.6)

Supporting this emerging culture of collegiality was the development of subject departments as an element of the School Development Planning (SDP) initiative at the time. This change in practice created among teachers a baseline for more collaboration and engagement with the school and its students:

> The development of subject departments within the school, I think has been important. That was never a thing we had before the intervention, but now that we have our subject departments we have great support and the work can be shared out. This working together on lesson planning between the Head of Resource and ourselves in the maths department has filtered down into the actual teaching in the classroom and the academic achievements that have resulted are a direct consequence of this. (Interview Transcript, M.C. p. 4)

2. Management Engagement

The principal highlighted how the intervention had caused a division of the management roles in the school and how through this division the development of the intervention was possible:

> The Student Engagement Programme divided our management systems, if you like, and allowed you focus more on students and me as the Principal to focus more on facility and employee elements of […] the school. So I was dealing with teachers and non-teaching staff, the actual running of the school and you were, you, you were allowed then to focus on being more systematic in developing the Student Engagement Programme. (Interview Transcript, F.C p.7)

Staff also observed the support and relationship that the principal gave to the Programme Coordinator, the SEP team and the staff throughout the intervention:

> As one of the older members of staff, I have to say that the appointment of the new Principal did bring with it a fear of the unknown. The Principal

quickly dispelled this by the supportive manner he displayed to all members of staff. He welcomed and supported new ideas and assisted the Programme Coordinator and the SEP Team in the implementation of student supports. In my opinion, it was this level of support that started us believing in ourselves again. (Interview Transcript, S.E. p. 4).

It was evident that there was a very good working relationship between the Principal and the Programme Coordinator ... this could be seen in the support afforded by the Principal to the intervention. (Interview Transcript, M.F p.4).

With regard to the relationship between the Programme Coordinator and the members of staff during the intervention, staff commented on the leadership shown by the coordinator throughout the programme:

... going back to relationships, in order for any new strategy or for, in order for anything to succeed in school, there has to be strong leadership. And I mean with the intervention programme, you have shown very strong leadership. As Programme Coordinator, [you] have shown everybody that 'this is what I want to achieve and this is how we're going to try to achieve it' ... there were very clear guidelines and very clear goals laid down for us. At all points, communication was left open, so we knew exactly who was involved. (Interview Transcript, E.R p.5).

Discussing the role that the coordinator played in the design, implementation and overseeing of the intervention, one member of staff noted:

In the initial stages, where a group or a year group was selected, everybody was kept in the loop as to what was happening ... each student was accounted for. At all times, we knew whether they were in class, if they were with yourself. And it gave the students a clear pathway, there was no chance of the intervention conflicting with the normal curriculum. Students and teachers had their own schedule to follow, with term meetings to ensure that the plan was being carried out, this kept us all in line and our more energetic students on task. (Interview Transcript, E.R p.5).

Elaborating on the role of the coordinator, the principal outlined additional characteristics displayed throughout the programme:

... your role was fundamental because […] as the Programme Coordinator you had to be very systematic and organised yet flexible about how you approached things. You had to have a full understanding of the problems that were associated with the students, at an individual level. And your role was very pastoral as well as, as a discipline role ... you have a pastoral role and you have a discipline role and you combine them very, very expertly because of your consistency. You have the experience and level of skill in working with not just difficult students, but difficult parents and demanding teachers ... you can balance all of them up and bring everything down to a

systematic, appropriate and fair way, which enables all participants to realise their full potential. (Interview Transcript, F.C p.8)

Staff noted that the Programme Coordinator possessed qualities that were necessary to support the intervention:

> ... only for the intervention leader, these interventions would not have taken place here because I don't see anybody else to have taken that role upon himself or herself. Not because we wouldn't be able, but because we didn't possibly have the skills. (Interview Transcript, S.E p. 3)

> ... there are a number of things that stand out, there is such high respect for you ... what you have done by coming in and not accepting anybody's failures, you have brought the best out in everybody. It's a very happy environment to work in. The office door is open all the time. If you have a problem, you can walk into the office ...the way that you work to me is you are constantly, constantly forward thinking... you just seem to have the ability to bring people with you, even sceptics. And you don't take defeat. (Interview Transcript, P.B p. 5 and 6).

One of the more senior members of staff noted how with the new management structure in the school came new ideas and a more modern, collegial approach to school improvement:

> ... new management came in and brought new ideas, which at the time, we said, 'Oh God, what's this?' But you know what, it was fantastic because it involved staff, students and the parents. And it made everybody kind of sing from the one hymn sheet. We were all directed in what our role was, and if you have a problem now, you have an avenue that you can go to. (Interview Transcript, P.B p.3)

Expanding, Ms Beirne noted why she felt that this new approach was accepted and put into practice by the staff:

> ... we went through a renewal. We had reached a very low place in the sense that we were gone so far down on the scale. There was only one thing that could do, was somebody to come in and say, 'Look it, we'll try it this way.' And we tried it this way and it worked. So far, it has worked and I'm sure at the time people found it difficult to move with all the new changes but this renewal gave us a sense of purpose. (Interview Transcript, P.B p.4)

Giving an example of how staff were supported through this time of rapid change, one member of staff identified one of the personal development programmes that was made available to them during a series of professional development workshops.

> .. .it was a time of rapid change ... the whole face was totally changing but during that time there was one programme ... the STEPS programme ... I

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learned so much about myself. I mean I thought I knew an awful lot about myself, but until I did the STEPS programme, I didn't. And now I realise that I'm doing it unknown to myself with the students. And they have done their version of STEPS and they're doing the same thing with me. So it's a much, much more, we're balanced. (Interview Transcript, P.B p.4)

One staff member identified the high energy level and work ethos displayed by the Programme Coordinator and how this had an impact on staff and student participation:

I saw that as you were young you had so much energy. Untold energy. And I used to say to other members of staff, I'd say, 'She's going to burn herself out' ... and we could see you working so hard, there in the evenings after school with one of your prodigies, encouraging them, we learned from this ... it wasn't just a once in a while thing, we witnessed this commitment to the students every day.   (Interview Transcript, M.C p.4)

... for me the Programme Coordinator led the field and brought into effect many different changes. I think the Programme Coordinator has been very forward-thinking and has worked extremely hard in improving so many aspects of the school ... it's more than a, than just a job. It's, it's a vocation, definitely. And I can see and the students can see the level of work that the coordinator has put into this ... you need management to spearhead anything, and that has been the case here ... like these interventions, which Ms Lohan has originally set off, say three or four years ago, you know, they have been the starting point for so many different changes. (Interview Transcript, G.G. p. 8)

Staff observed a keen sense of vision that the Programme Coordinator displayed throughout the intervention and how this vision was imparted on a daily basis to the staff:

... you're one of those people that … you had the idea. You had the vision. This is the way I perceived you to be. You had the vision and you were going to get it ... you detailed the approach we all needed to take, and we saw you giving it your all, and I guess it was easier for us to follow the energy source rather than the negativity which was present but got us nowhere in the past but down. (Interview Transcript, P.B p. 8)

5.9   Summary

This chapter has detailed how the SEP programme works, and analysed the research data to consider the outcomes of the SEP for the student participants and ways in which the programme scaffolds these outcomes through its design and practice. It has outlined the learning of the students from their participation, including insights into their academic and social development, and how their engagement in the programme was fundamental to increasing their life-chances, resulting in their progression into further education or employment.

Secondly, data was analysed to determine the effect the SEP had on the school community, as identified by the teachers. Through student engagement in the SEP, teachers witnessed a transformation of the school climate and culture to the benefit of all stakeholders in the school.

The final chapter details the overall findings of the programme and answers the final research question, "What are the design conditions and factors that will promote its (SEP's) success and that are transferable to other interventions?"

Chapter 6: Conclusion

This study set out to explore what type of localised intervention would improve the life-chances of children in a disadvantaged school. More specifically the project set out to investigate (a) the impact of localised policy intervention on increasing the life-chances of children, (b) the conditions that enable this intervention and (c) the factors that promote its success and are transferable to other interventions.

In this final chapter, I discuss each of the research questions, as outlined in Chapter 4, reflecting on the findings and analysis, and then put forward conclusions and recommendations regarding the implications of the research for the intervention programme itself and for improving the engagement of marginalised students in school. In doing so, I argue that the inclusion of the 'student voice' is fundamental when implementing a localised intervention to improve the educational outcomes of marginalised students.

I completed a School Effectiveness Research (SER) investigation for my M.St. in 2007, which found that Glenmore Community School was "ineffective" in a number of ways. The school presented all the characteristics of a "failing school" as described by Stoll and Fink (1998, p.192):

> "a school in which isolation, self-reliance, blame and loss of faith are dominating norms, and powerfully inhibit improvement. It will often, although not always, be in socially disadvantaged areas where parents are undemanding and teachers explain away failure by blaming inadequate parenting or unprepared children".

This assessment formed the basis for this research project. Grounded in the belief of Stoll and Myres (1998) that "every child has a right to the best possible education", with the support of my school principal, Roscommon VEC and the School Completion coordinator, a team was established (including myself) in the school to further investigate the contextual causes of failures that lay both inside and outside of the school (Stoll & Fink, 1998). Through this process, we sought to understand the processes and practices within the localised context of our school, in order to implement a successful and sustainable initiative to support students and therefore enhance their life-chances.

In line with the SER positivist epistemology (Willmott, 1999), a quantitative method of data collection was used initially in this investigation of 'how' and 'why' the school was failing the student. The data gathered was quantitative in nature; variables related to a variety of student outcomes such as cognitive, social and affective, as recommended by Sammons

(2007), were investigated. Sammons stressed that we must look at a student's social and affective as well as cognitive outcomes, such as attendance, attitudes to school, behaviour, motivation and self-esteem. These outcomes, she believes, have a direct influence on a student's academic attainment and progress, and cognitive outcomes should not be of primary importance to social and affective outcomes, and vice versa. In her earlier research, Sammons (1996) found that if a student's ability to learn improves, then the student's self-esteem, engagement and attitude to school also improve. During this time, we reviewed each individual student in the school, investigated the actual conditions of learning for the student, helped them to define their life circumstances and identify the key factors relating to educational disadvantage that were affecting their lives. The findings supported the theory of Townsend (2002) that, in order for our school to become "effective", it needed to focus on literacy, numeracy, curriculum development, behaviour, attendance, self-concept goals, citizenship, employment, other educational goals (e.g. values and attitudes) and community.

In the original design of SEP the areas as mentioned above were incorporated. Therefore, skill development in the academic, social and affective dimension were the primary focus of SEP. Throughout year one of SEP we continued to gather quantitative data to determine the impact of the programme on student outcomes. At this point we were able to answer the initial part of our research question: "What type of intervention would improve the life-chances of children in a disadvantaged school?" However, for this research to progress into stage two, the positivist epistemological approach was no longer viable. This realisation supports the findings of Luyten et al (2004) who found that positivist approaches to research ignore the values and life experiences of research participants and pay no attention to the meaning that they give to events; as a consequence, a solution to correctly address the cause of the problem cannot be established. Therefore, to assess its impact on student outcomes and identify the core elements, key factors and supporting conditions that enable success, I adopted a qualitative approach to data gathering, as reflected in School Improvement Research (SIR) which is a distinct approach to school change whose aim is to enhance student outcomes as well as strengthen a school's capacity for managing change (Hopkins, 2001). This approach was more in line with the intended outcome of SEP, where school improvement practice should not be as a direct consequence of the implementation of policies, but rather where improvements are a result of practices that are transformative in nature and engage actively with the learning process to achieve maximum impact on students, teachers and school. By adopting the key principles of SIR (Hopkins, 2001) and engaging the students in the research process, they assisted in defining the situational

factors (Creemers et al, 2000), both internal and external to the school and particularly the socio-economic context of the school, in order to determine what best fits the particular internal organisational culture of the school, and on a wider basis the situational factors that arise on a regular basis in other schools.

Educational research, as suggested by Kemmis (2005), should fuel "the development of education both in the interests of individuals (especially those disadvantaged in access to and success in education) and for the common good" (p.9). The SEP reflects the student participation approach in educational reform, as proposed by Kemmis's principle. According to this, students who have been marginalised within the education system should be directly involved in research relating to the obstacles and educational barriers they have experienced, from a real-life perspective.

Figure 6.1: 'The Student Engagement Programme (SEP) approach' shows how SEP initially used a framework to practically engage the students who were experiencing marginalisation, and how through their engagement with the programme they supported the research process by participating in a student-focused inquiry. Through this symbiotic process SEP transformed over time into a programme designed by the students within the localised context of the school to address their specific aspects of educational disadvantage. The school was ideal for this project in that the research was carried out in the natural, small-group setting of a school community and in the daily lives of the stakeholders rather than in an orchestrated, experimental setting. Lather (1994) noted that this type of research includes seeking patterns and commonalities; discovering underlying structures; revealing beliefs, kinships and ways of living; putting experiences into words and narratives, and uncovering ideologies and power relationships.

Through this process we became a community of practice and learning in which teachers, school leaders and students worked together to improve learning conditions and outcomes (Fullan, 2006). The final design of SEP incorporated the six fundamental components of the Professional Learning Community (PLC) framework as described by Dufours et al (2006): incorporating a focus on learning; a collaborative culture stressing learning for all; collective inquiry into best practice; an action orientation (learning by doing); a commitment to continuous improvement; and a focus on results.
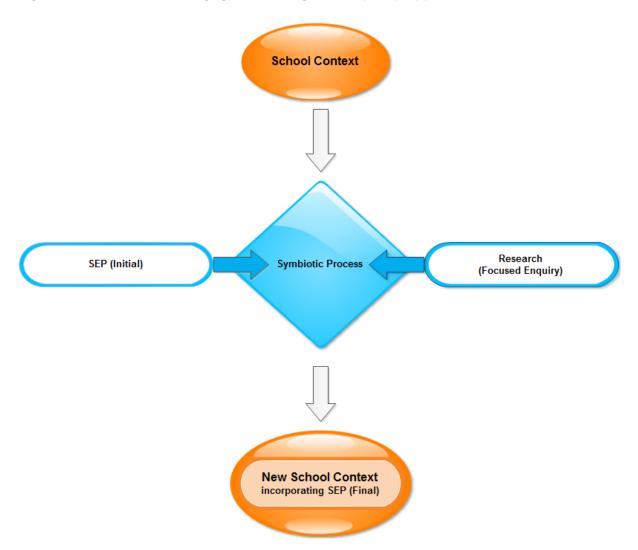
Figure 6.1: The Student Engagement Programme (SEP) Approach

This transformation was driven by an action agenda for reform "that may change the lives of the participants, and the institutions in which individuals work" (Creswell, 2003). Through the action research approach and mixed methods of data collection, I was able to develop a "more complete and full portrait of our social world through the use of multiple perspectives and lenses" (Somekh & Lewin, 2005) that in turn allows deeper understanding of a "greater diversity of values, stances and positions" (Somekh & Lewin, 2005). This generated the evidence to support the changes implemented in the project over the three years.

A transformative paradigm emerged which allowed for the student's voice to be central to the research process and programme development. During the initial stage of SEP, participating students were provided with a forum to engage in active discourse in relation to educational disadvantage, were supported and listened to, and treated as fundamental

to the change process rather than just being 'objects' to be investigated and reported on. Equally, it was important that the other stakeholders of the school community (the principal, teachers and parents) be continually consulted throughout each stage of the research process and programme development. By keeping the students at the heart of the research, they were allowed their own personal freedom to be active participants in the research process; they initiated investigations into new areas relevant to them and benefited from the outcome of these investigations by advocating and contributing to their yearly plans for development. This was vital to the success of the programme in that it provided what Rudd (2007) described as an "appropriate way of listening to the concerns, interests and needs in order to develop educational experiences better suited to those individuals" and ensured that students were viewed as "participants in a process of change" (Fullan, 2001).

Diagnosing and defining the student profile and allowing students to assist in developing an understanding of their socio-economic background, life expectations, educational record and the barriers that were preventing them from engaging fully with school, first of all gave me as leader (teacher) the opportunity to get to know my students on a personal level. Secondly, this enabled the students to talk about themselves and develop an understanding of their particular disadvantage and how it revealed itself in their lives and life-chances. Students were able to define their social position within school, and determine whether they were "insiders" or "outsiders" (Weber, 1961). By assisting with the initial diagnosis, they could identify with the common attributes of a child experiencing educational disadvantage, such as those described by Kohn and Schooler (1984), whereby the student determines that education is of no benefit to them, exhibit poor behaviour in class, fail to do homework or engage in truancy from school. Through this recognition of their own personal profile, students gained an understanding of why they removed themselves from the educational hierarchy (Bourdieu, 1977).

With the support of myself and the SEP team, students were able to progress to the next stage of the programme, action implementation, and design a plan of action to meet their individual social and academic needs. As students engaged in their individual learning plan and participated in the various components of SEP, such as the workshops, one-to-one meetings, team meetings and focus groups, it was observed by both the students themselves and the staff in Glenmore Community School that the programme was having an impact on their overall attitude in school, as exhibited by a change in their social and academic stance and behaviour.

Through their engagement in SEP, students claimed to have developed particular knowledge and skills in a variety of areas, including: an appreciation of educational opportunity; maturity, confidence and a sense of freedom in their ability to make choices in relation to their future careers; enhanced academic skills, and learning about third-level education as a post-school option.

The above outcomes were also acknowledged by the staff of Glenmore Community School. They noted how these outcomes emerged and became more evident throughout the action research cycle of the programme. As the programme evolved, there was a deepening engagement by the students. As this engagement deepened, the programme evolved and started to incorporate more students with a greater willingness to become involved in SEP. This supported the rational choice theory perspective at a micro-level as identified by Ballantine and Spade (2008); it became evident from the findings that, at an individual level, students could see the benefit of engaging in the programme and, as the benefits outweighed the costs, they decided to engage in the programme in order to continue receiving the benefit. The teachers attributed further changes to the students having a greater sense of belonging, increased confidence and self-esteem, a new sense of competitiveness and a willingness to take on new challenges. Teachers noted how students displayed stronger academic engagement and healthy peer competition. At the whole-school level, the engagement of the students in the classroom and the school created an energy within and positivity about the school and generated a new sense of purpose and sense of responsibility about their academic work. Teachers also observed the development of mutual respect between the teachers and the students, which created better relationships among all members of the school community. These findings support the theory of Fletcher (2005) about the outcomes that develop in a school when students actively engage as partners in school change.

Perhaps the most dramatic illustration of the importance of the above engagement was the way it enabled students to find empowerment through knowledge, comprising two key features: skills and learning. Unlike other interventions, the SEP is locally designed, integrated in nature and student-centred, and its design is coherently linked to the academic learning needs of the students. This was displayed by the dramatic change in student discourse, whereby the whole area of progression to further education became very topical, with each student willing to develop and share their life plan after their Leaving Certificate. Tiernan's story demonstrated that the learning led to improved results and a change of habitus, whereby the notion of attending third level became part of his expectations, culminating in his enrolment in a third-level course. Similarly, through the Career Guidance part of SEP, Emmet and Kelly, who were keen to attend university but

unaware of the academic qualifications needed, or how to gain the necessary financial assistance through the grant system, were both able to attend third level despite their families' financial constraints. While university entrance is a welcome outcome of SEP participation, it is not the key objective of SEP. It is more about helping students to gain a sense of empowerment and become active agents; as a consequence, they were able to engage better with school and make informed decisions about the most suitable progression for them within further education and life. Empowerment of students, which was the premise on which the transformative paradigm of this research project was based, is the process through which the students are continually "coming to power" (Lankshear, 1994, p.78); through participation in the programme, students developed a sense of agency and became actors in the discourse of their own education.

Returning to the second part of the research question, "what are the design conditions and factors in the project that promote the better life-chance and that are transferable to other interventions?", Figure 6.2 shows the core elements, key factors and supporting conditions of the SEP as it evolved.
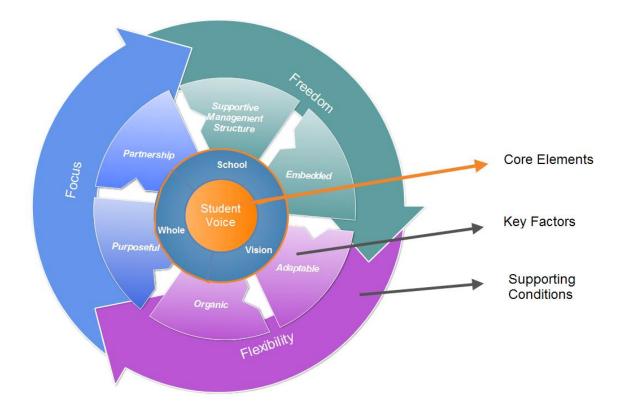
Figure 6.2: Elements of the Final Student Engagement Programme (SEP)

At the heart of the final SEP, two core elements resonate throughout each of the key factors and supporting conditions of the programme: the ***student voice*** and the ***whole-***

school vision. The student voice is inherently linked to the whole-school vision in that they are aimed jointly at strengthening the student's engagement and commitment to education. Placing the student voice and the whole-school vision as core elements of the SEP gave the students power, authority, freedom and equality to become equal partners in understanding the processes and practices within the localised context of the school. This engagement gave quality to the insights and recommendations of the students that led to the emergence of SEP as an integrated programme within the fabric of the school today. This supports the view of Vaneigem (1967) that "a minute correction to the essential is more important than a hundred new accessories" (p.5). These practices, which involve all stakeholders, particularly the students, have the power to invite and retain commitment (Fielding, 2001) from all members of the school community.

As well as the core elements – student voice and whole-school vision – that helped to ensure the success of the intervention, the SEP had six significant factors: ***Purposefulness*, *Partnership*, *Supportive Management Structure*, *Embeddedness*, *Adaptability*** and ***Organic Quality.*** These factors were intrinsically linked to three fundamental conditions: **Focus**, **Freedom** and **Flexibility.** These core elements, key factors and supporting conditions combined to create the foundation for the programme as it emerged. Together they played a crucial role in the design, implementation and modification of the intervention, ensuring adaptation to meet the needs of the students and to ensure that the programme was successfully embedded into the fabric and vision of the school as all stakeholders of the school engaged in a process of change.

Focus

All stakeholders in the school noted how the intervention was focused in that it matched the specific needs of the students and emerged as purposeful and intentional in relation to outcomes. The nature of the programme design ensured that students engaged *purposefully*, which at all times assisted them in engaging in a prescribed programme that supported them and staff in determining their individual needs and thus led them towards the intended outcomes. It was important to ensure that there was coherence; while the student voice was central, it was also important that it be aligned to the professional and moral obligations of the teachers. The SEP offered a forum for all members of the school community to support the students. This forum promoted the contextual factor of *partnership* between all members of the school community. This sense of partnership in turn promoted trust in and support for the intervention, developing collegiality among staff and an increased sense of duty of care towards the students. Staff could see that the programme was in line with their moral purpose as teachers; this

allowed our school to become, as termed by Fullan (2001a), a "living system" whereby, through the students' recognition of their individual needs, they were able to source a solution and we as teachers were able to promote "the moral purpose of school which facilitated critical enculturation, provided access to knowledge, build an effective teacher-student connection, and practice good stewardship" (p. 8-9). This created a synergy with the whole-school vision, whereby, through "turning the mirror inward" and participating in a "collective discipline" of continuous "practice", better work practices and structures were established (Senge, 1990). This was made possible through "dialogue" and "thinking together"; by changing core beliefs and assumptions surrounding "the myth of education", "the myth became a reality" for the most important stakeholder in the school, the student.

This sense of "moral purpose" enhanced the working relationships between the students and teachers and between the students themselves. All members of the school community worked in tandem to address the needs of the students. This process of "systems thinking" (Senge, 1990) allowed us to "make the full pattern clearer" and show how we as a community could engage effectively in a process of transformation.

Freedom

The management structure operating in the school at the time of the intervention was essential to the success of the intervention. This ***supportive management structure*** resulted partly from the nature of the relationship between the principal and myself in my role as deputy principal and as Programme Coordinator. It became a key factor, in that it gave me the freedom at both a local and system level to develop and adapt the programme to address the needs of the students without being burdened with predetermined managerial constraints. The manner in which the school management were able to communicate the vision of the school to the school community – that is, "Glenmore Community School is a place of excellence where children can achieve full potential in their academic, social, personal, physical, moral and spiritual development" – was vital to ensuring the success of the intervention. This supportive environment gave freedom to the intervention; it was aligned with the vision of the school while staff had confidence in the intervention, which allowed the intervention to ***embed*** itself into the fabric of the school without conflict or restriction. This was another key factor in determining the continued success of the programme.

Flexibility

As no two students or schools are the same, it is important to understand that 'one size does not fit all'. Therefore, the intervention was both ***adaptable*** and ***organic*** in nature, and was allowed to evolve over the years. As it progressed through the various cycles and

a new group of students participated in the programme, "personal mastery", as defined by Senge (1990), was sustained, in that we realised as a school community that the greatest leverage of organisational change is individual change and that through a cycle of "small, well-focused actions" we could produce "significant and enduring improvements" (Senge, 1990). Linking this individual change to organisational change, Hargreaves (1994) observed that "the kinds of organisations most likely to prosper are ones characterised by flexibility, adaptability, creativity, opportunism, collaboration, continuous improvement, a positive orientation towards problem-solving and commitment to maximising their capacity to learn about their environment and themselves" (p. 63). This emergent condition of "flexibility" was also recognised by Kanter et al (1992) as a key condition when describing a universal model for organisations to successfully implement change; "organisations that are flexible and adaptable to change, with relatively few levels of formal hierarchy and loose boundaries among functions and units, sensitive and responsive to the environment; concerned with shareholders of all sorts [...] these organisations empower people to take action [...] reward them for contributions and help them gain in skill (p. 13-14)." It is necessary therefore, to stress the importance of the link between individual change and organisational change. The findings of this research project show that, for a school to successfully address the needs of the student, there needs to be a synergy between the individual and the organisation, in order for the school to create sensitive and responsive change practices to address the needs of the student.

Conclusion

Making the student voice central to the programme of change in the school formed what Hargreaves termed the "gateway to change". Students are carriers of insider knowledge that can provide insights into the barriers that they face as well as the context in which they occur; equally, they can help to determine the most appropriate solutions to the problems they face. For schools implementing a change process, student involvement in a programme is an opportunity to obtain insider information to inform community relations and offers ways of engaging marginalised students. Student ownership of the SEP was crucial to its success, and such ownership led to empowerment. The learning that has arisen through the SEP can inform the work of similar projects involving students experiencing marginalisation. The students participating in the discourse of education through the SEP showed that they have an essential role to play and can, through this participation, challenge the current mental model (Senge, 1990) of a student and support a new reconceptualised mental model for their engagement in school.

Although it is difficult to legislate for different cultural, social and relationship factors, and the socio-economic history of academic achievement in an area, it is reasonable to speculate that a programme similar to SEP would lead to similar progress among disadvantaged students in other contexts. It is possible that the context in which students are situated may render them harder to reach, that there might be more resistance, and be a wider range of distractions, but the core features of SEP are transferable in that they are based on:

1) Aligning the intervention with the vision of the school; as proposed by Miles (1987) – this "creates an enthusiasm and sense of ownership of the programme, that increases willingness and engagement amongst the school community, but also creates an environment in which the long term vision of the future permits programme evolution that is always purposive, but reflects growth of activities rather than limiting implementation" (p.7);

2) Focusing on the students and their needs by developing personal relations with and encouraging individual students, and not least on giving them a central role in their own transformation – individual students do not vary much in their response to encouragement and to being 'listened to'; this personal focus of the SEP should make it effective in a variety of contexts (Fielding, 2008);

3) Ensuring flexibility in design so that the programme can be adapted and be organic in nature to meet the needs of mixed cohorts, where all stakeholders in the organisation, as suggested by Heywood (1989), learn how to adapt their skills to contribute better to the needs of the students;

4) Allowing freedom in operation, and allowing freedom among collaborative groups of teachers to actively engage in transforming the culture of the school – this feature of the intervention is supported by Fullan and Stiegelbauer (1982) who found that "the role of the principal is not in implementing innovations [...] the larger goal is in transforming the culture of the school [...] there is a limit to how much time principals can spend on change initiatives [...] it is likely that some advanced models of the future will show how the principal can support collaborative groups of teachers organising and conducting learning, perhaps without the presence of the principal" (p. 161);

A limitation of this research arose from the inability to track student progression past the stage of initial employment, selection for apprenticeships or acceptance into further or third-level education, and thus to determine the longer-term effects of the programme on the students – specifically their ability to engage as adults in life-long learning.

Further research in different contexts to determine the generalisability of the results is needed in order to fully realise the scope of the research and inform future practice. There is also a need to investigate the differential effects of gender in similar situations and programmes. It was observed by this researcher during the SEP programme that the female students (although in a minority) displayed unwavering interest in the discussion elements of the programme, showed greater openness, and communicated more easily than their male counterparts, who seemed to shy away from participation and display at times immense discomfort when asked to elaborate from a personal perspective, in the presence of their peers, on issues raised for discussion during the research process.

The issue of cultural difference was outside the scope of this research, but it does warrant investigation. It was observed during this project how students and their parents who experienced marginalisation and were from different ethnic backgrounds where English was their second language displayed lack of interest when invited to participate in the programme, even when invited to participate through translated written invitation and in person. It would be useful to investigate the reasons for this.

The findings of the Self-Esteem Inventory (Chapter 5, The Student Engagement Programme, p. 221) show that males were more likely to have higher self-esteem than females. These findings support those of Malcolm et al (2003), as discussed in the literature review, when identifying the association between students from lower socio-economic backgrounds and low self-esteem. The relationship between gender, self-esteem and socio-economic disadvantage would warrant further investigation.

During this research process there was a significant change in teacher attitude towards the students experiencing disadvantage. In-depth study of teacher attitudes was outside the focus of this study, and reasons for change in the attitudes of teachers would warrant further investigation.

Many of the support mechanisms put in place to support the students' skills development and learning during the SEP programme operated outside the mainstream classroom. Although at times the SEP supported cross-curricular pedagogical practices, it was not an orchestrated process but more an organic effect of the dual role that teachers within a small-school setting often play. However, as the extent of the SEP integration grew over the duration of this research project, it was observed how the SEP was able to create and maintain a continuum of support with the classroom pedagogies and so became more embedded and integrated into the classroom experiences with some cross-pedagogical practices. There is a need for further research into the practice of cross-pedagogical

practice and integration as a possible tool to engage students experiencing marginalisation.

MacIntyre (1965) argues that, as individuals, we are constrained by social circumstances: "we enter upon a stage we did not design and we find ourselves part of an action that was not of our making" (p. 213). This is applicable in an exact way to the educational system that a child enters. As educationalists, we have a moral obligation to ensure that no child is denied their right to education because of marginalisation or disadvantage. By listening to the student voice, students will guide us in arriving at what Kemmis and McTaggart (2005) described as "a shared decision through forms of public discourse in public spheres, in which people can do their best to remain open to hearing the views of others, to reaching intersubjective agreement about the ideas in play in their discussions, to reaching mutual understanding of one another's positions, and to aiming for unforced consensus about what to do". Supporting this view of placing the student voice at the heart of the decision-making process, Fielding (1999) stated: "I am confident that it will not be long before we see examples of new communities of practice developing between students and teachers despite the unpromising external frameworks within which we currently work [and] ... new spaces emerging in schools where students and teachers acknowledge and delight in their mutuality, in their reciprocal responsibilities for the world we live in now and the world we wish it to become, in their 'radical collegiality'" (Fielding, 1999). Finally, Kemmis (2010) stated that "as researchers, we are encouraged to make original contributions to knowledge; as action researchers, let us hope to do that but also to do something far more important. Let us hope to make history by living well, individually and collectively, and by living well in and for a world worth living in." Through promoting meaningful student involvement by listening to the student voice, schools can ready students for a lifetime of significant participation in their schools, communities and nation (Fletcher, 2005). This research project, through the Student Engagement Programme (SEP), succeeded in giving the students a voice, in facilitating their learning and personal development in a collegial and supportive environment, and in giving them the ability to transform their lives and increase their life-chances.

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Appendix 1

Diagnosing and Defining – Student Profile 2009/2010

1. Student Background

Our findings highlighted 8 out of a group of 27 sixth-years who met the specific criteria of the School Completion Programme and would be eligible to participate (as outlined on page 3) can be seen from the following table:

Students determined to be 'at risk'

Student ID	Marital Status of Parents (L/M/S)	Occupation of Resident Parent/s (F/M)	Medical Card Holder	Educational Attainment of Resident Parent
Student 1 (Aine)	Married	Unemployed (M)	Yes	Not available
Student 2 (Darren)	Married	Sales Rep/Housewife	Yes	LC/Not available
Student 3 (Padraig)	Lone	Farmer/Housewife	Yes	Not available
Student 4 (James)	Lone	Cleaner (M)	Yes	Not available
Student 5 (Sean)	Lone	Chef (M)	Yes	Inter Cert
Student 6 (Maureen)	Lone	Unemployment (M)	Yes	Not available
Student 7 (Enda)	Separated	Shop Assistant (M)	Yes	Inter Cert
Student 8 (Liam)	Separated	Unemployed (M)	Yes	O Levels

2. Career Expectation

During stage one of SEP, from the Career Inventory carried out by the Career Guidance counsellor and discussion the following expectations were highlighted as discussed in Chapter 5: SEP (p. 100 – p. 151).

Career expectations

Student ID	First Option	Second Option	Third Option
Student 1 (Aine)	Cashier	Sales Assistant	-
Student 2 (Darren)	Carpenter	Mechanic	Labourer
Student 3 (Padraig)	Farmer	Bar Person	-
Student 4 (James)	Mechanic	-	-
Student 5 (Sean)	Engineer	Construction	Fitter
Student 6 (Maureen)	Secretary	Childminder	Chef
Student 7 (Enda)	Plumber	Electrician	-
Student 8 (Liam)	Don't Know	-	-

5. Educational Record

In an attempt to determine the learning needs of the students from their school records we determined the following as discussed in Chapter 5: SEP (p. 100 – p. 151).

Learning needs of students

Student ID	Assessments Results to Date (Poor/Fair/Good/VG)*	Junior Certificate Results (Poor/Fair/ Good/VG)*	Problem Subjects	Problem Area
Student 1 (Aine)	Good	Good	-	-
Student 2 (Darren)	Fair	Fair	Literacy and Numeracy	Attendance
Student 3 (Padraig)	Fair	Fair	Literacy and Numeracy	-
Student 4 (James)	Poor	Poor	Literacy and Numeracy	-
Student 5 (Sean)	Fair	Average	Numeracy	Attendance
Student 6 (Maureen)	Poor	Fair	Numeracy	Attendance
Student 7 (Enda)	Fair	Good	Numeracy	Attendance
Student 8 (Liam)	Poor	Poor	Literacy and Numeracy	Attendance/Discipline

* For both Assessment and Junior Certificate Results: Poor: ordinary level subjects: unsuccessful less than eight subjects; Fair: ordinary level subjects: successful in eight subjects; Good: ordinary level subjects: successful in nine or more subjects; VG: ordinary/higher level subjects: successful in all subjects.
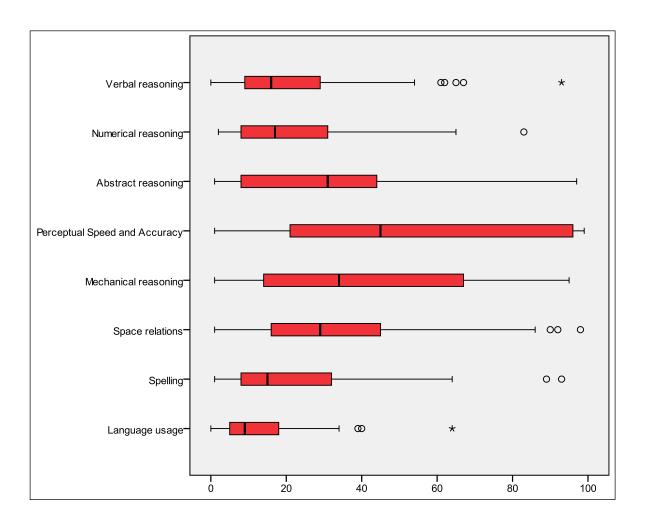
Additional to the overview of the students' assessment and examination results we carried out the following DATs test:

DATs Test (Individual Scores) as discussed in Chapter 5: SEP (p. 100 – p. 151).

Student ID	VR	NR	AR	PS &A	MR	SR	Sp	LU
Student 1 (Aine)	62	65	63	24	55	86	32	39
Student 2 (Darren)	9	3	8	45	14	22	6	7
Student 3 (Padraig)	6	27	40	9	68	40	4	9
Student 4 (James)	9	12	44	82	42	16	6	5
Student 5 (Sean)	46	34	22	32	22	22	34	24
Student 6 (Maureen)	51	12	44	10	71	70	15	15
Student 7 (Enda)	46	27	73	29	86	22	32	7
Student 8 (Liam)	14	19	19	4	38	42	11	15

Key*: (0-30 Well Below Average, 40 Low Average, 50-60 Average, 70 High Average, 80-100 Well Above Average)(VR=Verbal Reasoning, NR=Numerical Reasoning, AR = Abstract Reasoning, PS&A = Perceptual Speed & Accuracy, MR = Mechanical Reasoning, SR = Space Relations, Sp = Spelling, LU = Language Usage)*

DAT FOR GUIDANCE RESULTS (Pilot Group: 2009/2010)

Boxplots of the scores on the eight abilities measured by the DAT for Guidance

Descriptive statistics of scores on the DAT for Guidance (Group Result)

	median	(IQR)	minimum	maximum
Verbal reasoning	16.0	(8.0 to 29.0)	0	93
Numerical reasoning	17.0	(7.5 to 31.0)	2	83
Abstract reasoning	31.0	(8.0 to 44.0)	1	97
Perceptual Speed and Accuracy	45.0	(18.5 to 96.5)	1	99
Mechanical reasoning	34.0	(14.0 to 67.0)	1	95
Space relations	29.0	(16.0 to 49.5)	1	98
Spelling	15.0	(8.0 to 34.0)	1	93
Language usage	9.0	(4.5 to 18.0)	0	64
Educational aptitude	13.0	(6.3 to 23.0)	1	79

Appendix 2

Action – Implementation – the Intervention 2009/2010

Additional classes and workshops

Student ID	Additional Classes	Additional Workshop
Student 1 (Aine)	-	PX2, Study Skills
Student 2 (Darren)	Literacy and Numeracy	PX2, Study Skills, BBBS, Homework Club, Career Guidance.
Student 3 (Padraig)	Literacy and Numeracy	PX2, Study Skills, BBBS, Homework Club, Career Guidance.
Student 4 (James)	Literacy and Numeracy	PX2, Study Skills, BBBS, Homework Club, Career Guidance.
Student 5 (Sean)	Numeracy	PX2, Study Skills, BBBS, Homework Club, Career Guidance.
Student 6 (Maureen)	Numeracy	PX2, Study Skills, Career Guidance.
Student 7 (Enda)	Numeracy	PX2, Study Skills, One-to-One Counselling, Career Guidance.
Student 8 (Liam)	Literacy and Numeracy	PX2, Study Skills, Career Guidance.

Appendix 3
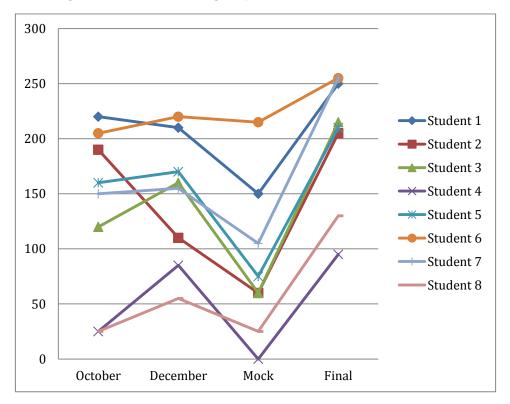
Determine – the Success of the Intervention 2009/2010

Below is a graph showing the results progression for the 8 students in the pilot group in their final year of school 2009/2010 as discussed in Chapter 5: SEP (p. 100 – p. 151).
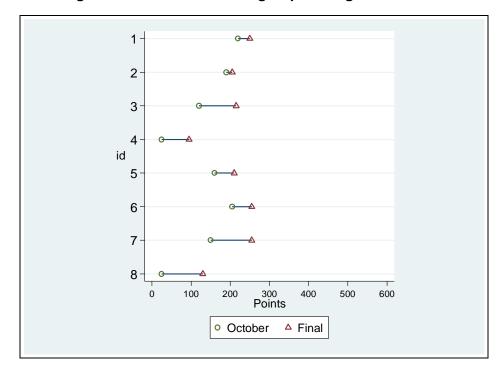
Results Progression

Below is a graph showing the results progression for the 8 students in the pilot group.

(a) Results Progression for 6th Pilot group, n=8

The results for the above results progression graph were collected from in-house October and December Assessments, Mock Examinations and Final Leaving Certificate Results.
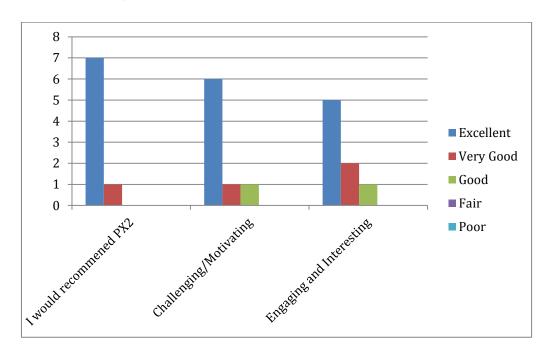
(b) Results Progression for 6th Pilot Year group: Change from October to Finals, n=8
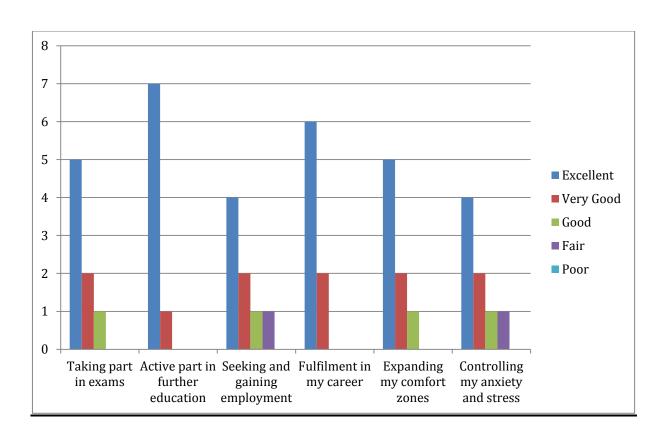
The results for the above results progression graph were collected from in-house October Assessments, and Final Leaving Certificate Results.

Individual plots of results progression for the 8 students in the pilot group

Note: This graph shows what happens to the student's scores between October and the Finals. If a circle starts the line and a triangle ends the line (from left to right) then the student improved between the two time points. On the other hand, if a triangle starts the line and a circle ends the line, the students points decreased between October and the Finals. The length of the line indicates the magnitude of the difference between the two time points.

PX2 Pilot Group Feedback

Career Progression

Student ID	Employment	Apprenticeship	Third Level	Further Education (PLC)
Student 1 (Aine)	-	-	Social Care	-
Student 2 (Darren)	-	-	Computer Aided Design (CAD)	-
Student 3 (Padraig)	-	-		Agriculture
Student 4 (James)	-	Mechanic	-	
Student 5 (Sean)	-	-	Mechanical Engineering	
Student 6 (Maureen)	-	-	Front Office Management	-
Student 7 (Enda)	-	-	-	Security Officer
Student 8 (Liam)			Management Degree Programme (LIDL)	

Appendix 4

Summary of Cycle 1: 2009/2010

SEP Research Framework and Data Collection Time-Line						
Pilot Group: Academic Year: 8 Sixth Year Students – Duration 1 Year **September 2009– May 2010**						
Diagnosing and Defining – Student Profile						
Time Line	**Duration**	**Personnel Involved**	**SEP Component**	**Programme Information**	**Student Report Folder**	**Information Dissemination and Data Collection Method**
March 2009	1 month (ongoing)	SEP Coordinator School Completion Coordinator	Design, Planning and Coordination	Discussion in relation to the implementation of a localised intervention to alleviate the difficulties being experienced by student from disadvantaged backgrounds who are attending Glenmore Community College.	n/a	Research Diary
April 2009	1 hour	SEP Coordinator School Staff	Design, Planning and Coordination	**Staff Meeting** Proposal to implement an intervention into the school to alleviate educational disadvantage	n/a	Staff Meeting Minutes Research Diary
May 2009	1 hour	SEP Coordinator School Staff	Design, Planning and Coordination	**SEP Meeting: SEP Framework** Student needs assessment SEP Team	n/a	SEP Staff Meeting Minutes Research Diary
Sept 2009	1 hour	SEP Coordinator SEP Team	Design, Planning and Coordination	**SEP Meeting: SEP Framework** Student needs assessment Programme planning Action research approach	n/a	SEP Staff Meeting Minutes Research Diary
Sept	1 month	SEP Coordinator	Design,	**Programme Planning**	n/a	Document Analysis

2009	(on-going)	School Completion Coordinator SEP Team	Planning and Coordination	Student Review Needs Analysis Human Resources: SEP Team/Teaching Staff Funding Needs		Discussion Observation Research Diary
Sept 2009	1 hour	SEP Coordinator SEP Team	Design, Planning and Coordination	**<u>SEP Meeting: SEP Framework</u>** Programme planning Discussion on Parents Information Evening	n/a	SEP Staff Meeting Minutes Research Diary

The following tables show a detailed overview of the research process throughout cycle one of the SEP and the data-collection method at each stage of the yearly cycle.

SEP Research Framework and Data Collection Time-Line						
Pilot Group: Academic Year: 8 Sixth Year Students – Duration 1 Year **September 2009– May 2010**						
Diagnosing and Defining – Student Profile Continued ...						
Time Line	**Duration**	**Personnel Involved**	**SEP Component**	**Programme Information**	**Student Report Folder**	**Information Dissemination and Data Collection Method**
Sept 2009	2 hours	SEP Coordinator SEP Team 8 SCP Targeted Senior Cycle Students and their parents/guardian	**Diagnosing and Defining –** Student Profile Induction and Registration	<u>**Parents Information Evening:**</u> Presentation and Handouts on: The Purpose of the SEP An overview of the AIP content What is Educational Disadvantage Purpose of Testing – Tests explained Preparing a Student Profile General Overview of the Extra Tuitions/Supports available: Literacy and Numeracy, Personal Development, Study Skills, Homework Club, BBBS Mentoring Programme.	Registration Form Permission Slip Student Information Pack (Appendix x)	Group Seminar One-to-One Support Observation Research Diary
Sept 2009	1 hour	SEP Coordinator SEP Team	**Diagnosing and Defining –** Student Profile	<u>**SEP Meeting: SEP Framework**</u> Student needs assessment Programme planning Planning introductory workshop	n/a	SEP Staff Meeting Minutes Research Diary
Sept 2009	2-day Workshop	SEP Coordinator SEP Team 8 SCP Targeted Senior Cycle Students	**Diagnosing and Defining –** Student Profile Understanding Self	<u>**SEP Introductory Workshop:**</u> Presentation and Handouts on: What is Educational Disadvantage Purpose of Testing – Tests explained Preparing a Student Profile General Overview of the Extra Tuitions/Supports available: Literacy and Numeracy, Personal Development, Study Skills, Homework Club, BBBS Mentoring	Handouts	Group Seminar One-to-One Support Meetings Research Diary **Tests**: DATS Test

				Programme.		
						Cont... ->

Cycle 1: 2009/2010 - SEP Research Framework and Data Collection Time-Line

Pilot Group: Academic Year 2009/10: 8 Sixth Year Students – Duration 1 Year **September 2009– May 2010**

Action Planning – the Intervention

Time Line	Duration	Personnel Involved	SEP Component	Programme Information	Student Report Folder	Information Dissemination and Data Collection Method
Sept 2009	1 hour (on-going)	• SEP Coordinator • SEP Team	**Action Planning** Preparing a Student Profile and an Individual Learning Plan	**SEP Meeting: SEP Framework** **Handout on the following:** • Individual Learning Plan Template **Results of Tests:** • DATs test **Handouts on the following modules available:** • Literacy & Numeracy • PX2 Personal Development Programme • Study Skills • BBBS Mentoring Programme • Career Guidance Programme • One-to-One School Counselling Service (Personal Problems)	• Personal Profile • Individual Learning Plan	• SEP Staff Meeting Minutes • Research Diary
Oct 20 09 – Apr 2010	7 months (inc. holidays)	• SEP Coordinator • SEP Team • 8 SCP Targeted Senior Cycle Students Members of Teaching Staff	**Action Planning** Programme Participation	**Programme Modules/Class Material (as applicable):** • Literacy & Numeracy (modular – in-school time) • PX2 Personal Development Programme (2 day Workshop)	• Individual Learning Plan	• Workshops • One-to-One Teaching • Small Group Teaching • Discussion • Observation • Research Diary

		• External Course Facilitators		• Study Skills (½ day) • BBBSMP (throughout school year at lunch times) • Career Guidance Programme • One-to-One School Counselling Service (Personal Problems)		
Oct 20 09 – Apr 2010	7 months Meetings held once a month	• SEP Coordinator • SEP Team	**Action Planning** Programme Participation	**SEP Meeting: SEP Framework** • Monitor/Review Student Progression • Issues and concerns arising • Module evaluation/feedback	• Evaluation and Feedback Sheets	• SEP Staff Meeting Minutes • Research Diary

Cycle 1: 2009/2010 - SEP Research Framework and Data Collection Time-Line						
Pilot Group: Academic Year 2009/2010: 8 Sixth Year Students – Duration 1 Year **September 2009– May 2010**						
Determine – the Success of the Intervention						
Time Line	**Duration**	**Personnel Involved**	**SEP Component**	**Programme Information**	**Student Report Folder**	**Information Dissemination and Data Collection Method**
May 2010	I hour	SEP Coordinator SEP Team	**Determine –** the Success of the Intervention Reflection and Documentation	**SEP Meeting: Progress Review** Review Individual Student Reports: attendance, programme contribution, performance in school-based assessments. Review programme feedback Plan SEP Student Achievement Awards Ceremony	Individual Student Report: attendance, programme contribution, performance in school-based assessments.	One-to-One Support/Discussion Observation Research Diary
May 2010	2 hours	SEP Coordinator SEP Team 8 SCP Targeted Senior Cycle Students	**Determine –** the Success of the Intervention Student Recognition	Student Achievement Award Ceremony	Student Achievement Award	Student Achievement Awards Observation Research Diary
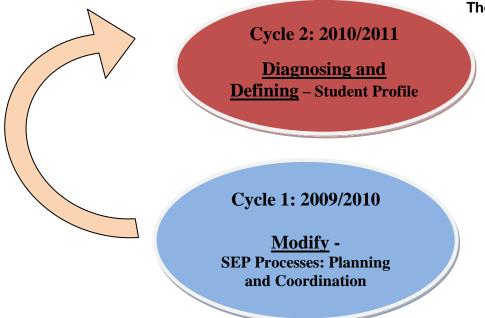
Cycle 1: 2009/2010 - SEP Research Framework and Data Collection Time-Line						
Pilot Group: Academic Year 2009/2010: 8 Sixth Year Students – Duration 1 Year **September 2009– May 2010**						
Modify – SEP Processes: Planning and Coordination						
Time Line	**Duration**	**Personnel Involved**	**SEP Component**	**Programme Information**	**Student Report Folder**	**Information Dissemination and Data Collection Method**
Sept 2010	1 week	• SEP Coordinator • SEP Team	**Modify** – SEP Processes Modify Planning and Coordination	**SEP Meeting:** • Individual Student Reports • Noted student and mentor issues and concerns • Summer School Report/SEP Report Student Achievement Awards • Prepare Report on Recommendations/Modifications Report for SEP Cycle 2 - 2010/11	• n/a	• SEP Team Meetings • Research Diary

The Action Research Spiral

Cycle 2: 2010/2011

Diagnosing and Defining – Student Profile

Cycle 1: 2009/2010

Modify -
SEP Processes: Planning and Coordination

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Appendix 5

Diagnosing and Defining – Student Profile 2010/2011

1. Student Background
From the 6th year group population of 22 students, 16 students met the criteria (page 3) of the School Completion Programme and were deemed eligible to participate on the programme as can be seen from the following table:Background characteristics of the 16 sixth-year students determined "at risk"

Student ID	Martial Status of Parents (L/M/S)	Occupation of Resident Parent/s(F/M)	Medical Card Holder	Educational Attainment of Resident Parent
Student 1 (Joe)	Married	Taxi Driver/Shop Assistant	Yes	GCSEs/Not available
Student 2 (Emmet)	Separated	Carer (M)	Yes	Not available
Student 3 (Kelly)	Separated	Carer (M)	Yes	Not available
Student 4 (Amber)	Lone	Unemployed (M)	Yes	Not available
Student 5 (Aaron)	Married	Carer/General Labourer	Yes	Inter Cert/Inter Cert
Student 6 (Paula)	Separated	Unemployment (M)	Yes	Not available
Student 7 (Colm)	Married	Sales Rep/Housewife	Yes	Inter Cert/Leaving Cert
Student 8 (Jonathan)	Married	Farmer/Carer	Yes	Leaving Cert/Inter Cert
Student 9 (Frederick)	Separated	Community Youth Worker (M)	Yes	Diploma in Social Care
Student 10 (Gabriel)	Married	Farmer/Housewife	Yes	Leaving Certificate/LC
Student 11 (Paul)	Married	Unemployed/Unemployed	Yes	Not available
Student 12 (Aileen)	Widow	Nurse's Aid (M)	Yes	Leaving Certificate
Student 13 (Padhraic)	Married	Farmer/Housewife	Yes	Leaving Certificate
Student 14 (Marius)	Separated	Housewife (M)	Yes	Not available
Student 15 (Ethan)	Separated	Unemployed (M)	Yes	Inter Cert
Student 16 (Liam)	Widow	Unemployed (M)	Yes	O Levels

From the 5th year group population of 27 students, 23 students met the criteria (page 3) of the School Completion Programme and were deemed eligible to participate on the programme as can be seen from the following table:

Student Background characteristics of the 23 fifth-year students determined "at risk"

Student ID	Martial Status of Parents (L/M/S)	Occupation of Resident Parent/s(F/M)	Medical Card Holder	Educational Attainment of Resident Parent
Student 1 (Ayo)	Fostered	Unknown	Yes	Unknown
Student 2 (Tiernan)	Married	Hairdresser/Housewife	Yes	Group Cert/Unknown
Student 3 (Rory)	Separated	Unemployed	Yes	Inter Cert
Student 4 (Sheamus)	Separated	Carer (M)	Yes	Leaving Cert
Student 5 (George)	Married	Unemployed/Student	Yes	FETAC 5/FETAC 6
Student 6 (William)	Married	Labourer/Housewife	Yes	Unknown
Student 7 (Cindy)	Fostered	Unknown	Yes	Unknown
Student 8 (Bryan)	Married	Farmer/Housewife	Yes	Leaving Cert/Leaving Cert
Student 9 (Joey)	Married	Plumber/Secretary	Yes	Dip. Plumbing/Sec Course
Student 10 (Dara)	Married	Farmer/Carer	Yes	Leaving Cert/Leaving Cert
Student 11 (Karolis)	Married	Unemployed/Carer	Yes	Unknown (Lithuanian Qual.)
Student 12 (Sean)	Married	Unemployed/Student	Yes	Unknown/FETAC 5
Student 13 (Thomas)	Married	Unemployed/Housewife	Yes	Unknown/Unknown
Student 14 (Gary)	Married	Bus Driver/Shop Assistant	Yes	Inter Cert/Inter Cert
Student 15 (Grant)	Married	Unemployed/Unemployed	Yes	Unknown/FETAC 5
Student 16 (Erin)	Married	Unemployed/Unemployed	Yes	Unknown/Unknown
Student 17	Married	Unemployed/Housewife	Yes	None/None

(Leigh Ann)				
Student 18 (Shane)	Married	Hospital Attendant/Secretary	Yes	Inter Cert/Sec. Course
Student 19 (Jason)	Married	Farmer/Housewife	Yes	Leaving Cert/Leaving Cert
Student 20 (ROC)	Married	Builder/Secretary	Yes	Inter Cert/Leaving Cert
Student 21 (Elizabeth)	Separated	Sales Rep/Shop Assistant	Yes	Leaving Cert/Leaving Cert
Student 22 (KellyW)	Separated	Unemployed (M)	Yes	O Levels
Student 23 (Kayleigh)	Separated	Driver/Housewife	Yes	None/None

2. Career Expectation

From the Career Inventory carried out by the Career Guidance counsellor and discussion the following ambitions were highlighted for both the 6th and 5th year groups:

6th Year Group:

Student ID	First Option	Second Option	Third Option
Student 1 (Joe)	Don't know	Don't know	Don't know
Student 2 (Emmet)	Science	Engineering	Business
Student 3 (Kelly)	Info Tec	Info Tec	Don't know
Student 4 (Amber)	Childcare	Beautician	Don't know
Student 5 (Aaron)	Mechanic	Garda	Prison Service
Student 6 (Paula)	Culinary Arts	Chef	Don't know
Student 7 (Colm)	Don't know	Don't know	Don't know
Student 8 (Jonathan)	Agriculture	Green Cert	Don't know
Student 9 (Frederick)	Don't know	Don't know	Don't know
Student 10 (Gabriel)	Farmer	Don't know	Don't know
Student 11 (Paul)	Army	Don't know	Don't know
Student 12 (Aileen)	Art	Don't know	Don't know
Student 13 (Padhraic)	Prison Service	Don't know	Don't know
Student 14 (Marius)	Business	Info Tec	Don't know
Student 15 (Ethan)	Business	Don't know	Don't know
Student 16 (Liam)	Don't know	Don't know	Don't know

5th Year Group:

Student ID	First Option	Second Option	Third Option
Student 1 (Ayo)	Business	Don't know	Don't know
Student 2 (Tiernan)	Music	Don't know	Don't know
Student 3 (Rory)	Don't know	Don't know	Don't know
Student 4 (Sheamus)	Farmer	Labourer	Don't know
Student 5 (George)	Don't know	Don't know	Don't know
Student 6 (William)	Mechanic	Don't know	Don't know
Student 7 (Cindy)	Childcare	Don't know	Don't know
Student 8 (Bryan)	Agriculture	Don't know	Don't know
Student 9 (Joey)	Plumber	Business	Don't know
Student 10 (Dara)	Farmer	Don't know	Don't know
Student 11 (Karolis)	Bio Medical Science	Science	International Business
Student 12 (Sean)	Don't know	Don't know	Don't know
Student 13 (Thomas)	Horticulture	Don't know	Don't know
Student 14 (Gary)	Farmer	Don't know	Don't know
Student 15 (Grant)	Horticulture	Business	Don't know
Student 16 (Erin)	Acting	Business	Don't know
Student 17 (Leigh Ann)	Business	Don't know	Don't know
Student 18 (Shane)	Agriculture	Mechanic	Business
Student 19 (Jason)	Business	Agriculture	Don't know
Student 20 (ROC)	Engineering and Design	Info Tec	Business
Student 21 (Elizabeth)	Culinary Arts	Chef	Hotel Management
Student 22 (KellyW)	Don't know	Don't know	Don't know
Student 23 (Kayleigh)	Don't know	Don't know	Don't know

2. Educational Record

In order to determine the leaning needs of the 6th year and the 5th year groups we reviewed their school records and determined the following:

Student ID	Assessments Results to Date (Poor/Fair/Good/VG)*	Junior Certificate Results (Poor/Fair/Good/VG)*	Problem Subjects	Problem Area
Student 1 (Joe)	Fair	Fair	-	Attendance
Student 2 (Emmet)	Good	Good	-	Attendance
Student 3 (Kelly)	Good	Good	-	Attendance
Student 4 (Amber)	Fair	Fair	Literacy and Numeracy	Attendance
Student 5 (Aaron)	Good	Fair	Literacy and Numeracy	Attendance
Student 6 (Paula)	Poor	Fair	Numeracy	Attendance
Student 7 (Colm)	Good	Good	-	-
Student 8 (Jonathan)	Good	Good	-	-
Student 9 (Frederick)	Poor	Fair	Literacy	Attendance
Student 10 (Gabriel)	Poor	Fair	Numeracy and Literacy	Discipline
Student 11 (Paul)	Poor	Fair	Numeracy and Literacy	Attendance & Discipline
Student 12 (Aileen)	Fair	Poor	Literacy	Attendance
Student 13 (Padhraic)	Poor	Poor	Numeracy and Literacy	Discipline
Student 14 (Marius)	Good	Good	Literacy	-
Student 15 (Ethan)	Poor	Poor	Numeracy and Literacy	Attendance & Discipline
Student 16 (Liam)	Good	Good	-	-

6th Year Group (Individual Result):

* For both Assessment and Junior Certificate Results: Poor: ordinary level subjects: unsuccessful less than eight subjects; Fair: ordinary level subjects: successful in eight subjects; Good: ordinary level subjects: successful in nine or more subjects; VG: ordinary/higher level subjects: successful in all subjects.

Additional to the review of the students' assessment and examination results we carried out the following DATs test:

Student ID	VR	NR	AR	PS&A	MR	SR	Sp	LU
Student 1 (Joe)	26	17	16	26	17	26	33	22
Student 2 (Emmet)	62	65	63	24	55	86	32	39
Student 3 (Kelly)	38	48	73	41	22	19	47	16
Student 4 (Amber)	16	13	3	6	7	7	17	13
Student 5 (Aaron)	2	22	63	21	71	25	11	6
Student 6 (Paula)	46	11	22	71	51	49	25	15
Student 7 (Colm)	54	53	84	61	19	35	39	11
Student 8 (Jonathan)	29	38	60	26	71	56	4	4
Student 9 (Frederick)	1	17	5	26	67	10	23	1
Student 10 (Gabriel)	29	8	38	15	50	29	6	2
Student 11 (Paul)	14	19	19	4	38	42	11	15
Student 12 (Aileen)	3	34	34	32	16	19	8	19
Student 13 (Padhraic)	16	6	12	21	67	10	10	6
Student 14 (Marius)	7	43	65	13	58	23	29	9
Student 15 (Ethan)	6	27	40	9	68	40	4	9
Student 16 (Liam)	22	34	11	10	27	11	39	36
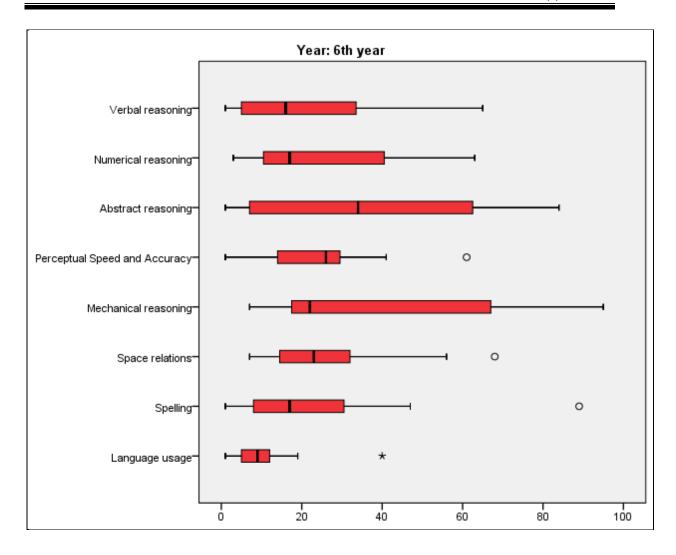
Key: (0-30 Well Low Average, 40 Low Average, 50-60 Average, 70 High Average, 80-100 Well Above Average)(VR=Verbal Reasoning, NR=Numerical Reasoning, AR = Abstract Reasoning, PS&A = Perceptual Speed & Accuracy, MR = Mechanical Reasoning, SR = Space Relations, Sp = Spelling, LU = Language Usage)

DAT FOR GUIDANCE RESULTS (6th Year: 2010/2011)

(1) DAT results for 6th year group, n=15

Descriptive statistics of scores on the DAT for Guidance

	median	(IQR)	minimum	maximum
Verbal reasoning	16.0	(3.0 to 38.0)	1	65
Numerical reasoning	17.0	(8.0 to 43.0)	3	63
Abstract reasoning	34.0	(6.0 to 65.0)	1	84
Perceptual Speed and Accuracy	26.0	(13.0 to 32.0)	1	61
Mechanical reasoning	22.0	(16.0 to 67.0)	7	95
Space relations	23.0	(13.0 to 35.0)	7	68
Spelling	17.0	(8.0 to 32.0)	1	89
Language usage	9.0	(4.0 to 13.0)	1	40
Educational aptitude	14.0	(7.0 to 31.0)	1	64

Boxplots of the scores on the eight abilities measured by the DAT for Guidance

5th Year Group (Individual Result):

| Student ID	VR	NR	AR	PS&A	MR	SR	Sp	LU
Student 1 (Ayo)	27	33	22	93	15	33	39	18
Student 2 (Tiernan)	1	3	8	9	9	3	3	18
Student 3 (Rory)	31	17	44	97	83	84	21	30
Student 4 (Sheamus)	12	12	8	48	24	13	13	2
Student 5 (George)	0	31	11	88	34	92	8	0
Student 6 (William)	14	15	31	99	59	45	11	5
Student 7 (Cindy)	23	23	11	42	29	23	32	16
Student 8 (Bryan)	1	2	8	48	24	13	13	2
Student 9 (Joey)	29	15	44	97	83	84	21	6
Student 10 (Dara)	14	31	19	95	81	40	8	4
Student 11 (Karolis)	67	83	84	99	83	98	48	34
Student 12 (Sean)	9	27	36	96	30	54	4	12
Student 13 (Thomas)	2	3	3	99	4	1	6	4
Student 14 (Gary)	22	31	36	99	47	56	39	18
Student 15 (Grant)	9	9	6	45	1	13	11	1
Student 16 (Erin)	22	22	27	98	47	45	15	30
Student 17 (Leigh Ann)	27	19	27	99	47	42	64	30
Student 18 (Shane)	19	19	44	99	88	20	8	9
Student 19 (Jason)	27	57	92	99	34	70	21	10
Student 20 (ROC)	93	27	97	99	63	90	93	64
Student 21 (Elizabeth)	22	32	38	99	47	56	39	32
Student 22 (KellyW)	3	21	12	13	19	23	8	9
Student 23 (Kayleigh)	16	13	1	41	19	13	32	6
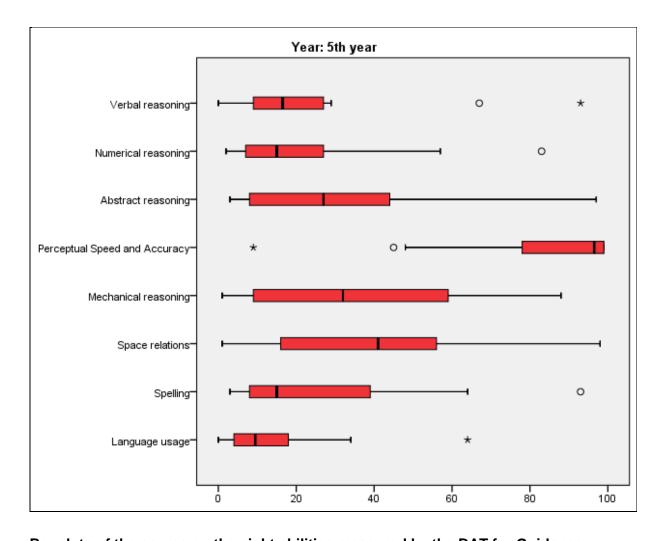
Key: (0-30 Well Low Average, 40 Low Average, 50-60 Average, 70 High Average, 80-100 Well Above Average) (VR=Verbal Reasoning, NR=Numerical Reasoning, AR = Abstract Reasoning, PS&A = Perceptual Speed & Accuracy, MR = Mechanical Reasoning, SR = Space Relations, Sp = Spelling, LU = Language Usage)

DAT FOR GUIDANCE RESULTS (5th Year: 2010/2011)

(1) DAT results for 5th year group, n=22

Descriptive statistics of scores on the DAT for Guidance, n=22

	median	(IQR)	minimum	maximum
Verbal reasoning	16.5	(7.3 to 27.0)	0	93
Numerical reasoning	15.0	(7.0 to 28.0)	2	83
Abstract reasoning	27.0	(8.0 to 44.0)	3	97
Perceptual Speed and Accuracy	96.5	(77.5 to 99.0)	9	99
Mechanical reasoning	32.0	(9.0 to 60.0)	1	88
Space relations	41.0	(15.3 to 59.5)	1	98
Spelling	15.0	(8.0 to 39.0)	3	93
Language usage	9.5	(4.0 to 18.0)	0	64
Educational aptitude	13.0	(3.5 to 19.0)	1	79
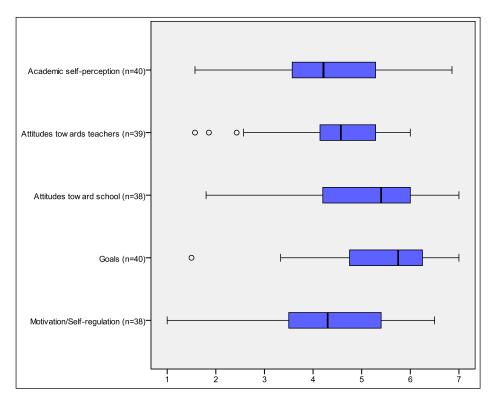
Boxplots of the scores on the eight abilities measured by the DAT for Guidance

MCCOACH'S SCHOOL ATTITUDE ASSESSMENT SURVEY – REVISED (SAAS-R)

Descriptive statistics of scores on the subscales of SAAS-R

	n	median (IQR)	minimum	maximum
Academic self-perception	40	4.21 (3.57 to 5.29)	1.57	6.86
Attitudes towards teachers	39	4.57 (4.14 to 5.29)	1.57	6.00
Attitudes toward school	38	5.40 (4.20 to 6.00)	1.80	7.00
Goals	40	5.75 (4.71 to 6.29)	1.50	7.00
Motivation/Self-regulation	38	4.30 (3.30 to 5.43)	1.00	6.50
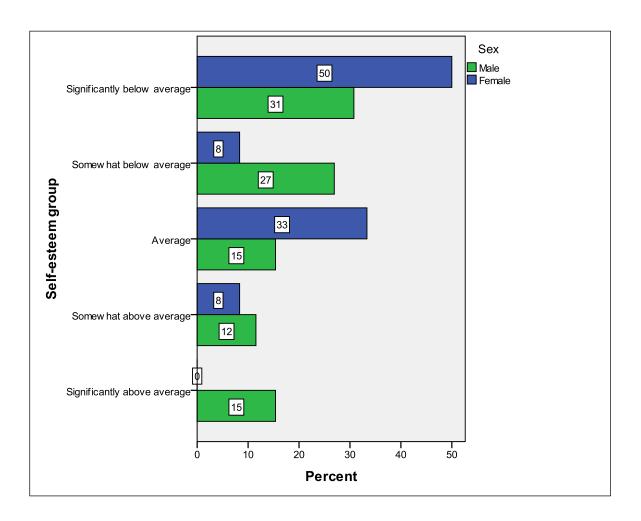
Boxplots of the scores on the five subscales of the SSAS-R

SELF-ESTEEM RESULTS

Self-esteem grouping by gender, n(%)

	Female (n=12)	Male (n=26)
Significantly below average	6 (50)	8 (31)
Somewhat below average	1 (8)	7 (27)
Average	4 (33)	4 (15)
Somewhat above average	1 (8)	3 (12)
Significantly above average	0 (0)	4 (15)

Self-esteem grouping by gender

Appendix 6

The Interview Questions

Question 1:
Thinking about the Student Engagement Programme (SEP), how has it impacted on the lives of the students in the school....tell me about their academic engagement, ...relationship and engagement with school... interpersonal relationships..... your life as a teacher, etc

Question 2:
Okay, so the students' experience of school is _____, is there any specific factor of the programme which enabled/caused this?

Question 3:
(Success) Question: What conditions were present in the school at the time of the intervention that enabled its successs? Or What condition do you feel need to be created to enable the SEP?

Question 4:
Explain its connection with the intervention leader (Deputy Principal), etc

Question 5:
Explain to me their increased knowledge of _____ (if stated by the teacher)

Question 6:
How do you feel this programme impacted on the rest of the school?

Appendix 7

Literacy and Numeracy

6th Year Group

Student ID	Problem Subjects Assessment/Exam Results	DATs Test Findings
Student 1 (Joe)	-	-
Student 2 (Emmet)	-	-
Student 3 (Kelly)	-	-
Student 4 (Amber)	Literacy and Numeracy	Literacy and Numeracy
Student 5 (Aaron)	Literacy and Numeracy	Literacy and Numeracy
Student 6 (Paula)	Numeracy	Numeracy
Student 7 (Colm)	-	-
Student 8 (Jonathan)	-	-
Student 9 (Frederick)	Literacy	Literacy
Student 10 (Gabriel)	Numeracy and Literacy	Numeracy and Literacy
Student 11 (Paul)	Numeracy and Literacy	Numeracy and Literacy
Student 12 (Aileen)	Literacy	Literacy
Student 13 (Padhraic)	Numeracy and Literacy	Numeracy and Literacy
Student 14 (Marius)	Literacy	Literacy
Student 15 (Ethan)	Numeracy and Literacy	Numeracy and Literacy
Student 16 (Liam)	-	-

5th Year Group:

Student ID	Problem Subjects Assessment/Exam Results	DATs Test Findings
Student 1 (Ayo)	-	-
Student 2 (Tiernan)	Literacy and Numeracy	Literacy and Numeracy
Student 3 (Rory)	-	-
Student 4 (Sheamus)	Literacy and Numeracy	Literacy and Numeracy
Student 5 (George)	Literacy and Numeracy	Literacy and Numeracy
Student 6 (William)	Literacy and Numeracy	Literacy and Numeracy
Student 7 (Cindy)	Literacy and Numeracy	Literacy and Numeracy
Student 8 (Bryan)	Literacy and Numeracy	Literacy and Numeracy
Student 9 (Joey)	-	-
Student 10 (Dara)	-	-
Student 11 (Karolis)	-	-
Student 12 (Sean)	Literacy and Numeracy	Literacy and Numeracy
Student 13 (Thomas)	Literacy and Numeracy	Literacy and Numeracy
Student 14 (Gary)	Literacy	Literacy
Student 15 (Grant)	Literacy and Numeracy	Literacy and Numeracy
Student 16 (Erin)	Literacy and Numeracy	Literacy and Numeracy
Student 17 (Leigh Ann)	Literacy and Numeracy	Literacy and Numeracy
Student 18 (Shane)	Literacy	Literacy
Student 19 (Jason)	Literacy	Literacy
Student 20 (ROC)	-	-
Student 21 (Elizabeth)	-	-
Student 22 (KellyW)	Literacy and Numeracy	Literacy and Numeracy
Student 23 (Kayleigh)	-	-

6th Year Group

Student ID	Additional Classes	Additional Workshop
Student 1 (Joe)	-	PX2, Study Skills
Student 2 (Emmet)	-	PX2, Study Skills, BBBS, Homework Club, Career Guidance.
Student 3 (Kelly)	-	PX2, Study Skills, BBBS, Homework Club, Career Guidance.
Student 4 (Amber)	Literacy and Numeracy	PX2, Study Skills, BBBS, Homework Club, Career Guidance.
Student 5 (Aaron)	Literacy and Numeracy	PX2, Study Skills, BBBS, Homework Club, Career Guidance.
Student 6 (Paula)	Numeracy	PX2, Study Skills, Career Guidance.
Student 7 (Colm)	-	PX2, Study Skills, One-to-One Counselling, Career Guidance.
Student 8 (Jonathan)	-	PX2, Study Skills, Career Guidance.
Student 9 (Frederick)	Literacy	PX2, Study Skills, BBBS, Homework Club, Career Guidance.
Student 10 (Gabriel)	Numeracy and Literacy	PX2, Study Skills, Career Guidance.
Student 11 (Paul)	Numeracy and Literacy	PX2, Study Skills, One-to-One Counselling, Career Guidance.
Student 12 (Aileen)	Literacy	PX2, Study Skills, Career Guidance.
Student 13 (Padhraic)	Numeracy and Literacy	PX2, Study Skills, BBBS, Homework Club, Career Guidance.
Student 14 (Marius)	Literacy	PX2, Study Skills, Career Guidance.
Student 15 (Ethan)	Numeracy and Literacy	PX2, Study Skills, One-to-One Counselling, Career Guidance.
Student 16 (Liam)	-	PX2, Study Skills, Career Guidance.

5th Year Group:

Student ID	Additional Classes	Additional Workshop
Student 1 (Ayo)	-	PX2, Study Skills, BBBS, Homework Club, Career Guidance.
Student 2 (Tiernan)	Literacy and Numeracy	PX2, Study Skills, BBBS, Homework Club, Career Guidance.
Student 3 (Rory)	-	PX2, Study Skills, BBBS, Homework Club, Career Guidance.
Student 4 (Sheamus)	Literacy and Numeracy	PX2, Study Skills, BBBS, Homework Club, Career Guidance.
Student 5 (George)	Literacy and Numeracy	PX2, Study Skills, Career Guidance.
Student 6 (William)	Literacy and Numeracy	PX2, Study Skills, BBBS, Homework Club, Career Guidance.
Student 7 (Cindy)	Literacy and Numeracy	PX2, Study Skills, BBBS, Homework Club, Career Guidance.
Student 8 (Bryan)	Literacy and Numeracy	PX2, Study Skills, Career Guidance.
Student 9 (Joey)	-	PX2, Study Skills, Career Guidance.
Student 10 (Dara)	-	PX2, Study Skills, Career Guidance.
Student 11 (Karolis)	-	PX2, Study Skills, Career Guidance.
Student 12 (Sean)	Literacy and Numeracy	PX2, Study Skills, Career Guidance.
Student 13 (Thomas)	Literacy and Numeracy	PX2, Study Skills, BBBS, Homework Club, Career Guidance.
Student 14 (Gary)	Literacy	PX2, Study Skills, Career Guidance.
Student 15 (Grant)	Literacy and Numeracy	PX2, Study Skills, BBBS, Homework Club, Career Guidance.
Student 16 (Erin)	Literacy and Numeracy	PX2, Study Skills, BBBS, Homework Club, Career Guidance.
Student 17 (Leigh Ann)	Literacy and Numeracy	PX2, Study Skills, BBBS, Homework Club, Career Guidance.
Student 18 (Shane)	Literacy	PX2, Study Skills, BBBS, Homework Club, Career Guidance.
Student 19 (Jason)	Literacy	PX2, Study Skills, Career Guidance.
Student 20 (ROC)	-	PX2, Study Skills, Career Guidance.
Student 21 (Elizabeth)	-	PX2, Study Skills, Career Guidance.
Student 22 (KellyW)	Literacy and Numeracy	PX2, Study Skills, Career Guidance.
Student 23 (Kayleigh)	-	PX2, Study Skills, Career Guidance.

Each member of the SEP Team mentored and monitored their students as they participated on their programme. Throughout their programme, as SEP Coordinator I was

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in constant contact with the students, ensuring that they had their appropriate schedule and time-table, answered any queries they may have hand in relation to programme content or general housekeeping, allayed any concerns or fears that they may have had throughout the programme.

Appendix 8

Determine – The Success of the Intervention 2010 - 2011
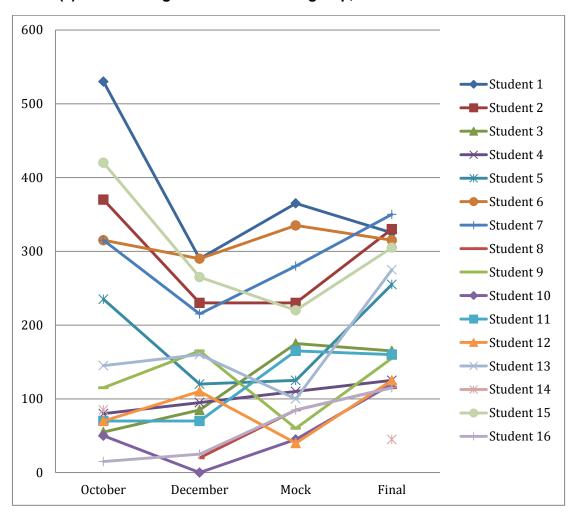
In order to determine the overall success of the intervention I complied the feedback that I received throughout the cycle, the compilation of which can be viewed as follows:
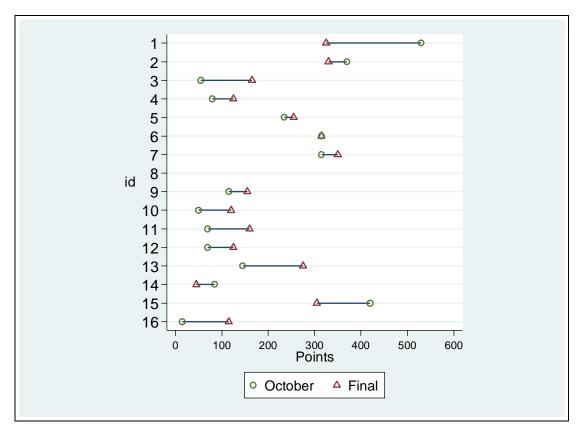
Results attained by the 6th Year students in their term assessments, mock and final Leaving Certification examination area as follows:

(a) Results Progression for 6th Year group, n=16

The results for the above results progression graph were collected from in-house October and December Assessments, Mock Examinations and Final Leaving Certificate Results.

(b) Results Progression for 6th Year group: Change from October to Finals, n=16

The results for the above results progression graph were collected from in-house October and the Final Leaving Certificate Results.

From the above figure, it can be seen that 13 students made significant improvements in their academic performance.

Career Progression (6th Year Group)

Student ID	Employment	Apprenticeship	Third Level	Further Ed. (PLC)
Student 1 (Joe)	-	-	-	Music Technician
Student 2 (Emmet)	-	-	Engineering	-
Student 3 (Kelly)	-	-	Information Tec	-
Student 4 (Amber)	Shop Assist. (Dunnes)	-	-	-
Student 5 (Aaron)	-	Mechanic	-	-
Student 6 (Paula)	-	-	Social Care	-
Student 7 (Colm)	-	-	Information Tec	-
Student 8 (Jonathan)	-	-	Agriculture Science	-
Student 9 (Frederick)	Shop Assistant (Spar)	-	-	-
Student 10 (Gabriel)	-	-	-	Agri Business
Student 11 (Paul)	Army Officer	-	-	-
Student 12 (Aileen)	-	-	-	Business/Secretarial
Student 13 (Padhraic)	-	-	-	Agri Business
Student 14 (Marius)	-	-	Mechanical Engineering	-
Student 15 (Ethan)	-	-	-	Business
Student 16 (Liam)		Carpentry	-	-

Appendix 9

Summary of Cycle 2: 2010/2011

The following tables show a detailed overview of the research process throughout the cycle two of the SEP and data-collection method at each stage of the yearly cycle.

Cycle 2: 2010/2011: SEP Research Framework and Data Collection Time-Line						
Senior Cycle Group: Academic Year: 19 Sixth Year Students: **September 2010– May 2011** – Duration: 1 Year 25 Fifth Year Students : **September 2010– May 2012 -** Duration: 2 Years						
Diagnosing and Defining – Student Profile						
Time Line	**Duration**	**Personnel Involved**	**SEP Component**	**Programme Information**	**Student Report Folder**	**Information Dissemination and Data Collection Method**
Sept 2010	2 hours	• SEP Coordinator • SEP Team	Modify – SEP Processes Planning and Coordination	**SEP Meeting** • Recommendations/Modifications Report for SEP 2010/11 • Approval of the modified SEP Framework • Student Review (5th & 6th Years) • Needs Analysis (5th & 6th years) • Human Resources: SEP Team/Teaching Staff • Funding Needs	• n/a	• SEP Team Meetings • Research Diary • Document Analysis • Discussion • Observation • Research Diary
Sept 2010	1 hour	• SEP Coordinator • School Staff	Programme, Planning and Design	**Staff Meeting** • Proposal to introduce a modified SEP to both Fifth Year for duration of 2 years and to the current Sixth Years to alleviate educational disadvantage • Outline of modified SEP	• n/a	• Staff Meeting
Sept 2010	4 hours (2 Eves)	• SEP Coordinator • SEP Team • 39 SCP Targeted	iagnosing and Defining Student Profile	**PP Presentation and Handouts on:** • The Purpose of the SEP • An Overview of the Content of the SEP	• Registration Form • Permission	• Group Seminar • One-to-One Support

		Senior Cycle Students (16 Sixth Years + 23 Fifth Years)	Induction and Registration	• Creation of "Student Profile" and an "Individual Learning Plan"	Slip	• Observation • Research Diary

Cycle 2: 2010/2011: SEP Research Framework and Data Collection Time-Line						
Senior Cycle Group: Academic Year: 19 Sixth Year Students: **September 2010– May 2011 -** Duration: 1 Year 25 Fifth Year Students : **September 2010– May 2012** - Duration: 2 Years						
Diagnosing and Defining – Student Profile Continued ..						
Time Line	**Duration**	**Personnel Involved**	**SEP Component**	**Programme Information**	**Student Report Folder**	**Information Dissemination and Data Collection Method**
Sept 2010	2-day Workshop	• SEP Coordinator • SEP Team • 39 SCP Targeted Senior Cycle Students (16 Sixth Years + 23 Fifth Years)	Diagnosing and Defining Student Profile Understanding Self	**SEP Introductory Workshop:** PP Presentation and Handouts on: • What is Educational Disadvantage • Purpose of Testing – Tests explained • Information on Self-Esteem, Attitude Towards School, Career Profile. • Preparing a Personal Profile • General Overview of the Extra Tuitions/Supports available: Literacy and Numeracy, Personal Development, Study Skills, Homework Club, BBBS Mentoring Programme.	• Handouts • Programme Diary	• Group Seminar • One-to-One Support Meetings • Research Diary **Tests**: DATS Test • Self Esteem Inventory • Satisfaction with Life Scale • Student Attitude Towards School • VARK Questionnaire • FPYC Personal Career Profile • Personal Strengths & • Wishes Checklist **Cont... ->** •

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Cycle 2: 2010/2011: SEP Research Framework and Data Collection Time-Line						
Senior Cycle Group: Academic Year: 19 Sixth Year Students: **September 2010– May 2011 -** Duration: 1 Year 25 Fifth Year Students : **September 2010– May 2012** - Duration: 2 Years						
Action Planning – the Intervention						
Time Line	**Duration**	**Personnel Involved**	**SEP Component**	**Programme Information**	**Student Report Folder**	**Information Dissemination and Data Collection Method**
Oct 2010	2 weeks (on-going)	• SEP Coordinator • SEP Team • 39 SCP Targeted Senior Cycle Students (16 Sixth Years + 23 Fifth Years)	Action Planning Preparing Personal Profile and an Individual Learning Plans	**Handout on the following:** • Individual Learning Plan Template **Results of Tests:** • Self Esteem Inventory • Satisfaction with Life Scale • Student Attitude Towards School • VARK Questionnaire • FPYC Personal Career Profile • Personal Strengths & • Wishes Checklist **Handouts on the following modules available:** • Literacy & Numeracy • PX2 Personal Development Programme • Study Skills • BBBS Mentoring Programme • Career Guidance Programme • One-to-One School Counselling Service (Personal Problems)	• Personal Profile • Individual Learning Plan • Programme Diary	• Group Seminars • One-to-One Support Meetings • Research Diary

| Oct 2010 – Apr 2011 | 7 months (inc. holidays) | • SEP Coordinator
• SEP Team
• 39 SCP Targeted Senior Cycle Students (16 Sixth Years + 23 Fifth Years)
• External Course Facilitators | Action Planning

Programme Participation | **Programme Modules/Class Material (as applicable):**

• Literacy & Numeracy (modular – in-school time)
• PX2 Personal Development Programme (2 day Workshop for 6th Years, built into timetable over year for 5th Years)
• Study Skills (½ day workshop for 6th Years, built into timetable over the year for 5th Years)
• BBBSMP (throughout school year at lunch times)
• Career Guidance Programme
• One-to-One School Counselling Service (Personal Problems) | • Individual Learning Plan
• Programme Diary | • Workshops
• One-to-One Teaching
• Small Group Teaching
• Discussion
• Observation
• Research Diary |

		Cycle 2: 2010/2011: SEP Research Framework and Data Collection Time-Line				
		Senior Cycle Group: Academic Year: 19 Sixth Year Students: **September 2010– May 2011 -** Duration: 1 Year				
		25 Fifth Year Students : **September 2010– May 2012** - Duration: 2 Years				
		Determine – the Success of the Intervention				
Time Line	**Duration**	**Personnel Involved**	**SEP Component.**	**Programme Information**	**Student Report Folder**	**Information Dissemination and Data Collection Method**
May 2011	2 week	• SEP Coordinator • SEP Team • 39 SCP Targeted Senior Cycle Students (16 Sixth Years + 23 Fifth Years)	Determine – the Success of the Intervention Reflection and Documentation	**Handouts on the following:** • Individual Student Report 5th & 6th Years: attendance, programme contribution, performance in school-based assessments. • Evaluation Sheets on each module attended • SEP Report	• Individual Student Report: • Evaluation Sheets on modules attended • SEP Report • Programme Diary	• Group Discussion • One-to-One Support/Discussion • Observation • Teacher/Facilitator Evaluation Sheets • Student Evaluation Sheets • SEP Report • Research Diary • Yearly Assessments (Oct, Dec, Easter, Summer)
May 2011	1 week	• SEP Coordinator • SEP Team • 39 SCP Targeted Senior Cycle Students (16 Sixth Years + 23 Fifth Years)	Determine – the Success of the Intervention Student Recognition	• Student Achievement Award Ceremony 6th Years only.	• Student Achievement Award: 6th Year Folders Only	• Student Achievement Awards • One-to-One Discussion • Observation • Research Diary

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Cycle 2: 2010/2011 - SEP Research Framework and Data Collection Time-Line						
Senior Cycle Group: Academic Year: 19 Sixth Year Students: **September 2010– May 2011 -** Duration: 1 Year						
25 Fifth Year Students: **September 2010 – May 2012** - Duration: 2 Years						
Modify - SEP Processes: SEP Planning and Coordination						
Time Line	**Duration**	**Personnel Involved**	**SEP Component**	**Programme Information**	**Student Report Folder**	**Information Dissemination and Data Collection Method**
May 2011	1 week	• SEP Coordinator • SEP Team	Modify – SEP Processes Planning and Coordination	**Planning and Coordination:** • Individual Student Reports • Student Evaluation Sheets • Teacher/Facilitator Evaluation Sheets on modules attended • Summer School Report/SEP Report Student Achievement Awards • Recommendations/Modifications Report for SEP 2011/12	• n/a	• SEP Team Meetings • Research Diary
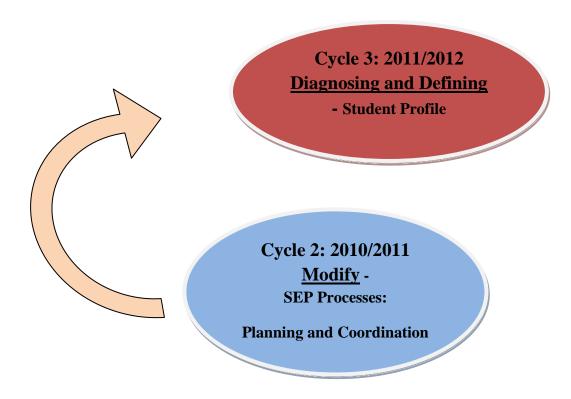
The Action Research Spiral
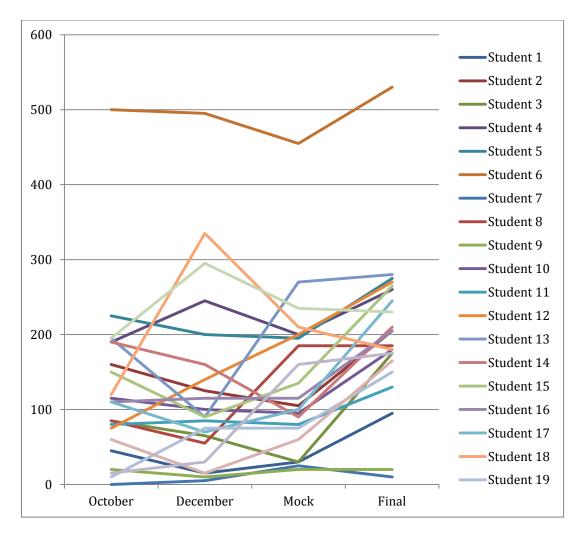
Appendix 10

Results Progression
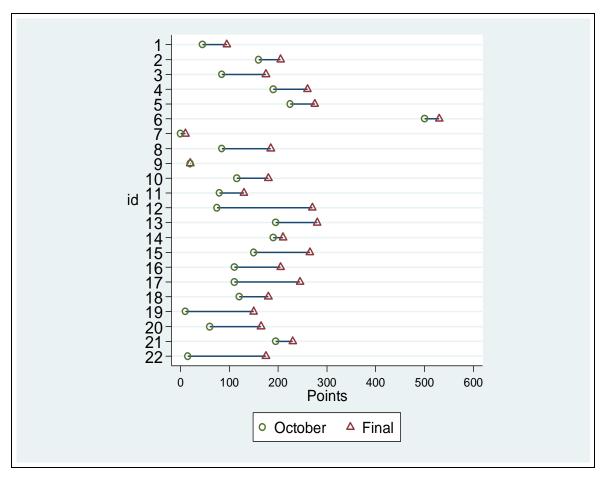
Below is a graph showing the results progression for the 23 students who participated in the SEP:

(a) Results Progression for 5ᵗʰ Year group, n=22 (note: previously, n=23 but one of the students only had results for Summer which is no longer included in these graphs).

The results for the above results progression graph were collected from in-house October and December Assessments, Mock Examinations and Final Leaving Certificate Results.

(b) Results Progression for 5th Year group: Change from October to Finals, n=22

The results for the above results progression graph were collected from in-house October and the Final Leaving Certificate Results.

The above figure shows that all students the majority of students improved their examination results.

Career Progression (5th Year Group)

Student ID	Employment	Apprenticeship	Third Level	Further Ed. (PLC)
Student 1 (Ayo)	-	-	Info Tec	-
Student 2 (Tiernan)	-	-	-	Music Tec
Student 3 (Rory)	-	-	Info Tec	-
Student 4 (Sheamus)	-	-	-	Agri Science
Student 5 (George)	Shop Assist.	-	-	-
Student 6 (William)	-	-	-	Agri Science
Student 7 (Cindy)	-	-	-	Childcare
Student 8 (Bryan)	-	-	-	Agri Science
Student 9 (Joey)	-	Plumber	-	-
Student 10 (Dara)	-	-	-	Agri Science
Student 11 (Karolis)	-	-	Info Tec	
Student 12 (Sean)	-	-	-	Business
Student 13 (Thomas)	-	-	-	Horticulture
Student 14 (Gary)	-	-	-	Agri Science
Student 15 (Grant)	-	-	-	Horticulture
Student 16 (Erin)	-	-	Front Office	-
Student 17 (Leigh Ann)	-	-	-	-
Student 18 (Shane)	-	-	Agri Science	-
Student 19 (Jason)	-	-	Agri Science	-
Student 20 (Ryan)	-	-	Design/Engineer.	-
Student 21 (Elizabeth)	-	-	Culinary Arts	-
Student 22 (KellyW)	-	-	-	Business/Sec
Student 23 (Kayleigh)	-	-	-	Art/Craft/Design

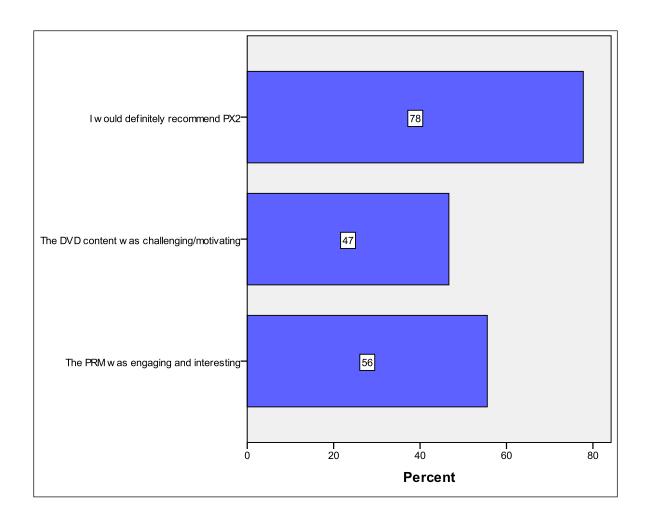**Feedback from both the 5th and 6th year group in relation to the PX2 Programme**

PX2 (STEPS) EVALUATION

Level of agreement (%), n=45

Statement	Strongly Disagree/Disagree	Neutral	Strongly Agree/Agree	Mean score (scale 1-5)
	n (%)	n (%)	n (%)	
I would definitely recommend PX2	2 (4)	8 (18)	35 (78)	4.27
The DVD content was challenging/motivating	6 (13)	18 (40)	21 (47)	3.51
The PRM was engaging and interesting	5 (11)	15 (33)	25 (56)	3.71
In which areas of your life do you consider PX2 to be of use to you?				
Taking part in exams	6 (13)	8 (18)	31 (69)	3.89
Being successful in exams	3 (7)	10 (22)	32 (71)	3.98
Taking an active part in further education	3 (7)	12 (27)	30 (67)	3.89
Seeking and gaining employment*	7 (16)	10 (23)	27 (61)	3.77
Fulfilment in my career	5 (11)	12 (27)	28 (62)	3.91
Expanding my comfort zones*	3 (7)	13 (30)	28 (64)	3.86
Controlling my anxiety and stress*	4 (9)	16 (36)	24 (55)	3.70
Goal setting**	1 (2)	6 (14)	36 (84)	4.35
Getting along with friends and family*	5 (11)	16 (36)	23 (52)	3.66
Taking care of myself	9 (20)	8 (18)	28 (62)	3.71
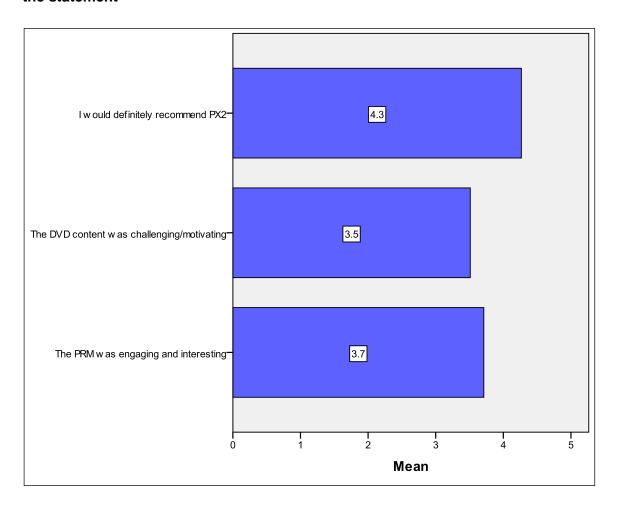
* n=44 as 1 respondent failed to answer this question
* n=43 as 2 respondents failed to answer this question

Note: A higher mean score indicates greater agreement with the statement.
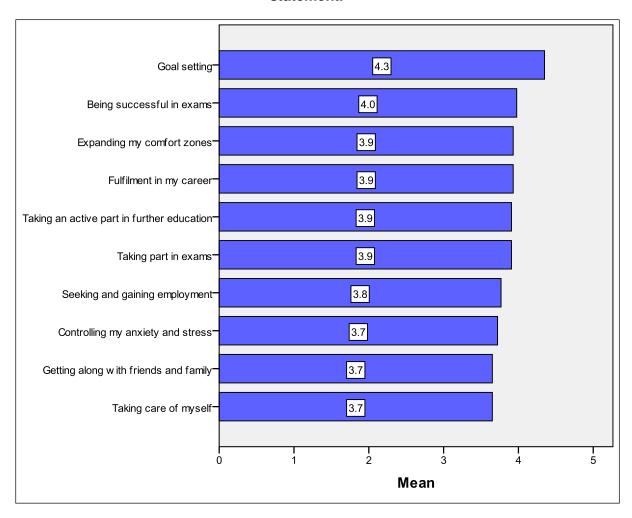
Bar chart of students' responses to statements related to PX2. Percentages represent the percentage of students who answered "Strongly Agree" or "Agree" to the statement

Bar chart of students' mean responses to statements related to PX2

Statement	Percent
Goal setting	84
Being successful in exams	71
Taking part in exams	69
Taking an active part in further education	67
Expanding my comfort zones	64
Fulfilment in my career	62
Taking care of myself	62
Seeking and gaining employment	61
Controlling my anxiety and stress	55
Getting along with friends and family	52

Percent

Bar chart of students' responses to statements related to "In which areas of your life do you consider PX2 to be of use to you?" Percentages represent the percentage of students who answered "Strongly Agree" or "Agree" to the statement.

On completion of the SEP students we asked to rate their Satisfaction with Life:

SATISFACTION WITH LIFE SCALE
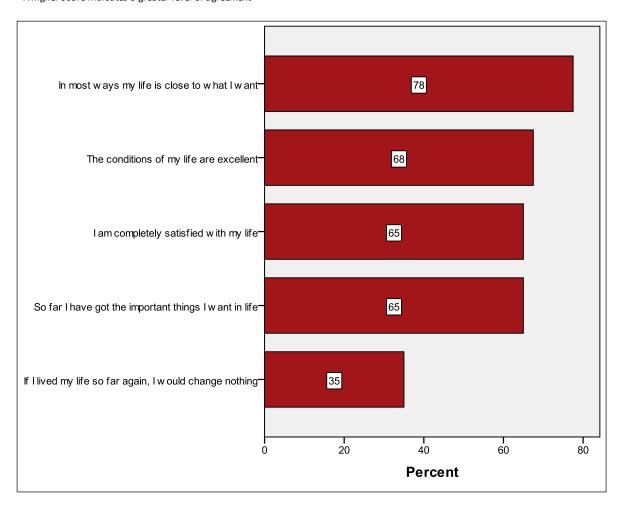
(A) Responses to individual questions that make up the Satisfaction with Life scale

Level of agreement with individual questions on the Satisfaction with Life scale, n=40

Statement	Disagree[1]	Neither agree nor disagree	Agree[2]	Mean score (scale 1-7)[3]
	n (%)	n (%)	n (%)	
In most ways my life is close to what I want	5 (13)	4 (10)	31 (78)	5.15
The conditions of my life are excellent	4 (10)	9 (23)	27 (68)	5.10
I am completely satisfied with my life	8 (20)	6 (15)	26 (65)	5.00
So far I have got the important things I want in life	10 (25)	4 (10)	26 (65)	4.83
If I lived my life so far again, I would change nothing	21 (53)	5 (13)	14 (35)	3.75
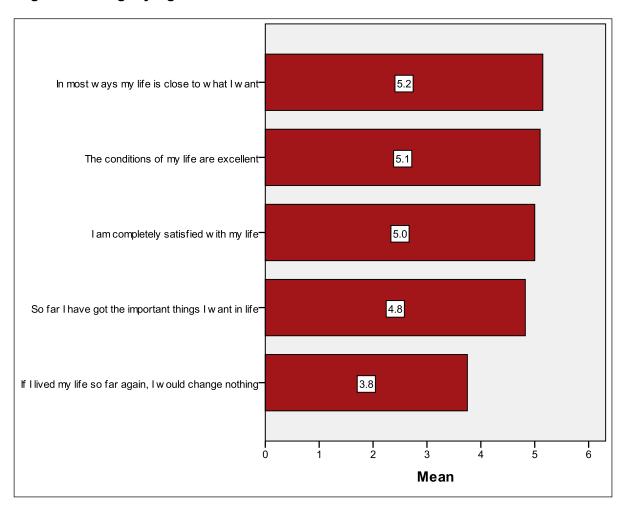
[1] Students who answered "Strongly Agree", "Agree" or "Slightly Agree"
[2] Students who answered "Strongly Disagree", "Disagree" or "Slightly Disagree"
[3] A higher score indicates a greater level of agreement
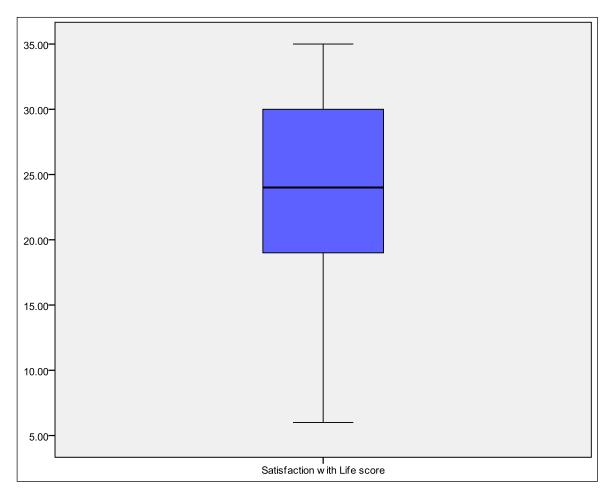
Bar chart of students' responses to statements in the Satisfaction with Life scale. Percentages represent the percentage of students who answered "Strongly Agree", "Agree" or "Slightly Agree" to the statement.

Bar chart of students' mean responses to statements in the Satisfaction with Life scale

(B) Overall score on the Satisfaction with Life scale

The mean (sd) score on the satisfaction with life scale is 23.83(6.67).

Satisfaction with Life score
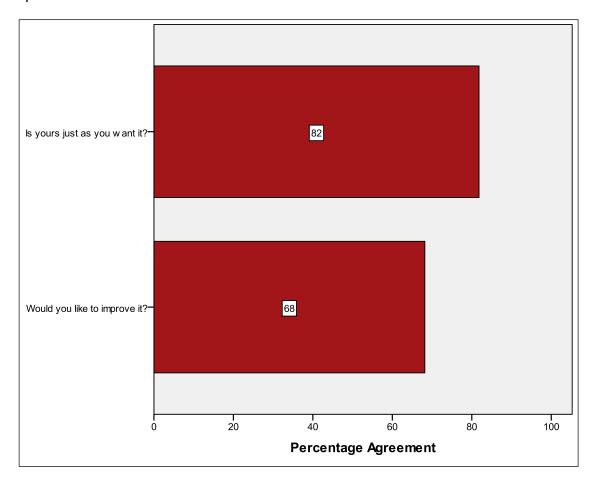
Boxplot of students' Satisfaction with Life scores

Q1: Is yours just as you want it?

22 (out of 40) students answered this question. Of those, 18 (81.8%) answered "yes" to this question.

Q2: Would you like to improve it?

23 (out of 40) students answered this question. Of those, 15 (65.2%) answered "yes" to this question.

Bar chart of students' agreement with the questions

Appendix 11

The following tables show a detailed overview of the research process throughout cycle three of the SEP and data-collection method at each stage of the yearly cycle.

| Cycle 3: 2011/2012: SEP Research Framework and Data Collection Time-Line						
Senior Cycle Group: Academic Year: – Duration: 2nd Year: 25 Sixth Year Students: **September 2011– May 2012**						
Diagnosing and Defining – Student Profile						
Time Line	**Duration**	**Personnel Involved**	**SEP Component**	**Programme Information**	**Student Report Folder**	**Information Dissemination and Data Collection Method**
Sept 2011	1 month (on-going)	• SEP Coordinator • School Completion Coordinator	Planning and Coordination	• Findings of Stage 4: 2010-2011 forms the bases of planning and coordination for Stage 1 of 2011-2012. • Recommendations/Modifications Report for SEP 2010/11Preparation of the modified SEP Framework • Student Review (6th Years) • Needs Analysis (6th years) • Human Resources: SEP Team/Teaching Staff • Funding Needs	• n/a	• SEP Team Meetings • Research Diary • Document Analysis • Discussion • Observation • Research Diary
Sept 2011	1 hour	• SEP Coordinator • School Staff	Outline of modified SEP	• Proposal to finish year two of the modified SEP to the current Sixth Years to alleviate educational disadvantage	• n/a	• Staff Meeting
Sept 2011	2 hours	• SEP Coordinator • SEP Team • 25 SCP Targeted Senior Cycle Students	**Step 1:** Induction	**PP Presentation and Handouts on:** • An Overview of SEP for 2011/2012 •Discuss the development of SEP for Transition Years and modules to be integrated into the Junior Cycle curriculum.	• n/a	• Group Seminar • One-to-One Support • Observation • Research Diary

Summary of Cycle 3: 2011/2012

Cycle 3: 2011/2012: SEP Research Framework and Data Collection Time-Line						
Senior Cycle Group: Academic Year: – Duration: 2nd Year: 25 Sixth Year Students: **September 2011– May 2012**						
Stage 2: Action Planning – Designing/Modification/Participation – the Intervention						
Time Line	**Duration**	**Personnel Involved**	**SEP Component**	**Programme Information**	**Student Report Folder**	**Information Dissemination and Data Collection Method**
Sept 2011	2 weeks (on-going)	•SEP Coordinator •SEP Team •25 SCP Targeted Senior Cycle Students	**Step 3:** Reviewing and Modifying Personal Profile and Individual Learning Plans	**Handouts on the modules available for 2011/2012:** •Literacy & Numeracy •PX2 Personal Development Programme (time-tabled class) •Study Skills (time-table class) •BBBS Mentoring Programme •Career Guidance Programme •One-to-One School Counselling Service Personal Problems)	•Modified Personal Profile •Modified Individual Learning Plan	•Group Seminars •One-to-One Support Meetings •Research Diary

| Oct 2011 – May 2012 | 7 months

(inc. holidays) | • SEP Coordinator
• SEP Team
• 25 SCP Targeted Senior Cycle Students
• Members of Teaching Staff
• External Course Facilitators | **Step 4:**

Programme Participation | **Programme Modules/Class Material (as applicable):**

• Literacy & Numeracy (modular – in-school time)
• PX2 Personal Development Programme (time-tabled class)
• Study Skills (time-tabled class)
• BBBSMP (throughout school year at lunch times)
• Career Guidance Programme
• One-to-One School Counselling Service (Personal Problems)
• Focus Groups: Design of TY and Junior Cycle SEP | • Individual Learning Plan | • Workshops
• One-to-One Teaching
• Small Group Teaching
• Discussion
• Observation
• Research Diary |

Cycle 3: 2011/2012: SEP Research Framework and Data Collection Time-Line

Senior Cycle Group: Academic Year: – Duration: 2nd Year: 25 Sixth Year Students: **September 2011– May 2012**

Stage 3: Determine – the Success of the Intervention

| Time Line	Duration	Personnel Involved	SEP Component	Programme Information	Student Report Folder	Information Dissemination and Data Collection Method
May 2012	2 week	• SEP Coordinator • SEP Team • 25 SCP Targeted Senior Cycle Students	**Step 4:** Reflection and Documentation	**Handouts on the following:** • Individual Student Report 6th Years: attendance, programme contribution, performance in school-based assessments. • Evaluation Sheets on each module attended • SEP Report	• Individual Student Report: • Evaluation Sheets on modules attended • SEP Report	• Group Discussion • One-to-One Support/Discussion • Observation • Teacher/Facilitator Evaluation Sheets • Student Evaluation Sheets • SEP Report • Research Diary • Yearly Assessments (Oct, Dec, Easter, Summer)
May 2012	1 week	• SEP Coordinator • SEP Team • 25 SCP Targeted Senior Cycle	**Step 5:** Student Recognition	• Student Achievement Award Ceremony	• Student Achievement Award:	• Student Achievement Awards • One-to-One Discussion • Observation Research Diary
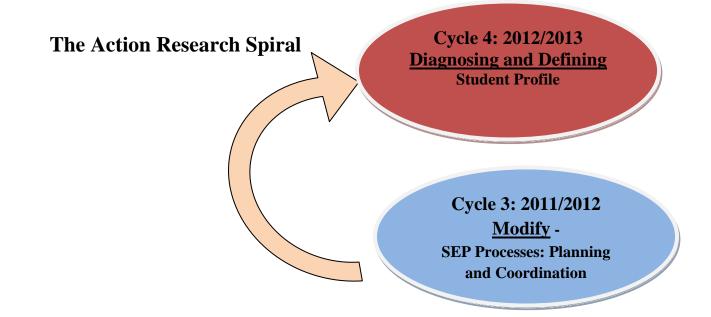
		Students				

Cycle 3: 2011/2012: SEP Research Framework and Data Collection Time-Line						
Senior Cycle Group: Academic Year: – Duration: 2nd Year: 25 Sixth Year Students: **September 2011– May 2012**						
Stage 4: Modify - SEP Processes: SEP Planning and Coordination						
Time Line	**Duration**	**Personnel Involved**	**SEP Component**	**Programme Information**	**Student Report Folder**	**Information Dissemination and Data Collection Method**
May 2012	1 week	• SEP Coordinator • SEP Team	**Step 6:** Planning and Coordination	• Individual Student Reports • Student Evaluation Sheets • Teacher/Facilitator Evaluation Sheets on modules attended • Summer School Report/SEP Report Student Achievement Awards • Recommendations/Modifications Report for SEP 2012/13	• n/a	• SEP Team Meetings • Research Diary

The Action Research Spiral

Cycle 4: 2012/2013
Diagnosing and Defining
Student Profile

Cycle 3: 2011/2012
Modify -
SEP Processes: Planning
and Coordination

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Proposal for Future

At this stage, it was decided that the project should become part of the fabric of the school and it was introduced into the Transition Year and the Junior Certificate year groups (1st, 2nd, 3rd) as part of a weekly timetabled class.

SEP Proposal for Future				
Transition Year Group: Duration: 1 Year: 24 TY Students: **September 2012– May 2013 (ongoing)** **Junior Cycle Groups: 1st, 2nd and 3rd Years:** Duration: 1 year: 1st (48), 2nd (40), 3rd (30): 118 Students: **September 2012 – May 2013** (**ongoing**)				
Stage 1: Diagnosing and Defining – Student Profile				
Sept 2012	2 weeks Two class periods per week 1 evening	•SEP Coordinator •SEP Team •24 SCP Targeted TY Students •118 Junior Cycle Students and their parents	**Step 1:** Induction and Registration	**PP Presentation and Handouts on:** •An Overview of SEP for 2012/2013 •Understanding Educational Disadvantage •The Student Role in the SEP •How to do Action Research **PP Presentation and Handouts on:** •An Overview of SEP for 2012/2013 Junior Cycle students. •Educational Disadvantage •What is the Get Smart Programme and how it can benefit your child's engagement in school?
Sept 2010	4 Weeks Two class periods per	•SEP Coordinator •SEP Team •24 SCP Targeted TY Students	**Step 2:** Understanding Self	**PP Presentation and Handouts on:** •What is Educational Disadvantage and How to Recognise its Characteristics •Purpose of Testing – Tests explained •Information on Self-Esteem, Academic Self-Concept, Student Motivation, Student Engagement. •Students take the following tests: DATs, Self-Esteem Inventory, Satisfaction with Life Scale, Attitude towards School,

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	week			VARK Questionnaire, FPYC Personal Career Profile, Personal Strengths and Wishes Checklists. • How to Read My Test Results and What They Mean. • Preparing a Personal Profile General Overview of the Extra Tuitions/Supports available: Literacy and Numeracy, Personal Development, Study Skills, Homework Club, BBBS Mentoring Programme.
Time Line				

SEP Proposal for Future				
Transition Year Group: Duration: 1 Year: 24 TY Students: **September 2012– May 2013** **Junior Cycle Groups: 1ˢᵗ, 2ⁿᵈ and 3ʳᵈ Years:** Duration: 1 year: 1ˢᵗ (48), 2ⁿᵈ (40), 3ʳᵈ (30): 118 Students: **September 2012 – May 2013** (**ongoing**)				
Stage 2: Action Planning – Designing/Modification/Participation – the Intervention				
Time Line	**Duration**	**Personnel Involved**	**SEP Component**	**Programme Information**
Oct 2012	2 weeks (on-going)	• SEP Coordinator • SEP Team • 24 SCP Targeted TY Students • 118 Junior Cycle Students	**Step 3:** Reviewing and Modifying My Personal Profile and Defining My Individual Learning Plans	**Handouts on the modules available for 2011/2012:** • Literacy & Numeracy • PX2 Personal Development Programme (time-tabled class) • Get Smart Personal Development Programme (time-tabled class) • Study Skills (time-table class) • BBBS Mentoring Programme • Career Guidance Programme • One-to-One School Counselling Service (Personal Problems)
Oct 2012 – May 2013	7 months (inc. holidays)	• SEP Coordinator • SEP Team • 25 SCP Targeted Senior Cycle Students • 118 Junior Cycle Students • Members of Teaching Staff	**Step 4:** Programme Participation	**Programme Modules/Class Material (as applicable):** • Literacy & Numeracy (modular – in-school time) • PX2 Personal Development Programme (time-tabled class) • Get Smart Personal Development

		•External Course Facilitators		Programme (time-tabled class) •Study Skills (time-tabled class) •BBBSMP (throughout school year at lunch times) •Career Guidance Programme One-to-One School Counselling Service (Personal Problems)

Transition Year Group: Duration: 1 Year: 24 TY Students: **September 2012– May 2013**
Junior Cycle Groups: 1st, 2nd and 3rd Years: Duration: 1 year: 1st (48), 2nd (40), 3rd (30): 118 Students: **September 2012 – May 2013** *Appendices*
(ongoing)

Time Line	Duration	Personnel Involved	SEP Component	Programme Information
			Stage 3: Determine – the Success of the Intervention	
May 2012	2 week Report Writing Workshop: 2 days Student Presentation Seminar: 1 day	•SEP Coordinator •SEP Team •24 SCP Targeted TY Students	**Step 5:** Reflection and Documentation	**Course Handouts on the following:** •Report Writing •Sharing My Experience of SEP •Students present their findings through PowerPoint Presentation and through their Student Report **Handouts on the following:**
May 2012	2 week	•SEP Coordinator •SEP Team •24 SCP Targeted TY Students •118 Junior Cycle Students		•Individual Student Report 4th Years: attendance, programme contribution, performance in school-based assessments. •Evaluation Sheets on each module attended •SEP Report •Evaluation Sheets
May 2012	1 week	•SEP Coordinator •SEP Team •24 SCP Targeted TY Students	**Step 6:** Student Recognition	•Student Achievement Award Ceremony •Student Presentation of the SEP (Volunteers)

SEP Proposal for Future				
Transition Year Group: Duration: 1 Year: 24 TY Students: **September 2012– May 2013** **Junior Cycle Groups: 1ˢᵗ, 2ⁿᵈ and 3ʳᵈ Years:** Duration: 1 year: 1ˢᵗ (48), 2ⁿᵈ (40), 3ʳᵈ (30): 118 Students: **September 2012 – May 2013** (**ongoing**)				
Stage 4: Modify - SEP Processes: SEP Planning and Coordination				
Time Line	**Duration**	**Personnel Involved**	**SEP Component**	**Programme Information**

May 2013	1 week	•SEP Coordinator
		 •SEP Team
			Step 7: Modifying
			
			 Step 8: Planning and Coordination
				•Individual Student Reports
				 •Student Evaluation Sheets
				 •Teacher/Facilitator Evaluation Sheets on modules attended
				 •Summer School Report/SEP Report
				  Student Achievement Awards
				
				  Recommendations/Modifications Report for SEP 2013/14

Appendix 12

Letter of information and consent to parent

12th February 2008

Dear Parent

Growing up is full of challenges, contradictions and pressures. It has always been this way, but these days, everything seems to be on a much larger scale.

Career choices are no longer simple. Traditional industries are disappearing, while new ones arrive demanding greater skills from employees. Immediate employment out of school is no longer a "done deal". For the teen making the transition from adolescent to adult, it can be a confusing and frightening time. To give our students the tools to make this transition easier, and set them on a path to a successful, purposeful life, we would like to offer you the opportunity of registering your child on our "Student Engagement Programme (SEP)". This programme focuses on your child's learning and personal development needs. I would like to take this opportunity to invite you and your child to attend an information evening on the 18th September 2009, at 7.30 pm in the school library, where a full presentation with regard to the programme content will be outlined.

If, you are interested in registering your child please complete the following consent form and return to Ms Lohan after the presentation.

If you require any further information, please do not hesitate to contact me.

Yours sincerely

Jude Lohan

Jude Lohan
SEP Coordinator

Registration and Consent Form

I _____ parent of _____ give my consent for

    Name of Parent (in Caps)   **Name of Student (in Caps)**

my child to participate in the "Student Engagement Programme (SEP)". I understand that this programme is part of a research project being conducted by Ms Lohan, and that information with regard to my child's progress will be collected and presented as part of her on-going research.

Parent's Signature _____   Date _____

Letter of permission to conduct research

Jude Lohan

Four Roads, Roscommon.
Tel: (086) 8692953

12th February 2008

Mr Frank Chambers
Principal
Roscommon Community College
Lisnamult
Roscommon

Mr Larry O'Farrelly
Chief Executive Officer
Rosocmmon VEC
VEC Buildings
Lanesboro Street
Roscommon

Dear Sirs

REQUEST FOR PERMISSION TO CONDUCT RESEARCH AT ROSCOMMON COMMUNITY COLLEGE

As a follow on from the "School Effectiveness Research" that I carried out during September 2006 – January 2008. I request your permission to conduct further research for my PhD thesis titled "Alleviating Educational Disadvantage through Localised Policy Intervention". This project will be conducted under the supervision of Dr. Mary Fleming (NUI, Galway).

I am hereby seeking your consent to engage with students, their parents and members of Roscommon Community College over the course of a 5 year period ending in September 2013. I have provided you with a copy of my research proposal which outlines the stages of the research process where student, teacher and parent input is necessary. Research will comply at all times with the ethical guidelines laid down by the NUI. Galway.

If you require any further information, please do not hesitate to contact me on the above mobile number. Thank you for your time and consideration in this matter.

Yours sincerely,

Jude Lohan

Jude Lohan

Appendix 13

My Profile

Year Group ☐   5ᵗʰ Year ☐

6ᵗʰ Year

Student Name _____   Mentor's Name _____

Medical card ☐ Yes   ☐ No   Date of Birth _____

Address _____

Mother's Occupation _____   Fathers Occupation _____

Guardian's Occupation _____

Educational Record

Primary School/s attended _____

Secondary Schools attended _____

Examinations/Qualifications taken by:

Student   ☐ Junior Cert   ☐   Leaving Cert   ☐ Other

_____

Mother   ☐ Junior Cert   ☐   Leaving Cert   ☐ Other

_____

Father   ☐ Junior Cert   ☐   Leaving Cert   ☐ Other

_____

Guardian   ☐ Junior Cert   ☐   Leaving Cert   ☐ Other

DATs results

Please use your educational record which has been provided for assistance with the following questions:

_____ Verbal Reasoning   _____ Numerical Reasoning   ——— Abstract Reasoning

_____ Perceptual Speed & Accuracy ——— Mechanical Reasoning   ——— Space Relations

——— Spelling   _____ Language Usage

Feelings about School (SAAS-R)

Please use your educational record which has been provided for assistance with the following questions:

——— Academic self-perception   ——— Attitudes towards teachers

——— Attitudes towards school   ——— Goals

_____ Motivation/Self-regulation

Self-Esteem Result

Please use your educational record which has been provided for assistance with the following questions:

——— Significantly below average ——— Somewhat below average   _____ Average

_____ Somewhat above average   _____ Significantly above average

Satisfaction with Life Result

Please use your educational record which has been provided for assistance with the following questions:

——— Significantly below average ——— Somewhat below average   _____ Average

——— Somewhat above average   _____ Significantly above average

My Learning Plan

Please use your educational record which has been provided for assistance with the following questions:

LC subjects, I enjoy _____

LC subjects, I am good at _____

LC subjects, I do not enjoy _____

LC subjects, I would like assistance with _____

Outline the barriers that you feel are preventing you from reaching your full potential

_____

_____

_____

_____

Please select the Personal and Skills Development Programmes, that would be of benefit to you in overcoming your barriers (please tick):

☐ PX2   ☐ GAISCE   ☐ Big Brother Big Sister   ☐ Homework Club

☐ Literacy ☐ Numeracy   ☐ Study Skills   ☐ Career Guidance

☐ One-to-One Counselling   Other, please state _____

Reflection

On completion of your learning plan please complete the following:

Do you feel your programme of learning been of benefit   ☐ Yes ☐ No

If, no please state why _____

_____

If, yes please state why_____

_____

In what way has the programme affected your attitude towards the school?

_____

_____

Has your life-path changed since completing your programme, and if yes, in what way?

_____

_____

Additional information:

_____

_____

_____

Mentors signature   _____   Date _____

Student signature   _____   Date _____

Appendix 14

Growing up is full of challenges, contradictions and pressures. It has always been this way, but these days, everything seems to be on a much larger scale. The entertainment industry fills our minds with who we should aspire to be and what we should be doing with our lives. Advertisers tell us what to wear, how to look, and what music to listen to. Positive, productive role models for our children are harder and harder to find.

Career choices are no longer simple. Traditional industries are disappearing, while new ones arrive demanding greater skills from employees. Immediate employment out of college is no longer a "done deal." The critical thinking skills necessary to making the best career choices are not always taught in school.

For the teen making the transition from adolescent to adult, it can be a confusing and frightening time. To give our youth the tools to make this transition easier, and set them on a path to a successful, purposeful life, The Pacific Institute introduces *PX2*™ - the next generation in teen success.

About the Program

Long considered world-class in the effectiveness of its programs and delivery, The Pacific Institute has created *PX2* to help young people recognize that they do have choices in life. By understanding how the human mind works, how their current beliefs and attitudes shape their expectations for the future, our youth learn that they are in control of the way they think, and can use that power to change the way they live their lives.

Studies have shown that with no goals of our own, we become susceptible to the loudest voice around us – whether it's good for us or not. *PX2* teaches the art and science of goal-setting, combined with a thorough understanding of just how we think, so that our youth come away with self-confidence, self-esteem and a strong ethical center. It is one thing to know "the right thing," it's quite another to have the confidence to act on it.

As parents, we are constantly on the look-out for negative influences in the lives of our children. Our challenge is to build strength of character, and strong self-belief, so that our youth can stand up against these influences and maintain confidence in their own decisions.

PX2 is a life-changing experience, not just for teens but for the entire family. Promoting positive communication among family members, it builds stronger relationships between parents and children, brothers and sisters, friends, teammates. *PX2* is a springboard to a successful future.

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Learning Units

Video, music, graphics – and more – are used to make the concepts easy to understand and fun to learn. Presenting the same concepts that have made *Investment in Excellence*® celebrated around the world, Lou Tice teaches the core curriculum in 12 short segments, while Antowaine Richardson acts as your "VJ" – your Video DJ.

Step 1   **My Mind Is Made Up**
There is more in the world than our human senses allow us to perceive. We build our own scotomas (blind spots), and we can break them to help us "see" what we've been missing.

Step 2   **Who Do I Listen To?**
When we lock on to one point of view, we miss other alternatives, and may buy into someone else's version of "the truth."

Step 3   **How My Mind Works**
The conscious, subconscious and creative subconscious all work together to keep us acting like we "know" ourselves to be. Understanding this process is the first step toward being able to change our expectations for the future.

Step 4   **Opening Up the Powerhouse**
We act like we know ourselves to be. By opening up our awareness, we find what we need to create the future we want.

Step 5   **Changing My Attitudes and Beliefs**
Are you leaning toward or away from your future? Avoidance is a sure sign that an attitude is getting in your way.

Step 6   **How My Beliefs Are Formed**
Thoughts accumulate to become beliefs, and our "self-talk" is a powerful tool when used to raise our own self-image to that next level.

Step 7   **I'm Worth It**
It is important to think well of ourselves, because we draw to ourselves what we feel worthy of receiving – including a purposeful future.

Step 8   **Stretching My Comfort Zones**
We naturally seek the familiar, but this instinct can be holding us back from an exciting and fulfilling future.

Step 9   **Moving Up and Out**
Goals keep us moving forward, and without them we keep repeating yesterday, last month or last year.

Step 10   **Ready to Create My Future**
Affirmations are the key to change – change that happens quickly and without stress. Send yourself out of order, and you will automatically seek order.

Step 11   **Taking Charge of My Life**
Imagination and forethought are unique to humans. We use them to their greatest advantage as we visualize our goals into achievement.

Step 12   **Motivating Myself**
There are no "have-to's" – put your life on a "want-to" basis and you'll find yourself taking on more and giving yourself the freedom to be accountable for your decisions.

While Lou Tice teaches concepts by illustrating with stories, singer/songwriter Antowaine Richardson illustrates with music. Accompanying this DVD program is a specially prepared CD, with original music that carries home the "4-1-1" to success.