Stepping Out of the Shadows: 

Exploring How Middle Class and Working Class Parents Choose a Secondary School for their Children

– A Study in the Irish Market


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Submitted to the Department of Education and Professional Studies, University of Limerick, April 2011, in fulfilment of the requirements for the Degree of Masters of Arts (Education).
Declaration

I declare that this thesis has been prepared in compliance with the University of Limerick’s regulations for the Degree of Masters of Arts (Education).
Abstract

This research has examined how middle class parents have mobilised themselves as active consumers in the educational marketplace, where it appears that educational markets work to the advantage of middle class parents and to the disadvantage of working class parents, notably in the area of school choice. The research design utilised qualitative research methods and was closely related to the interpretivist research philosophy. By conducting eighteen in-depth interviews with parents of children entering or having recently entered first year in secondary school in Limerick city (Ireland), complete with its unique Common Application Process, this research hopes to allow the seldom heard voice of parents, tell their own narratives of the school choice process in Limerick city.

This research makes some interesting findings that may not have been dealt with in the literature on educational inequality previously, namely that (i) working class parents in this research do care about their children’s education, contrary to what the educational markets believe; (ii) there appears to be a dearth of knowledge, in an Irish context, into parental choice of secondary school, something this research may begin to fill, as the voice of those affected by educational inequality is not listened to often enough; (iii) the plight of the most vulnerable of parents – the ‘rookie’ working class parent, the first time parent entering this educational marketplace as a novice – needs to be (a) heard and (b) supported; (iv) perhaps it is time for a transparent and equitable enrolment of students from all social classes into secondary schools to replace evident selection policies that are operated in some schools.

The author recommends that the role of emotional care needs to hold a higher place of prominence in the dialogue on educational inequality; that schools, in conjunction with the various educational agencies, should actively seek to encourage interaction with parents as a means of reducing parental anxiety; that schools should move towards a more cost conscious approach to the issues of uniform, books and ancillary extras to ease the significant costs associated with entering first year in secondary school, especially for working class parents; that the practice of streaming in schools be ended; that a clearer picture of how crucial a role cultural capital plays in educational disadvantage in Irish society is needed; that it is imperative that the issue of educational inequality is a prominent feature in all teacher-training programmes, as well as being a part of in-service for existing teachers through their careers; that schools on their own cannot reduce inequality and its links to poverty, what is required is a national collaborative alliance of all the key stakeholders to reduce educational inequality.
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To my mother, Clare, for her support over the years.
Table of Contents

Declaration i
Abstract ii
Acknowledgments iii
Table of Contents iv
Dedication xi

Chapter One Introduction
1.1 Introduction 1
1.2 The origins of the pro-market tradition 2
1.3 Parental choice and the education marketplace 2
1.4 Inequality 3
1.5 The Irish situation and inequality 4
1.6 Legitimacy of the present study 5

Chapter Two Global Politics of Education: Markets, Choice and Inequality
2.1 Introduction 9
2.2 Prelude to markets 10
2.3 The emergence of an educational marketplace 12
2.3.1 Neoliberalism 12
2.3.2 Neoconservatism 15
2.3.3 Thatcher’s Conservative Party in power 15
2.3.4 The Picot Report in New Zealand in 1988 18
2.3.5 The New Right in Bush’s and Obama’s USA 19
2.3.6 Blair’s New Labour and the educational

iv
buds of Cameron and Clegg’s Conservative/Lib Dem coalition

2.4 Inequality – ‘The other side’ of choice

2.5 Conclusion

Chapter Three Education Policy: Parental Choice and Inequality

3.1 Introduction

3.2 Parentocracy

3.3 Emerging inequalities

3.4 Parental hierarchy in choosing a school

3.5 The re-socialisation of working-class parents

3.6 Social inclusion

3.7 Similarities in Canada

3.8 Silver bullet or sticking plaster

3.9 Conclusion

Chapter Four Home and School Processes and Educational Disadvantaging

4.1 Introduction

4.2 Varying views on educational disadvantage

4.3 Home processes and educational inequality

4.3.1 Language deficit

4.3.2 The impact of poverty

4.3.3 Home processes and educational attainment

4.4 School processes and educational inequality

4.4.1 Bourdieu: cultural capital and social class

4.4.2 School processes and educational attainment – streaming

4.4.3 Multiple intelligences

4.4.4 Resistance cultures
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter Five</th>
<th>Markets, Accountability and Equality in Irish Educational Policy</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>5.1</td>
<td>Introduction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.2</td>
<td>The 1922 and 1937 Constitutions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.3</td>
<td>Conflict between Church and State</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.4</td>
<td>Markets, choice and emerging inequality in Irish educational policy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.4.1</td>
<td>School inspection reports</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.4.2</td>
<td>Feeder school lists</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.4.3</td>
<td>Legislation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.4.4</td>
<td>Segregation in the school system</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.4.5</td>
<td>External market influence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.5</td>
<td>Inequality</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.5.1</td>
<td>The cost of ‘free education’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.5.2</td>
<td>Exacerbating educational inequality</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.5.3</td>
<td>Drop out rates</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.5.4</td>
<td>Bizarre priorities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.5.5</td>
<td>No light on the horizon</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.6</td>
<td>Educational disadvantage</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.6.1</td>
<td>Educational interventions aimed at tackling educational disadvantage</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.7</td>
<td>Some recent literature on markets and choice in Ireland</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.8</td>
<td>Limerick city’s unique school application process</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.9</td>
<td>Conclusion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter Six</td>
<td>Research Methodology</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-------------</td>
<td>----------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.1</td>
<td>Introduction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.2</td>
<td>The research process</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.2.1</td>
<td>Stage one: defining the project’s purpose</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.2.2</td>
<td>Stage two: determine the research design</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.2.3</td>
<td>Stage three: design the data collection method and conduct the research</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.2.4</td>
<td>Stage four: ethical considerations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.2.5</td>
<td>Stage five: select respondents and collect data</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.2.6</td>
<td>Stage six: analyse and interpret the data</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.2.7</td>
<td>Stage seven: prepare the research report</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.3</td>
<td>Conclusion</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter Seven</th>
<th>Context of the Research</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>7.1</td>
<td>Introduction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.2</td>
<td>Limerick Area Post-Primary Schools Common Application Process</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.3</td>
<td>Changes in the educational and economic landscape</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.4</td>
<td>Conclusion</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter Eight</th>
<th>Getting In – The Emotional Rollercoaster of the School Choice Process</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>8.1</td>
<td>Introduction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.2</td>
<td>Uncertainty and stress</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.3</td>
<td>Information gathering process</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.3.1</td>
<td>Open night</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.3.2</td>
<td>Other sources</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.3.3</td>
<td>Teachers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Section</td>
<td>Title</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---------</td>
<td>--------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.3.4</td>
<td>Peers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.4</td>
<td>Location, location, location</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.5</td>
<td>Principal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.6</td>
<td>Using connections</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.7</td>
<td>Getting notification</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.8</td>
<td>Second guessing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.9</td>
<td>Conclusion</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Chapter Nine  Getting on – Coping with the Snowballing Costs of ‘Free Education’

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>9.1</td>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>157</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9.2</td>
<td>Books</td>
<td>158</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9.3</td>
<td>Uniforms</td>
<td>163</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9.4</td>
<td>A new dimension of educational inequality</td>
<td>166</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9.5</td>
<td>Extra-curricular</td>
<td>168</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9.6</td>
<td>Parental supports</td>
<td>171</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9.7</td>
<td>Parents giving up work</td>
<td>172</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9.8</td>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td>175</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Chapter Ten  Getting Through – Possessing the Cultural Capital Road Map

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>10.1</td>
<td>Prologue</td>
<td>177</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10.2</td>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>178</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10.3</td>
<td>Knowing about choices</td>
<td>179</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10.3.1</td>
<td>Knowing about subjects</td>
<td>180</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10.3.2</td>
<td>Knowing about subject level – higher</td>
<td>182</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10.3.3</td>
<td>Knowing how to interact with the school</td>
<td>186</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10.4</td>
<td>Expectations and aspirations of parents</td>
<td>188</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Chapter Eleven  Conclusions and Recommendations

11.1 Introduction  198

11.2 School choice is an emotional rollercoaster for parents regardless of social class  201

11.2.1 Recommendations  202

11.3 Parental hierarchy reinforces inequality in the school choice process  202

11.3.1 Recommendations  204

11.4 How free is ‘free education’?  205

11.4.1 The bottleneck cost of books – middle class and working class perspectives  205

11.4.2 The bottleneck cost of uniforms – middle class and working class perspectives  206

11.4.3 Cost of extra-curricular trips – differing experiences  207

11.4.4 No respite – annual cycle of expense  207

11.4.5 Second chances more open to the middle class parents  207

11.4.6 Greater middle class material capital reaps benefits in the home  207

11.4.7 Location as an influencing factor  208

11.4.8 A new dimension of educational inequality  208

11.4.9 Recommendations  209

11.5 The crucial second part of the advantage formula – cultural capital  210

11.5.1 Middle class parents more strategic
11.5.2 Differing parental responses to the open night
11.5.3 Knowledge leads to assured middle class performances
11.5.4 Interacting with the school principal – differing approaches
11.5.5 Child matching
11.5.6 Veteran lessons yet to be learnt by rookie
11.5.7 Various forms of reassurance
11.5.8 Subtleties within the active middle class consumers
11.5.9 Some positives for the working class parents
11.5.10 Recommendations
11.6 Further research
11.7 Conclusion:
A time of change and a time for change

Bibliography

Appendices

Appendix 1 Limerick Area Post-Primary Schools Common Application Form 2011-2012
Appendix 2 Interview Guide
Dedication

I dedicate this work to my wife, Sinéad, for her consistent support, patience and understanding.
Chapter 1
Introduction

1.1 Introduction

During the 1980’s an economic and cultural renewal took place, which reorganised education in much of the western world. This was influenced by the New Right (Levitas, 1986) or Neo-Conservative (Aronowitz and Giroux, 1986) ideology. This ideology influenced the governments of the UK, the US, New Zealand and in sections of Australia and Canada. (Halsey et al 2003) The educational policies of these anglophile countries have undergone a radical shift whereby the more traditional social goals of education have been replaced by a new philosophy; that of the pro-market tradition. This marketisation of education is characterized by a focus on quality, competition, consumer choice and accountability (Ball 2003, Apple 2001, Ball et al 1997, Gewirtz et al 1995). This marketisation of education lead to educational inequality, where middle class parents used their greater cultural, material and social capital to gain an advantage over working class parents in the area of school choice (BBC 2010a, Apple 2009, Derman-Sparks and Fite 2007, Reay 2006, Bosetti 2004, Toynbee 2002 cited in Olssen et al 2004, Ball et al 1997), which Hirsch (1995 cited in Gordon & Whitty: 1997) referred to as “the other side of choice”. Both the home environment and the school environment influence educational attainment (Lynch and Lodge 2002, Smyth 1999, Kellaghan et al 1993, Drudy and Lynch 1993, Rogers 1986, Bloom 1981, Bernstein 1975). This research has examined how middle class parents have mobilised themselves as active consumers in the educational marketplace, where it appears that educational markets work to the advantage of middle class parents and to the disadvantage of working class parents. By conducting eighteen in-depth interviews with parents of children entering or having recently entered first year in secondary school in Limerick city, complete with its unique Common Application Process, this research hopes to allow the seldom heard voice of parents (Spring 2007), tell their own narratives of the school choice process in Limerick city. This research makes some interesting findings that may not have been dealt with in the literature on educational inequality previously, namely that (i) working class parents in this research do care about their children’s education, contrary to what the educational markets believe (Gewirtz 2001; Reay 2006); (ii)
there appears to be a dearth of knowledge, in an Irish context, into parental choice of secondary school, something this research may begin to fill, as the voice of those affected by educational inequality is not listened to often enough (Spring 2007); (iii) the plight of the most vulnerable of parents – the ‘rookie’ working class parent, the first time parent entering this educational marketplace as a novice – needs to be (a) heard and (b) supported; (iv) perhaps it is time for a transparent and equitable enrolment of students from all social classes into secondary schools to replace evident selection policies that are operated in some schools (Downes 2004).

1.2 The origins of the pro-market tradition

By the mid-1980’s the Conservative government of Margaret Thatcher had been returned to power, the teachers’ industrial action campaign had ended in demoralising defeat and the Labour Party’s educational policy echoed strongly the Conservative viewpoint. The 1988 UK Education Reform Act emerged with a barely audible dissenting voice. With the establishment of the Education Reform Act, Ball argues, the education market began. The liberal 1960’s ideology of equal opportunities and egalitarianism in education policy was replaced by a policy, which focussed more on quality and standards, a policy that came to encapsulate New Right thinking on educational policy. The introduction of market competition into all educational sectors was the basis of New Right education policy (Ball 2003, Apple 2001, Ball et al 1997, Gewirtz et al 1995). In the words of Ball (1990):

“Schools are to become businesses, run and managed like businesses with a primary focus on the profit and loss account. The parent is now the customer, the pupils in effect the product. Those schools which produce shoddy goods, it is believed will lose custom.”(Ball 1990: 11)

1.3 Parental choice in the educational marketplace

In 1975 The Thatcher led Conservative Party adopted Hayek’s free market philosophy, giving rise to two distinct policies – neoliberalism and neoconservatism. Neoliberalism is concerned with choice, competition and the market in education (Apple 2001), while neoconservatism looks for strong state controls and longs for a return to ideals of the past, with the school central to the adoption of this policy. The neoliberal and neoconservative viewpoints have a somewhat symbiotic relationship
with one another and are stronger allied together (Apple 2009; Lawton 1992). As part of the New Right agenda choice became popular with parents allowed to make real choices about their children’s education (Olssen et al: 2004). The introduction of competition at a local/regional level among schools is believed to be beneficial as it raises standards so that only the best schools survive. Devolving control to local/regional educational institutions allows schools to set their own goals, use initiative and autonomy of teachers, and creates a team spirit which sets a positive ethos for the school (Halsey et al, 2003). The New Right agenda spread through New Zealand in the late 1980s and in the US with the 2001 No Child Left Behind Act (Apple 2001, 2009). When Blair’s New Labour came to power in 1997 with their ‘Education, Education, Education’ priority, they sought to trace a path between a free market ideology and a social democratic ideology (Whitty: 2002).

1.4 Inequality

However, within this neoliberal education marketplace inequality emerged, with middle class parents using their greater cultural and material capital to outmanoeuvre working class parents, leading to a polarisation between the classes where a child’s ability to thrive in school becomes proportionate to their parents’ ability to operate in this marketplace (Apple 2009 and 2001, Ball 2003, Ball et al 1997, Brown 1997, Gewirtz et al 1995). Botstein (1998 cited in Brown 1997) uses the term ‘social Darwinism’ to describe this inequality. The market is seen as a middle class arena, parental choice favours the middle class, and schools operate in the shadow of the middle class parents (Gewirtz et al 1995). Middle class parents view this investment in the educational marketplace as a long term investment that will reap a dividend at a later stage and are seen as the most capable of parents operating in this marketplace as they are able to decode school organisations effectively, while the parents that do not operate as proficiently are working class parents (Ball et al 1997, Gewirtz et al. 1995). The home environment plays a key role in a child’s educational attainment (Flynn 2007, Bloom 1981). Schools tend to use the style of language that is also used in middle class homes (Bernstein 1975). Poverty plays a determinate role in educational attainment, with many working class families hamstrung from reaping any potential rewards from education by financial constraints (Drudy and Lynch 1993, O’Neill 1992, O’Brien 1987). Schools also play an influential role in determining educational
attainment, not least the negative impact streaming can have on students, with significantly higher levels of students in lower stream classes dropping out of school compared to their counterparts in higher streams (Byrne and Smyth 2010, Lynch and Lodge 2002, Smyth 1999, Drudy and Lynch 1993). Teachers can also be significantly influential as a consequence of their preconceived notions of a student’s ability (Rogers 1986).

The educational marketplace has led to the emergence of two conflicting views; the ideal citizen, neo conservative, as against the less than ideal citizen who is left alienated from this approach. This view is highlighted in the following quote (Ball 1990):

“...neo-conservatism is the loyal, law-abiding family man, holder of and believer in traditional values and sober virtues. Over and against this ideal citizen/parent is set an alternative subject: the carrier of alien values or alien culture, the agitator/trade unionist, the sexual deviant, or working, single-parent mother, permissive/liberal, and progressive teacher – in other words 'the enemy within’, the traitor.” (Ball, 1990: 40)

1.5 The Irish situation and inequality

The concept of parental choice has been enshrined in the Irish constitution, Bunreacht na hÉireann, since 1937, with the shadow of the Catholic Church dominant (Coolahan 1981). The Catholic Church’s influence on Irish education can be seen in the conflict over the mooted merger of UCD and TCD in the late 1960s (Whyte 1971) and the sacking in 1982 of Eileen Flynn who was having an affair with a married man and expecting his child (Farrell 2010). However the influence of the Catholic Church in Irish education has become significantly weakened since the start of the twenty first century, as a consequence of the Catholic Church’s handling of the various sexual abuse scandals, with a 2010 survey claiming a majority of Irish people wanted a change in the Catholic Church’s patronage of Irish schools (Collins 2010a).

Nonetheless the New Right policies, which had largely been avoided in Ireland, emerged with the 2005 Department of Education and Science’s ‘Customer Service Charter’ which used terms such as ‘clients’ and ‘customers’ (Tormey 2007). In January 2006 the demand for information and accountability in aiding parental school choice saw inspection reports published on the Department of Education and
Science’s website and national daily newspapers publishing ‘feeder lists’ – crude school league tables based on the number of students sent onto third level education (Flynn 2010, 2009, 2005 a-g and 2005 i-l). Interestingly these ‘feeder lists’ revealed segregation within the educational marketplace with some secondary schools using restrictive enrolment policies (Tormey 2007, Flynn 2005h). In 2010 the significant financial impact on parents was revealed by Barnardos who put the cost of equipping a child starting first year in secondary school at €815 on average, a cost that many working class families would struggle to meet (Barnardos 2010). Secondary school students in Ireland from professional families scored significantly higher Leaving Certificate scores than students from working class families (Flynn 2009e). A number of programmes have been introduced to combat educational inequality including the designation of schools as being in areas of disadvantage (DAS) scheme, the Home School Community Liaison (HSCL) scheme, the Early Start initiative, the School Completion, the Teacher/Counsellor Project, Breaking the Cycle, the Giving Children an Even Break, the Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS) (Tormey 2007). With poverty levels expected to rise in the immediate future, concerns must remain for the most vulnerable families who face the very real risk of consistent poverty or social exclusion” (Smyth 2010a).

1.6 Legitimacy of the present study

Despite the view that the marketisation of education promotes equality, competition, consumer choice and accountability, it has been found to exacerbate inequality in education where the middle class by virtue of greater material and cultural capital derive greater advantage than their working class counterparts (Gewirtz et al 1995). Gewirtz et al (1995) have contributed to deepening our understanding of parental choice of school within the British social and political context. There is a lack of empirical research in an Irish context. This research moves towards bridging this gap.

Examining the literature on markets, choice and inequality in education, this research has found the following points. As the neoliberal New Right agenda dominates educational discourse across many anglophile countries so too does its belief that parental choice, accountability and testing are key parts of educational landscape. However this has resulted in educational inequality with middle class parents better
able to navigate their way through this educational milieu to gain an advantage over working class parents who struggle in this New Right marketplace, with many schools using socially selective enrolment policies (BBC 2010a; Apple 2009, 2001; Olssen et al 2004; Lynch and Lodge 2002; Fiske & Ladd 2000; Chomsky 1999; Hirsch 1995 cited in Gordon & Whitty 1997; Lawton 1992). Parentocracy has replaced meritocracy and within this process of parental choice there is a parental hierarchy that reveals middle class parents, as a result of their greater social, material and cultural capital, dominate the educational marketplace (Bosetti 2004; Vincent 2001; Brown 1997; Ball et al 1995; Gewirtz et al 1995). The impact of poverty sees many lone working class mothers unable to fully prioritise education and in order to seek a solution to the evident educational inequality a genuine engagement with the realities of many working class parents is required (O’Brien and Flynn 2007; Gewirtz 2001). The ‘deficit’ ‘difference’ theories were two perspectives that have dominated the debate about educational disadvantage (Drudy and Lynch 1993). However the ‘deficit’ model of disadvantage is now seen as out of date and inadequate (EDC 2005). The language used in schools replicates the language used in the dominant middle class homes, and this cultural capital can then be reinvested to give a distinct advantage to middle class children – while literacy levels in working class homes are significantly behind their middle class, which in turn can limit the range of choices in life (Healy 2010b; Morgan and Kett 2003 cited in Flynn 2007; Bernstein 1975; Bourdieu 1973). This inequality in the educational marketplace disadvantages students who do not have dominant cultural capital (Winkle-Wagner 2010; Obidah and Marsh 2006; Ross 2000). Teacher-expectancy and streaming can have significantly negative impact on the educational attainment of students, with anti-school sentiment developing among students affected by this (Byrne and Smyth 2010; O’Brien and Flynn 2007; Lynch and Lodge 2002; Smyth 1997; Bilton et al 1996; Drudy and Lynch 1993; Roger 1986). Parental choice has been enshrined in the 1937 Irish constitution, which drew strongly from the Catholic Church’s social teaching, but there have been times during which the Church and the Irish state have been in conflict (Farrell 2010; Farry 1996; Keogh 1988; Chubb 1978; Whyte 1971). The most significant of which, as a consequence of the reaction Murphy report in 2010, has led to the Education (Amendment) Bill 2010 was published whereby the VECs were to be involved in the “development of a new model of patronage for primary schools” (Education [Amendment] Bill 2010: 8; Collins 2010b). The Catholic Church’s
chairman of the bishop’s education pointed out that “the central issue at stake surely is parental choice. It is not whether the church or the State should have control of primary schools” (O’Reilly 2010). The use of terms such as ‘clients’ and ‘customers’ showed the language of the New Right being used by the Department of Education in Ireland (DES 2004). Further evidence of choice and accountability could be seen in the publication of school inspection reports online, the annual production in the media of crude league tables of feeder schools compiled by examination of third level intake data, from which emerged data suggesting very evident segregation in operation in Ireland (Flynn 2009a, 2009b, 2009c, 2005a, 2005h, 2005k; Kennedy 2005b). The cost of Ireland so called ‘free’ education system continues to polarise the classes, with a child’s future educational attainment evidently linked to the occupation of their parents (Barnardos 2010; Byrne and Smyth 2010; Cullen 2010; Walshe 2010a; Flynn 2009e). Any reduction of the gap in educational attainment between the classes is only temporary because the middle class parents will seek other avenues to keep their children in a position of advantage (Layte and Whelan 2002 cited in Tormey 2007). Various, somewhat contradictory, schemes have been put in place to address educational inequality but they have achieved limited success (Tormey 2007). Since 2005 parents of children wishing to attend a secondary school in Limerick city have had to operate within the nationally unique Limerick Area Post-Primary Schools Common Application Process (see Appendix 1 page 243), as a result of large numbers of students who were left without a place in secondary school (RTE 2005, Downes 2004, Dáil Éireann 1993).

Nonetheless gaps appear to remain in the literature - why is there an apparent dearth of knowledge, in an Irish context, into parental choice of secondary school? What is Ireland’s relationship with the New Right educational marketplace in the anglophile world? Why are some schools, including those in Ireland, allowed to be socially selective? Who is the most vulnerable parent amongst the least dominant working class parents? What happens to the low income parents who are least able to engage with this school choice process? Can teacher-training programmes play a role in reducing the impact of teacher-expectancy? How do middle class and working class parents respond to streaming in their children’s’ schools? Why has there not been greater account taken of the emotional impact of school choice and the value that a mother’s love has in the educational market? Why, despite their evident Christian
ethos, some schools in Ireland and Limerick practice socially selective enrolment? Is it now time to operate transparent and equal enrolment practices where students from all social classes are placed in secondary schools? Is it now also time to hear the voice of those affected by educational inequality? Has the plight of the most vulnerable of parents – the ‘rookie’ working class parents, the first time parents entering this educational marketplace as novices – been heard? This research hopes to address some of these gaps as it explores the process of how middle class and working class parents choose a secondary school in Limerick city for their children.
Chapter 2
Global Politics of Education: Markets, Choice and Inequality

2.1 Introduction

This chapter will trace the emergence of the educational marketplace with neoliberal and neoconservative policies to the fore in the UK, US and New Zealand and the resulting inequality that parental choice brings with it.

During the last century education moved from the shadows of the political landscape toward centre stage. Often political parties did not have a single clear educational policy. Consensus planning was the dominant ideology (Lawton 1992). That was up until the late 1960s when a new approach was beginning to emerge: neoliberalism, based on the laissez-faire, free market ideology of Friedrich Hayek. This added to a desire to encapsulate a return to traditional values as put forward by another ideology: neoconservatism. Combined they made up the New Right agenda, as most clearly illustrated in the UK by Margaret Thatcher’s Conservative Party Government 1979-1990 and perhaps most clearly represented by Kenneth Baker’s Education Reform Act 1988, which included an emphasis on markets and parental choice.

The New Right agenda emerged in New Zealand through the Picot Report 1987 and later the 1991 Education Amendment Act. Through then President George W. Bush’s 2001 No Child Left Behind Act, the USA has become influenced by the New Right school of thought and the ‘conservative modernization’ process (Apple: 2001: 9). In 2009 President Barack Obama unveiled ‘Race to the Top’ where grants are given to states whose schools meet the standard laid down under the plan (Knoller 2010).

In 1997 Tony Blair’s New Labour swept to power in the UK, mainly as a reaction to the previous twenty years of Conservative Party rule. New Labour strived to trace a path between a free market ideology and a social democratic ideology (Whitty: 2002). In 2010 in the UK the Conservative – Liberal Democrats coalition stated that they wished to promote reform of schools, allowing parents a greater say in their child’s education, whereby new state funded ‘free schools’ could be established and further
funding could be received, a ‘pupil premium’, whereby, for each pupil from a disadvantaged background a school admits, the school get additional funds from the state (Woods 2010).

One of the cornerstones of educational politics is parental choice. However this has been shown to lead to inequalities within society, whereby the classes become polarised and children’s ability to succeed is deeply dependent on their parents’ ability to operate effectively in this educational marketplace (Apple 2001; Gewirtz et al 1995).

2.2 Prelude to markets

During the last century ‘progressive education’ sought to make schools an agent by which a more equal and democratic society could be promoted (University of Vermont 2010). Two key ideals were stressed; respect for diversity and the development of critical, socially engaged intelligence. In progressive education these two ideas are called ‘child-centred’ and ‘social reconstructionist’. Neither idea took root in American educational philosophy where the dutiful citizen was revered above the critical citizen. Dewey, amongst others, felt the onus was on education to counteract the decline of local community life where young people had lost the art of democratic participation, setting up his Laboratory School at the University of Chicago and publishing books such as ‘The School and Society’ and ‘Democracy and Education’. In 1919 he set up the Progressive Education Association. Dewey opposed the concept of segregated education where the few received academic education, whereas the masses received vocational training. In the 1920s when intelligence testing and cost-benefit management dominated the educational landscape, proponents of progressive education stressed the importance of the emotional, creative and artistic aspects of education. What might be regarded as the heyday of progressive education followed the Great Depression with students of Dewey teaching the concepts of progressive education to thousands of teachers. In time it was reported that students from progressive schools were competent, adaptable learners who could succeed in the top universities. Then the 1950s arrived with its narrower view and cultural conservatism, renouncing progressive education causing its demise. However by the end of the last century many educators returned to the Dewey’s concept of progressive education to address the changing student profiles and the changing needs
of classrooms. In the twenty first century educators are re-examining Dewey and progressive education with a view to seeing what lessons can be learnt for a postmodern age, what balm Dewey can offer in an era when neoliberal educational policies dominate (University of Vermont 2010).

In 1944 Rab Butler’s Education Act came into being in the UK. It established a nationwide system of free, compulsory schooling from age 5 to 15. One of the main provisions of the Act was to replace the Board of Education with the Ministry of Education. Previously there had not existed a government department dedicated to education. For almost forty years after this Act the Conservative Party had no real educational policy (Knight: 1990). They were not alone in this educational policy vacuum. The Labour Party won the 1945 election and had to implement the 1944 Education Act. They had little in the way of an educational policy and merely strove to placate any potential Tory objections to their implementation of the Act. Consensus planning was the approach taken with regard to education (Lawton 1992).

The dominant view on educational reform after the Second World War focussed on the notion of equality and meritocracy (Brown 1990 cited in Tormey 2007). In the UK the post-war period saw a move away from the tripartite system towards the comprehensive model of secondary education. The hope was that this new system would raise standards, narrow the gap between the classes in education, remove the social and cultural barriers between the social classes. While the comprehensive period did rise, in terms of examination success, but in their attempt to narrow the gap with grammar schools many comprehensive schools began to concentrate on the ‘brightest’ students via streaming and banding. The 1998 Education Reform Act allowed a return to selective systems whereby schools in affluent areas, funded in part by parents, and could select the pupils they would take (Bilton et al 1996). In the US segregation ended with the Brown v. The Board of Education of Topeka (1954) Supreme Court ruling, while in 1950s New Zealand school zoning was brought in to promote educational equality (Olssen et al 2004 cited in Tormey 2007). However by the late 1960s the seeds of change were beginning to emerge. The violent student demonstrations seen in Paris, the USA and in English universities in 1968 aided the swing to the right within the Conservative Party (Lawton 1992).
2.3 The emergence of an educational marketplace

In 1969 Tony Dyson and Brian Cox published an article, which criticised the excesses of progressive education and the introduction by the Labour Party of comprehensive schools, a Black Paper in contrast to the Government's White Papers. The progressive style of education was being used in the primary schools, as it was seen as trigger for student unrest in universities and other unrest (Cox and Dyson: 1969). Labour Party views, as a consequence, came under scrutiny through the publicity generated by the Black Papers. In 1970, the Conservative Party won the General Election of that year and Margaret Thatcher was appointed Secretary of State for Education and Science. Two ideas emerged; traditional standards and parental choice and these ideas were highlighted on the Conservative Party manifesto in 1974 (Lawton: 1992). In 1975 by Margaret Thatcher, now leader of the Conservative Party, and Sir Keith Joseph set up the Centre for Policy Studies, a think-tank designed to champion the free market. Joseph was a believer in Friedrich Hayek’s school of thought – the free market. Two distinct policies began to emerge, that of neoliberalism and neoconservativism.

2.3.1 Neoliberalism

Neoliberalism is concerned with choice, competition and the market in education (Apple 2001). Neoliberalism originates in the opinions of Adam Smith an eighteenth century classical economist. Hayek, the Austrian economist and author of ‘The Road to Serfdom’ (1944 cited in Lawton 1992), is seen as the modern exponent of the free market. As Lawton explains,

“...the economic relationship between individuals is the dominant social relationship: social theory should be based on this ‘fact’ not on the desire to do good, to be generous or to put right any injustices.” (Lawton: 1992: 4)

Hayek belief revolved around the notion that the free market was a superior system than individual freedom; that economic freedom gave rise to social freedom; that a benevolent ‘hidden hand’ guided the market for the common good; that some people benefit form the market while others are disadvantaged but that is merely bad luck as opposed to anything unjust; that it is not unjust to steal from someone, they are just losers in this game of chance – it is however wrong to steal from them if they are poor or ill; that individuals will be financially rewarded on a par to what they put into the
free market; that state involvement is needed to ‘referee’ this economic game, i.e. a police force (Lawton 1992).

Robert McChesney, in his introduction to Noam Chomsky’s ‘Profit Over People – neoliberalism and global order, defines neoliberalism as

“the defining political economic paradigm of our time.” (Chomsky 1999: 7)

McChesney continues

Neoliberal initiatives are characterised as free market policies that encourage private enterprise and consumer choice, reward personal responsibility and entrepreneurial initiative, and undermine the dead hand of incompetent, bureaucratic and parasitic government, that can never do good even if well intended, which it rarely is. (Chomsky 1999:11 cited in Apple 2001: 17)

It is this notion of consumer choice and the rewarding of those consumers that choose well, that has become a dominant force of educational policy in the western world for the past three decades, since Thatcher in the UK and Regan in the USA were in power. McChesney (Chomsky 1999 cited in Apple 2001) sounds a word of caution with regard to this neoliberal paradigm,

“To be effective, democracy requires that people feel a connection to their fellow citizens, and that this connection manifests itself through a variety of nonmarket organisations and institutions. A vibrant political culture needs community groups, libraries, public schools, neighbourhood organisations, cooperatives, public meeting places, voluntary associations and trade unions to provide ways for citizens to meet, communicate, and interact with their fellow citizens. Neoliberal democracy, with its notion of the market ubert alles, takes dead aim at this sector. Instead of communities, it produces shopping malls. The net result is an atomized society of disengaged individuals who feel demoralized and socially powerless.” (Chomsky 1999:11 cited in Apple 2001: 17)

McChesney warns that this neoliberal theory will result in polarisation within society, a polarisation that is all too evident in education, in essence that this neoliberal policy stifles democracy. Apple (2009) stated that even Adam Smith acknowledged that there would be five hundred poor people for every one rich person, an alarmingly unequal condition. Apple (2001) warns that corporations focus on profit and this takes precedence over the lives and aspirations of a corporation’s employees. He then asks the pertinent question – why let a profit hungry, undemocratic model become a model for the education of our children? Apple also warns that
“Looking at education as part of a mechanism of market exchange makes crucial aspects literally invisible, thereby preventing critique before it even begins.” (Apple 2001: 19)

Writing about the traits of neoliberalism within educational policy Olssen et al (2004) state that the neoliberal view on education includes the fact that although it is a provided publicly it is privately accessed and distributed, operates as a quasi-market in that consumers (i.e. parents) can choose the type of education they want, education is seen as a commodity which can be traded within this marketplace for financial gain or for status, but perhaps what stands out is the fact for this researcher is that the state can have no influence over what kind of education is best for an individual citizen – that the neoliberal educational policy promotes the freedom of choice in schooling. However a concern needs to be raised around the equity of this arrangement as not all consumers, i.e. parents, are operating on an equal footing in this marketplace, some consumers are better equipped to succeed in this neoliberal educational marketplace than others. The market may dictate a policy of choice that seems equitable but during the course of this research it will become evident that some parents advantaged by this neoliberal marketplace, while conversely other parents are in a disadvantaged by the same marketplace.

In his 1976 publication, ‘Stranded in the Middle Ground’, Joseph spoke of the market as being far superior to planned approach of government. He went on:

“The market system is the greatest generator of national wealth known to mankind: coordinating and fulfilling the diverse needs of countless individuals in a way no human mind or minds could ever comprehend, without coercion, without direction, without bureaucratic interference.” (Joseph 1976 cited in Olssen et al 2004)

The disciples of Hayek’s free market ideology were beginning to make their voices heard within the Conservative Party, including education policy. One of the earliest decrees from Joseph’s Centre for Policy Studies was with regard to vouchers as a means of achieving freedom and choice in education. This represented the market ideas in education.
2.3.2 Neoconservativism

Neoconservativism believes in strong state control, desire a return to the romanticised ideals of the past where a Westernised Christian tradition dominates. Schools are seen as a conduit for this viewpoint. This manifests itself in schooling via a national curriculum, which is taught and tested. The argument is that in order to test students, the exact same neoconservative curriculum, with its emphasis on traditional values and traditional subjects, has to be taught. The neoliberal and neoconservative viewpoints have a somewhat symbiotic relationship with one another and are stronger allied together (Apple 2009; Lawton 1992). This begs another question – what if a family’s belief is different to that extolled by the neoconservatives. Are they excluded or required to adopt this other culture?

Andrew Gamble (1988) highlights possible conflicts between neoliberalism and neoconservativism. He talks of ‘the free economy and the strong state’. Thatcher was aware of these possible conflicts and strove to roll back government involvement when she came to power, but she also did not weaken its role.

2.3.3 Thatcher’s Conservative Party in power

Fortune seemed to smile on the Conservative Party through 1974 and 1975 with the William Tyndale Affair and through 1976 with, the then Labour Party Prime Minister, Jim Callaghan’s speech on education – The Ruskin Speech. As a consequence of the William Tyndale Affair a number of crucial questions arose around the control of the school curriculum, the LEA, the accountability of teachers and assessment of effectiveness in education. Callaghan’s Ruskin Speech, outlining his concern at events unfolding in education – standards, the curriculum and teaching quality, ironically, closely mirrored Joseph’s Centre for Policy Studies educational review taking place at the time. Following the Conservative Party’s election victory of 1979, Margaret Thatcher now became Prime Minister. She strove to move the Conservatives away from consensus politics which had not succeeded for the previous prime ministers; Wilson, Heath and Callaghan. (Lawton: 1992)

Denis Healy, described as the Labour Party’s best Prime Minister they never had, shed some light on Thatcherism in his autobiography ‘The Time of My Life’. Healy states that Thatcher merely articulated the feeling the public on both sides of the
Atlantic were having. Across the developed world was a reaction to the permissive attitude of the 1960s. He continues;

“Ordinary people longed for a return to order, to the family values which used to provide a moral framework for individual behaviour. They were not prepared to believe patriotism was evil, that all authority was bad, that every leader was bound to betray his cause, that pursuit of excellence was what the New Left regarded as the worst of all possible vices –’elitism’. Ronald Regan represented this backlash in the US, as did Margaret Thatcher did in Britain; in this sense their victories were a triumph for traditional bourgeois values.” (Healey: 1989)

Through the 1980 Education Act, the Conservative Party gave more power to parents by entering into a partnership with parents whereby they would be represented on governing bodies. Parents could choose where they wanted to send their children as well as appeal if they did not get the school of their choice (Lawton: 1992).

In 1984 the Conservative Party changed their focus from vouchers and teacher training to the role of employers in determining what should be on the curriculum. The disastrous teachers’ pay dispute of 1985, which eroded any hope of public support, allowed the Tories tough policy on education to continue whereby schools, teachers and teacher training was criticised. The government had taken the high moral ground and much of the public agreed with the Conservative Party (Lawton: 1992).

Unlike the Butler Education Act 1944, which evolved from consensus, Kenneth Baker’s Education Reform Act 1988 was both ideological and political. Baker strove to encourage more parental choice while at the same time acknowledging the strong state.

Ranson (1990) details three related and consequential steps that gave rise to the Education Reform Act starting in 1969 and concluding in 1988. The first step took place between 1967 and 1977 when Dyson and Cox’s Black Papers criticised the quality of the education system and called for greater parental input. The second step began in 1974 with the growth of the concept of a ‘parent’s charter’, included the 1980 Education Act that demanded greater parental involvement in school life though better representation on school boards and governing bodies as well as crucially promoting greater choice of school. The final step was from 1984 to the Education
Reform Act (1998), which prescribed even greater powers for parents. It was felt that educational policy was being driven by producers (teachers) rather than consumers (parents & pupils). In order to redress this, greater power would be given to parents through the concept of choice. This move echoes Hayek’s belief that the free market gives rise to social freedom and choice, that the free market and its ‘hidden hand’ benevolently aids the common good. A national curriculum was also established. This idea of choice was one of the main driving forces behind the Education Reform Act 1988, but there existed another. Accountability was the other, the need for value for money from the education system.

Kenneth Baker saw the National Curriculum both as a method of central control and accountability as well as providing choice for parents to make informed decisions. This information would come from ‘league tables’ of schools formulated from an analysis of National Curriculum assessment. These tables would rank schools from high achieving to low achieving (failing) schools, which would close in time. This system would allow parents see where the schools of their choice are ranked.

Milton Friedman and later Rose Friedman developed a model that gave individuals freedom and also improved educational systems via a school voucher system. By giving parents vouchers to aid their children to purchase educational services at public or private schools, parents could choose which school they preferred, on the basis of quality. Choice would also improve the efficiency and effectiveness with which the producers, i.e. the educators and the state would meet the needs of the consumers, i.e. parents and students. Schools that meet the demands of their consumers will prosper whereas those that do not will go out of business and close (Olssen et al: 2004).

Choice policies became extremely popular in the western world because they are seen as removing bureaucratic constraints on personal freedom, which in turn allows people to make real choices about their children’s education. Thus choice is seen as a key strength of the neoliberal policies (Olssen et al: 2004). However there exists subtleties within this choice system that lead to inequality;

“The rhetoric of ‘choice’ is given as the justification for government withdrawal from public provision of services and encouraging private provision. However... such a policy has merely created and entrenched an educational divide for our least
2.3.4 The Picot Report in New Zealand in 1988

In New Zealand the neoliberal agenda blossomed after the election of the fourth Labour government in the ‘snap’ election of July 1984. The major neoliberal policy response stemmed from the report of the Taskforce to Review Education Administration (the Picot Report) and the subsequent government white paper, ‘Tomorrow’s Schools’, which adopted almost in their entirety the recommendations of the taskforce. The recommendations included reducing the size of the central bureaucracy, abolishing regional education boards and converting each learning institution into a self-managing unit having its own elected board of trustees. Control though remained resolutely anchored within central state agencies, including the Ministry of Education, the Education Review Office and the Qualifications Authority (Olssen et al: 2004).

The focus on school choice in the New Zealand reforms conflicted with the 1950s zoning policies, aimed at promoting equality of educational opportunity. The zoning policy continued after the 1989 reforms. However by 1990 the more right wing National government were in power and they introduced the 1991 Education Amendment Act which abolished school zoning regulations thus allowing students compete for students. With increased competition, some schools attracted more socially advantaged students (Olssen et al: 2004).

However empirical evidence began to emerge that there was clear proof of increased inequality between schools. In particular there was one striking piece of empirical work carried out by Edward B. Fiske and Helen F. Ladd in 1998. Fiske and Ladd spent five months in New Zealand conducting a thorough analysis of the New Zealand educational reforms. They discovered, upon investigation of enrolments and census data, increased ethnic and socio-economic polarization as a direct consequence of the 1991 school choice policies addressed above (Fiske & Ladd: 2000, Olssen et al: 2004).
2.3.5 The New Right in Bush’s and Obama’s USA

In 2001 the Bush administration introduced the “No Child Left Behind” (NCLB) Act, a reform that the Department of Education claimed “contained the most sweeping changes to the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, since it was enacted in 1965” (Apple: 2001). The act contains the then President’s four basic education reform principles:

1. Stronger accountability for results
2. Increased flexibility and local control
3. Expanded options for parents
4. An emphasis on teaching methods that have been proven to work

(U.S. Department of Education 2001)

The language of accountability and parental choice place this ideology within the New Right philosophy and is akin to the Education Reform Act 1988 in England and the Picot Report 1988 in New Zealand. Apple highlights a coalition of rightist groups, which he terms the “conservative modernizers”. Apple explains that this coalition of convenience is made up of four key groups, groups that do not automatically compliment one another but together form a potentially powerful alliance. Along with the neoliberals allied to the neoconservatives, described above, Apple (2001 & 2009) includes two other groups, the authoritarian populists and the new middle class, to make up the powerfully influential group – conservative modernisers (Apple 2009).

The authoritarian populists, the fastest growing group, want a return to the focus of their God in all schools; they are religious fundamentalists and conservative evangelicals. The new middle class belong to the managerial and professional ranks and their focus is on evidence, accountability and testing. They possess cultural capital through qualifications as well as economic capital (Apple 2009). Apple stated that this group, the ‘conservative modernisers’, wish to have everything around education measured in fact he explained their stance as follows, ‘if it moves measure it, if it doesn’t move measure it in case it does move’ (Apple 2009). Interestingly Albert Einstein once stated that ‘what counts can’t always be counted and what can be counted doesn’t always count’ (Kiberd 2010).
This statement is perhaps worth bearing in mind as the race towards accountability and testing seems to dominate various educational beliefs. Similarly, Hess (2009), while discussing potential solutions to the current global economic crisis, as well as the belief that it might now be time to view members of society as citizens and not consumers, stated that the market paradigm can be liable to overlook the reality that many things in society

“...are not marketable and that have no price. For example, education is a sphere that can’t be conceived of merely in terms of instrumental cost-benefit calculations.” (Hess 2009: 13)

Some similarities exist with the New Right in England and also in New Zealand, e.g. marketisation of education through voucher plans, the desire to return to traditional values and a national curriculum. However unlike the situation in both England and New Zealand there is a strong Christian Right focus as can be seen by the role-played by the Authoritarian Populists in this coalition, who want God back in the classroom (Apple: 2001).

The NCLB Act appears to sate the appetite of each of the four main groups responsible for conservative modernisation. The Act satisfies the professional middle class by focussing on stronger accountability for results. The authoritarian populists get increased flexibility and local control allowing God to be put back in the classroom. The neoconservatives are pleased to see the emphasis returning to teaching methods that have been proven to work. The neoliberals’ focus is drawn to the commitment to markets and to freedom as individual choice (Apple: 2001).

In February 2009 President Barack Obama signed into law the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009 (ARRA) with the stated aim of stimulating the economy, supporting job creation, and investing in critical sectors, including education (U.S. Department of Education 2009). As part of the ARRA, Obama unveiled the Race To The Top, which he called "the single most ambitious, meaningful education effort we've attempted in this country in generations" where federal grants are awarded to states whose educational systems meet the program's criteria (Knoller 2010). The $4.35 billion Race To The Top focuses on the following four core educational reform areas:
• setting rigorous learning standards in schools
• attracting and keeping top teachers
• testing students to evaluate school and teacher performance
• taking innovative steps fix problem [low achieving] schools (Knoller 2010)

It seems accountability and testing remains on the educational horizon.

2.3.6 Blair’s New Labour and the educational buds of Cameron & Clegg’s Conservative/Lib Dem Coalition

By the mid-1990s there was a swing away from New Right governments and ideology and a swing toward centre left parties. The theories of neoliberalism were spent in the mind of much of the public. In the United Kingdom, Tony Blair’s New Labour came to power after the 1997 General Election. Blair and New Labour declared their policy priorities were ‘education, education, education’. In power, New Labour’s key slogan was ‘High quality education for the many rather than excellence for the few’. The ‘Assisted Places Scheme’, from the Thatcher’s 1980 Education Act, ended. There was to be a focus on partnerships between the partners in education (Whitty: 2002).

While Tony Blair’s New Labour still concerned itself with choice in education, they wished to provide a progressive alternative to the New Right policies of the preceding two decades. They strove to do this via their policy agenda of ‘The Third Way’. Blair explains this in his The Third Way: New Politics for the New Century:

“The Third Way...draws vitality from uniting two great streams of centre-of-left thought – democratic socialism and liberalism – whose divorce this century did so much to weaken progressive politics across the West.” (Blair: 1998: 1)

Blair identified four component parts of this new policy, with “each taking progressive politics beyond old dividing lines of left and right” (Blair: 1998: 18). He focused on (i) the economy, (ii) civil society, (iii) public services and (iv) foreign policy. Looking at public services he was of the belief that there should be investment to ensure quality of opportunity as well as

“...restructuring to provide more individually tailored services built around the needs of the modern consumer, and to secure the public goods that markets, if left to themselves, could not provide.” (Blair: 1998: 18)
But this approach was not without its critics. Clyde Chitty commented in *The Guardian* (13 October 1998)

“*New Labour is clearly basing its education policy on the principles of competition, choice and diversity - the popular themes of all Conservative White Papers.*”

Alex Callinicos criticised the ‘Third Way’ as a vague mix of irreconcilable values that attempts to steer a middle way between a free market and a traditional welfare state (Callinicos: 2001). Olssen et al (2004) view on the ‘Third Way’ also found the doctrine to be incoherent as an alternative to neoliberalism.

In May 2010 David Cameron and Nick Clegg spoke in the Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition deal about reform of schools in the UK whereby “new providers can enter the state school system in response to parental demand and that all schools have greater freedom over curriculum, and that all schools are held properly accountable” (The Guardian 2010). Michael Gove, the secretary of state for education wants to make it easier for parents to set up state-funded “free schools”. And he would direct extra government money, a “pupil premium”, towards educating children from disadvantaged backgrounds (Woods 2010). The thinking behind the proposal, created to narrow the educational attainment gap between poorer children and better off children, would see schools accept students in receipt of free school meals placed ahead of students who live locally (BBC 2010b).

2.4 *Inequality – ‘the other side’ of choice*

The educational marketplace, described above in this chapter, promotes the idea of choice – most notably parental choice in education. However over the past three decades or so the market era has exacerbated educational inequalities via this paradigm.

A report authored by Anne Penney for children’s charity in the UK, Barnardos, claims that schools which “control their admissions are more likely to be selective” (BBC 2010a). Barnardos believe their ideas of ‘fair-banding’, where schools are compelled to take an equitable range of abilities so as to help less well off students succeed. The complex admission system means that many working class parents struggle to negotiate their way through this system, which results in fewer students from working class families accessing
education in ‘top’ school. The flip side of this situation is that middle class parents are much more able to negotiate and ‘play’ the admissions system than their working class counterparts. The report finds that working class parents are less likely to engage in the educational marketplace, as is their right, and choose to send their children to their local school instead, thereby often perpetuating educational disadvantage through the generations. Interestingly the report also adds that there are clear indications that schools, including faith schools, who control their own admissions are more “socially selective” than those school which do not (BBC 2010a). The author of the report, Anne Pinney, expressed her concern over potential moves to “extend school freedom”, including allowing schools control over their admission policies. While the director of Civitas, David Green, felt this type of “social engineering” has its genesis in an “animosity to middle class parents”, recommending instead that schools be free “to choose their own curriculum to target remedial measures” (BBC 2010a).

Nonetheless, Sue Berelowitz, deputy children's commissioner for England, felt a more equitable situation was needed:

"As Barnardo's point out, the top secondary schools on average only take 5% of pupils entitled to free school meals, so a level playing field is needed. All the available evidence shows that in order to narrow the achievement gap children from disadvantaged backgrounds should have equal access to the best schools." (BBC 2010a)

Lynch and Lodge (2002) argue that some “schools position themselves to attract the most educationally attractive students through a host of mechanisms that are clearly biased” (Lynch and Lodge 2002: 62). These biased practices include expensive uniforms, voluntary contributions, favouritism towards the children of past pupils as well as those children who attend certain primary schools with specific catchment areas (Lynch and Lodge 2002).

Polly Toynbee’s article in The Guardian newspaper, ‘Lessons in class warfare’, illustrated the inequality that was evident within the school choice process, as New Labour’s education policy allowed parents to:

“...quickly decode the true meaning of ‘difference’, ‘aptitude’ and ‘choice’. Give them any hint that one school is better than others, and they will queue to get in. The middle
class navigates choice much better than the rest, and it is the rational and right thing to do – once one school is officially tagged as better, the other schools will get worse. Where middle-class children congregate, any 'chosen' school quickly becomes a self-fulfilling success” (Toynbee 2002 cited in Olssen et al 2004)

The “self-fulfilling success” that Toynbee refers to has a strong echo in Hirsch’s 1995 paper, ‘The other school choice: how oversubscribed schools select their students’, presented at a public lecture at the London Institute of Education, where he coined the phrase ‘the other side’ of choice (Hirsch 1995 cited in Gordon & Whitty: 1997). This ‘other side’ of choice can lead to inequality and a scenario where one group is advantaged, i.e. the middle class parents and another group are consequentially disadvantaged.

Looking at disadvantage, Derman-Sparks and Fite (2007), wrote that

“The meaning of advantage is the ghost that lurks within the meaning of disadvantage” (Derman-Sparks and Fite 2007: 48)

They stressed that understanding the relationship between disadvantage and advantage is crucial in examining disadvantage. They state that disadvantage follows on as a consequence of advantage that those in a position of disadvantage have to ‘feed’ on the leftover scraps from the table of those advantaged in society. They wish to re-examine the order in which the invite of the table is issued and argue that once those in a position of advantage are identified then those in a position of disadvantage can also be identified (Derman-Sparks and Fite 2007).

Ryan, in his work Blaming the Victim (Ryan 1976 cited in Derman-Sparks and Fite 2007), warns that ‘victim blaming’, whereby inequality is justified by ‘blaming’ defects in those people, the victims, who experience hardship, is a convenient belief that justifies a “perverse form of social action” created to change the victim rather than society as a whole.

Downes and Gilligan (2007) argue that the impact of poverty will dilute a child’s chances of educational equality with their more advantaged neighbour. Barnardos 2008 research Tomorrow’s Child (cited in O’Brien 2008) states that tomorrow’s child will leave school early without qualifications and with poor literacy if they are living
at high risk of poverty. Spring feels that the prevailing view when dealing with educational inequality is that of those “deemed to educated” (2007: 6), when in actual fact those that are most affected by educational inequality are rarely listened to – this research hope to provide some of these voices.

2.5 Conclusion

This chapter has found that with the growth of neoliberal and neoconservative philosophies in many anglophile countries that it was perhaps inevitable the educational marketplace would replace the previously more egalitarian progressive educational system (Apple 2009, 2001; Chomsky 1999; Lawton 1992). In the UK Thatcher’s Conservative Party came to power and introduced the 1988 Education Act which gave greater power to parents through the concept of choice. The desire for greater accountability was addressed by the introduction of a National Curriculum which fed league tables, allowing parents get more information to make their choice. This new educational marketplace was predicated on the belief that schools that met the demands of its consumers (parents and pupils) would prosper while those schools who did not meet those standards would go out of business and close (Olssen et al: 2004). Blair’s 1997 New Labour government in the UK tried to find a ‘third way’ between a free market and a traditional welfare state (Blair 1998) but the focus remained on choice and competition (Olssen et al. 2004). The 2010 Conservative – Liberal Democrat coalition government in the UK also continue to promote choice and accountability. Similarly in the US, the No Child Left Behind Act 2001 was based on similar principles of the marketplace where choice and accountability were to the fore, as were the developments in New Zealand as a consequence of the Picot Report in 1988 (Olssen et al 2004; Apple 2001). Obama’s 2009 Race to the Top has kept accountability and testing on the educational horizon in the US (Knoller 2010). However there is ‘the other side’ of choice which often leads to inequality and a situation where one group is advantaged with another group consequentially disadvantaged (Hirsch 1995 cited in Gordon & Whitty: 1997). In New Zealand increased socio-economic polarisation occurred as a direct result of the 1991 school choice policies (Fiske & Ladd: 2000, Olssen et al: 2004). The complex admissions system in place in the UK sees many working class parents struggle to navigate their way through the system whereas middle class parents are much more able to navigate
their way through the system and thereby gain an advantage over working class parents (BBC 2010a; Toynbee 2002 cited in Olssen et al 2004). Many schools in the UK are “socially selective” by controlling their admissions policy (BBC 2010a; Lynch and Lodge 2002). In order to address educational disadvantage it is imperative to examine the relationship between disadvantage and advantage (Derman-Sparks and Fite 2007). Nonetheless questions remain after this chapter. Why is there an apparent dearth of knowledge, in an Irish context, into parental choice of secondary school? What is Ireland’s relationship with the New Right educational marketplace in the anglophile world? Why are some schools, including those in Ireland, allowed to be socially selective?

It is evident that with the politicising of education the concept of education changed. The introduction of the free market and also parental choice redefined the educational horizon. The issue of choice brought with it inequality and polarisation of the classes. It is this inequality that the next chapter will look at in more detail.
Chapter 3

Education Policy: Parental Choice and Inequality

3.1 Introduction

Social class has always had a profound impact on the provision of education policy (Apple 2009; Bosetti 2004; Reay 2006). Working-class families have often fared poorly when compared to their middle-class counter-parts in relation to educational opportunity. With the advent of market forces within the education spectrum the slogan of parental choice loomed large. The system of ‘meritocracy’ was replaced by a system of parentocracy (Brown 1997). Based on their greater cultural and material capital the choices open to middle-class families are often superior to those of the working-class. Through their engagement with the process of parental choice, allied to their aforementioned cultural and material capital, the middle classes gained the advantage (Ball et al 1997; Ball 2003). Although measures have been taken to remedy this inequality of educational opportunity, the real long-term solution to ending this educational disadvantage appears to be linked to wider economic policies. However with the influence of the middle-class voters weighing heavily on the mind of successive governments this change may be some way off yet. Nonetheless if one group of parents are in a position of advantage, the middle class parents, then consequentially, another group of parents, the working class parents, must be in a position of disadvantage in this educational marketplace. Boldt et al (1998) define educational disadvantage on two levels, those still inside the formal education system and those who have left it, as

- “In relation to a student in the formal education system, educational disadvantage may be considered to be a limited ability to derive an equitable benefit from schooling compared to one’s peers by age as a result of school demands, approaches, assessments and expectations which do not correspond to the student’s knowledge, skills, attitudes and behaviours into which (s)he been socialised (as opposed to those to which (s)he is naturally endowed)” (Boldt et al.1998: 10).

- “In relation to people who have left formal schooling, educational disadvantage may be considered to be the condition of possessing minimal or no formal educational qualifications and/or being inadequately trained or without knowledge, skills, attitudes and behaviours associated with the demands of available employment, so that one’s likelihood of securing stable employment is disproportionately limited as compared to one’s peers by age” (Boldt et al.1998: 10).
The 1998 Education Act (1998: 32: 9) refers to educational disadvantage as “the impediments to education arising from social or economic disadvantage which prevent pupils from deriving appropriate benefit from education in schools.” Some of the principal symptoms of educational disadvantage include early school leaving, absenteeism, poor academic performance and behavioural difficulties (Ireland 2006).

3.2 Parentocracy

Philip Brown (1997) argues that there is a ‘third wave’ in relation to education policy where ‘meritocracy’ is being replaced by ‘parentocracy’, with the emergence of the New Right. Brown explains ‘where a child’s education is increasingly dependent upon the wealth and wishes of parents, rather than the ability and efforts of pupils’ (Brown 1997: 393). Brown (1997) believed that the existing ‘third wave’ policies would increase educational inequalities. Borrowing Toffler’s metaphor of the ‘wave’, from The Third Wave (1981), Brown (1997) explains, that the ‘first wave’ focussed on the development of elementary state schooling for the working-class, so as to equip them with enough basic knowledge and information necessary for them to carry out their predetermined roles. The ‘second wave’ shifted focus from ascription to age, aptitude and ability. It was a meritocratic system that ultimately did not promise or deliver equality of opportunity. The ‘third wave’ placed at it heart, parental choice (parentocracy), standards in education as well as the free market. Brown (1997) also highlights the introduction of “social selection by stealth” (Brown 1997: 400) through operation of the market systems.

In the 1970s the desire to maintain equality within the educational process was hindered by a number of factors. There was high unemployment and the economy was waning. Furthermore, James O’Callaghan’s Labour government viewed comprehensive education as a liability and added to that was the failure of the working-class to ‘embrace the comprehensive school as the road to their liberation’ (Brown 1997: 401). The popular press also attacked the concept of comprehensive education and when the disastrous teachers’ industrial action campaign of the mid-1980s also dominated the headlines, the middle-class parents began to send their children to private schools in response to the crisis in the public schools. As Brown (1997) points out, the working-class children did not have that choice.
The New Right education policies included choice for parents and improved standards. Parents who could afford to buy a competitive advantage for their children did so. Now that parents were being encouraged to choose, the responsibility for their child’s education rested squarely with them – if a school was deemed ‘poor’ then the parents should have selected a more suitable school for their child (Brown 1997). Ironically, the twentieth century began with a move away from ascription as the determinate in educational progress towards a meritocratic process based on ability and efforts. The close of the twentieth century brought a return to the ‘heredity curse’ with organisation along social lines (Brown 1997: 404).

Brown (1997) quotes Botstein (1988) as he presents the notion of ‘social Darwinism’ relating to educational ability. Botstein wrote:

“In the view of the Regan Administration, the universal acceptance of proper standards, in the name of objective merit, must result inevitably in creating a sanctioned but unequal system of educational achievement. In this view, since the crux of equality lies in educational opportunities and not results, and since school is a limited instrument, the educationally disenfranchised have no one but themselves to blame. This becomes just another hard fact of life...More money and programs will not solve the problem. Therefore, the social fact that the poor and non-white populations do not achieve well enough by measurable standards in sufficient numbers cannot be held against the government” (Botstein 1988; 5).

During their thirteen years in power from 1997 to 2010, New Labour increased the education budget by seventy five per cent. However despite this spend many hundreds of thousands of students left school without getting five GCSE grades, which can be viewed as a minimum result (Hennessy 2009). Indeed as Hennessy (2009) states

“Poverty explains some of the issues, but not all. [In 2008] just 79 boys of the 75,000 pupils who received free meals got three A levels – the passport to a place in the best university courses. Just under half of all white British boys who qualified for free meals reached the minimum standard in English and maths, compared with a 71.8 per cent average for those from better-off backgrounds” (Hennessy 2009: 13).

3.3 Emerging inequalities

Sharon Gewirtz et al (1995) reveal four main findings from their study looking at the areas of markets in education to choice and the impact on equity within the educational system:

1. The market is a middle-class mode of social engagement.
2. Parental choice of school is class- and ‘race’-informed.
3. Schools are increasingly oriented towards meeting the perceived demands of middle-class parents.
4. The cumulative impact of the findings 1-3 is the 'decomprehensivization' of secondary schooling.

(Gewirtz et al 1995: 181)

The decomprehensivization of education results in ‘working-class children being ‘ghetto-ized’ in underresourced and understaffed low-status schools’ (Gewirtz et al 1995: 188). Their study has found that with the market system of education allied to a decomprehensivization of secondary schools that resources are being removed from the students with the ‘greatest needs to those with the least need. Thus we are seeing a growing inequality of access to the quality of provision necessary for children to succeed educationally’ (Gewirtz et al 1995: 189).

Gewirtz et al (1995) make a number of salient points on their findings. The class nature of the market and the distinct advantages it gives the middle classes are ‘likely to be replicated whatever the particular market form adopted.’ Middle-class parents will always harvest their greater cultural and material capital to ‘exploit the market to their children’s advantage’. The perverse nature of the market system is highlighted ‘in that, children are rewarded largely in proportion to the skill and interest of their parents’ (Gewirtz et al 1995: 189). The study continues:

“That schools are increasingly oriented towards meeting the perceived demands of middle-class parents, however, may well be a more specific product of the English market. It is the outcome of a market where funding takes minimal account of pupils’ needs, where there is a highly regulated curriculum and regime of testing which encourages segregation and provisional differentiation, where schools are made to feel they are going to be primarily judged on their raw examination scores, and where the devices of selection and exclusion are permitted as means of controlling pupil compositions” (Gewirtz et al 1995: 189).

In order to improve equity within the education market Gewirtz et al (1995) suggest that ‘adopting needs-led funding, more educationally useful performance indicators and assessment procedures, and completely removing from schools the right to control their own pupil compositions’ (Gewirtz et al 1995: 190) may limit the existing inequalities.
3.4 Parental hierarchy in choosing a school

With the advent of the 1988 Education Reform Act, competition has moved centre stage – competition between schools and indeed competition between parents. Stephen J. Ball et al (1997) found that when parents make choices, it is not always done on an equal footing; cultural and material differences come into play. Middle-class parents utilize their greater cultural and material capital more so than working-class parents, giving them a distinct advantage. Ball et al focussed on the ‘interplay between social class, cultural capital and choice within the differentiated circuits of schooling in this market system’ (Ball et al 1997: 409).

The research that Ball et al (1997) conducted via 70 in-depth, loosely-structured interviews with parents of Year 6 students also found a number of interesting differences in the mechanics of how middle-class parents and working-class parents choose a secondary school for their children. Working-class parents focussed on the immediate, short term goals of ease of transport to the school, family considerations and welfare issues whereas middle-class parents look more long-term and also include educational concerns (Ball et al: 1997). Middle-class parents were more adept at utilizing their cultural capital by knowing how ‘to approach [a school], mount a case, maintain pressure, make an impact, be remembered’ (Ball et al 1997: 417). Another example of the utilization of their cultural capital by the middle-class was where one mother who paid an educational consultant who then advised her on the type of school that suited her child (Ball et al: 1997). It was also found that ‘two distinct discourses are evident; a working-class discourse dominated by the practical and the immediate and a middle-class discourse dominated by the ideal and advantageous’ (Ball et al 1997: 419).


“The educational market thus becomes one of the most important loci of the class struggle...Strategies of reconversion are nothing but the sum of the actions and reactions by which each group tries to maintain or change its position in the social structure or, more precisely, to maintain its position by changing...the reproduction of the class structure
operates through a translation of the distribution of academic qualifications held by each class or section of a class…which can conserve the ordinal ranking of the different classes” (Bourdieu and Boltanski 1979: 220-1).

When the time comes to choose a school for their child, parents display differing approaches in the way they operate with regard to this school choice process. Ball et al (1997), writing about the differing parental approaches to choosing a school, found three types of ‘choosers’. The “privileged/skilled choosers”, are the parents who factor in their child’s personality and interests when choosing a school. Next are the “semi-skilled choosers” who are drawn to the reputation of the school and finally are the “disconnected choosers”, parents whose choice is strongly influenced by the location of the school relevant to the family home and wider community (Ball et al 1997: 425). Ball et al (1997) found that when these ‘choosers’ are examined under the lens of social class that the vast majority of ‘privileged/skilled choosers’ are middle class parents, whereas the ‘disconnected choosers’ are almost exclusively working class parents.

Similarly, Carol Vincent (2001) refers to a project entitled ‘Little Polities: Schooling, Governance and Parental Participation’ that she, Jane Martin, Stewart Ranson were involved in, at the University of Birmingham. The project set out to explore the formation and expression of parental voices in the school context (Vincent 2001: 348). Two schools involved were ‘Willow’ – multi-ethnic girls’ comprehensive in an inner-urban area of London and ‘Carson’ – a mixed, majority white (98%) comprehensive in a suburban location (Vincent 2001). The parents divided into three cohorts:

- **High** – attend meetings in addition to parents’ evenings & initiate contact with school on a wide range of issues
- **Intermediate** – usually attend parents’ evenings and have other meetings with the school not initiated by themselves, rarely attend other meetings
- **Low** – may attend parents’ evenings, minimal contact with the school, unless initiated by school

(Vincent 2001: 348-9)

Vincent (2001) highlights the emergence of the new middle classes. The traditional depiction of middle class parents was of those who had high levels of educational capital have been recruited via professional employment. Now that industrialised countries are increasingly becoming service-based economies in response to growing
consumer wealth and advances in new technology, those from traditional working-class backgrounds have been promoted up along the career ladder, into managerial positions in manufacturing, distribution and other service occupations associated with the new middle class (Vincent 2001).

Like many of the writers mentioned previously (Gewirtz 1995, Brown 1997, Ball et al 1997, Gewirtz 2001) Vincent (2001) concludes that “middle-class parents can call upon resources of social, cultural and economic capital in order to exercise their voice over education issues. Working-class parents, often lacking the sense of entitlement to act, and often the same degree of knowledge of the education system are more likely to be dependent upon professionals” (Vincent 2001: 360). It is clear that a parental hierarchy in relation to school choice exists, with the middle class parents in the position of most advantage and conversely working class parents in the position of least advantage.

3.5 The re-socialisation of working-class parents

Sharon Gewirtz (2001) addressed the ideas in the then UK Secretary of State for Education, David Blunkett speech to the Confederation of British Industry (CBI) in July 1999, which set out New Labour’s vision for a system of education in which there is ‘excellence for the many not just the few’. This was to be operationalised by a range of reforms aimed at improving educational engagement among the working-class areas including programmes such as. Sure Start and the New Deal for unemployed 18-24 year olds. The second part was the promotion of a ‘culture of achievement’ (Gewirtz: 2001). According to Gewirtz ‘what it amounts to is a massive investment in an ambitious programme of re-socialisation and re-education, which has as its ultimate aim the eradication of class differences by reconstructing and transforming working-class parents into middle-class ones’ (Gewirtz 2001: 366).

Gewirtz analysis of New Labour’s re-socialisation project, which was formulated under the shadow of the latest research, suggests that many middle-class families have four sets of attributes that contribute to superior performance of middle-class children in school:
1. They are active consumers in the education market place
2. They monitor and closely police what schools provide, intervening when necessary to rectify any shortcomings
3. They possess and transmit appropriate forms of cultural capital
4. Middle-class parents possess a good deal of social capital – i.e. the social contacts, networks and self-confidence that enable them to exploit the education system to their children’s best advantage.

(Gewirtz 2001: 367)

Echoing her earlier thoughts, Gewirtz recognizes that middle-class families are strongly inclined to choice. She argued that they are;

Able to ‘decode’ school systems and organisation, to discriminate between schools in terms of policies and practices, to engage with and question (and challenge if necessary) teachers and school managers, to critically evaluate teachers’ responses and to collect, scan and interpret various sources of information. In respect to all of this, they also maintain a degree of ‘healthy’ scepticism about the meaning and value of impressions and information (Gewirtz et al. 1995: 25).

New Labour wishes all parents to value choice and strive to develop the cultural skills necessary to utilize the system of choosing a school that best suits their child. The Department of Education and Employment’s (DfEE) website (www.parents.dfe.gov.uk) provides detailed advice on how to choose a school, echoes the ‘Parent’s Charter’ that the Conservative introduced. The information contained on the website regarding school performance and Ofsted reports will already be familiar to middle-class parents as they are ‘active consumers’ (Gewirtz 2001: 367). The real targets of this online resource are the working-class parents who are guided through the information and are tutored in what to expect from a school, as well as how to approach the management of the school (Gewirtz 2001).

Another step in the re-socialisation of working class parents is again operationalised via the DfEE’s website. The habitus of middle-class parents in the home education of their children is detailed on the website for working-class parents to follow. The website suggests parents take their children on visits to the local library, to museums, to read as much as possible with their children, do homework with their children and so on (Gewirtz 2001). There now exists support and advice for parents who are involved in the school choice process, websites such as www.adviceguide.org.uk which gives advice on the types of schools; www.gettherightschool.co.uk which gives advice on school catchments; www.direct.gov.uk which gives advice on choosing a school, as well as parental advocacy website such as www.attheschoolgates.co.uk and
www.school-appeal.org.uk. However given their ability as active consumers, it may well be that these sites are primarily accessed by well informed, advantaged middle class parents, which may in turn strengthen their position in the educational marketplace.

Finally, New Labour wanted the self-confidence that seems to permeate the middle classes and germinates the social networks they cultivate to be extended to the working classes. This confidence and social capital appears to be a recipe for middle-class success at school. New Labour argue that this social capital is lacking in working-class areas where the breakdown of ‘traditional family’ units are far more prevalent. Sure Start, New Labour’s policy designed to promote social capital in working-class areas, ‘aims to build for parents in areas designated as disadvantaged the kinds of intra-family and community social capital that middle-class parents are assumed to be able to exploit’ (Gewirtz: 2001, p371-2).

She lists her concerns at the process of re-socialisation of the working class. New Labour need to “dismantle the existing hierarchies in schooling and in employment provision” instead of introducing polices “that are keeping these hierarchical structures in place”; poverty, and the associated impact of poverty, prevent many working class parents from prioritising education; the middle class model of being an active consumer in the educational marketplace cannot always be as easily replicated by parents who have various conflicting demands on their time, most notably lone working class mothers - who often struggle to reconcile both engaging “in the middle-class model of being an active consumer of education” and bringing home a wage, where “any failure [to do this] could be deemed as evidence of inadequate parenting”; these generic policies do not show any genuine engagement “with the diverse perspectives of real working-class parents”, where other forms of social capital could be validated (Gewirtz 2001 372 -376). Gewirtz (2001) suggest three alternatives to the New Labour approach. First, evaluate the middle-class values that are stressed in New Labour policy and consider carefully which of the values should be exemplified and which should be challenged. Secondly, dismantle the “disparities of wealth and power and the hierarchies which structure schooling and employment” that are responsible for the unequal gap in the ability to succeed at school between middle-class and working-class children (Gewirtz 2001: 376). Finally, there is a need to
include the working-class voice, as well as the middle-class voice, in the development of curricula and decision-making structures (Gewirtz 2001). A failure by those in power to so will merely prolong this stubborn and complex issue of educational inequality, diluting many children’s potential to benefit equally from education.

3.6 Social inclusion

Geoff Whitty (2001) highlights the influence of class on entry into higher education and the labour market. Examining the Assisted Places Scheme, whereby academically able students from working-class backgrounds were given assistance in paying their fees to attend leading private schools, Whitty (2001) writes that a sample of students who attended private schools, either as a benefit of the Assisted Places Scheme or as feepayers, and students who attended state schools were followed through to their mid-twenties. It was found that attending a private school or state school gave only a slight advantage in terms of A-level scores “but this was translated into quite disproportionate benefits in terms of entry to different levels and sectors of higher education and the labour market” (Whitty 2001: 290: Power et al 1999).

Whitty (2001), like others mentioned above, feels that there is a need to address the unequal playing field in terms of opportunities open to the middle-classes children and to the working-class children. Whitty feels that this will require much stronger measures of positive discrimination than have been tried in this country hitherto. He feels that New Labour’s ‘Excellence in Cities’ programme, which aims to provide a boost to inner-city state schools, could result in more middle-class children staying in those schools and encouraging improved achievements amongst working-class students. The Sure Start programme is another approach that may yield dividends but the danger is it may whither because of a lack of adequate funding and resources. Whitty (2001) stresses that education policy initiatives aimed at improving equality of opportunity need be formulated with an eye towards the bigger picture: that of addressing wider economic inequalities.

3.7 Similarities in Canada

Lynn Bosetti (2004) conducted research on the mix of rationalities parents utilise when choosing schools for their children. 1,500 parents were surveyed; parents who
had students attending private, public and alternative elementary schools in Alberta, Canada. Bosetti (2004) found that working-class parents were underrepresented in the study, indicating that

“...choice schemes designed to provide the same educational opportunities to students from economically disadvantaged families that are normally available to families who can afford to rent or buy houses in neighbourhoods with more desirable schools is not working. It is the more educated parents from this group who are motivated and better equipped to exercise choice in selecting a school for their children” (Bosetti 2004: 402).

Bosetti (2004) writes that choice schemes need to target these working-class families and enable them to exercise choice; or ‘provide enriched curriculum in schools in these neighbourhoods to bring the quality of education to the level available in wealthier neighbourhoods’ (Bosetti 2004: 402).

3.8 Silver bullet or sticking plaster

Emma Smith (2005) discusses the response to the Bush Administration’s 2001 No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB). She acknowledges the importance of this legislation that is ‘seemingly equitable’ but has caused such ‘consternation in US education circles’ (Smith 2005: 507). The act strives to ensure the academic progress of all students. However, many commentators feel that ‘the high stakes testing and accountability-linked sanctions [Adequate Yearly Progress] that underpin the Act could result in many otherwise successful schools being labelled as failing (Smith 2005: 508).

By using the state of New Jersey as her research site, Smith (2005) reports the seemingly legitimate concerns of the many commentators:

“Although equitable in its intent, the failure of the Act to provide contextualized or value added analysis of assessment data means that many schools appear to be unfairly labelled as failing. Schools that are failing to demonstrate Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) are overwhelmingly those that are located in the poorer school districts and who serve disproportionately larger numbers of students who traditionally do less well in school, such as students from economically disadvantaged homes and who come from the African-American community.

On the other hand, schools located in the more wealthy school districts were more likely to serve larger communities of white students who were performing at higher levels on the state assessments. These schools were more likely to meet New Jersey’s accountability targets.
The use of a value added model to account for the failure of schools to make AYP revealed that around 50% of schools were incorrectly labelled as failing and, it could be argued, being unfairly subjected to the punitive sanctions that are administered to schools that fail to make AYP for two consecutive years.” (Smith 2005: 521-2)

While Obama’s 2009 Race To The Top and Cameron and Cleggs’ 2010 Pupil Premium may be new initiatives in education, the fact remains that educational inequality is a stubborn, complex problem and these new initiatives may not do enough to truly tackle the issue. Time will tell whether these initiatives will prove to be a silver bullet or a sticking plaster.

3.9 Conclusion

This chapter has told how parentocracy has replaced meritocracy in the New Right educational marketplace which allows “social selection by stealth” (Brown 1997: 400), whereby a type of ‘social Darwinism’ takes place (Botstein 1988 cited in Brown 1997). Markets in education favour middle class parents (Gewirtz et al 1995). A parental hierarchy emerged also with the advent of the educational marketplace with middle class parents better able to utilise their material, social and cultural capital allowing them to gain an advantage over working class parents (Bosetti 2004; Vincent 2001; Ball et al 1995). Poverty, and its associated impact, prevents many working class parents from prioritising education, with many lone working class mothers unable to replicate the middle class model of engaging with the educational marketplace as an active consumer. In order to address this educational inequality a genuine engagement with the realities of many working class parents is required (O’Brien and Flynn 2007; Gewirtz 2001). Whitty (2001) argues that stronger positive discrimination is key to addressing the unequal playing field between middle class and working class children, while also stating that wider economic inequalities need to be addressed. The 2001 No Child Left Behind Act in the US has seen schools labelled as failing when no account is taken of the location and student intake of these schools (Smith 2005). Perhaps answers still need to be found to these questions – with the clear parental hierarchy in operation with middle class parents dominant and the working class parents least dominant, who is the most vulnerable parent amongst the least dominant working class parents? What happens to the low income parents who are least able to engage with this school choice process?
While neoliberal educational policies dominate the educational landscape and with them the stated desire for parental choice of school, it is patently clear that after three decades of these policies educational inequality remains an elusive, unresolved and polarising issue. While advocates of the neoliberal educational marketplace state that choice is a good thing this chapter suggests that this is not the case. Parental choice instead perpetuates inequality in education; with those most able to choose being in a premier position, i.e. the middle class parents, and conversely someone else has to be in a weaker position, i.e. the working class parents. The fact remains that tackling educational inequality would require middle class parents to allow some of their advantage be diluted. However with the political mindset anchored on the next election and keeping the electorate happy, it would be difficult to imagine a government that would risk allowing the middle class parents lose any advantage in their child’s schooling.
Chapter 4
Home and School Processes and Educational Disadvantaging

4.1 Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to examine the role the home environment plays in educational attainment, as well as the role the school plays in educational attainment. It hopes to also examine how this influences how parents choose where to send their children to secondary school. Research suggests that the educational system is stacked in favour of the middle-class, to the detriment of the working-class. This chapter strives to shed some light on how these inequalities exist, by examining the various views on educational disadvantage, as well as looking at the impact of language usage, poverty and educational attainment has in the home life of students. Then the focus will move to the school processes and the impact of possessing the dominant cultural capital, streaming, the place of multiple intelligences in schools, teacher-expectancy, school organisation and resistant cultures existing in schools.

4.2 Varying views on educational disadvantage

Two distinct views have dominated educational disadvantage – ‘deficit’ and the ‘difference’ perspectives. The ‘deficit’ theory on educational disadvantage is based on the belief that there is a “presumed deficit in the family or community of the disadvantaged person”, that could be a culture of poverty, an urban ghetto neglect or abuse or a parent-child relationship that has a negative impact on the child’s educational attainment (Tormey 2007: 175); Gilligan (2002 cited in Downes and Downes 2007: 25) describes a ‘deficit’ model as the “lack in the individual experiencing disadvantage, their family and/or their community that has to be made up by ‘compensating’ for this deficit”. Drudy and Lynch (1993: 147) explain that the ‘deficit’ model “focuses on the ‘presumed deficiencies’ in the child’s cognitive, cultural and linguistic abilities and those of his or her family and community”. Whereas, according to Drudy and Lynch (1993: 147), the ‘difference’ model “focuses on the role of knowledge systems, school organisation and educational practices in the reproduction of inequality”. Bourdieu and Patterson (1977 cited by Tormey 2007) explain that the ‘difference’ theory sees cultural difference as the root cause of
educational disadvantage, with the cultural capital valued by the school evident. The majority of initiatives aimed at tackling educational disadvantage have operated in the distinct shadow of the deficit perspective (CSER 2005). The, now abolished, Educational Disadvantage Committee’s 2005 report, ‘Moving Beyond Educational Disadvantage’ found that “the deficit model of disadvantage…is now seen as outdated and inadequate” (EDC 2005: 19). Gilligan (2005 cited by the EDC 2005: 27) stressed the urgent need to “find a new language to describe the reality of those young people who are being failed by the present system”. The EDC (2005) report sought to promote a more “enlightened” approach.

“In the context of lifelong learning, solutions to educational disadvantage must begin at pre-birth stage and continue throughout the life cycle across early childhood, primary, second level, further, higher, adult and continuing education. Interventions must span the entire spectrum of formal, non-formal and informal learning from “cradle to grave.” (EDC 2005: 29 cited in CSER 2005: 33).

Zappone (2002 cited by Downes and Downes 2007: 26) feels that the education system should be an organic, responsive, living system that would generate a joint up approach across “all actors and agencies; not silences and seccreces nor protection of territories”. This approach may offer a better alternative to the outdated deficit model. Tormey (2007) also contends that the two dimensional deficit/difference model is quite limited in that it “tends to render problematic any attempt to make sense of the relationships between and within what are referred to as common positions” (2007: 175). O’Sullivan (1999 and 2005 cited in Tormey 2007: 175) presented a six part model on educational disadvantage that includes the view that because for some children their cultural environment is somehow lacking and that this “cultural deficit” is responsible for these children developing anti-school attitudes; the view that schooling has the handprint of the middle class culture and therefore working class children may find this “culturally irrelevant”; the view that “material condition” of a student’s community has an impact on the student’s schooling; the view that as a consequence of the “political economy” of Irish society some parents are in a position of advantage and from that there follows that some parents are in a position of disadvantage. In the 1990s measuring educational disadvantage was an important focus for governments, with two different models being used – the ‘outputs models’ and the ‘comparative model’. The outputs model – aligned with a conservative political stance – focused on minimum standards and those who fell below these were
deemed disadvantaged, while the comparative model – aligned with a liberal and egalitarian political stance – examined “systematic differences between social groups in participation or attainment” (Power and Tormey 2000 cited in Tormey 2007: 177).

4.3 Home processes and educational inequality

Flynn (2007: 91) states that “the ability of a child to benefit from the education system or on the contrary to be disadvantaged is set from moment of conception. The level of disadvantage experienced as a child moves through the educational system is strongly influenced by the socio-economic status and the health and welfare of the family unit.” In the 1950s there was a view that poor attainment was due to a culture of poverty and was realised by the short term thinking of many parents of children from poorer backgrounds where little or no value placed on education, as well as parents having low expectations for their children and a lack of role models for children to follow. In order to tackle this problem ‘compensatory’ models of education emerged which included special education withdrawal and targeted programmes. There was a belief that it was the parents and children’s own fault, a sense of blaming the victim, as Ryan (1976) titled his work (Derman-Sparks and Fite 2007: Tormey 2005a). Ryan (1976 cited in Derman-Sparks and Fite 2007: 49) claims it is “a brilliant ideology for justifying a perverse form of social action designed to change, not society, as one might expect, but rather society’s victim”.

4.3.1 Language deficit

A report by Dr Timothy Shanahan, professor of urban education at the University of Illinois, Chicago and director of the literary centre there, found that “children from low-income families are 1½ years behind their middle-class peers in language ability when they start school” (Healy 2010b). Shanahan also described how children learn language by being spoken to but a dichotomy arose in that parents under economic stress spoke to their children less and that the home environment can play a role as children can imitate what they see their parents do, like reading books, magazines, newspapers and using writing materials. He also found that many middle class parents worked with their children on the areas of reading and writing before the children started school, whereas “working class parents were afraid to begin this work”. He explained that middle class mothers were keen to “get ahead of the curve” but
working class parents are anxious that they’ll make things worse by trying to help their children (Healy 2010b). The type of language used in schools has an impact on a child’s education. Dr. Áine Cregan found that the formal language used in primary classrooms could have an impact on a child’s attainment, “children use different varieties of language, and when they come into the school context, there is one particular variety of language – a literate or academic style of language – which is expected in that context” (O’Brien, Ciara 2009). Cregan added that for some children “their experience of language in an out-of-school context is not this style of language to the same extent as other children’s are”, which may result in a mismatch that can be overcome by allowing children to access the formal style of language used in schools. The report also stressed that ‘difference’ did not necessarily mean ‘disadvantage’ (O’Brien, Ciara 2009).

These studies are following on the idea developed by Basil Bernstein. Bernstein (1975) examined the link between language, class and education and found that two different forms of language in use. He described the language that was used by both middle class and working class children as ‘restricted code’. Bernstein described the language used predominately by middle class children as ‘elaborate code’; this ‘elaborate code’ was the style of language used in schools. The ‘restricted code’ was characterised by the use of short, grammatically simple sentences, whereas the ‘elaborated code’ uses longer, grammatically complex sentences (Lund 2003, Burke and Porter 1987, Bisseret 1979, Stubbs 1976). Schools use the ‘elaborated code’ of language, with the middle class student more in tune with the ‘elaborated code’ that the teacher in the classroom uses. Bernstein (1970) felt that “if the culture of the teacher is to become part of the consciousness of the child, then the culture of the child must first be in the consciousness of the teacher (cited in Reay 2006: 303).

4.3.2 The impact of poverty

The National Anti-Poverty Strategy defines poverty as:

“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 regarded as acceptable by Irish society generally. As a result of inadequate income and resources, people may be excluded and marginalised from participating in activities which are considered the norm for other people in society” (The Combat Poverty Agency 2008: 7)
O’Neill (1992) and O’Brien (1987), in their separate studies, suggest that the main problem working-class people have with regard to education is that they cannot maximise the advantages that the system could offer because of financial constraints. They are competing on an unequal footing with the middle-class in relation to educational attainment. Both of these studies indicated that low income had a direct bearing on students’ inability to participate fully in education (cited in Drudy and Lynch 1993). Increased expenditure on education has not eliminated class inequalities in educational participation or achievement. In fact the main beneficiaries have been the middle-class. Substantial proportions of working-class are still underachieving:

“The findings of Irish studies on poverty and education suggest that while theories that emphasise cultural capital and inequalitarian practices in educational institutions have validity, income may have a stronger explanatory power than many studies have implied...If income and wealth differentials were eliminated, the problem of working-class ‘failure’ in education would be significantly reduced.” (Drudy and Lynch 1993: 163).

An ESRI report, *Monitoring Poverty Trends in Ireland 2004-2007*, published in September 2010 found that one in six households were in a poverty trap and that lone parents households were the most vulnerable households. Perhaps unsurprisingly the report also found that people at risk of poverty fell from nineteen per cent in 2004 to sixteen per cent in 2007 during the during the economic boom (Russell, Maitre and Nolan, 2010). Between 2004 and 2007 the numbers of children in lone parent families in consistent poverty increased from fifty three per cent to sixty three percent. A household was deemed at risk of poverty if it fell below an income threshold of sixty per cent of median income – this income was €202.49 a week in 2006. In 2004 twenty three per cent of children were deemed at risk but by 2007 this figure had fallen to twenty per cent. Increased welfare payments during these boom years but however in 2010 these same welfare payments are in danger of being cut significantly as a consequence of the current economic recession embracing Ireland. Unemployment figures have soared by over three hundred thousand to four hundred and fifty thousand since 2007 (Kerr and Cunningham 2010; Smyth 2010a). The report expresses grave concerns for future trends in poverty as the economic recession continues to bit in Ireland in 2010 and the most vulnerable groups will experience considerable hardship (Kerr and Cunningham 2010; Smyth 2010a). The educational impact on children from a lone parent household can be seen in a 2006 report,
Succeeding in Reading – the largest ever survey on reading in primary schools carried out in Ireland, which found that children living in lone parent households have, on average, a significantly lower reading test scores when compared to other types of family units. The report also found that thirty per cent of children from poorer backgrounds have serious reading difficulties (Flynn 2006). Morgan and Kett (2003) stated that there is a significant amount of evidence that “poor literacy skills restrict a range of life choices” (cited in Flynn 2007: 92). Ireland at the height of its economic boom was something of a polarised country, as the then economic boom had created one of the richest countries in Europe, while a 2006 EU Survey on Income and Living (EUSILC) found one in five people were at risk of poverty and seven per cent of the population went without adequate food, heating and clothing – a measurement of consistent poverty, with lone mothers being at significant risk of poverty (cited in Downes and Gilligan 2007). A Combat Poverty Agency report in 2006 found that “one in five children live in income poverty of five years or more” (cited in Downes and Gilligan 2007: xiv). A 2008 Central Statistics Office (CSO) Survey on Income and Living Conditions reported that the disposable income of the top ten per cent of households in Ireland was almost €130,000, whereas the disposable income for the bottom ten percent of households was €11,800, while households in the top ten to twenty per cent section had a disposable income of almost €80,000 (Browne 2010). It would appear that a polarised situation remains unabated. Downes and Gilligan (2007: xiv) warn that “the impact of poverty on children’s lives has multiple long-term consequences, not least of which is that deprivation that corrodes educational equality.” The Combat Poverty Agency stated that is not just limited to visible effects but can have equally serious long term effects such as poor health and general welfare. It also found poverty is a generational problem in that the child experiencing poverty today is likely to experience poverty as an older person; a child of unemployed parents are more likely to be unemployed themselves, leave school earlier and earn less throughout their life; children in lone parent households will experience significantly more time in poverty than their counterparts in two parents households (Combat Poverty Agency 2008).
4.3.3 *Home processes and educational attainment*

Various researchers have examined conditions that would be conducive to children doing well in school. It is argued that these conditions determined how well a child would do in school, more so than the socio-economic status of the parents (Kellaghan et al 1993). Bloom (1981) developed a five part comprehensive model that illustrated the necessary conditions in the home that would promote school learning. The conditions included (i) the “work habits of the family”, where there was a structured routine in the home and a preference for “educational activities over other activities”; (ii) “academic guidance and support” where appropriate guidance was accessible on school matters in addition to the availability and use of material for school learning; (iii) “stimulation to explore and discuss ideas and events” where family activities and interests stimulated thinking and imagination; (iv) “language environment” where modelling of language allowed for the correct use of language and (v) “academic application” where parental knowledge existed of the educational progress of the child, where scholastic achievement was rewarded, as well as informed planning to obtain these educational goals (cited in Kellaghan et al 1993: 53). Kellaghan et al (1993) concluded that:

> even in homes that differ from each other in a great variety of ways, home processes represent aspects of the family environment that are significant for success in the formal educational system” (Kellaghan et al 1993: 54).

The characteristics evident in the home, as described above, predict educational attainment better than examining social class, family structure, or parental characteristics. It is argued then that ‘what parents do is more important than what they are’ (Kellaghan et al 1993: 55).

The non cognitive characteristics of children were also explored, in particular in Weiss (1974) who examined what the characteristics were that motivated achievement, while also looking at the importance of self-esteem in the developing personality of the child (cited in Kellaghan 1993). Weiss (1976) listed three categories that promoted achievement – (i) the “generation of standards of excellence and expectations from parents”; (ii) “independence training” where freedom as well as assistance is provided to children and (iii) “parental improvement” where parents are both involved and aware of their children’s activities (cited in Kellaghan 1993: 59).
O’Brien and Flynn (2007: 77) writing about the “extensive educational care work” carried out by mothers – including helping with homework and assignments, listening to their children, meeting teachers, planning events and organising transport – state that “what is evident is that in order to provide this emotional care, mothers need access to resources and time” and that these resources depend on the social position of mothers.

4.4 School processes and educational inequality

Derman-Sparks and Fite (2007: 48) state that “the meaning of advantage is the ghost that lurks within the meaning of disadvantage”. If one group is in a position of advantage it follows that another group is in a position of disadvantage. In order to allow greater equality those who have the advantage will have to give up some of their advantage, something that they may be unwilling to do (Tormey 2005b).

4.4.1 Bourdieu: cultural capital and social class

Bourdieu’s 1973 work ‘Cultural Reproduction and Social Reproduction’ proposed the concept of ‘cultural capital’. This cultural capital, whereby someone’s cultural background, complete with their outlook, skills and knowledge, is a commodity that can be traded for economic capital and therefore reproduce inequality in society. Bourdieu argued that each social class has its own unique cultural capital and the cultural capital of the most dominant class is what is reproduced in schools. The most dominant class then can reinvest this cultural capital for an academic or economic profit and thereby gaining an advantage over the less dominant class. Students who are not in possession of the dominant cultural capital, the cultural capital that is valued and seen in schools, are disadvantaged within the educational process. Equally those students in possession of this type of cultural capital, that which is valued in schools, are seen to have an advantage in the educational process. Disadvantaged children, Bourdieu claims, who are not succeeding in school is not just down to a lack of cultural capital but a deeper belief that they are just not capable of achieving success. He warns that this unequal distribution of cultural capital produces a situation whereby the failure of children not from the dominant class is seen as a failure at an
individual level and not a failure of the education system (Winkle-Wagner 2010; Obidah and Marsh 2006; Ross 2000)

Bourdieu sees the social functions of education to be four-fold:

1. To produce individual with predispositions and attitudes (habitus) capable of adapting to social and economic structures
2. To allow for the controlled mobility of a limited category of individuals, carefully selected and modified by and for individual ascent
3. To legitimate the perpetuation of the social order and the transmission of power and privileges
4. To mask the real nature of its relationship to the structure of class relations, i.e. its role in perpetuating inequality

(Bourdieu 1973: 71-112; Bourdieu and Passeron 1977:208)

Tranter (2006: 4) writing about Bourdieu’s concept of ‘habitus’ explained that

“it is habitus and its relationship to the [educational] field and the capital valued by the field that determines whether a person is able to win, or even play, the game. It is a preconscious, shared set of acquired and embodied dispositions and understandings of the world, developed through both objective structures and personal history.” (Tranter 2006: 4)

Bourdieu (1986 cited in O’Brien and Flynn 2007) found that mothers’ cultural capital and habitus play a significant role in the educational field. O’Brien and Flynn (2007: 71) find it “strange that emotional care has not been the subject of discourse and research on social justice, morality, and educational equality until recently”.

Reay (2006) contrasts teacher training courses of thirty years ago when Paul Willis’ ‘Learning to Labour’ (1977) and Basil Bernstein’s Class, Codes and Culture (1975) were set, very different, texts in the area of social class, as part of the teacher training courses of the late 1970s in the UK, with teacher training courses in the UK today that have an absence of text books on the sociology of education. She even cites the findings of a recent focus group of trainee teachers in London that found ‘Getting the Buggers to Behave’ (Cowley 2001) was one of the most useful books these trainee teachers had read during their training, she also expressed her alarm at some of the focus group’s “ill-informed and prejudicial views about working-class parents” (Reay 2006: 302). Reay (2006) warns that
“...until we address social class as a central issue within education then social class will remain the troublesome un-dead of the English education system. I am not conjuring up here some gentle shadowy ghost haunting our classrooms but a potential monster that grows in proportion to its neglect.” (Reay 2006: 289)

Definition of social class
For the purposes of this research social class will be defined, in this research, according to the area where the parents live, rather than the traditional means of parental occupation. Since 1996 the Central Statistics Office (CSO) has classified the entire Irish Population into one of the following social groups which are defined on the basis of occupation; (i) professional workers, (ii) managerial and technical, (iii) non-manual, (iv) skilled manual, (v) semi-skilled, (vi) unskilled and (vii) all others gainfully occupied and unknown (CSO 2006). Understanding working class and working class communities, their culture and experience is related to but differs from the CSO census definition.

4.4.2 School processes and educational attainment - streaming
Pygmalion in the Classroom (1968), by Rosenthal and Jacobson, argues that teachers, who predominantly come from middle-class backgrounds, expect students from working-class backgrounds to fail. Not only that, but teachers were responsible for the success of some students and the failure of others. This claim became known as the ‘teacher-expectancy effect’ (Rogers 1986). The study was conducted in a Californian school where students were tested on basic learning ability. The researchers informed the teachers, that this test would flag 20 per cent of the pupils who would be likely to ‘bloom’ over the course of the coming year. However, in reality, the 20 per cent that were flagged as ‘bloomers’, were merely picked at random by the researchers. This meant that there should be no discernible improvement in the performance of this 20 per cent, unless the expectations of the teachers had an impact. Eight months later the pupils were retested. The control group, those not flagged as ‘bloomers’ gained on average 8 IQ points whereas the ‘bloomers’ gained on average 12 IQ points. The teachers claimed that the ‘bloomers’ had scored better in reading. As a consequence of performing well in reading the pupils were streamed in top, middle or bottom classes, the ‘bloomers’ were allocated the top stream. Also teachers rated the behavioural characteristics of the ‘bloomers’ as happy, curious, interesting and destined to have great success in the future. This study suggested that teachers’
expectations did influence pupil performance. While the study focussed on experimentally induced expectations that were positive, it is fair to argue that the study also could imply that negative teacher expectations could hinder pupil performance:

“Teachers will know their pupils, if not through their own past dealings with them, then by reputation. The interpretation placed upon the behaviour of the pupils will be influenced by the teacher’s expectations” (Rogers 1986: 160).

Where schools use streaming it can have an impact on a student’s self image with students in higher stream classes exposed to “more critical and higher-order forms of thinking” (Hallinan 1997 cited in O’Brien and Flynn 2007). Conversely streaming has a “significant negative impact on average pupil performance” (Smyth 1999: 52) as well as having “negative effects on students in terms of self-esteem, sense of belonging to one’s school and class, relationships” with teachers and peers (Lynch and Lodge 2002: 85). There is also an over-representation of students from poorer backgrounds in lower stream classes (Drudy and Lynch 1993 cited in O’Brien and Flynn 2007). The fact that students are keen to move to a higher stream class if the choice arose is indicative of the fact that students are keenly aware of the perceived privilege associated with being in a higher stream class (Lynch and Lodge 2002). (McCoy et al 2010) found that, in their study on low participation rates in higher education, students from the non-manual group who did not go onto higher level education had a negative experience of the advice offered from schools, with guidance only being directed towards ‘honours’ classes. From the perspective of teachers, teaching higher stream classes were found to be more rewarding; to allow for more positive student-teacher relationships; to be faster-paced and more task-oriented; with teachers investing more time in the preparation of these classes and have higher expectations of students in these higher streamed classes (Oakes 1985; Sorenson and Hallinan 1986; Harlen and Malcolm 1997; Boaler 1997 cited in Lynch and Lodge 2002). Teachers who taught lower stream classes tended to describe this as a negative experience as the lower stream classes were viewed as more difficult to teach as well as discipline (Taylor 1993 cited in Lynch and Lodge 2002). Streaming appears to propagate social and economic inequalities, as can be seen from the fact that sixty per cent of students in a lower stream class are more likely not to remain in school compare with only seven per cent in a mixed ability class (Byrne and Smyth
2010) – perhaps this should not be surprising where students sit in a classroom where teaching time is diluted, lower order questions dominate, pupil-teacher relationships are predominantly negative and the expectations of the school are low.

4.4.3 Multiple intelligences

Gardner (1983) put forward the notion of multiple intelligences, eight in overlapping intelligences; Linguistic; Logical; Interpersonal; Intrapersonal; Musical; Visual/Spatial; Naturalistic; Kinaesthetic. These intelligences may be valued by society but in schools personal intelligences come second to cognitive, the ability to develop “emotionally rewarding and supportive personal relationships is not a subject for analysis in most schools (Drudy and Lynch 1993; Lynch 1999 cited in O’Brien 2007: 75).

The theory that IQ scores reflect ‘natural’ abilities and that these scores can explain educational attainments is flawed. IQ tests merely reflect how a pupil’s intelligence has developed in correspondence to the environment in which they grew up, natural ability cannot be separated from cultural influence. IQ is not the only dynamic that impacts on educational achievement. Douglas (1967) found that even when their IQ tests matched, working-class pupils were still educationally disadvantaged when compared to their middle-class counterparts. The tests themselves can be daunting for pupils, unless the pupils are familiar with them. Therefore cultural factors can influence performance. Indeed many researchers believe IQ test ‘put a naturalistic gloss on differences between pupils that are, in fact socially created’ (Bilton et al 1996: 351). Interestingly Bilton et al (1996) refer to Judge Peckham’s decision in the late 1970s to ban the use of IQ tests on minority children in California, which was later broadened to all children. The judge had presided over a case where evidence was provided that a disproportionately high number of black students in California were in classes for the ‘mentally retarded’. Reflecting on expert testimony, the judge concluded that this was due ‘racially and culturally biased’ IQ tests which discriminated against children from the black community (The Economist, 8 December 1979 cited in Bilton et al 1996).
4.4.4 Resistance cultures

Before a teacher delivers a class it is planned and prepared with a specific type of pupil in mind, the ‘ideal-type pupil’. Teachers can be seen as ‘successes’ and may not relate to ‘failures’ in the classroom, the ideal pupil concept. Teachers often see students from the teacher’s own experience, a predominantly middle class experience and when pupils do not fit into the ‘ideal-type’ profile, the pupil is blamed for this. This student’s learning then may become a time where they do not feel good about themselves, their motivation may decrease and, on occasions, they may develop anti-school cultures, whereby they are yet again blamed for their own failures (Tormey 2005b, Willis 1977).

Stratification occurs in many classrooms whereby wealth, income, ethnicity, gender, religion or other characteristics become the precepts for this division into unequal layers or strata. Green (1985 cited in Bilton et al 1996) demonstrated how teachers displayed ethnocentric attitudes whereby they were unable to understand the force or veracity of cultures other than one’s own. This manifested itself in Green’s study when males of European origin were favoured over girls and boys of Afro-Caribbean origin (Bilton et al 1996). In addition, an anti-school culture can often emerge from those pupils not favoured within a school environment (Bilton et al 1996). Citing Ball’s 1981 study ‘Beachside Comprehensive’, Bilton et al writes:

“...that ability-grouping may also contribute to the formation of pupil subcultures with an anti-school bias. The differentiation of pupils into three broad bands on entry to Beachside encouraged a polarisation between the top and middle bands. Initially, both bands were described by teachers as pliable and a pleasure to teach, but by the second year the higher record of detentions and absences among middle-band pupils, their avoidance of extra-curricular activities and the fact that nearly half of them claimed to dislike school are all signs, Ball argues, of the emergence of an oppositional culture. This anti-school culture can be seen partially as a group response to failure, pupils dissociating themselves from the school that devalued their efforts. But of course, the subculture contributed to further failure; disorder in the middle-band classes disrupted the efforts of even those pupils who remained committed to the school.” (Bilton et al 1996: 362)

Ball (1981 cited in Bilton 1996) found that when Beachside Comprehensive adopted mixed-ability teaching, and dropped banding, that many of the behavioural problems ceased in the middle-bands. However, even within mixed-ability classes, stratification of pupils continued as teachers still differentiated between ‘bright’ pupils and those pupils who were not ‘bright’. Bilton et al (1996) explain that pupils lowered their
sights, without being failed in an obvious way, believing that it was not the ‘system’ that was at fault but themselves. They continue:

“This has been termed the ‘cooling-out process’: pupils who are cooled out abandon their educational ambitions ‘voluntarily’, while believing that they have had a fair chance. Some educational practices do not serve simply to fail people, but to convince them that failure is and individual, rather than a structural problem.” (Bilton et al 1996: 364).

Some pupils adopt an instrumental approach whereby the pupil adopts a strategy which will provide for the attainment of a particular goal, i.e. educational success. However this success is at a cost to their cultural integrity Bilton et al (1996).

Wright (1988 cited in Bilton 1996) drew attention to the fact that anti-school cultures could be prompted by a school’s attitude to race. When in a study of classroom observation, teachers often made racist comments. Pupils who challenged these racist comments were labelled as troublemakers and found themselves embarking on a downward spiral as they made their way through their secondary school careers. By the time they were in their senior years in school they formed the core anti-school group, made up entirely of black girls and boys. This illustrated how teachers could act, consciously or unconsciously, as ‘agents of differentiation’ (Bilton 1996: 363).

4.4.5 The inter-relationship between home and school

Kellaghan et al (1993) acknowledge the changing nature between home and school as the traditional family roles changes and with it the changing influence upon children’s education. As a consequence to these changes, Kellaghan et al (1993) ask:

“will schools (and other agencies) have to provide a larger share of educational inputs or are there ways in which the roles of families can be strengthened to help them in their educational tasks?” (Kellaghan et al 1993: 2)

Kellaghan et al (1993) recognise the various school reforms that have strived to reduce inequality in education but feel that these reforms have not succeeded and now the focus is on the children’s home backgrounds and on the role of the family in children’s school learning. Schools on their own are unlikely to be successful in meeting all of society’s expectations. Kellaghan put forward five reasons for holding this viewpoint:
1. Despite many curricular reforms since the early 1970s there has not been a substantial increase in levels of students' attainments
2. The polarisation between the classes continues in education despite the expansion of education
3. The more equitable distribution of educational resources across the classes has not been as successful as initially hoped
4. In developing countries a lack of resources has hindered public educational expansion
5. Expenditure on public education did not grow during the 1980s at the same rate as it did in previous decades (Kellaghan 1993: 8).

The reasons for home involvement relate to the (i) central role of the home in children’s lives, (ii) the importance of early development, and (iii) the cumulative nature of development (Kellaghan 1993). Parents are the primary educators of their children. When children go to school they already have developed some of their motor skills as well as their social and emotional skills. In addition to this, the home is also responsible for nutrition and health care. Poor diet and nutrition can often take place ‘in conditions of poverty, social disadvantage, and environmental deprivation’ (Kellaghan 1993: 10). Bloom (1964 cited in Kellaghan 1993) stated that the first five years of a child's life witnesses the most rapid period of development. This development can be influenced by the experiences of the child in school, if a child blossoms during the early years of school that gain can be weakened if the quality of educational experiences depreciates. Equally this works in reverse (Hunt 1979 cited in Kellaghan et al 1993). Allied to the problems of equality of opportunity, this ‘pointed to a need for a greater understanding of the role of the home in the early development of children’s scholastic knowledge and skills’ (Kellaghan et al 1993: 13). If there is inadequate support from the family and the environment in which the child lives then the school will struggle to facilitate the educational attainment of the pupil. The extended family is no longer the norm, and there has been increase in the single-parent family, both of which reduce the potential impact of the home to aid the child’s education. When pupils experience difficulties in school, assistance could be provided and even welcomed (Kellaghan et al 1993).

4.5 Conclusion

This chapter looked at how the ‘deficit’ perspective, which sees the “presumed deficit in the family or community of the disadvantaged person” (Tormey 2007: 175) and the difference perspective, which focuses “on the role of knowledge systems, school
organisation and educational practices in the reproduction of inequality” (Drudy and Lynch 1993: 147), were two perspectives that have dominated the debate about educational disadvantage. However the ‘deficit’ model of disadvantage is now out of date and inadequate (EDC 2005). Bernstein (1975) found that the language used in middle class homes was also the style of language that was used in schools, while children from low income homes were significantly behind their middle class counterparts in language ability by the time they began school (Healy 2010b). Poverty also played a crucial role in a child’s educational attainment as low income families cannot maximise the advantages that the system could offer because of financial constraints (Drudy and Lynch 1993). An ESRI report, *Monitoring Poverty Trends in Ireland 2004-2007*, found that one in six households were in a poverty trap and that lone parents households were the most vulnerable households (Russell, Maitre and Nolan, 2010). Children living in lone parent households have, on average, a significantly lower reading test scores when compared to other types of family units (Flynn 2006) and “poor literacy skills restrict a range of life choices” (Morgan and Kett 2003 cited in Flynn 2007: 92). Bloom (1981) developed a five part comprehensive model that illustrated the necessary conditions in the home that would promote school learning. Kellaghan et al (1993: 55) argue that ‘what parents do is more important than what they are’. Bourdieu (1973) believed that each social class had its own distinctive cultural capital – someone’s cultural background, complete with their outlook, skills and knowledge – with the cultural capital of the most dominant class being reproduced in schools. The most dominant class can then reinvest this cultural capital to gain an advantage over the less dominant class. This inequitable division of cultural capital disadvantages students who do not have dominant cultural capital (Winkle-Wagner 2010; Obidah and Marsh 2006; Ross 2000). The emotional care provided by mothers has only recently featured on the debate about educational inequality (Obrien and Flynn 2007). Teachers can hold a hugely influential place in a student’s journey towards educational attainment; Rogers (1986) called this ‘teacher-expectancy effect’. Furthermore the use of streaming in schools has a profoundly negative impact on students’ performance, self-image and drop-out rates (Byrne and Smyth 2010; O’Brien and Flynn 2007; Lynch and Lodge 2002; Smyth 1997; Drudy and Lynch 1993). As a consequence resistant cultures may then arise in schools (Bilton et al 1996). This chapter however does not explain the important role that teacher training programmes can play in reducing the impact of
teacher-expectancy. Nor does it show how middle class and working class parents respond to streaming in their children’s’ schools. Also not enough account has been taken of the emotional impact of school choice and the value that a mother’s love has in the educational market (O’Brien and Flynn 2007).

We live in a polarised, unequal society, should it really surprise us that this inequality has spread into the educational system? Certainly children form working class households have improved attainment levels but the gap has not narrowed, the middle class have carefully adapted to ensure the thirty metre head start remains in place – that in essence their advantage remains unblemished or diluted. Schools are far from perfect but they do have a role to play in reducing educational disadvantage but perhaps the most significant movement for change can only come from the middle classes, whose cultural capital is dominant, if they were to reduce the thirty metre head start they possess.
Chapter 5
Markets, Accountability and Equality in Irish Educational Policy

5.1 Introduction

Irish education has evolved from the foundation of the state in 1922 through to the opening decades of the twenty-first century. This evolution included a strong Catholic Church presence and influence, notably in the drafting of Bunreacht na hÉireann, which promoted the notion of choice for parents. The influence of the Catholic Church in Ireland became diluted at the cusp of and continuing into the new millennium. Although “Ireland has largely escaped the new-right educational reforms found in the rest of the English – speaking world” (Hogan 2000 cited in Tormey 2007: 184), external influence through market led organisations such as the OECD, led to the new-right tendencies such as accountability in Irish education (Halton 2003 cited in Tormey 2007). The demand for information about schools reached its zenith as the new millennium began as can be seen from the publication of the ‘Feeder Schools Lists’ in The Irish Times and Irish Independent, ranking schools in order of the percentage of its pupils it sent onto third level education. Some schools which are placed ‘top’ of these crude league tables appear to manipulate their intake so as to remain at the top of these crude league tables (Flynn 2009c, Kennedy 2005c). Middle class parents operating in this system sought to keep their children in a position of advantage through their greater material and cultural capital, consequentially leaving the majority of working class children in a place of disadvantage. This scenario promoted educational inequality, a resolutely stubborn and complex issue. This chapter hope to tell this story.

5.2 The 1922 and 1937 Constitutions

With the dawn of the Irish Free State in 1922, Article 10 of the Constitution of the same year, referred to education simply; “All citizens of the Irish Free State have right to free elementary education” (Coolahan 1981: 155). Michael Farry claimed that that idea “smells a little of State omnipotence” (Farry 1996: 10). In fifteen years this simple detail would be altered greatly by the then Taoiseach, Eamonn DeValera, as he strove to bring to an end the 1922 Constitution that had emerged from the 1921
Anglo-Irish Treaty. Keogh (1988) wrote that “the 1922 Constitution was an imposed document, not wholly Irish…this view was held in Catholic circles” (Keogh 1988:107).

De Valera had extremely close associations with members of the Catholic hierarchy and this network of important clerico-political connections proved of incalculable political assistance. De Valera sought the help of the clergy in writing the constitution because he needed their intellectual know-how, also he had chosen to not to draft the document in full committee and could not risk writing his documents in complete administrative and political vacuum. De Valera accessed two religious figures in particular with whom he could work; Edward Cahill (Jesuit) and John Charles McQuaid (Holy Ghost). Cahill felt the 1922 Constitution should be replaced by a new document, which would be more in line with Catholic teachings. Cahill got advice from his superiors in the Jesuits in Milltown and set up a committee that in turn forwarded a draft to de Valera with a “preamble, articles on religion, marriage, the family, education, private property and liberty of speech” (Keogh 1988: 109). The ‘Milltown Draft’ did not always have its suggestions taken on board but it was used as a springboard for further discussion. McQuaid’s influence was more prominent and in fact “the influence of the Holy Ghost Order can be found particularly in articles 41 to 45” (Keogh 1988:110). DeValera’s most arduous piece of the 1937 Constitution was with regard to the article on religion. Having recognised the Catholic Church as the church of Christ, he then had to retreat from this position as Ireland had not yet embraced an ecumenist outlook, “it was like trying to tattoo bubbles” (Keogh 1988: 111).

Given the fact that over 90 per cent of the Irish population was Catholic, the 1937 Constitution would be framed within the scope of Catholic social teaching. In 1891 Pope Leo XIII published Rerum Novarum, a papal encyclical on the condition of the working classes, which became the point of reference as the beginning of the Church’s tradition of social teaching. The Catechism of the Catholic Church, 2207 and 2229 respectively, stressed the predominant rights of the parents as well as accentuating the subsidiary role of the state in education (Coolahan 1981):

“2207 The family is the original cell of social life.
As those first responsible for the education of their children, parents have the right to choose a school for them which corresponds to their own convictions. This right is fundamental. As far as possible parents have the duty of choosing schools that will best help them in their task as Christian educators. Public authorities have the duty of guaranteeing this parental right and of ensuring the concrete conditions for its exercise.”

Vatican Achieves (2010)

Keogh writes that

“The sharp church-state divisions over the religious article may deflect attention from the degree to which Catholic culture influenced the articles on personal rights, the family, education, private property and directive social principles. In a sense, the cluster of articles 41 to 45 is a petrified image of positions particular to a certain current of Irish Catholicism in 1937” (Keogh 1988: 118).

Catholic doctrine and belief impacted significantly on the formulation of the various Articles of the Constitution in 1937, aside from the contributions of John Charles McQuaid and the Jesuit order. Basil Chubb wrote:

“The clearest and most unequivocal enunciation of Catholic principles in Bunreacht na hÉireann is to be found in Articles 41 and 42 which deal with the family and education” (Chubb 1978: 46)

Two papal encyclicals published by Pope Pius XI highlight the impact. The first was Divini Illius Magistri, on Christian Education of Youth, and the second was Casti Connubii, on Christian Marriage. Divini Illius Magistri was published at the end of 1929 and had a significant impact on the Catholic Bishops response to the Vocational Education Act the following year in 1930 and also seven years later the formulation of the 1937 Constitution. Divini Illius Magistri, placing the family as the primary and natural educators as well as emphasising the right of parents to provide for this education, clearly influences Article 42 of the 1937 Constitution (Farry 1996).

The 1937 Constitution strongly echoes the Catholic Church’s social teaching on parental rights, the place of the church, the state and the child in education. Article 41 of the Constitution recognises the family as the natural primary and fundamental unit group of society. Article 42, on Education, succinctly summarises Catholic teaching on the prior rights of the parents:

1. “The State acknowledges that the primary and natural educator of the child is the Family and guarantees to respect the inalienable right and duty of parents to provide,
The limited nature of the State’s rights in education is stressed. For instance:

3.1 “The State shall not oblige parents in violation of their conscience and lawful preference to send their children to schools established by the State, or to any particular type of school designated by the State.

3.2 The State shall, however, as guardian of the common good, require in view of actual conditions that children receive a certain minimum education, moral, intellectual and social” (Whyte 1971: 52).

The 1937 constitution could be viewed as de Valera’s constitution, insofar as he personally controlled every aspect its drafting;

“The very composition of the drafting committee again demonstrates de Valera’s determination to retain the process in his own hands… None of the four [committee members] worked in an outside department under the direction of any other minister, all but [one] worked directly to de Valera.” (Fanning 1983: 39)

De Valera held a tight and controlling rein over the emergent drafts of the new constitution. Article 44 of the new constitution, whereby the “special position” of the Catholic Church was assured, gives an example of this control, as it only appeared for the first time on the final draft before it was sent to print the following day, April 27th 1937. The Constitution also stated that ‘The most Holy Trinity’ was the source of all authority. The “special position” of the Catholic Church continued until December 1972 when in light of the Troubles in Northern Ireland certain clauses were removed (Fanning 1983). “From de Valera’s perspective in 1937, however, article 44 was a compromise that denied the Catholic Church the kind of exclusive recognition it would have preferred” (Fanning 1983: 40-1).

5.3 Conflict between Church and State

Writing on the relationship between Church and State in the field of education since the 1937 Constitution, Whyte states

“Over most of the period since independence, the remarkable feature of educational policy in Ireland has been the reluctance of the State to touch on the entrenched positions of the Church. This is not because the Church’s claims have been moderate: on the contrary, it has carved out for itself more extensive control over education in Ireland than in any other country in the world. It is because the Church has insisted on its claims with such force that the State has been extremely cautious in entering its
Taking the world as a whole, one can say that education has caused more trouble between Church and State than any other single topic. In self-governing Ireland, it has only rarely been an issue” (Whyte 1971: 21).

The Vocational Education Act (1930) illustrates the relationship between Church and State. The act was designed to expand technical education, the only aspect of the education system not controlled by religious denominations but run by local authorities. The status quo continued under the new act. However these local authority committees often had members of the clergy co-opted, frequently as chairmen. In fact in Thom's Directory of Ireland, 1958, 22 out of 27 Vocational Education Committee chairmen were priests (Whyte 1971). Whyte (1971) also adds that the then Minister for Education gave the bishops written confirmation that the vocational education system would not impinge on the schools run by the religious denominations. In 1950 the then Minister for Health, Noel Browne, set about introducing the Mother and Child scheme, whereby, regardless of income, free maternity care would be provided for all mothers and all children up to the age of sixteen would receive a free medical card. The Catholic Church, lead by Archbishop McQuaid, opposed this fiercely warning against a totalitarian state and communist ideology, believing that healthcare was a matter for parents themselves to decide (Whyte 1971: Sunday Independent 2010a). The Catholic Church stated that the right to provide for the health of children belongs to parents, not to the State. The State has the right to assist in a subsidiary capacity only (Whyte 1971).

During the mid-1960s the disharmony between church and state centred on education, censorship, constitutional reform and housing. After a conservative and cautious forty years in the Department of Education a "succession of energetic ministers” (Whyte 1971: 337) armed with adventurous new policies, which included:

1. “A proposal to merge TCD and UCD
2. Giving grants to post-primary school owners for the building and extension of schools
3. Ensuring students are not debarred from receiving education due to a lack of means
4. Facilitating co-operation between secondary and vocational schools in areas where existing schools are too small to provide a complete coverage of subjects on their own
5. Setting up comprehensive schools in areas inadequately served by existing secondary and vocational schools” (Whyte 1971: 338).
In 1967 Donagh O’Malley, then Minister for Education, was aware of serious opposition to his plans but was equally determined to press ahead with his scheme, in addition to amalgamating TCD and UCD, with a new interdenominational university. This took place under the dictate from the Catholic Church who had discouraged Catholics from attending TCD. The disputes continued when Brian Lenihan became Minister of Education after Donagh O’Malley, involving the controversy with the Council of Managers of Catholic Secondary Schools over teachers’ salaries as well as the who held the balance of power between managers and the State. George Colley, in his role as Minister of Education subsequently clashed with Bishop Browne of Galway over amalgamating small rural schools over ecclesiastical authority (Whyte 1971). In 1978 Judge Kenny in Crowley vs. Ireland, a Supreme Court ruling on the issue of the extent of the State’s obligation, concluded that putting the word ‘for’ into the constitution was to limit the power of the state, not the right to education … the state’s obligation was not to educate but to provide for it (Farry 1996).

In 1982 Eileen Flynn, a teacher at a Sisters’ of the Holy Faith School, admitted she was having an affair with a married man and expecting his child. The parents were strongly opposed to this flagrant breach of the Catholic principles the school and its employees espoused. Flynn was subsequently fired and brought her case to the Employment Appeal Tribunal and arguing that events in a teacher’s private life could not result in their dismissal. She lost the case and subsequent appeals to the Circuit and High courts. In 1985 the High Court stated that Flynn’s private behaviour “was capable of damaging [the nuns’] efforts to foster in their pupils…religious tenets the school had been established to promote” (Farrell 2010). Such was the impact of this case that “the Bank of Ireland refused to open an account for an appeal fund, the teachers’ unions were divided on the issue – and one of the trial judges, Noel Ryan, even gave an opinion that the nuns had been too lenient on her” (Sunday Independent 2010b). This issue arose again twelve years later, when, on May 15th, 1997, Ireland’s Supreme Court ruled that dismissals and selective hiring practices motivated by an institution’s religious ethos were in fact constitutional (Farrell 2010).

In April 2002 Tomás O'Dúlaing, principal at Gaelscoil Thúlach na nÓg, one of only six interdenominational Gaelscoils in the country, was sacked by the school’s Board of Management in a row over the teaching of religion. “Mr O'Dúlaing had wanted
pupils preparing for the sacraments of first holy communion and confirmation to be taught religion outside school hours so that non-Catholic children would not be segregated from their classmates during religion classes. However the school's board of management endorsed a directive from the school's patron, An Forás Patrunachta, that the children should be taught within school hours (RTE 2002)

Former Minister of State at the Department of Foreign Affairs and then Chief Whip of the then Progressive Democrats – the junior party in the then coalition government – Liz O'Donnell T.D., spoke in Dáil Éireann on Wednesday 9th November 2005, on Judge Murphy's Ferns Report, “In a democracy, all views can be articulated, but the special relationship is over. The deference is over. The cosy phone calls from All Hallows to Government Buildings must end” (O'Donnell 2005), she was referring to the 1937 Constitution. The then Taoiseach, Bertie Ahern, strongly defended the Catholic Church's role in primary school education, stating:

“...the State owed religious communities a great debt of gratitude for its management of schools...The State would not be able to manage the schools without the religious, he said, and he believed the State owed a great debt of gratitude to the communities... However, Mr Ahern said the Catholic Church was an important part of civil society without which Ireland would not have come as far as it had.” (Brennock and O'Brien 2005)

By the time Eileen Flynn died, at the age of 53, in September 2008 Irish attitudes to the Catholic Church had begun to change drastically. Indeed by 2010, Ireland witnessed previously unimagined changes in the relationship between Church and State. These changing times could clearly be seen as a consequence of flurry of activity in the media about the Catholic Church’s role in education in Ireland, some seventy three years after Bunreacht na hÉireann. In an Irish Times/Ipsos, MRBI poll published in January 2010, seventy four percent of people “think that the [Catholic] church did not respond adequately to the [Murphy] report [into the sexual abuse scandal in the Catholic Archdiocese of Dublin published in 2009] ” (Collins 2010a). Following on from this the same Irish Times/Ipsos, MRBI poll found that sixty one per cent of people “said the [Catholic] church should give up control of the school system” (Collins 2010b). Responding to this poll, Bishop Leo O’Reilly, of Kilmore and chairman of the bishops’ education commission, stated that “the central issue at stake surely is parental choice. It is not whether the church or the State should have
control of primary schools” (O’Reilly 2010). Also in January 2010 the inauguration of
the Catholic Schools Partnership took place at the Emmaus Centre, Dublin (Healy
2010a). The partnership was launched by Cardinal Sean Brady who said “the vitality
of the Catholic Church was closely linked to the health of Catholic schools” (Healy
2010a). The partnership is described as “an umbrella support group for everyone
involved in Catholic education. It was set up to take account of the changing role of
the religious in education” (Healy 2010a). The then Minister for Education, Batt
O’Keefe, said in January 2010, that “local plebiscites are expected to be held in each
school area where the Catholic Church agrees to relinquish control” (Flynn and
Carswell 2010). The Department of Education were examining areas where “the
Catholic Church is over-represented and where it is prepared to hand over control of
school management to other patrons (Flynn and Carswell 2010).” Educate Together,
the multidenominational group appear “well placed to take over management of the
schools…however local vocational education committees could also have a key role.
Two new State-run community primary schools have been established on a pilot basis
under the aegis of Co Dublin VEC” (Flynn and Carswell 2010). The Archbishop of
Dublin, Diarmuid Martin, welcomed that announcement by the then Minister for
Education (McGarry 2010).

In a letter to The Irish Times, published on 8th February 2010, Paul Rowe, Chief
Executive of Educate Together wrote in relation to the issue of who controlled
schools. He stated that:

“As an organisation that has had to forge an alternative model of education in the face
of a powerful and sometimes hostile establishment...[that] parents have an inalienable
right to educate their children in a manner compatible to their conscience...[and that] this right is expressed as a legal entitlement in Ireland both in our Constitution and laws...Educate Together has proposed a simple mechanism to address the urgent need for change. First, that local authorities are empowered to provide administrative, legal HR and facilities support services for all types of recognised schools on an equal basis. Second, that parents of all children are provided with a form in which they can express their first three preferences on school type or ‘ethos’ and the local authority is then legally bound to allocate buildings, resources and places according to these preferences.” (Rowe 2010)

Educate Together seems set to increase its role in the provision of primary schooling
in Ireland. The first Educate Together National School (ETNS) opened its doors in
Dalkey in 1978. The ETNS are multi-denominational, with the onus falling on parents
to facilitate religious instruction outside of the school day. Significant religious occasions in the various religions calendar are addressed via parents visiting the school and talking with a class or the students are brought to various places of worship. There are thirty-nine of the ETNS around the country which are State-funded and free to pupils (Boland 2005). Paul Rowe, Chief Executive of Educate Together, writing in *The Irish Times* stated

“Despite the overwhelming evidence of growing religious diversity in Ireland, our primary education system remains largely monolithic. Ninety-eight per cent of all schools are obliged in law to promote the religious outlook of single religious denominations. This would not be an issue if all families had an equal choice of schools under secular management in which all faiths had equity...Unequal arrangements for religious difference have been shown to be divisive and dangerous...” (Rowe 2005: 14).

In a briefing document released under the Freedom of Information Act, and seen by The Irish Times in May 2010, the then Minister for Education, Mary Coughlan, was advised by her department that there was an increasing call for a secular and less segregated system of education on the one hand and on the other hand there remained a strong demand also for Catholic schools (O’Brien 2010). The briefing document also stated that “the whole issue of school patronage in a changing landscape is a very fraught one” (O’Brien 2010). In July 2010 the Department of Education chose forty areas across the Irish Republic where “it believes a number of Catholic Church-run primary schools could be handed over to be run by another patron” (Donnelly 2010). Minister Coughlan established the Second-Level Patronage Advisory Group, to consider and assess “patronage applications for new secondary schools” (Minihan 2010). This expert group would commence work in the autumn of 2010. There will be an increase of over 67,000 post-primary pupils in the State by 2024 that will also have a bearing on this process (Minihan 2010).

In September 2010 the Department of Education and Skills published the Education (Amendment) Bill 2010 which provided a legislative basis for the involvement of Vocational Education Committees (VECs) in the provision of primary education whereby VECs will play a role in the “development of a new additional model of patronage for primary schools” (Education [Amendment] Bill 2010: 8). Also included in the Education (Amendment) Bill 2010 is “clarification on the delivery of speech therapy services to students... and arrangements for the employment, in certain
exceptional and limited circumstances, of persons who are not registered teachers under the Teaching Council Act 2001” (Education [Amendment] Bill 2010: 8). In addition to these amendments the formal abolition of the Educational Disadvantage Committee is included as a consequence of the Government’s 2008 rationalisation programme, whereby this “formal statutory Committee … is no longer required in order to advise on the issue of educational disadvantage” (DES 2010). The Department of Education and Science will view educational disadvantage as part of the wider social inclusion plan and remains committed to implementing “DEIS, the Action Plan for Educational Inclusion, which provides for the educational needs of children and young people from disadvantaged communities” (DES 2010). It will remain to be seen the impact of this amendment regarding the abolition of Educational Disadvantage Committee.

These are times of significant and rapid change in Ireland as the educational landscape appears to be undergoing previously unimagined change. Central to much of the debate over the control of schools is the constitutional right of parents to choose a school for their children. In this new era it is vitally important to ensure that the issue of inequality in education is not pushed to the side or overlooked in the debates.

5.4 Markets, choice and emerging inequality in Irish educational policy

The language of the New Right and the politicisation of educational debates have largely been avoided in Ireland (Tormey 2007). Nonetheless the Department of Education and Science’s ‘Customer Service Charter’ uses terms such as ‘clients’ and ‘customers’. Also pressure has grown from the media to release data that allows the media publish crude ‘Feeder School’ lists.

5.4.1 School inspection reports

Indeed, in the later part of 2005 significant media coverage was given to the notion of accountability in schools from which an interesting dialogue emerged. In August 2005 The Irish Times published an article that flagged the then Minister for Education, Mary Hanafin’s, plans to publish school inspection reports. It was hoped that this would placate the demand for school league tables that are in operation in the UK. In a confidential letter, seen by The Irish Times, Minister Hanafin felt that the
publication of school inspection reports could make a “significant contribution to providing accurate and balanced information on schools” (Flynn 2005a). The then Minister also was of the opinion that the school inspection reports could aid parents when choosing a school for their children by providing information on “educational opportunities” provided by the schools (Flynn 2005a). Minister Hanafin continued “the provision of adequate information on schools is one of the challenges facing us in the Irish education system… [and the Whole School Evaluations would be] fully sensitive to the context in which the school operates in a way which is not possible with league tables” (Flynn 2005a). The school inspection reports will give an overall rating of a school’s performance, without specific reference to exam results or individual teachers. These reports were first published in January 2006.

This demand for information on schools, within the context of parental choice, stems in part from the Supreme Court ruling earlier in 2005 which banned the publication of school inspection reports from primary schools. The Supreme Court overturned an earlier decision from the High Court, which ordered the Department of Education to release this information to The Irish Times. Ms. Fionnuala Kilfeather, of the National Parents’ Council (Primary) (NPCP) claimed that Ireland was “caught in a time warp where parents cannot get information about schools” (Flynn 2005a). Ms. Emily O’Reilly, the Information Commissioner, also wanted the school inspection reports published (Flynn 2005a). In The Irish Times editorial on this issue on the 29th August 2005, Geraldine Kennedy wrote, “…the public debate [regarding information about schools] has moved on. The phenomenal success of the ratemyteacher.ie website and the huge popularity of the school league tables published in The Irish Times and elsewhere underline this” (Kennedy 2005a). Fionnuala Kilfeather, chief executive of the National Parents Council (Primary) and also a member of both the National Educational Welfare Board and the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, writing in The Irish Times stated that:

“Parents need to be able to compare schools so that they can make the best possible choice for their child...This objection [how league tables reflect on schools in disadvantaged areas] is based on an acceptance that some schools will have to be excused for having continuing poor results simply because of the children who attend them. This low level of expectation for children must be challenged and the focus must be on what schools can do to stop this. Schools must be able to compare results they have achieved for children and share good practices. Quite clearly, good schools make more of a difference.” (Kilfeather 2005)
The cultural and material capital of the middle-classes once again appears to be adapting to this evolving situation and reap its dividend.

Unlike in the UK – post the disastrous 1985 pay campaign - the teachers unions in Ireland are, on the whole, quite strong and vocal, although the ASTI’s reputation has been tarnished during its somewhat militant role in the teachers pay campaign in 2001. The three main teaching unions in Ireland, the Association of Secondary Teachers of Ireland (ASTI), the Teachers Union of Ireland (TUI) and the Irish National Teachers Organisation (INTO) stated that they were opposed to the Minister for Education’s plans to publish the school inspection reports on the grounds that (i) “the publication of school reports could identify individual teachers, who are being criticised; (ii) publication could allow the media to publish school league tables, which are prohibited under the Education Act” (Kilfeather 2005). Replying to Ms. Fionnuala Kilfeather’s (NPCP) comments on this issue, Mr John White of the ASTI stated, “Ms. Kilfeather’s new-right prescriptions will serve to demoralise our system. She should rethink her position before the damage is done” (Flynn 2005c). Responding to union disquiet over the publication of the school inspection reports Minister Hanafin insisted;

“We must have a system that can give us fair and balanced information on how effective each school is in enabling each young person to achieve his or her potential. Parents, students, school authorities and the general taxpayer have a right to this information. We owe it to our young people to ensure that schools do provide a high-quality service.” (Flynn 2005e)

Incidentally, also on the 30th August 2005, The Irish Times highlighted two private second-level schools, Blackrock College, Dublin and St. Columba’s College, also in Dublin, who published their Leaving Certificate results. These results were significantly above the national average (Flynn 2005b). The following day the same paper carried the story of a Dublin community college, Collinstown Park Community College, published the details of the Department of Education’s evaluation of the school. Mr. Brian Fleming, the school principal, said, “…parents are entitled to much more information about what is going on in schools” (Flynn 2005d). Following discussions between the Department of Education and the teacher unions, the department proposed that schools have a right to reply to any criticisms made in the school inspection report (Flynn 2005f). When compiling the guidelines for the
publication of the school inspection reports the Department of Education stated that teachers or board of managements could delay the publication of the reports if they are unhappy with their findings. A formal review can be requested and the publication of the report cannot take place until the review process is complete (Flynn 2005g).

5.4.2 Feeder school lists
In response to the growing demand for information on secondary schools in Ireland, *The Irish Times* published a special supplement entitled ‘Feeder Schools – The Master Lists’ on Monday November 21st 2005. The newspaper stated that it was the most comprehensive survey conducted on this topic. *The Irish Times* accessed, via The Freedom of Information Act 1997, information regarding the number of students each secondary school in the Republic of Ireland sent to the seven universities, thirteen institutes of technology, as well as the Dublin Institute of Technology. Sean Flynn, *The Irish Times* Education Editor and editor of this special supplement, acknowledged that the information does not give

> “a full rounded picture of everything that goes on in schools...the sporting and cultural life of the school. Crucially, it does not tell you about the social profile of the school or the number with learning or other difficulties.” (Flynn 2005h)

Flynn (2005h), clarifying why the feeder lists were so popular, explained that parents wish to make as informed a decision as possible regarding where they would send their child to second-level school because the parents see it as one of the key decisions that they would make concerning their child’s progress in the future. Flynn (2005h) writes that there exists an information vacuum at present in the area of information on schools and many parents make this decision based on “local gossip and anecdote” (Flynn 2005h). This begs the questions: which parents can access and use this information? Is the cultural capital of the middle classes coming to the fore again? On whose behalf is this information accessed? The schools *The Irish Times* special supplement, ‘Feeder Schools – The Master Lists’, places in the overall top 25 list, are, in the main, predominantly located in middle class areas and a number are also fee-paying.

John White, ASTI general secretary, criticised the promotion of school league tables, stressing that “league tables must be resisted and we must never cease to reiterate that
those who promote such tables are doing a great disservice to education” (Flynn 24th November 2005: 1). White also emphasised the need for an inclusive approach to schooling where one form of intelligence is not favoured over another, adding “the best schools are those which are attended by the full ability range from all sectors of society. Ghettoes of the disadvantaged or of the advantaged should be discouraged” (Flynn 2005i). These words do not correlate with the action of some schools, many of which have majority ASTI membership. Principals interviewed by The Irish Times, underlined the schools that provide the Leaving Certificate Applied Programme and whose students proceed onto Post-Leaving Certificate courses do not feature on the ‘feeder list’. While also emphasising the right-wing ideology of league tables that equate success with the third level, which in turn marginalizes sections of the community (Flynn 2005j).

With the publication of The Feeder Schools List in November 2009, the fifth annual publication of these lists came to pass, with the education editor of The Irish Times, Sean Flynn, hailing them as “a rare triumph for parents ” (Flynn 2009c). Flynn (2009d) stated that the teacher unions, the then Minister for Education, Batt O’Keeffe, most of the opposition parties and even the National Parents Council (Post-Primary) were opposed to league tables. He also writes, with some distain, that the school inspection reports make no reference to state examination results, while acknowledging that the feeder lists are not perfect or even provide a “fully rounded picture of school performance… [or take any] account of socio-economic background[s]… [and] can stigmatise poorly performing schools, located in working class estates… but [he is still of the opinion that] half a loaf is better than no bread” (Flynn 2009d). A frankly startling admission, which could also be read as that the stigmatising of poorly performing schools located in working class areas are merely collateral damage in this pseudo information/accountability war.

### 5.4.3 Legislation

However, despite these seemingly neoliberal notions, Ireland, it appears has not embraced the neoliberal educational philosophy to the same degree as other English speaking countries and (Hogan 2000 cited in Tormey 2007) argues that the Education Act 1998 and Teaching Council Act 2001 illustrates Ireland was not following “the neoliberal road”, instead on a Frostian road of one that has been less travelled by and
which made all the difference it would seem (Hogan 2000 cited in Tormey 2007: 184).

In the Education Act (1998), Section 6, the objects of the act includes the stated objective “to promote equality of access to and participation in education and promote the means whereby students may benefit from education” (Education Act 1998: s.6). Also included, was the stated aim “to give practical effect to the constitutional rights of children, including children who have a disability or who have other special educational needs, as they relate to education” (Education Act 1998: s.6.), which six years later evolved into the Education for People with Special Educational Needs (EPSEN) Act 2004. The notion of choice was also stressed “to promote the right of parents to send their children to a school of the parents’ choice having regard to the rights of patrons and the effective and efficient use of resources” (Education Act 1998: s. 6). The Equal Status Act (2000) was enacted in April 2000, which aimed to “promote equality and prohibit types of discrimination and related behaviour in connection with the provision of services, property and other opportunities to which the public has access” (Equal Status Act 2000:5). In April 2001 the Teaching Council Act (2001) came into force, “to promote teaching as a profession” (Teaching Council Act 2001), as well as establishing “standards, policies and procedures for the education and training of teachers…and the registration of teachers…to enhance professional standards” (Teaching Council Act 2001: 5). In July 2002 the Education (Welfare) Act came into being to “provide for the entitlement of every child in the state to a certain minimum education” (Education [Welfare] Act 2002: 5). From this Act the National Education Welfare Board (NEWB) was established which monitors children who do not attend school regularly and monitors children for whom there may exist concerns regarding their educational welfare, complete with educational welfare officers who operate on the ground.

Many countries embraced liberal educational policies in the aftermath of the Second World War, where those countries moved towards “comprehensive and de-segregated education, Ireland had seen little that was comparable” (Tormey 2007: 184). Comprehensive schooling was “weakly promoted and conceptualised” in the 1960s and 1970s and never really took hold to the extent that was envisaged (O’Sullivan 2005 cited in Tormey 2007). More students from poor and working class families did
access education, this uptake was not supported by “economic resources” (Lee 1989 cited in Tormey 2007). Ireland had two segregated schooling systems: the secondary school for the more academic students and the vocational schools for the less academic students (Barber cited in Tormey 2007). By the 1980s Ireland had a “fully functioning market”, with local management of schools, and parents free to send their son or daughter to their school of choice (Tormey 2007).

5.4.4 Segregation in the school system

Tormey (2007) wrote that “parents avail of the market and ‘choose’ to segregate the school system” (Tormey 2007: 185). The 2005 ‘Feeder Schools – The Master Lists’ special supplement in The Irish Times, also gave information “detailing special needs provision in Dublin schools. The figures show how some schools are cherry-picking their pupils, leaving it to other schools to make provision for special needs students” (Flynn 2005h). The Education Act 1998 requires that all schools should have an admissions policy in place highlighting how access to and participation in the educational process is available to all students including those with special educational needs. In January 2006 the National Council for Special Education intended to oversee the provision of education for those students with special educational needs (Flynn 2005h). The Irish Times editorial on the special supplement, ‘Feeder Schools – The Master Lists’, commented that special needs provision in Dublin schools showed, broadly, that

“...provision is concentrated in poorer and disadvantaged areas... [raising] serious questions about the enrolment policies of some school. Many fee-paying schools...operate an admissions policy which can marginalize pupils with poor academic standards and/or special needs.” (Kennedy 2005c)

The Irish Times published figures released by the Department of Education that showed almost 30 per cent of pupils in certain schools were in receipt of special needs provision whereas in other schools that provision was very low. The Irish Times highlighted that special needs provision was inclined to be focussed more in poorer areas and non-fee-paying schools (Kennedy 2005b). The Conference of Religious in Ireland (Cori) was challenged by the ASTI to explain the socially divisive nature of some Cori schools. John White, general secretary of the ASTI, stated that
“By definition schools which select, either covertly or overtly, by ways of academic tests or by ability to pay fees will send more pupils to third level than schools which accept the whole social cohort of pupils” (Flynn 2005k).

By December 2009, four years on from the coverage detailed above, it was quite clear that little had changed in this segregated system of schooling. Peter MacMenamin, general secretary of the Teachers’ Union of Ireland (TUI) “accused some fee-paying schools of operating a kind of ‘educational apartheid’” (Flynn 2009b). This accusation stemmed from a 2006 Audit by the Department of Education where it was found “that many schools were using restrictive admissions policies to exclude certain categories of students, including those with special needs and the children of immigrants” (Flynn 2009c). Furthermore the seemingly segregated schooling system that exists was perhaps encapsulated in the following example;

“The audit found that in one (unnamed) Dublin area, fewer than 1 per cent of students in one secondary school had special learning needs, compared with 17 per cent in neighbouring vocational schools” (Flynn 2009c).

While the figures above are based on 2006 data, The Irish Times compiles a ‘Special Needs Provision’ table based on Dublin schools in the academic year 2008/2009. The table revealed that many of the fee-paying schools which had topped the Feeder Lists table were now close to the bottom of this ‘Special Needs Provision’ table (Flynn 2009c) – a damning indictment of a segregated school system in operation in Dublin. It is perhaps logical to draw similar parallels in other cities and areas across Ireland of this two-tiered, segregated school system, albeit on a smaller but no less significant scale than in Dublin. The ‘Feeder Schools 2009’ lists show broadly similar patterns of progression to third level, whereby fee-paying school top the tables, however “the gap between the performance of fee-paying and non-fee paying schools has narrowed” (Flynn 2009a). Many non-fee paying schools are sending large numbers onto study at third level but these crude league tables do not reveal the social mix of each school, and the consequential impact that may have.

While schools remain in control over their student intake, this segregated school system is likely to continue whereby some schools cherry-pick the ‘best’ students. Maybe the time has now come for that control over student intake to be reviewed.
5.4.5 External market influence

The OECD mission statement says that it “brings together the governments of countries committed to democracy and the market economy from around the world to (i) support sustainable economic growth, (ii) boost employment, (iii) raise living standards, (iv) maintain financial stability, (v) assist other countries' economic development and (vi) contribute to growth in world trade” (OECD 2010). As a market led organisation, the OECD has promoted some New Right views in Ireland in the early 1990s (Halton 2003 cited in Tormey 2007). The Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) is an OECD programme that operates on a three year cycle, starting in 2000, and continuing on in 2003 and 2006. The Department of Education and Science described PISA as

“...one of the largest international studies of student achievement in the world, with almost 400,000 students taking part in 57 countries. PISA is designed to measure how well students can apply knowledge and skills considered to be important for their future lives. It does not aim to measure students’ mastery of specific curricular content... PISA is designed to measure how well students can apply knowledge and skills considered to be important for their future lives” (DES 2007).

The then Minister for Education, Mary Hanafin, who launched the publication Ready for Tomorrow's World - the Competencies of Ireland's 15-year-olds in PISA 2006, said

“...studies such as PISA provide us with important information on the performance of the Irish education system in the context of international trends. The results also present us with challenges and directions for the continued development of the system and the improvement of the educational experience of our students” (DES 2007).

It becomes evident that the influence of the OECD is significant in Irish education. According to Dr Willem Adema, senior economist at the OECD social policy division, addressing a ‘Future of the Welfare State’ conference in September 2010, social spending in Ireland will increase sharply as a consequence of the recession. This sharp increase will be in the region of one fifth of Ireland’s GDP by 2011 (Smyth 2010c). However this could see the middle classes benefitting more from the welfare state than the working classes (Smyth 2010c). Commenting on what he warned could be a regressive instead of a progressive step, UCD professor of social policy Tony Fahey, explained that:
“Tax breaks for social purposes are of benefit only to those earning taxable income and usually the more taxable income they earn, the greater benefit they can derive from those measures” (Smyth 2010c).

The OECD report, Education at a Glance 2010, shows that Ireland is towards the bottom of an international league table detailing expenditure on education, with Ireland spending 4.7 per cent of its GDP on education which trails behind the OECD average of 6.2 per cent. The data is based on figures from 2007, a time when the Celtic Tiger roared loudest. Government spending on education was significantly higher in 1995 when the figure spent on education was 5.2 per cent of GDP (Flynn 2010). This trend is spectacularly revealing – it seems to suggest that during Ireland’s so-called ‘boom years’ an opportunity was missed for investment in education. It then leaves one wonder what will happen in these lean post economic boom years, when the roar of the Celtic Tiger has faded from memory?

There exists an established partnership approach to policy-making decisions in Ireland. The National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) is a statutory agency, consisting of representatives from teacher unions, school management organisations, parents’ groups, industry and trade union interests, which advises the Minister for Education and Science on curriculum and assessment from the pre-school through to the second-level spectrum. It operates on a consensus basis. Another example of a partnership approach is the review of the Primary School Curriculum (1999), the first since 1971. Mr. Noel Dempsey, the then Minister for Education and Science began a public consultation process with the Your Education System in 2004 whereby general issues on education were raised at a series of open public meetings (DES 2004).

Nonetheless, Irish educational policy did not “need new-right educational reforms [detailed in the previous chapters] when the educational system already operated on the basis of the old-right principles” (Tormey 2007: 186).
5.5 Inequality

During the late 1990s the Irish economic boom began. Economist David McWilliams christened it the ‘Celtic Tiger’, and it brought tremendous prosperity to Ireland, up to its demise in 2008, but this prosperity is not evenly distributed.

“It is shown that Ireland is actually one of the most unequal countries in the industrialised world, and that, despite the recent economic progress, inequality continues to be one of the hallmarks of Irish society...one form of this inequality is educational inequality.” (Tormey and Haran 2003: 19)

With the presence of an educational marketplace promoting choice and accountability, differing types of ‘consumers’ emerged. Some were ‘active consumers’ who were quite skilled in operating in the educational marketplace. These were almost exclusively middle class parents, who by their cultural and material capital gained a considerable advantage in the issue of school choice. If one group is in a position of advantage, it consequentially follows there must be another group in a place of disadvantage, who are unable to operate in the market to the same level as the middle class parents. This group are predominately made up of working class parents. This section strives to show the educational inequality evident in an Irish context.

5.5.1 The cost of ‘free education’

Barnardos put the cost of equipping a child starting first year in secondary school at €815 on average, while The Back to School Clothing and Footwear Allowance was just €305. Barnardos stressed the significant financial burden placed on parents’ shoulders as a consequence of the average €500 gap between these two figures, which was spent on school books and materials. Barnardos also pointed out that parents spent more on books in 2010 than they did the previous year. The children’s charity welcomed the changes in the School Book Grant Scheme however the charity felt that a book rental scheme was to be encouraged, as well as an end to the use of workbooks which have a short, non-transferable lifecycle (Barnardos 2010). The total cost of educating a child from primary school to third level graduation is touching €70,000, the breakdown is as follows - €13,528 for primary school, €14,112 for secondary school on average and €41,851 for third level (Walshe 2010b). Many banks and financial institutions are offering the opportunity of investing child benefit in the stock-market so parents can fund the most expensive part of their child’s education
(Weston 2010b). This opportunity would possibly be only open to middle class parents, whereby they can combine their material and cultural capital to maintain their 30-metre head start Allen (2008) spoke of. For many working class families the luxury of investing their child benefit payments is just not an option. The cost of Ireland’s ‘free education’ system saw reports emerge in the national media of parents turning to their local credit unions for loans to pay the significant costs associated with equipping their child for school (Quinlan 2010). A Sunday Independent/Quantum Research poll of August 2010 saw ninety one per cent of respondents agree that back-to-school costs of books and uniforms should be regulated (McConnell 2010). Indeed in August 2010 the Health Service Executive in the west and mid-west of Ireland had to draft in extra staff in response to the twenty per cent increase in applications for the means tested Back to School Clothing and Footwear Allowance (Gartland 2010: Carberry 2010).

Where a parent decides to send their child to secondary school is often influenced by their ability to pay the associated school transport costs. Currently the charge for secondary schools students is €300, with primary school children travelling for free on the school bus. As a consequence of the recommendation in the McCarthy report on public spending, the 2010 Budget may increase this to “a €500 charge on all pupils” (De Bréadún 2010). This, potential, sixty seven per cent increase has the ability to further promote educational inequality by reducing even more the choice to parents of where to send their children to school.

The gap between higher income families and lower income families is increasing in Ireland and in fact “Ireland’s level of income inequality is one of the highest in OECD countries” with only the UK and the US higher (OECD 1999 cited in Zappone 2007: 12). Zappone (2007) also suggests that Government spending on education actually increases inequality, highlighting a 2001 study which showed that state expenditure on third-level education was almost seventy per cent higher than at second-level. She also stated that “the state spends much more on the education of the better off young people (who tend to remain in the system) than it does on young people from poorer families (who tend to leave the system early) (Zappone 2007 cited in Archer 2001).
A 2009 ESRI School Leavers’ Survey found that students from professional families got the best grades in the Leaving Certificate with nearly two thirds gaining four or more higher level honours, which is six times more than those students from an unemployed background. Students who took Transition Year, predominantly from higher income families, were more likely to “achieve strong Leaving Certificate results” (Flynn 2009e). A study carried out on the data of the ESRI School Leavers A survey by Dr. Kevin Denny of the Geary Institute, UCD, found significant disparities in Leaving Certificate results based on the occupation of a child’s father with children of professional fathers getting on average ninety points more in their Leaving Certificate than those children whose father is a manual worker. If a child’s father is unemployed, the study found, would get thirty points less than the average (Walshe 2010a).

A 2010 ESRI study found that lone parent households are up to ten times more likely to be living in consistent poverty compared to other households. In Ireland being a lone parent significantly increases that parent’s chances of living in poverty, unlike their Finnish counterpart who is only slightly more likely to be living in poverty when compared to the rest of the population. The authors, Chris Whelan of UCD and Bertrand Maître of the ESRI, found that Ireland represents the “worst-case scenario” for lone parent households, as Ireland finished bottom of the seven countries included in the study. Also Government has plans to limit payments to lone parents by ceasing to pay benefits once the youngest child reaches the age of thirteen, currently payment stops when the child reaches eighteen or twenty two if in full time education (Cullen 2010).

5.5.2 

Exacerbating educational inequality

Lynch and Crean (2008: 42) gave the following examples of how Irish educational policy exacerbates inequalities. Firstly, the continued reliance on parents paying voluntary contributions, they cited a 2006 INTO survey which highlighted the €71 shortfall between the €145 actual state contribution per child versus the actual cost per child of €216 – the survey estimated the total ‘local contribution’ was €32 million nationally. Secondly, the significant cost of school books at both primary and secondary level promotes inequality, which begs the question why a privatised and profit driven business had such an impact in education? It is worth noting that the
Consumers’ Association estimated that in September 2010 it cost “€350 to buy books for a first-year secondary school student” (Weston 2010a). Thirdly, the continued state funding of fee-paying secondary schools fuels a two tier educational system. In 2008 private fee-paying schools were funded by the taxpayer to the tune of over €100 million (Flynn 2009d). Allen (2008), writing on this issue in The Irish Times, stated that at that time €90 million was paid by Irish taxpayers for private fee-paying schools. Allen (2008) continued, painting an interesting picture of the educational dichotomy that exists, with many parents, collecting one the one hand, Tesco tokens to purchase a computer for their child’s classroom, while also on the other hand, “generously donating through their taxes to schools with private swimming pools” (Allen 2008). He continues by explaining:

“Despite all the rhetoric about a meritocratic society, the wealthier sections of society want a head start. In a 100 metre sprint, they want to start at the 30-metre line. They are aware that nine out of the 10 top ‘performing’ schools for boys who gain entrance to university are fee-paying. And as the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu put it, they want to transfer their money into ‘cultural capital’ to perpetuate structures of inequality. What is particularly galling, though, is that they want assistance from poorer taxpayers who already – before the cuts – put up with sub-standard schools.” (Allen 2008)

Allen (2008) calls for “a quality, State-run public education system that treats all children equally.” Lynch and Crean (2008) continue by pointing out the fact that the higher income earners, who pay little tax benefit from free fees at third level. They suggest the possibility of introducing a benefit-in-kind taxation. Furthermore Lynch and Crean (2008: 44) highlight additional fuelling of inequality as a consequence of there being “no system in place to monitor the unequal outcomes in educational attainment, [effectively ensuring that] the problem remains invisible and those who are already advantaged can maintain their advantages without any public query or debate”. Also those who are involved in the making decisions on education, the education partners often benefit themselves from educational inequality, with community groups, women’s groups, disability groups and new communities in Ireland being excluded from this educational partnership (Lynch and Crean 2008). The fact that poorer parents, more often than not women, have to choose between caring for their child and bringing in a wage as a consequence of Ireland not having a national child care system; the reality that second chance educational opportunities are limited as a result of “declining support for community education especially if it is not market oriented”; and the fact that the State has funded Gaeltacht summer camps
for middle classes children all also provide evidence of Irish educational policy exacerbating educational inequality (Lynch and Crean 2008: 42). This type of situation may well lead to a “growing normalisation of poverty and inequality in the education system” (Lynch 2008 cited in Holland 2008).

Allied to the economic boom of the early 1990s, the abolition of third-level fees in 1994 allowed middle class parents to cash in on their material capital advantage and begin to use the money previously ear-marked for third-level fees to pay for private education for their children. This can be most clearly seen in Dublin. An analysis by The Irish Times, based on Department of Education and Science enrolment figures released in 2010, focusing on the years between the 2004/2005 academic year and 2009/2010 academic year, show four broad trends emerging; (i) “demand for fee-paying schools in Dublin is remarkably robust, despite the recession; (ii) ‘free’ State schools located close to fee-paying schools in south Dublin have seen a surge in pupil numbers since 2004; (iii) there is a very mixed picture for some of the famous Christian Brothers schools in Dublin – some have seen a huge fall off in demand whereas others show signs of revival; (iv) all over the State community colleges, colleges of further education and many VEC schools are showing a remarkable increase in enrolment” (Flynn 2010b). Indeed ten private schools in Dublin have increased their fees, despite the current economic recession, reflecting a sustained and “strong demand by parents for private education which has been largely unaffected by the economic downturn. Overall, the total number of students in fee-paying second-level schools this year (26,277) has dipped only marginally on last year” (Flynn and McGuire 2010). This suggests that the thirty metre head start that middle class parents seem to engineer, that Allen (2008) spoke of above, shows no sign of being lessened.

Further advantage can be paid for through grinds, indeed it has become big business. Ireland’s largest grind school, the Institute of Education in Dublin, responding to the fact that it did not feature on the ‘Feeder Schools – The Master Lists’ published in The Irish Times in 2005, claimed that almost fifty per cent of the students in the top performing schools in Dublin on the ‘feeder lists’ also attended the Institute of Education for grinds Flynn, S. (2005 l).
In September 2010 the director of Tasc, an independent think-tank dedicated to combating economic inequality and charged with keeping equality front and centre in public policy, Paula Clancy stated that “equality must be placed at the heart of government policy as we attempt to repair the economy”, that higher levels of taxation could trigger economic growth, echoing the “Nordic countries, which have historically enjoyed high levels of productivity and economic growth, combined with high levels of public expenditure, paid for by high levels of taxation” (Edwards 2010).

5.5.3 Drop out rates

Students who drop out of school early are more likely to be male and come from a working class home where their parent(s) are not employed and belong in the semi/unskilled manual and skilled manual category (Byrne and Smyth 2010). Furthermore working class students tend to find “the school climate as negative and to be allocated to lower stream classes (Byrne and Smyth 2010: 66). This Byrne and Smyth (2010) state that “streaming is now disproportionately prevalent in disadvantaged schools” (cited by Smyth, McCoy and Darmody: 2004 cited in Byrne and Smyth 2010: 66). It appears that ability grouping in schools, perhaps unsurprisingly, plays a significant role in early school leaving, with Byrne and Smyth (2010) offering some startling statistics:

- Students in mixed ability classes were less likely to drop out of school
- The highest drop out rates were found amongst those who had been allocated to a lower stream class
- Those in lower stream classes were 13 times more likely to drop out than those in mixed ability classes (Byrne and Smyth 2010: 67-68)

Other factors that influenced early school leaving include a general pervasiveness of low expectations from the school, poor relationships between students and teachers, while a positive relationship between students and teachers appears to retain more students (Byrne and Smyth 2010). The fact that almost nine thousand students leave school before completing their Leaving Certificate inevitably will have an impact on their long-term lob opportunities (Byrne and Smyth 2010). Indeed, alarmingly, little seems to have changed over the years. In their 2003 research, Tormey and Haran cited Hyland:

81
As Hyland explains “In all, at the end of the 1990s, about 17,500 young people (almost a quarter of the cohort) left school annually without the Leaving Certificate. It is clear then that, if the Leaving Certificate is regarded as a necessary qualification for life ...., the school system is currently failing almost a quarters of our young people” (cited in Tormey and Haran 2003: 21-2).

The percentage number of students who fail to stay on in school to sit the Leaving Certificate has remained unchanged since the mid-1990s, with the rate at or around eighteen per cent, despite a number of programmes designed to improve school completion (Hyland 2007; Lynch 2010).

5.5.4 Bizarre priorities

During the boom years of the Celtic Tiger in Ireland, €1 billion was spent on the Government’s ill-fated decentralisation plan (Money to Burn 2010). This €1 billion could have had the potential to make a lasting impact on educational inequality in Ireland. Examples of brutal Governmental mismanagement and wasteful spending policies abounded, as they did in the print media. The Office of Public Works (OPW) was to decentralise from Dublin to Trim, Co. Meath but as of August 2010 half of the OPW staff is still being bussed out to Trim in the morning and back to Dublin in the evening; €30 million was spent on a site for the prison Thornton Hall which has yet to have a sod turned on it; €26 million was spent on a site adjacent to Mountjoy Prison but is now worthless as it can never be developed; by 2007 10,300 Dublin based public servants should have moved outside the capital as part of the decentralisation process but as of September 2010, over three years later only 3,159 jobs have moved; in 2007 nearly €6 million an acre was spent on a two-acre site in Drogheda for a new headquarters of the Department of Social Protection – this was the most expensive purchase by Government as part of their decentralisation programme, this move has been put on hold; in Mullingar €8.25 million was spent on a site which was to be the new headquarters for the Department of Education and Skills, nearly 300 staff were to have moved there, but only seven are in place – many of these moves across various groups are classified as ‘deferred’ and are unlikely ever to be realised, certainly not in the short term; “temporary accommodation (with total fit-out costs of €5 million-plus) is also being rented in Athy, Carlow, Cavan, Claremorris, Dundalk, Portarlington, Portlaoise, Roscrea and Thurles to accommodate advance parties from other departments and agencies whose ultimate relocation is under review, the combined rent is costing €1.36 million per year”; “the most expensive long-term lease –
€800,000 per year – is being paid in Carrick-on-Shannon for offices for 159 staff from the Department of Social Protection”; FÁS – the State training and employment authority – spent €1.5 million, over twice the initial valuation its own property consultants on a 5.6 acre site for new headquarters in Birr, Co Offaly are just a few of the countless examples of an erroneous spending policy (Money to Burn 2010: McDonald 2010a; McDonald 2010b; McDonald 2010c). This staggering waste of money raises a lot of questions, one of which could be – how could that money have been spent addressing the long term reduction of educational inequality is a question that may never be answered?

According to an OECD report, ‘Education at a Glance’, which was published in September 2010 and dealt with Ireland in 2007, revealed that at the height of the economic boom in Ireland was ranked thirtieth out of thirty three countries “for the amount of its overall wealth invested in education in 2007” (Flynn 2010a). In 2007, when the Celtic Tiger was at its zenith, Ireland apparently spent 4.7 per cent of its income on education, the OECD average stood at 5.7 per cent, between 1995 and 2007 “the proportion of GDP that went to education in Ireland fell by half a percentage point…at the height of the boom Ireland was spending significantly less of a proportion of its income on education compared to other OECD countries” (Flynn 2010a). When compared with the vain political folly that Government’s decentralisation programme has become, it perhaps reflects that all the talk of valuing education that was part of the Renewed Programme for Government announced in October 2009 is merely misplaced rhetoric. It truly is a staggering portrait of fiscal policy.

5.5.5 No light on the horizon
The current economic reality in Ireland in 2010 seems to ensure a significantly bleak future for the most vulnerable in Irish society. A report issued by the Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI) ‘Monitoring Poverty Trends in Ireland 2004-2007’, published in September 2010, stated that poverty levels were expected to rise in the immediate future with those most vulnerable facing a “greater risk of consistent poverty or social exclusion” (Smyth 2010a). The long-term unemployed, lone parents were seen as the group most likely to be caught in “a deepening poverty trap”. The ESRI report called on Government to find a way to ensure the most vulnerable in
society are “poverty-proof[ed]” against further cuts. Those at risk of poverty in 2006 were those whose income is less than €202.49 per month” (Smyth 2010a). The ESRI report found that the decision to “phase out the one-parent family payment for children over 13 years of age as particularly challenging” (Smyth 2010a). The fact that the costs associated with having a thirteen year old in secondary school, the majority as new first year students, is ever increasing makes this decision regrettable and ill-judged. Furthermore the ESRI has warned that the trend of the children of immigrants attending designated disadvantaged schools, as a consequence of these school not being oversubscribed, could lead to increased “ghettoisation” in the Irish school system (Smyth 2010b). A report by the ESRI found that “high levels of ‘clustering’ of immigrant students in certain primary schools, while other primary schools had no immigrants at all” (Smyth 2010b). In October 2009 the Government published its ‘Renewed Programme for Government’ which stated that with regard to education

“The best investment with the greatest return any Government can make is in education. It empowers the individual, strengthens society and is truly transformational. In the savings that must be made, we will protect our children's education insofar as we can.” (Ireland 2009: 2)

As part of this new programme the Home School Community Liaison Scheme, the School Completion Programme and the Visiting Teacher for Traveller Service were all integrated, some would say diluted, under the National Educational Welfare Board (Ireland 2009).

5.6 Educational disadvantage

Educational disadvantage is a complex issue. Tormey (2007: 172) states the “crux of the problem” is, when he writes, that “disadvantage itself can be seen as a function of advantage”. Where the middle class parents can call upon additional material, cultural and social capital to maintain their position of advantage in the educational marketplace, they can keep their 30-metre head start. The flip side of this scenario is that another group are 30-metres behind in a position of disadvantage, and consequentially experience educational inequality. This group in a position of disadvantage and experiencing educational inequality are made up of working class parents. The gap between the educational attainment of middle class children and
working class children is unlikely to be reduced significantly because as soon as working class students improve their educational attainment then, in response, the middle class will either improve standards and attainment or look for another avenue which will ensure their advantage (Layte and Whelan 2002 cited in Tormey 2007).

5.6.1 Educational interventions aimed at tackling educational disadvantage

A number of significant interventions have been undertaken to address educational disadvantage in Ireland. They include (i) the designation of schools as being in areas of disadvantage (DAS) scheme whereby additional teachers and grants are provided to schools as a result of their socioeconomic profile; (ii) the Home School Community Liaison (HSCL) scheme where designated disadvantaged schools dedicate a full time teacher to liaise with parents and schools to promote stronger relationships between both; (iii) the Early Start initiative focussed on giving early childhood education in designated disadvantaged areas; (iv) the School Completion programme designed to provide supports to the most vulnerable students to ensure they remain in school; (v) the Teacher/Counsellor Project which looked at managing disruptive or introverted students; (vi) Breaking the Cycle seeking to address educational disadvantage in rural school; (vii) the Giving Children an Even Break scheme was set up to ensure funding reached all disadvantaged students, not just those attending designated disadvantaged schools; (viii) the Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS) initiative sought to promote a more integrated approach to support those students at risk during their schooling (Tormey 2007). These interventions have been contradictory in nature as some are scattered and others are targeted with a more systematic response perhaps achieving greater success in addressing educational inequality (Tormey 2007).

The current government, in office since 1997, albeit in various guises, has sought to address the inequality of opportunity within the Irish second-level sector through a variety of measures along a ‘continuum of interventions’ and in May 2005 it unveiled ‘Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS) – An Action Plan for Educational Inclusion 2005’. The first phase of implementation of DEIS was during the school year 2005/2006. The basis for reform focussed on identifying schools serving disadvantaged communities and directing additional supports, supporting vulnerable groups, legislative measures, focussing on early-school leavers, promoting greater parental and community involvement with the school, as well as curricular
reform, professional development and a national framework of qualifications (DES 2005).

“The aim of the plan is to ensure that the educational needs of children and young people from disadvantaged communities are prioritised and effectively addressed. Its core elements compromise: -

- a standardised system for identifying, and regularly reviewing, levels of disadvantage
- a new integrated School Support Programme (SSP) which will bring together, and build upon, existing interventions for schools and school cluster/communities with a concentrated level of educational disadvantage will be taken into account in targeting actions under the programme.” (DES 2005: 9)

However in November 2009 delays in implementing the DEIS programme were criticised in a study carried out by the National Economic and Social Forum (Carbery 2009). Amongst the criticisms were the fact that the five year plan, launched in 2005, supporting over eight hundred primary and secondary designated disadvantaged schools had not reached all school as promised; some schools experienced a two year delay in accessing supports; schools that do not achieve improvements in literacy are not penalised while those schools who do well are not rewarded; the disparity in the goals set by individual schools; doubts remain whether the Government's goal of halving literacy problems in disadvantaged areas from thirty to fifteen per cent will be achieved; the plan only covered twenty two per cent of schools and thereby not reaching disadvantaged children in other schools; as well as “a lack of information on progress, a lack of co-ordination across agencies and a lack of literacy data to show what was working well” (Carbery 2009).

In the summer of 2003 the Combat Poverty Agency put forward a number of initiatives to tackle educational disadvantage which included the development and implementation “appropriate targets” that would end educational disadvantage, promote educational equality and seek to end the relationship between educational attainment and social background; use a “system-wide response”, that builds on the numerous pilot projects in operation; utilise early identification of vulnerable children and subsequent early intervention; see educational disadvantage “as a symptom of a wider range of problems”; promote integrated, multi-level responses at national level to ensure effective delivery of these programmes; allow “appropriate re-entry
opportunities...for those who have left the education system” (Combat Poverty Agency 2003: 7). From July 2009 the voice of the Combat Poverty Agency has been diluted as a result of it being integrated with the Office for Social Inclusion to form the Social Inclusion Division within the Department of Social and Family Affairs and subsequently on May 2010 the Social Inclusion Division became part of the Department of Community, Equality and Gaeltacht Affairs (Combat Poverty Agency 2010).

5.7 Some recent literature on markets and choice in Ireland

The issues surrounding educational markets and the choice process in an Irish context have been the source of some recent literature (O’Brien 2004, 2005; Lynch and Moran 2006; Smyth et al 2004). In a study about the transfer from primary to secondary schooling for students, teachers and parents, O’Brien (2004) found that the majority of parents in non-disadvantaged areas had completed secondary school whereas this was not the case in disadvantaged areas with the majority of parents having left school early. Many of these parents now felt a sense of regret at having left school early. As a consequence some of these parents possess less social, cultural and material capital and “their children have an unequal starting point with those who are more advantaged” (O’Brien 2004: 36). O’Brien (2004) also discovered that when explaining their choice of secondary school, parents’ explanations were split along social class lines; with working-class parents choosing a secondary school for their child because of the nearby location of the school as well as other members of the family having attended the school, whereas middle-class parents also included the idea of the potential school being single sex or co-educational, the religious ethos of the school, the culture of care and the sports played at the school in their decision making process. Many middle class parents therefore chose secondary school further a field than their own immediate locality, in some cases also choosing private secondary schools if the local schools did not provide the appropriate mix of criteria these parents sought (O’Brien 2004). O’Brien (2004) also wrote:

“It is evident from the interviews with parents in our study that middle-class parents possess greater economic and cultural capital which affords them and their children a greater range of choice than those in more disadvantaged circumstances. This is an
An area where O’Brien (2004) found common ground between the classes was with regard to the feelings that parents experienced. A nervous tension allied to a sense of excitement was prevalent amongst the majority of parents, with those parents who had previously experienced the transition process feeling reassured. Both working-class and middle-class parents expressed concern that their child would be supported in secondary school. With regard to the hopes of the parents, these hopes centred on the child doing well both socially and academically at secondary school, with the majority of parents hopeful that their child would sit the Leaving Certificate. Nonetheless some differences emerged between the classes as parents of children who attended disadvantaged schools felt that it would entail a greater struggle to keep their child in school until the Leaving Certificate and the view that their child would attend college was seen not seen as an “automatic progression”, while for middle class parents college was seen as the natural next step in their child’s educational journey (O’Brien 2004: 39). O’Brien also made some of the following recommendations to assist parents at the time of transfer from primary to secondary school; these included (i) the continued resourcing of important schemes such as the Home School Community Liaison, (ii) resources for initiatives within the community that support parents through the transfer process and (iii) improved financial aid to parents at the transfer time due to the increased financial demands for families in economic difficulties (O’Brien 2004).

Smyth et al (2004) explored the experiences of first-year students in post-primary education. They found that “in Ireland, little is known about parents’ perceptions of the transition process from primary to post-primary school” (Smyth et al 2004: 261). Citing O’Brien (2001) and Lyons et al (2003), Smyth et al (2004) state that the reasons parents choose second-level schools for their children and the impact of these choices on their children’s futures is an area of research that has not been explored sufficiently. Echoing some of O’Brien’s 2004 research in the previous paragraph, Smyth et al (2004) found a mix of factors influenced parents’ decision of where to send their child to secondary school- these factors included the location of the school
in relation to the family home, where older children had gone to secondary school, the reputations and facilities of the school, as well as the child’s own preferences of where to attend secondary school. Similarly, all the parents Smyth et al (2004) interviewed told of their anxiety about the transfer process regardless of class – mirroring O’Brien’s (2004) study, with parents recognizing that friends were a key factor in aiding the transfer process by “taking the edge off” (Smyth et al 2004: 280).

Lynch and Moran (2006) examined the complex dynamics of school choice. They stated that “parents are but one set of actors in the ‘choice’ play, and schools are only one of the stages where the play is acted out” (Lynch and Moran 2006: 231). Some schools try to carefully ‘choose’ children that will aid the survival and the standing of the school while also attempting to dissuade certain children from attending the school – these selection mechanisms include offering sports that are more associated with the middle-classes such as hockey and rugby, or having expensive and elaborate uniforms or the use of high-priced ‘voluntary contributions’ (Lynch and Moran 2006). The advent of ‘grind schools’ has added another layer to the ‘choice’ play, with the choice between schools and the private market which allows those with greater material capital to choose between schools and the private market and not just between schools (Lynch and Moran 2006). Lynch and Moran (2006) have found that for parents in Ireland their

...constitutional rights to be ‘the primary and natural educators’ of their children, granted to secure religious freedom, has thus facilitated the emergence of a choice-based system driven by wholly market-based principles (Lynch and Moran 2005: 232).

The characteristics of this neo-liberal environment within the Irish educational vista can be observed by (i) the emergence of ‘grind’ schools; (ii) the zealous efforts of newspapers to provide league tables of results for schools within the state system while at the same time allowing the private colleges or ‘grind’ schools to publish their results without mention of their socially and academically selective application structures; (iii) the support of the National Parents Council provides for the continued state subsidization of fee-paying schools (Lynch and Moran 2005). Lynch and Moran (2005) describe market choice as “an underground defining feature of the Irish educational landscape” (Lynch and Moran 2005; 232).

O’Brien (2005: 225) highlights “the inequalities and differences between mothers as education workers, inequalities that exist relative to social identities and positionings, and outsider or insider status in education.” O’Brien (2005) focuses on the idea of emotional capital as a resource to stand alongside cultural, material and social capital when examining education and social reproduction whereby the act of caring requires emotional capital. The time when a child transfers to secondary school involves both educational and care work with a need to access emotional resources – a type of ‘love labour’. Lynch (1989 cited in O’Brien 2005: 226) defines ‘love labour’ as

“the efforts of maintaining intimate relationships through looking out for, thinking about, and acting in the interests of another despite the costs to oneself” (Lynch 1989 cited in O’Brien 2005: 226)

O’Brien’s (2005) study found that it is mothers who do the on-the-ground tasks associated with the move from primary to secondary school. It was acknowledged that while fathers do play a role in this process, mothers have a “deeper understanding of the educational needs of their particular children because it is they who are engaged in daily caring and emotional work” (O’Brien 2005: 232). It was also found that mothers and fathers differ in the types of caring they are involved in during the school selection and transfer process, with fathers “characterised more by a rational decision-making process and as less emotional and protracted” than mothers (O’Brien 2005: 233). The type of care work carried out by the mothers in O’Brien’s research included supporting their children with:

- School assessment tests
- Preparing and organising uniforms, schoolbooks and equipment
- Negotiating transport to new schools
Mothers in O’Brien’s research were found to have changed careers, altered their hours of paid work so as to make themselves emotionally available to care for and about their children. The research felt that the silence about this invisible and taken-for-granted care and educational work carried out by mothers could not continue (O’Brien 2005).

One area that this recent literature has highlighted is the myth of equal choice in the Irish educational landscape. Often a parent’s own education can often cast a shadow over their child’s educational journey – whereby parents who left secondary school early often feel a deep sense of regret and may be left with less social, material and cultural capital to navigate the school choice process when compared to parents who completed their secondary schooling and are au fait with how the school choice process works, bestowing on these parents an advantage. Conversely the parents who left school early are in a place of disadvantage. It has also shed light, in an Irish context, on the class division of how parents choose where to send their child to secondary school with working-class parents being influenced by location and previous family history of attending the local school whereas middle-class parents factor in a broader set of criteria. The studies mentioned above found that all parents were anxious and nervous about their children embarking on life in secondary school regardless of class. However there was a distinct difference when it came to parental hopes and expectations with many working-class parents hopeful that their child would sit the Leaving Certificate whereas the majority of middle-class parents saw secondary school as another step on the road to college. The view of parents with regard to their children’s experience of transferring to secondary school has not been widely heard in Irish education also. Parents are not the only ones involved in choosing, as schools are also active ‘choosers’ as they place obstacles in the path of students they may wish to exclude. Also the neoliberal presence is well established in the Irish educational vista with the clamour for league table being sated with the now annual publication of ‘feeder school’ lists in the national newspapers, something
Lynch and Moran (2006) warned against in their work. The role of emotional capital as another resource in addition to social, cultural and material capital, as well as the unique, invisible and ‘taken for granted’ caring work that mothers do around education as crucial education workers was highlighted also.

5.8  Limerick city’s unique school application process

Parents who wish their children to attend a secondary school in Limerick city have to operate within the unique *Limerick Area Post-Primary Schools Common Application Process* (see Appendix 1 page 243). This is the only common application system for secondary schooling in use in Ireland. In 1993 over one hundred children had been left without a secondary school place in Limerick city (Dáil Éireann 1993). In 2004 forty-nine children from disadvantaged areas of Limerick city did not get a place in secondary school (Downes 2004). As a consequence of this the *Limerick Area Post-Primary Schools Common Application Process* was established in 2005 and has been in operation since (RTE 2005). It operates in a similar fashion to the Central Application Office (CAO) used for application to third level. Each sixth class pupil and their parents are required to fill in the common application form listing their top nine preferences of secondary school out of a list of eighteen secondary schools. The Limerick Education Centre operated the process with the schools co-operation. The schools continue to use their enrolment policies to decide their intake (RTE 2005). The application forms have to be completed by January and the offers are posted out in February of each year.

5.9  Conclusion

The findings within this chapter illustrate that in Ireland parental choice was guaranteed under the 1937 Irish Constitution, echoing Catholic social teaching (Keogh 1988; Chubb 1978). The Mother and Child Scheme in 1950s, the UCD TCD merger in the late 1960s and the case of Eileen Flynn saw the Catholic Church in conflict with the state with regards to education (Farrell 2010; Farry 1996; Whyte 1971). In 2010 the fall out of the Catholic Church’s handling of the Murphy report into sexual abuse scandal in the Catholic Archdiocese of Dublin saw a significant majority of Irish people felt that the Catholic Church’s patronage of schools should be revisited (Collins 2010b). Responding to this poll, Bishop Leo O’Reilly, of Kilmore
and chairman of the bishops’ education commission, stated that “the central issue at stake surely is parental choice. It is not whether the church or the State should have control of primary schools” (O’Reilly 2010). The Education (Amendment) Bill 2010 was published whereby the VECs were to be involved in the “development of a new model of patronage for primary schools” (Education [Amendment] Bill 2010: 8). The language of the New Right could be seen in Department of Education and Science’s ‘Customer Service Charter’ which used terms such as ‘clients’ and ‘customers’ (DES 2004). The demand for information was sated when school inspection reports were made available online for parents in 2006 (Flynn 2005a). From 2005 further information could also be gleaned from the publication of feeder school lists in the national daily newspapers which cobbled together crude league tables (Flynn 2005h). These same feeder lists also provided an account of special needs provision in Irish secondary schools with some schools operating a selective enrolment policy whereby students with special needs were not provided for, giving rise to a segregated school system (Flynn 2009a, 2009b, 2009c, 2005h, 2005k; Kennedy 2005b, 2005c). Barnardos (2010) put the cost of equipping a child for first year in secondary school at €815. €14,112 was the total average cost to parents for their child’s secondary school education (Walshe 2010b). Students from professional families significantly outperformed students from manual and unemployed backgrounds in the Leaving Certificate (Walshe 2010a; Flynn 2009c). Lone parent households are up to ten times more likely to be living in consistent poverty compared to other households (Cullen 2010). A child’s ability to ‘succeed’ in education seems to be related to their parents’ ability to pay. Working class students were more likely to drop out than their middle class peers (Byrne and Smyth 2010). Given the current economic climate in Ireland the numbers of people in poverty seems set to rise with the most vulnerable facing a “greater risk of consistent poverty or social exclusion” (Smyth 2010a). The evident gap between the educational attainment of middle class and working class students is not likely to narrow notably because as any improvements in the educational attainments of working class students will be mirrored and subsequently improved upon by the middle class students (Layte and Whelan 2002 cited in Tormey 2007). A number of significant interventions have been undertaken to address educational disadvantage in Ireland. These interventions have been contradictory in nature as some are scattered and others are targeted with a more systematic response perhaps achieving greater success in addressing educational inequality (Tormey 2007). Since
2005, as a consequence of large numbers of children in Limerick city not having a secondary school by the time they finish primary school over a number of years, parents who wish their children to attend a secondary school in Limerick city have to operate within the nationally unique *Limerick Area Post-Primary Schools Common Application Process* which functions in a similar fashion to the Central Application Office (CAO) used for application to third level. Parents and their children have to list their top nine preferences out of eighteen secondary schools, with the letters of application arriving each February (RTE 2005, Downes 2004, Dáil Éireann 1993). Questions also remain after this chapter. Why, despite their evident Christian ethos, some schools in Ireland and Limerick practice socially selective enrolment? Is it now time to operate transparent and equal enrolment practices where students from all social classes are placed in secondary schools (Downes 2004)? Is it now also time to hear the voice of those affected by educational inequality (Spring 2007)? Has the plight of the most vulnerable of parents – the ‘rookie’ working class parents, the first time parents entering this educational marketplace as novices – been heard? This research hopes to explore the process of how middle class and working class parents choose where to send their children to secondary school in Limerick city.

Although school choice has been enshrined in the Irish Constitution since 1937, the advent of the neoliberal educational marketplace has seen school choice and accountability pushed further into the Irish education system. This system promotes educational inequality, as not all those who enter this marketplace are equally equipped. Through their greater material and cultural capital middle class parents have established a place of advantage and if one group has a place of advantage then consequentially another group must occupy a place of disadvantage. This group is the working class parents alone. The demand for accountability and information on schools has lead to the now annual publication of crude league tables based on the numbers of students a school sent onto third level education. Further a manipulation of the system by better equipped middle class parents has seen a segregation within the education system emerge and it has to be pointed out that schools themselves have played a role in this segregation by operating restrictive enrolment policies. If a parent of a child entering first year of secondary school is not as equipped with the same level of economic, social and cultural resources as the majority of middle class parents, then the prospects for that child are inequitable. Some would point to the fact
that during the so called ‘boom years’ of the Celtic Tiger Government spending on education was not reflective of this increased revenue as a damning indictment of a wasted opportunity. Now that the Celtic Tiger has passed on and Ireland’s economic future is less certain one can only wonder what further difficulties lay ahead in trying to reduce that most complex of issues – educational inequality.
Chapter 6

Research Methodology

6.1 Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to describe the research methodology adopted to undertake the research study. The chapter is structured around the seven stages in the research process. Firstly, the main purpose of the research and its supporting objectives are outlined. This is followed by an introduction to the importance of research design with emphasis on the impact the different research philosophies have on the chosen research design. Following on from this the choice and design of the main data collection method is discussed, as is the criteria for selecting the respondents. The analysis and interpretation of the findings are then addressed and the chapter concludes with the importance of writing a complete, accurate, clear and concise research report.

Examining the literature on markets, choice and inequality in education, this research has found the following points. As the neoliberal New Right agenda dominates educational discourse across many anglophile countries so too does its belief that parental choice, accountability and testing are key parts of educational landscape. However this has resulted in educational inequality with middle class parents better able to navigate their way through this educational milieu to gain an advantage over working class parents who struggle in this New Right marketplace, with many schools using socially selective enrolment policies (BBC 2010a; Apple 2009, 2001; Olssen et al 2004; Lynch and Lodge 2002; Fiske & Ladd 2000; Chomsky 1999; Hirsch 1995 cited in Gordon & Whitty 1997; Lawton 1992). Parentocracy has replaced meritocracy and within this process of parental choice there is a parental hierarchy that reveals middle class parents, as a result of their greater social, material and cultural capital, dominate the educational marketplace (Bosetti 2004; Vincent 2001; Brown 1997; Ball et al 1995; Gewirtz et al 1995). The impact of poverty sees many lone working class mothers unable to fully prioritise education and in order to seek a solution to the evident educational inequality a genuine engagement with the realities of many working class parents is required (O’Brien and Flynn 2007; Gewirtz 2001). The ‘deficit’ ‘difference’ theories were two perspectives that have dominated the
debate about educational disadvantage (Drudy and Lynch 1993). However the ‘deficit’ model of disadvantage is now seen as out of date and inadequate (EDC 2005). The language used in schools replicates the language used in the dominant middle class homes, and this cultural capital can then be reinvested to give a distinct advantage to middle class children – while literacy levels in working class homes are significantly behind their middle class, which in turn can limit the range of choices in life (Healy 2010b; Morgan and Kett 2003 cited in Flynn 2007; Bernstein 1975; Bourdieu 1973). This inequality in the educational marketplace disadvantages students who do not have dominant cultural capital (Winkle-Wagner 2010; Obidah and Marsh 2006; Ross 2000). Teacher-expectancy and streaming can have significantly negative impact on the educational attainment of students, with anti-school sentiment developing among students affected by this (Byrne and Smyth 2010; O’Brien and Flynn 2007; Lynch and Lodge 2002; Smyth 1997; Bilton et al 1996; Drudy and Lynch 1993; Roger 1986). Parental choice has been enshrined in the 1937 Irish constitution, which drew strongly from the Catholic Church’s social teaching, but there have been times during which the Church and the Irish state have been in conflict (Farrell 2010; Farry 1996; Keogh 1988; Chubb 1978; Whyte 1971). The most significant of which, as a consequence of the reaction Murphy report in 2010, has led to the Education (Amendment) Bill 2010 was published whereby the VECs were to be involved in the “development of a new model of patronage for primary schools” (Education [Amendment] Bill 2010: 8; Collins 2010b; ). The Catholic Church’s chairman of the bishop’s education pointed out that “the central issue at stake surely is parental choice. It is not whether the church or the State should have control of primary schools” (O’Reilly 2010). The use of terms such as ‘clients’ and ‘customers’ showed the language of the New Right being used by the Department of Education in Ireland (DES 2004). Further evidence of choice and accountability could be seen in the publication of school inspection reports online, the annual production in the media of crude league tables of feeder schools compiled by examination of third level intake data, from which emerged data suggesting very evident segregation in operation in Ireland (Flynn 2009a, 2009b, 2009c, 2005a, 2005b, 2005k; Kennedy 2005b). The cost of Ireland so called ‘free’ education system continues to polarise the classes, with a child’s future educational attainment evidently linked to the occupation of their parents (Barnardos 2010; Byrne and Smyth 2010; Cullen 2010; Walshe 2010a; Flynn 2009e). Any reduction of the gap in educational attainment between the classes is
only temporary because the middle class parents will seek other avenues to keep their children in a position of advantage (Layte and Whelan 2002 cited in Tormey 2007). Various, somewhat contradictory, schemes have been put in place to address educational inequality but they have achieved limited success (Tormey 2007). Since 2005 parents of children wishing to attend a secondary school in Limerick city have had to operate within the nationally unique *Limerick Area Post-Primary Schools Common Application Process* (see Appendix 1 page 243), as a result of large numbers of students who were left without a place in secondary school (RTE 2005, Downes 2004, Dáil Éireann 1993).

Nonetheless gaps appear to remain in the literature - why is there an apparent dearth of knowledge, in an Irish context, into parental choice of secondary school? What is Ireland’s relationship with the New Right educational marketplace in the anglophile world? Why are some schools, including those in Ireland, allowed to be socially selective? Who is the most vulnerable parent amongst the least dominant working class parents? What happens to the low income parents who are least able to engage with this school choice process? Can teacher-training programmes play a role in reducing the impact of teacher-expectancy? How do middle class and working class parents respond to streaming in their children’s’ schools? Why has there not been greater account taken of the emotional impact of school choice and the value that a mother’s love has in the educational market? Why, despite their evident Christian ethos, some schools in Ireland and Limerick practice socially selective enrolment? Is it now time to operate transparent and equal enrolment practices where students from all social classes are placed in secondary schools? Is it now also time to hear the voice of those affected by educational inequality? Has the plight of the most vulnerable of parents – the ‘rookie’ working class parents, the first time parents entering this educational marketplace as novices – been heard? This research hopes to address some of these gaps as it explores the process of how middle class and working class parents choose a secondary school in Limerick city for their children.

### 6.2 The research process

According to Bell (1999) it is essential the researcher adopt a systematic approach in conducting his/her project in order to avoid time wasting. In Bell’s own words (1999:
2) establishing good research habits will ‘take you from the stage of selecting a topic through to the production of a well-planned, methodologically sound and well written final report or dissertation – on time.’ The stages in the research process adopted for this study are illustrated in Figure 6.1 below.
Figure 6.1  *Stages in the research process*

Stage 1  Defining the Purpose of the Research

Stage 2  Determine the Research Design

Stage 3  Design the Data Collection Method and Conduct the Research

Stage 4  Ethical Considerations

Stage 5  Select Respondents and Collect Data

Stage 6  Analyse and Interpret the Evidence

Stage 7  Writing the Research Report

(Adapted from Bell 1999)
6.2.1 Stage 1 Defining the project’s purpose

The objective of this thesis is to undertake an exploratory study to develop an in-depth understanding of the decision making process of parents from different social backgrounds in selecting a secondary school for their children.

The supporting objectives of the thesis are as follows:

1. To review the existing body of research on the marketisation of education and parental choice and social class.
2. To present a historical review of choice and markets in Irish educational policy.
3. To qualitatively gather and understand information on individual parental experiences of choosing a secondary school, appreciating the social and political context within which that choice is made.
4. To thoroughly analyse and interpret the research results and present the findings in a clear, comprehensible and concise manner.

6.2.2 Stage 2 Determine the research design

In order to determine an appropriate research design it is important the researcher has a clear understanding of the research philosophies that exist and their potential impact on the research. Thus, the philosophy of research design will be reviewed with an examination of how it has informed the chosen research design.

According to Easterby-Smith et al (1995) there are three reasons why an understanding of philosophical issues is very useful:

"Firstly, it can help to clarify research designs, and by 'research design' we mean more than simply the methods by which data is collected and analysed. It is the overall configuration of a piece of research: what kind of evidence is gathered from where, and how such evidence is interpreted in order to provide good answers to the basic research question. Secondly, a knowledge of philosophy can help the researcher to recognise which designs will work and which will not. It should enable the researcher to avoid going up too many blind alleys and indicate the limitations of particular approaches. Thirdly, knowledge of philosophy can help the researcher identify, and even create, designs that may be outside his/her past experience. It may
The Philosophy of Research Design

Every researcher operates within a scientific paradigm. According to Guba and Lincoln (1994: 105) a scientific paradigm is ‘the belief system or worldwide view that guides the investigator’. Silverman (1994) discusses two main scientific paradigms or philosophies that exist in social science, each approaching research from very different perspectives; positivism and interpretivism. Silverman (1994) uses the table below to explain the two approaches.

Table 6.1 Two ‘schools’ of social science

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Approach</th>
<th>Concepts</th>
<th>Methods</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Positivism</td>
<td>Social structure, social facts</td>
<td>Quantitative hypothesis-testing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interpretive social science</td>
<td>Social construction, meanings</td>
<td>Qualitative hypothesis-generation</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Silverman: 1994: 21)

Positivism

Positivism is based on the view that physical and natural science research methodologies can be successfully applied to the social sciences. The paradigm holds that the world exists externally and can be measured objectively. It posits that knowledge is only of value if it is based on this external world, which is reality. The positivist belief system argues that the researcher’s choice of study can be determined through objective means rather than subjectively by the researcher’s beliefs and interests. The researcher is seen to be independent of the research and attempts to always approach their research in an objective, rational and logical manner. Positivism uses theory testing and deduction as its primary method of inquiry. Data collection techniques associated with this method are primarily quantitative including surveys, experiments, official statistics, structured observation and content analysis. Sample sizes are carefully chosen to ensure results are generalisable to the entire population (Bryman and Bell 2003, Silverman 2000).
Despite the dominance of the positivist paradigm it has been open to much criticism. Some of criticisms of quantitative research have been summarised by Silverman (2000: 7):

- Quantitative can amount to a ‘quick fix’, involving little or no contact with people or the ‘field’
- Statistical correlations may be based upon ‘variables’ that, in the context of naturally occurring interaction, are arbitrarily defined.
- After-the-fact speculation about the meaning of correlations can involve the very common-sense processes of reasoning that science tries to avoid.
- The pursuit of ‘measurable’ phenomena can mean that unperceived values creep into research by simply taking on board highly problematic and unreliable concepts such as ‘delinquency’ or ‘intelligence’.
- While it is important to test hypotheses, a purely statistical logic can make the development of hypotheses a trivial matter and fail to help in generating hypotheses from data

Silverman (2000: 7)

Certainly it would appear, to this researcher, that a quantitative approach does not provide a significant level of personal contact with the ‘field’, as a survey or statistical analysis cannot interpret non-verbal cues such as body language, facial expression, as well as the tone of voice of people, which can add to a piece of research. This may be of importance when talking with parents about their decision making process around the area of school choice.

*Interpretivism*

The interpretivist paradigm developed in response to the criticisms of the use of the positivist approach within social science. Here, the world or reality is seen as being socially constructed rather than being external and objective. The researcher’s choice of study depends on their interests and their beliefs. Here the researcher is not independent from what is being researched but part of it. Thus, the researcher is inter-subjective rather than objective. Interpretivism emphasises the importance of describing and understanding rather than measuring social phenomena. It focuses on understanding and explaining why people have different experiences rather than searching for external factors and laws to explain behaviour. Data collection techniques associated with this method are primarily qualitative e.g. case study; personal experience; introspection; life story; interview; artefacts; cultural texts and productions; observational, historical, interactional, and visual texts (Denzin and Lincoln: 2000). Sample sizes are normally small but results can be generalisable from
one setting to another if, according to Norman (1970), your analysis has captured the interactions and characteristics of the phenomena you are studying. Thus, the researcher is concerned with the theoretical generalisability, rather than empirical, of the concepts and theories developed in one setting to other settings (Bryman and Bell: 2003, Silverman: 2000).

As with positivist research interpretivism has also been open to much criticism. Qualitative research methods are often assigned low credibility and viewed as a support to the main quantitative data collection stage in traditional quantitatively orientated research methodology texts. It has also been argued that qualitative research has problems in relation to the reliability and validity of its findings (Hamersley 1992, Bryman: 1988, Silverman: 2000). According to Silverman (2000) it is unwise for the researcher to have a fixed preference towards qualitative or quantitative research but instead, one's choice of methodology should be guided by the research problem at hand. In his own words:

“...if you want to discover how people intend to vote, then a quantitative method, like a social survey, may seem the most appropriate choice. On the other hand, if you are concerned with exploring people’s life histories or everyday behaviour, then qualitative methods may be favoured.” Silverman (2000:1)

A qualitative research design has been chosen for the present study. Given the focus on meaning where an opportunity is presented to the researcher to delve deeper into the narratives of people’s lives and seek to explore the reasons for their actions at certain key times in their lives, for example around the time when parents choose a secondary school for their child. A qualitative piece of research allows the researcher to build “a complex, holistic picture”, indeed Creswell (1998) defines qualitative research as:

“...an enquiry process of understanding based on distinct methodological traditions of enquiry that explore a social or human problem. The researcher builds a complex, holistic picture, analyses words, reports detailed views of informants, and conducts the study in a natural setting.” Creswell (1998:15)

The qualitative design is deemed appropriate, as the purpose of the study is to gain an in-depth understanding and insight into parental choice, an area where little prior
knowledge exists in Ireland. The qualitative approach provides the flexibility to delve below surface level responses to gain this insight.

An interpretativist position and inductive approach are proposed. More specifically a phenomenological research tradition is considered appropriate. A phenomenological study “explores the structures of consciousness in human experience” (Polkinghorne 1989 cited in Creswell, 1998: 51). Spradley (1979 cited in Kvale 1996) provides the following description of the phenomenological endeavour:

“I want to understand the world from your point of view. I want to know what you know in the way you know it. I want to understand the meanings of your experience, to walk in your shoes, to feel things as you feel them, to explain things as you explain them. Will you become my teacher and help me understand.” (1979 cited in Kvale 1996: 125)

6.2.3  Stage 3  Design the data collection method and conduct the research

There are several methods associated with qualitative research; observation, interviewing, focus groups, case studies and personal documents. Having evaluated each, the interview was considered most appropriate for the present study and worthy of further exploration because it affords the researcher an opportunity to meet the respondents face to face and through this seek to gain a greater insight and understanding into the parents’ narrative of how they processed the their decision making progression of where to send their children to secondary school.

The Interview


“Increasingly, qualitative researchers are realizing that interviews are not neutral tools of data gathering but active interactions between two (or more) people leading to negotiated, contextually based results. Thus the focus of interviews is moving to encompass the hows of people’s lives (the constructive work involved in producing
order in everyday life) as well as the traditional whats (the activities of everyday life).”
Fontana and Frey (2000: 646)

According to Bell (1999: 135) a key advantage of the interview is its adaptability. In her own words:

“A skilful interviewer can follow up ideas, probe responses and investigate motives and feelings, which the questionnaire can never do. The way in which a response is made (tone of voice, facial expression, hesitation, etc.) can provide information that a written response would conceal.”

Interviews can take the form of structured, semi structured, or unstructured (Fontana and Frey: 2000).

**Structured interviewing**

In a structured interview, the interviewer asks each respondent identical pre-established sets of questions. These questions have a limited, predefined number of responses. It is as if the interviewer is reading from a “theatrical script”, from which they cannot deviate (Fontana and Frey: 2000: 649). The interviewer must remain objective and removed from the respondents’ replies. Within this context there is little scope for the interviewer to use their own judgement and it is worth highlighting that not every contingency can be predicted (Bradburn 1983, Frey 1989 cited in Fontana and Frey 2000). Fontana and Frey (2000 citing Kahn and Cannel 1957), argue that “it is not enough to understand the mechanics of interviewing, it is also important to understand the respondent’s world and forces that might stimulate or retard response” Fontana and Frey (2000: 651).

**Group interviewing**

The group interview operates whereby a number of individuals are simultaneously questioned in a formal or informal setting. There are some advantages to this type of interview in that it is inexpensive to perform and can provide a rich source of data as the respondents’ stimulate each other’s memories. However there are some difficulties with group interviews also, as one or two respondents may dominate and thereby skew the groups’ responses with the emergence of uniform “groupthink”. The skill of the interviewer is put to the test more within this context, than an individual
context. Also more sensitive issue become difficult to address within a group interview process (Merton et al: 1956 cited in Fontana and Frey 2000).

**Unstructured interviewing**

Fontana and Frey (2000) argue that:

"Unstructured interviewing can provide a greater breadth of data than the other types, given its qualitative nature...[and the] traditional type of unstructured interview [is]: the open-ended, ethnographic (in-depth) interview..." (Fontana and Frey: 2000: 652).

The difference between structured and unstructured interviews is that whereas the structured interview attempts to capture data in order to test a hypothesis, the unstructured interview is attempting to generate a hypothesis (Fontana and Frey: 2000). Fontana and Frey (2000: 654) refer to unstructured interviewing as “the establishment of a human-to-human relation with the respondent and the desire to understand rather than explain.”

Fontana and Frey (2000) highlighted some basic elements of unstructured interviewing, which included accessing the setting, understanding the language and culture of the respondents, deciding on how to present oneself, locating an informant, gaining trust, establishing a rapport and also collecting empirical materials (Fontana and Frey: 2000: 654-656). Having evaluated each interview type, the unstructured in-depth interview was considered most appropriate for the present research study. Its more intensive form provides an ideal medium to explore parental choice in a confidential one-to-one setting. In the words of Johnson (2002 cited in Marvasti 2004)

"In depth interviewing begins with common sense perceptions, explanations, and understandings of some lived cultural experience...and aims to explore the contextual boundaries of that experience of perception, to uncover what is usually hidden from ordinary view or reflection or to penetrate to more reflexive understandings about the nature of that experience” (Johnson 2002 cited in Marvasti 2004:21)

Here the researcher adopts an interactionist position viewing the interview as a social event rather than the opposing positivist position where the interview is conducted as a fact-finding exercise. Silverman (1994: 91) describes status of the data from a positivist position as “facts about behaviour and attitude”, using the methodology of
“random samples, standard questions and tabulations; whereas he describes status of the data from a interactionist position as “authentic experience”, using the methodology of “unstructured open-ended interviews”. Hammersley and Atkinson (1986) support the interactionist stance stating:

“Interviews must be viewed, then, as social events in which the interviewer (and for that matter the interviewee) is a participant observer....Interview data, like any other, must be interpreted against the background of the context in which they were produced.”

(Hammersley and Atkinson 1986: 126)

Interview principles
In order to conduct the unstructured in-depth interview the steps in interview principles were reviewed as shown in figure 6.2 below.

Figure 6.2 Interview principles

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Step 1</th>
<th>Plan the interview</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Step 2</td>
<td>Access the interviewees</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Step 3</td>
<td>Contact interviewees</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Step 4</td>
<td>Start the interview</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Step 5</td>
<td>Manage the interview</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Step 6</td>
<td>Conclude the interview</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Step 7</td>
<td>After the interview</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Adapted by Author from Bell (1999) and Fontana and Frey 2000)
Planning the interview

An interview can be planned according to its main objective, interview guide and probe topics. The overall objective of conducting the interviews was to develop an in-depth understanding of the decision making process of parents from different social backgrounds in selecting a secondary school for their children. An in-depth interview was needed with each respondent. In preparing for the interviews an interview guide was prepared which contained a number of probe topics developed on foot of the literature review (see Appendix 2 page 246). The purpose of the guide was to focus the discussion while still allowing for flexibility. The areas covered under the interview guide included:

- Application process
- Criteria of choice
- Costs associated with books, uniform, transport, extra-curricular
- Open nights and visiting the school
- Transition from primary to secondary school
- Peers
- Home School Liaison Officer
- Parental expectations and hopes
- Parent teacher meetings
- School principal
- Streaming
- Subject choice
- Extended family support
- Desire for more information on school
- Transport to and from school
- Family members attending school
- External information that influenced choice and how accessed,
- ICT technology in the home, levels of familiarity with educational issues via media
- Opinion on league tables, publication of Whole School Inspection Reports
- Awareness of recent legislation 1998 Ed Act, Welfare Act, EPSEN Act
- Influence/Attitude of community towards education attainment
• Who else is in the household, atmosphere, diet, responsibilities, support for child’s homework
• Perception of parents’ own role in education and school life
• Resources in school, how funded, facilities
• Causes of pressure/stress on both child and parent
• Relationship with the school and staff plus relationship other parents/students have with the school
• Family members attending school
• Access to extra resources, grinds, extra tuition
• Level of satisfaction with atmosphere in the school and the school’s approach to discipline
• The future for their child
• Parent’s own educational background and their own value on education
• Level of contentment of child in school

The researcher also familiarised himself with the various types of probes which could be used in the event the researcher wished to clarify or sharpen up the interviewees response to a particular question. Easterby-Smith et al (1995) devised seven types of probes and when to use these probes. These probes include the ‘basic probe’ where the initial question is repeated if the interviewee is drifting off topic; the ‘explanatory probe’ which seeks clarity about a statement that is incomplete or in some way vague and should be used if the interviewee is unclear; the ‘focused probe’ where detailed questions are asked in order to obtain specific information; the ‘silent probe’ where the interviewer pauses allowing the interviewee to break the silence if the interviewee is reluctant or hesitant to answer the question asked; ‘drawing out’ where the interviewer repeats the last few words the interviewee said, while looking expectantly at the interviewee when the interviewee has stopped talking or dried up; ‘giving suggestions or ideas’ whereby the interviewee is given ideas to think about because the interviewer wants to introduce a new angle on a topic being discussed; ‘mirroring or reflecting’ where the interviewer expresses in their own words what the interviewee has said so as to force the interviewee to rethink their answer and construct another reply (Easterby-Smith et al 1995: 80).
The researcher also prepared for the interviews by becoming familiar with the modes of non-verbal communication which may be displayed by the respondent. Gorden (1980 cited in Fontana and Frey 2000) describes four basic modes of non-verbal communication – “proxemic”, which is “the use of interpersonal space to communicate attitudes”; “chronemics”, which is “the use of pacing of speech and length of silence in conversation”; “kinesic” which is “the use of body movements or postures” and “paralinguistic”, which is “the use of variations in volume, pitch and quality of voice” (Gorden 1980 cited in Fontana and Frey 2000: 660-661). The researcher should observe and record these means of communication as well as the verbal responses. The researcher also became familiar with the rules of good interviewing outlined by Yin (1994: 56-57) which included the importance of asking good questions; being a good listener as well as being adaptive and flexible; having a firm grasp of the issues being studied, and being unbiased by preconceived notions.

Accessing the interviewees

The researcher used a number of ‘gatekeepers’ (people who because of their professional capacity or simply because of their awareness of parents in the midst of the school choice process) who could identify parents who were in the middle of or who had recently undergone the school choice process and were willing to be a part of this research. The researcher contacted a number of secondary schools and spoke to a number of home school community liaison officers in order to arrange an appointment with them. The purpose of these appointments was to explain (a) the nature and relevance of the research being undertaken, (b) to highlight the role played by the University of Limerick’s Research Ethics Committee around the area of confidentiality during the research and (c) identify potential interviewees. In time the home school community liaison officers, interested in taking part in the research, spoke with potential interviewees and when a parent agreed to be interviewed by this researcher, the home school community liaison officers contacted me giving me contact details of each interviewee. This researcher also contacted a principal once the interviewees generated via the home school liaison co-ordinators were exhausted with a view to identifying more possible interviewees, again the same information process that was used with the home school liaison co-ordinators was utilised. This principal then informed parents of first year students about the research and how parents may get involved if they wished. Finally this researcher availed of any unexpected
opportunistic discoveries of parents who were involved in the school choice process. As with the home school community liaison officers and principal, this last group were informed of the nature and relevance of the research being undertaken and the role played by the University of Limerick’s Research Ethics Committee around the area of confidentiality during the research.

This researcher found that the reality of this ‘accessing process’ is that this is not the sample this researcher would have chosen, as there were certain difficulties and limitations in this process. This researcher found some parents did not want to participate in this research perhaps borne out of a wariness or reluctance to give information about their family situation; other parents remained suspicious around possible ‘true’ motives for this research; also some Home School Community Liaison Officers (HSCLO) felt that the parents they were in contact with would not be interested in partaking in this research or the HSCLO themselves were not interested in taking part in this research. This researcher also acknowledges that it can be difficult to access the voice of the most vulnerable of parents. Nonetheless this researcher feels that the selection does work because the voice of parents was heard, most notably those parents’ voices not often heard from or those voices in need of being heard from, the working class ‘rookie’ parent amongst others. The rationale for the research does appear to work.

For the purposes of this research, I took the places where people live as a proxy for their social class.

*Contact interviewees*

Once the ‘gatekeepers’ had identified parents who were willing to be part of this research and supplied the contact details of the interviewees, the researcher, having fully prepared for the interviews, made initial contact with these parents. After a preliminary phone call, during which the nature and relevance of the research being undertaken, the format and length of the interview and the role played by the University of Limerick’s Research Ethics Committee around the area of confidentiality during the research was explained, an appropriate venue was agreed to suit both parties. The venues included the parents’ own home, their children’s school, a university canteen and a parent’s workplace.
Starting the interview

The researcher began each meeting, with the interviewee(s), with a friendly greeting and general conversation to build rapport. Once the researcher and the interviewee(s) had reached the interview room the researcher organised the interview material and began the interview once it was clear the interviewee(s) was ready to proceed. The interview began with the researcher repeating the purpose of the research and the purpose of the interview. Once the researcher reiterated the confidentiality of the research, and the consent form from the University of Limerick Research Ethics Committee was signed by the parent, the interviewee(s) was asked permission to use a MP3 player with voice recording facility to aid analysis of the material after the interview, as well as allowing a freer flow of information like a conversation. While the researcher was aware of the criticisms of using recording devices in interviews e.g. the distraction they cause for both the interviewer and interviewee(s), it was felt that the benefits outweighed the negatives e.g. the ability to achieve complete comprehensiveness allowing the researcher to transcribe the data which would aid the analysis of the information at a later stage. The researcher then checked the interviewee(s) was available for the agreed time. At this point the researcher began the interview properly (Fontana and Frey: 2000).

Managing the interview

The location of the interview was an important factor. When the interviews took place in the family home it was agreed to find a quiet room where the interview could be conducted without interruption or at a time of day when the house was quieter. Occasionally both parents were available for the interview and it took place, largely uninterrupted, at the kitchen table. Some interviews took place in the children’s school, after the school had finished, where the principal made the guidance counsellor’s office available, affording an excellent environment in which to conduct the interview. One interview took place at night in an empty university canteen which, in the main, allowed for a very good environment for the interview. One interview was conducted in a parent’s office at their workplace at lunchtime, which was uninterrupted and allowed for an excellent interview environment.

Once the consent forms were signed and the interview was under way this researcher managed the interview by referring to the interview guide complete with probe topics.
In the main the questions were open-ended and when necessary the researcher followed the advice of Easterby-Smith et al (1995) regarding differing types of probes for varying situations. In the main, this researcher found that parents were very willing to discuss the issue of school choice as it was experienced by them and their children and their family. The researcher also paid heed to Gorden’s (1980 cited in Fontana and Frey 2000) descriptions of non-verbal communication and took on board Yin’s (1994) rules for good interviewing. During the course of the interview any self-consciousness on the part of the interviewees about being recorded disappeared as the interview developed. It was felt by the researcher that it was important to monitor the time subtly and stick to the agreed time, which was approximately one hour.

**Concluding the interview**

To conclude each interview the researcher asked the interviewee(s) if they had anything further to add that had not been addressed by the researcher’s question, perhaps a topic they wished to talk about but did not feature during the course of the interview or a topic they wished to return to in order to clarify it. The researcher thanked the interviewee(s) for being so generous with their time.

**After the interview**

After each interview, once the researcher had left the site of the interview, memory joggers regarding the time, date, duration, and relevant observations made during the meeting were noted. The researcher also sent a thank you letter to the interviewees following each interview.

**6.2.4 Stage 4 Ethical considerations**

In conducting research one’s ethical obligations cannot be ignored. Gorden (1975) offers this definition of ethics:

“...let us define ethics as the application of social values to concrete behaviour. It is the practical application that distinguishes ethical problems from the problems of building a system of values or a set of ideals. In the abstract world of thought we can imagine a set of harmonious and mutually reinforcing values which can never compete with one another. However, in the empirical world of deeds and actions, the most attractive set of ideals can be thrown into conflict.” (Gorden 1975: 138)
The ethics of interviewing is of particular importance for this piece of research. Over time the ethical concerns that arose for interviewing, developed from issues such as informed consent, right to privacy and protection from harm. The respondents that are interviewed, as part of the research process, need to be treated with respect and care has to be taken to avoid harm to them. Researchers should operate within the parameters of common sense with responsibility to the respondents firstly, secondly to the research being undertaken and lastly to the researcher themselves (Fontana and Frey: 2000).

Gorden (1975) outlines the researcher’s responsibilities to the respondent. He states that participation should be voluntary where there is an appeal to the respondent’s altruism, there is evidence of selflessness on the part of the interviewer, an offer to assist the respondents in some feasible way and also an effort is made to reduce the cost to the respondent. Goren (1975) also stresses the need not to harm the respondent by leaking information that could be used against the respondent and it may be harmful to the respondent to be even be seen with the interviewer. A significant way of avoiding harm is by keeping information confidential or anonymous. He also suggests that, if possible, the interviewer could help the respondent by allowing time to provide some diagnostic information during the course of the interview. But Gorden (1975) warns to avoid promising more assistance than can be provided and for the researcher “not to shift their activities from science to service to such an extent that science is lost”. He also advises not to deceive the respondents and finally, share the results with the respondents (Gorden: 1975: 153-168). Gorden (1975) also detailed the interviewers responsibilities to the research organisation whereby: the sampling instructions are always followed; responses are recorded verbatim and not fictionalised; the researcher does not allow external factors, such as fatigue or loss of curiosity, to hinder any probes; the researcher does not lose their objectivity whereby responses become biased; and finally to report any invalidities in the interview schedule. The researcher has sought and been granted permission from the University of Limerick’s Research Ethic Committee to carry out these interviews according to the guidelines of this committee.
6.2.5 Stage 5 Select respondents and collect data

According to Gordon (1975:196) “The type of respondent needed depend mainly on the type of information sought.” Gordon (1975) lists four basic criterion questions that must be answered when selecting respondents:

1. Who has the relevant information?
2. Of those having the relevant information, which are physically and socially accessible?
3. Which persons having the information are most willing to give it?
4. Which persons having the information are most able to give an accurate accounting? (Gorden: 1975: 197)

Having given due consideration to each of the above questions the researcher decided that the selected respondents had to adhere to the following criteria:

- Be a parent or state guardian of a child that has entered secondary school in the past 12 months
- Reside in or around Limerick city
- Working class parents whose children attend a working class school
- Middle class parents whose children attend a middle class school
- Working class parents whose children attend a middle class school
- Middle class parents whose children attend a working class school

Purposeful sampling was used to choose a number of respondents from a cross section of social backgrounds. Purposeful sampling is a form of non-probability sampling. It involves hand picking a selection because it is believed to serve the research purpose (Denzin and Lincoln 2000). Respondents may be chosen because they are deemed to be representative or because while not representative they can make a valuable contribution to the research. In addition to self-selecting respondents snowball sampling was used to identify suitable respondents. Contacts used included home school liaison co-ordinators, community youth leaders and parish priests.

6.2.6 Stage 6 Analyse and interpret the data

Following permission from the respondents a MP3 player with a voice recording facility was used to record the interviews to aid data analysis later on. The researcher
is aware that there is debate in the literature regarding the appropriateness of such a recording devise however, is of the opinion that the benefit of obtaining a complete transcript of the interview outweighs the possible risk of the devise being a distraction to the respondent. Practical steps were employed to minimise the distraction and the respondent was assured that the recording of the session was for personal uses only.

Completed transcripts were initially read and re-read by the researcher to ensure complete familiarity. Once complete the researcher began to formally analyse the qualitative data. According to Huberman and Miles data analysis (1994 as cited in Coffey and Atkinson, 1996: 7) consists of three linked processes: data reduction, display, conclusion drawing and verification. Coding was used to identify key themes and patterns. According to Coffey and Atkinson (1996):

“Many analyses of qualitative data begin with the identification of key themes and patterns. This, in turn, often depends on processes of coding data. The segmenting and coding of data are often taken-for-granted parts of the qualitative research process. All researchers need to be able to organise, manage, and retrieve the most meaningful bits of our data. The usual way of going about this is by assigning tags or labels to the data, based on our concepts. Essentially what we are doing in these instances is condensing the bulk of our data sets into analysable units by creating categories with and from our data. This process is usually referred to as coding.” (Coffey and Atkinson 1996: 26)

Once coding was complete the researcher was able to better understand what the data was saying. The discussion of the qualitative results within the main body of the report will be thematically organised with insightful quotes used to support the discussion.

6.2.7 Stage 7 Prepare the research report

The final stage in the research process is to write the research report in a way that effectively communicates the research to its readers. The researcher endeavoured to present the research in a clear, comprehensive and concise manner.

6.3 Conclusion

In conclusion, the chapter set out to describe to the reader the research methodology adopted by the researcher. It began with an introduction to the six-stage research process chosen for the present study which formed the structure for the chapter. The project’s purpose and supporting objectives were described followed by an in-depth
look at the research design which was exploratory in nature, utilised qualitative research methods and was closely related to the interpretivism research philosophy. The reader was then guided through the process of choosing and designing the main research method, followed by a review how the respondents were selected. The methods which were embraced to analyse and interpret the data were presented and finally the guidelines by which the research report was prepared were highlighted.

*It is frequently over the course of the research that one discovers what the research is really about* (Hammersley and Atkinson cited in Silverman 2001:7)
Chapter 7

Context of the Research

7.1 Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to place in context the unique school application system that operates in Limerick City, the only common application system for secondary schooling in use in Ireland. The chapter includes the fascinating and informative Dáil debate about the 1993 situation in Limerick city where over one hundred children had been left without a secondary school place; the 2004 situation where forty nine children from disadvantaged areas of Limerick city did not get a place in secondary school and the consequential setting up of the Limerick Area Post-Primary Schools Common Application Process in 2005. The final part of this chapter acknowledges the changing economic climate in Ireland as the Celtic Tiger boom years are replace with austerity years and the impact this will inevitably have on educational inequality.

7.2 Limerick Area Post-Primary Schools Common Application Process

The upset and anxiety caused to parents, and indeed to the children themselves, in the event of their child not getting a place in a secondary school in Limerick city in the September of any given year, is sadly virtually perpetual. In the following 1993 exchange in Dáil Éireann between two then Limerick East deputies, the late Peadar Clohessy and Des O’Malley, the issue of school paces in Limerick city was an issue of much debate, as can be seen from the fact that this adjournment debate took place at 12.35am, Thursday June 23\textsuperscript{rd} 1993, in Dáil Éireann:

Mr. Clohessy: ...The problem facing 101 pupils and their parents in the Limerick city region in not having secondary school places available to them for the start of the next school year is totally unacceptable. This appalling situation is a source of great concern and anguish to these pupils and their parents ... This problem has been ongoing for more than a month and while the number of pupils affected has been reduced from 160, there is still a total of 89 boys and 12 girls who are due to leave primary school in the next week who wish to start secondary school in September.

The parents of these children have mounted a very effective, reasoned and informative campaign to highlight their plight and deserve better than they have got to date. Last week they came to Dublin to bring their complaint and frustration to the gates of Leinster House. When Deputy O'Malley raised this matter with the Minister for
Education on 26 May last she told him she had met representatives of parents and assured them that no pupil would be left without a place in a second level school next September. That was a month ago and the problem still exists.

Starting secondary school is a difficult experience for children, but when they do not know what school they will be attending or whether there will be a place for them at all it is most unacceptable. Every other pupil leaving primary school in the next week knows what school they will be attending and their parents can plan their books, uniforms and other needs. However, these 101 children in Limerick and their families are in limbo. The Minister should convene a meeting of all secondary school principals in Limerick as well as the chief executive officer of Limerick Vocational Education Committee in order to find a solution to this problem, not only for next September but on a long term basis, so that the problem will not recur next year. The people of this country, including the people of Limerick, are providing a total of £1.8 billion for education this year and one of the basic returns must be the provision of places for every child who wishes to go to secondary school. The children of Limerick and their parents are entitled to nothing less.

Mr. O’Malley: …This problem has arisen to a limited extent in the last two or three years since the system was changed in Limerick. It was resolved quickly every other year but this year has not been resolved…This is a cause of grave concern to the children and parents concerned. Some of the children have been informed they will not even be allowed stay on in primary schools. At a time when numbers coming out of primary schools are dropping, as they are this year, it seems inexcusable that this difficulty should arise and that more than 100 children are in this position as we come towards the end of June…The numbers that have to be accommodated next September are less than the numbers that had to be accommodated in earlier years. Therefore, there is no excuse for the fact that they are not accommodated. Those children and their parents demand that something be done immediately so that they do not have to suffer throughout the summer (Dáil Éireann 1993).

Both deputies articulate extremely well the sense of despair and distress felt by the parents of the one hundred and one students who were left without a place in a secondary school. O’Malley makes an interesting point in that in 1993 there were less students looking for secondary school places than in previous years, raising the question – where had those places had gone? Below is the reply of the then Minister of State at the Department of Education, Liam Aylward who states the situation as it stood in 1993:

Mr. Aylward: … The Minister and the Department are very much aware of and concerned about the situation which has developed in Limerick city regarding the intake of pupils into post-primary schools for the purpose of commencing their post-primary education next September.

There are at present 15 post-primary schools in the city which take in pupils at first year, junior cycle level. The Department is aware that each year for some years past a number of children experienced difficulty in getting a post-primary school place in the city. The Department accepts that the accommodation situation in some of the post-primary schools is tight at present and that there is in the short term a peaking of annual output of children from the primary schools in the city.
The situation has been complicated, however, by the practice of some schools taking in pupils from outside the Limerick city post-primary catchment area and by the unwillingness of some parents to consider placing their child in a school other than that of first preference.

It was with a view to resolving this situation that the post-primary managements in Limerick have since the 1991-92 school year adopted a uniform enrolment policy involving a common application form on which parents are required to list schools of greater preference, and a common assessment on a common date. Regrettably, however, this system has not succeeded in eliminating the problem of where a proportion of pupils still find themselves without an offer of a school place for September next as the end of the current school year is reached.

The most recent information made available to the Department indicates that some 100 children still remain unplaced. In this regard the Department's main responsibility is to ensure that overall an adequate number of post-primary places exist in Limerick city to meet the demand. Over the past number of weeks the Minister met concerned parents, and Department officials met both parents and school authorities in Limerick city.

The Minister has assured parents that no pupil will be left without a place in a second level school next September. It has been made clear by the Minister and the Department that if extra resources are required to ensure places for these children they will be made available. Negotiations with a number of school authorities in the city are ongoing with a view to resolving the problem. As Deputies will appreciate, the matter is a difficult and sensitive one. However, the Minister and the Department are hopeful that the matter will be satisfactorily resolved very shortly. (Dáil Éireann 1993).

Aylward makes a number of notable points including the fact that some schools in Limerick city operated a practice of selecting pupils from outside the Limerick city catchment area; some parents are unwilling to accept a place other than in their school of first preference; the uniform enrolment policy of 1991-92 was not working and the acknowledgement of the Department of Education that the matter is both a difficult and sensitive one.

This topic was undoubtedly debated further in the print and electronic media, which would no doubt increase the levels of stress and upset experienced by the one hundred and one children and their parents. What also happened was that the parents of children in fifth class became anxious as to their children’s place in a secondary school as a consequence of this situation, as did many other parents whose children were in primary school.
Eleven years later in 2004, forty-nine children from disadvantaged areas of Limerick had not received a place in a secondary school for the academic year 2004/2005; over forty-five of these children were male; ten of the forty-nine children attended Corpus Christi National School in Moyross, a designated disadvantaged school. The school’s principal, Áine Cremin, explained how the children got a letter from the prospective secondary school’s board of management informing the child that the child did not “meet the criteria of the school”. The then Minister of Education, Noel Dempsey, stated that the evidence he had was that “there are some schools in some places that are operating policies that to [him] look less than fair” (Downes 2004). In February 2005 a new Central Application Office (CAO) style secondary school application system made its first round of offers to sixth class children for the 2005/2006 academic year, after the first round of offers over eighty children had got rejection letters. The ‘Limerick Area Post-Primary Schools Common Application Process’ requires every sixth class pupil to fill in a common application form listing his or her top nine preferences. “Schools still use enrolment policies to decide who they will take but they have been co-operating in a centralised process overseen by the local education centre” (RTE 2005). The severe weather conditions of January 2010 added to parents stress levels as schools were forced to close because of the severe weather conditions. The deadline date for submission for completed Common Application Process forms was 8th January 2010 but this was extended to 15th January 2010 as a consequence of the weather and subsequent school closures (Finucane 2010).

This unique process, Limerick is the only area in Ireland that uses this process for the transfer of pupils from primary to secondary school, while not perfect, appears here to stay, as does the almost annual rise in anxiety and stress levels for parents undertaking the school choice process in Limerick city.

7.3 Changes in the educational and economic landscape

In November 2008 the Irish Government in the 2009 Budget abolished the Educational Disadvantage Committee which had been set up under the 1998 Education Act to identify ways in which educational disadvantage could be addressed. The educational cutbacks announced in the 2009 Budget are predicted to impact on the
running of a number of programmes in secondary schools including the Leaving Certificate Applied programme which can play a key role in retaining pupils in the education system that may otherwise drop out. Another casualty of these cutbacks in spending on education is the abolition of the free books scheme to non-disadvantaged schools. Many students from poorer backgrounds do not attend designated disadvantaged schools (Carberry 2009). In July 2009 the Combat Poverty Agency, which had for over twenty years taken a lead role in raising awareness and understanding of poverty and it’s consequential knock on impact on educational attainment, was integrated with the Office for Social Inclusion to form a new division within the Department of Social and Family Affairs.

Evidence of the worsening economic situation in Ireland can be seen in the 20 percent rise in the number of applications for the back to school clothing and footwear allowance, twenty seven thousand more applications for this allowance have been made with the Health Service Executive for 2009 than in 2008 (Donnellan: 2009). More and more families are finding the cost of a ‘free’ education difficult to meet. Fergus Finlay, Barnardos' CEO, called on the Irish government to ensure that all necessary supports are provided so as children can harvest the maximum from their education, especially those living in disadvantage. He continued:

"All parents want the best for their children, yet many struggle to meet the high cost of sending their children to school fully equipped to get the best start in life. This is very distressing for parents and children and can have long-term negative affects on children's lives, including literacy difficulties, unemployment and poverty."

(Barnardos: 2009)

7.4 Conclusion

The Limerick Area Post-Primary Schools Common Application Process was put in place to prevent the reoccurrence of the situations like those in 1993 and 2004 when large numbers of children in Limerick city were left without a place in secondary school, and to prevent a system of selection that to the then Minister of Education, Noel Dempsey, seemed “less than fair” (Downes 2004). This process has been in operation since 2005. Given the far-reaching impact of the current recession that Ireland now finds itself in, concerns exist about the full long-term impact this
recession will have on children whose the parents who struggle to equip them for secondary school.

The following three chapters in this study will afford an opportunity to hear the voices of parents in Limerick city who were involved in the Limerick Area Post-Primary Schools Common Application Process where the emotional impact of school choice on families becomes evident, as does the evident two tier system where middle class parents are in a position of advantage, as a consequence of greater economic and cultural capital, over the working class parents in this research.
Chapter 8
Getting In – The Emotional Rollercoaster of the School Choice Process

8.1 Introduction

With the advent of the New Right policies in education, whereby the marketplace is central, parental choice of school and being an astute educational consumer within the marketplace will, according to the New Right policies in education, see parents rewarded for making correct and responsible decisions (Gewirtz et al 1995; Whitty, Power and Halpin: 1998; Apple 2001). This process of choosing where to send their son or daughter to secondary school becomes an important and, consequently, stressful process for parents akin to boarding a roller coaster complete with the undulating journey ahead, from which, at times, there seems no escape and no control over the final destination is reached. In this research, the process, for some parents, began as early as 4th class but certainly by 6th class it dominated and took over family life for most parents. The heightened emotional state experienced by many parents during this process becomes a feature of this research. For many parents the levels of anxiety they lived through proved worthy of further comment. Indeed there appears to be something of a dearth of literature in the area of parental anxiety and emotional responses to the process of school choice. This research endeavours to begin to fill this vacuum. An important thread of this research study has found that first time parents are the most stressed and anxious parents, i.e. the ‘rookie’ parent, the novice who is on their maiden voyage, venturing out into this world of second level education for the first time, whereas for many experienced or ‘veteran’ parents the levels of stress are not always as acute.

Categories of parents

This research divides the parents into four categories: the ‘rookie’ working class parent, the ‘rookie’ middle class parent, the ‘veteran’ working class parent and the ‘veteran’ middle class parent.
The ‘rookie’ working class parent / the ‘rookie’ middle class parent

This working class / middle class parent is experiencing the process of where to send their son or daughter to secondary school for the first time. Their child is the eldest and it is the parent’s debut in this decision making journey, as they climb on board the roller coaster for the first time. These ‘rookie’ parents are anxious to make the right choice for their child. The ‘rookie’ working class parent lives in a working class area, whereas the ‘rookie’ middle class parent lives in a middle class area.

The ‘veteran’ working class parent / the ‘veteran’ middle class parent

For this working class / middle class parent they once again climb on board the roller coaster, complete with the knowledge and experience of the journey from the last time they were on the roller coaster. Their child is a younger child, not the eldest. Despite their previous white knuckle ride, they remain anxious as they are onboard with a different child with different concerns. The ‘veteran’ working class parent lives in a working class area, whereas the ‘veteran’ middle class parent lives in a middle class area.

This chapter will examine how the emotions experienced by parents, across the socioeconomic spectrum, begin the process of choosing a school, focusing on (a) the avalanche of emotions set in train by the commencement of the school choice process and the impact on parents’ behaviour, both ‘rookie’ and ‘veteran’; (b) the often varied and disparate [chaos-theory] information gathering process; (c); the factor of a school’s location; (d) the role of the principal; (e) the use of various ‘connections’ by parents; (f) the day parents get notification from the school and (g) the potential to re-evaluate the ‘success’ in getting a child into school.

8.2 Uncertainty and stress

Like a roller coaster ride, the downswing is far more terrifying than the upswing in this process; the anxiety experienced by parents is what more immediately springs to mind when they recall the decision-making roller coaster ride of where to send their child to secondary school, when the journey to the decision is completed, indeed when the roller coaster stops. In this research the choice of where to send their child to
second-level school reveals the following emotional responses from parents: “stressful”, “most daunting”, “worrying”, “all-consuming”, “nerve-wrecking” and “a sick feeling in the pit of my stomach”, these experiences impact on all parents regardless of their socio-economic status.

O’Brien and Flynn (2007, p.70), citing Kellaghan (1999); Clancy (1995, 2001); Bernstein (1977, 1997); Bourdieu (1984, 1986, 1999), point out that the impact of material and cultural capital in reproducing educational disadvantage has been significantly addressed in educational research. While acknowledging the value and importance of this work, they cite Barker et al (2004) in suggesting that “inequalities are also generated and experienced in the affective/emotional context” (Barker et al. 2004 cited in O’Brien and Flynn 2007, p.70). They wish to move the discourse from a marginalisation of emotions in educational research to a situation where “a more holistic view of the human as vulnerable, interconnected and inescapably affected by their emotional relations” is sharing the stage (O’Brien and Flynn 2007, p.71). Similarly, the importance of examining the emotional process is highlighted by Rosiek:

“Human experience is an emotional affair. This is true for educational experience as it is for any other aspect of our lives. Learning is not simply about comprehending the abstract content of ideas; it is about discovering ourselves in relation to new ideas. It involves surprise, revelation, delight and sometimes outrage...It is distressing, therefore, that we find ourselves in a moment when the public discourse about education is so exclusively focussed on measurable cognitive outcomes of teaching.” (Rosiek 200, p. 399 cited in Tormey 2005)

Maeve’s story

Romach and Parker (2001) define anxiety as:

“...an unpleasant emotional state, a response to anticipated threat... characterized by feelings of apprehension or fear of losing control... and difficulties in concentration. Strains around the performance of social roles (e.g., spouse, parent, wage earner) and certain life situations (e.g., separating from parents, when starting school or leaving home, illness) can generate anxiety.” (Romach and Parker 2001)
Maeve, a working class ‘rookie’ mother, recalls a situation from the school choice process which revealed her sense of losing control and leads her to behave in an irrational manner. The strain the process was having on her is evident. Maeve retold this story to me with an evident sense of embarrassment.

Maeve, an unemployed working class lone parent, who was venturing out into the process of choosing a school for her eldest child for the first time found the stress of waiting for the acceptance letter from her school of choice unbearable. The mother’s stress was heightened by the fact that other mothers, in the neighbourhood that she had met, had already got their letters of acceptance from the school but she had not received any letter of acceptance. The stress reached its zenith on one particular morning when she followed a relief postman around the neighbourhood pleading with him to give her her mail, but he did not know her and she would have to wait until he delivered the mail to her house. This mother was reduced to tears and severe feelings of anxiety as well as inadequacy, as she felt she would have failed her daughter:

“I nearly got a heart attack; everyone in her class had got letters [of acceptance]. If you saw me going around the place calling the post man every morning...but this morning I met a new post man who didn’t know me and said he couldn’t give me the post, well, I walked away from him crying! ...I got the envelope and she got her place. It was like a weight lifted off me, I was meeting other mothers who were telling me they had got letters [of acceptance]... If I thought she didn’t get [her first choice school] I would literally die. I wouldn’t like to be one of those mothers on the paper with no place for their child.” (Maeve, a working class ‘rookie’ mother)

The hallmarks of anxiety are evident in Maeve’s story. This research suggests that her irrational behaviour was caused by her heightened state of emotion experienced by this mother during the decision making process surrounding school choice. She knew where she wanted her daughter to go to secondary school and wanted desperately to fulfil her role as mother by orchestrating her daughter’s successful application. The anxiety was prolonged and became the centre around which her life and family life revolved, with everything else taking a back seat until the moment of truth arrived with the much delayed and much anticipated letter of acceptance. Having experienced success in securing her daughter a place in her school of choice, Maeve bucks the trend that much of the literature on school choice has found in relation to working class parents – that working class parents are not succeeding in the educational market
because they don’t care about education (Gewirtz 2001; Reay 2006). However it is clear in Maeve’s narrative how much she evidently cares about her daughter’s education. This irrational behaviour is not exclusive to working class families as can be seen by Hilary’s story. Hilary is a middle class ‘rookie’ mother who does not work by her own choice; she gave up her job once her children were born and now that they are in secondary school she has not yet returned to work. She found the process of choosing where to send her daughters to secondary school an extremely anxious and stressful time.

*Other parent’s story*

The process took on almost a military style approach in Hilary’s household, with the list of secondary schools being photocopied endlessly and spread out across the kitchen table like Eisenhower pouring over maps of Normandy in June 1944, with the various permutations and combinations being considered, increasing the stress levels of Hilary and her husband:

“Stressful, very stressful... When we got the list I think I photocopied it twenty times and every week we flicked through it and wondered what if we don’t get such and such. ...But we picked the bones out of it ... You need to do your homework as a parent when making the choice...” (Hilary, a middle class ‘rookie’ mother)

For Clara, a middle class ‘rookie’ mother, the stress around the whole area of choosing a school can be seen in her following account of the experience:

“I got him grinds in maths last year (6th Class) – I was so worried about this entrance exam so I got him grinds once a week with the maths because he was weak enough at them ” (Clara, a middle class ‘rookie’ mother)

Her fear of failing to ensure her son passed the entrance exam prompted anxiety and worry for Clara. The associated guilt of not ‘providing’ for their children, with regard to school choice, is a common feature in this research, regardless of socio-economic status.

The process of where to send his eldest son to secondary school began somewhat earlier for Kevin, a middle class ‘rookie’ father, but interestingly did not significantly reduce the levels of stress experienced:
Kevin decided to inform himself of the various potential options of where his son might attend secondary school, feeling that knowledge is king. He did so two years before the decision needed to be formalised. Replicating Benjamin Franklin’s advice of ‘fail to prepare, prepare to fail’, Kevin prepared. However the idiom did not hold true as he found the process ‘confusing’, and disorientating – failure won out. Once again anxiety ruled.

Some mothers found the waiting time between applying for a place, in October of sixth class, and receiving a letter of acceptance, in February of sixth class – some four months later, as “daunting”, “nerve-wracking” and “worrying”. The topic of where their child is going to go to secondary school dominated their lives and as these mothers put it:

“It [school choice] takes over; it takes over [conversations]” (Wendy, a working class ‘veteran’ mother)

“For the children themselves, it is clear it is the topic of conversation in most houses, particularly if it’s the first child.” (Gráinne, a middle class ‘rookie’ mother)

It seems that once on board this roller coaster it was almost impossible to get off until the ride comes to a complete stop.

For some parents, most notably ‘rookie’ parents across the social spectrum, the process of where to send their child to secondary school becomes a full-time project, dominating their lives, where everything else is pushed to the side. The heightened emotion of anxiety leaves some parents feeling ill, where respite is only received when the appetite for as much information as possible is sated:

“It is a full time project. For ages I was anxious and getting this sick feeling in the pit of my stomach... I certainly needed more information...” (Laura, a middle class ‘rookie’ mother)
“We were worried about all this and we were trying to get as much information as we could...I did as much research as I could on each school...Oh nerve-racking. I’ll never forget it – I’ll really never forget it. The whole time - it was completely stressing” (Clara, a middle class ‘rookie’ mother)

For both of these mothers the choosing of a secondary school for their children was a time in their lives they found all consuming. This research found that the all-consuming nature of school choice was not adequately dealt with in the literature and could perhaps be a source of further investigation.

In sharp contrast to the emotional rollercoaster experienced by the ‘rookie’ parents, the ‘veteran’ parents who have a right of entry to their school of choice, because of an older child attending that school or because of their primary school being a feeder school for that school, were not as anxious, nor was their decision as fraught with such emotional upheaval. The whole process was something of an automatic administrative process where the outcome had been decided beforehand, without the accompanying levels of stress and anxiety. Nonetheless many of the ‘veteran’ parents had already paid their emotional dues some years previously.

“I just marked them all off because I knew she’d get right of entry” (Ursula, a working class ‘veteran’ mother)
“I wasn’t too overwhelmed because it’s my third time doing this, I have two older, there’s a big gap between them, 12 –13 years between them.” (Catherine, a middle class ‘veteran’ mother)

“For this particular child it was really because the other two children went there and so the big choice was for the first child” (Margaret, a middle class ‘veteran’ mother)

A parent’s own education is often a cause for concern or added anxiety for parents (Drudy and Lynch 1993). This research has found that some parents feel anxious, as they would not be able to help their son or daughter with their homework. French homework was a cause of concern for Wendy, a working class ‘veteran’ mother, but her eldest daughter was in a position to help her son with his French homework. Similarly, a sibling’s support in maths helped Rebecca’s, a middle class ‘veteran’ mother, son with his maths homework. This sibling was studying Business Studies at university, was still living in the family home and could bridge the mathematical information gap between Rebecca’s knowledge of maths and the knowledge required for her son to do his homework.
For many of the working class parents a cause of frustration is the fact that although there were ample potential schools for their children to attend, many felt that the reality is that the pool of potential schools is in fact much smaller, with many schools deselecting themselves because of additional costs associated with attending certain schools, costs such as transport, additional uniform items, as well as the academic reputation of the school; academic profile of the students. This begs the question is this being done deliberately by some schools so as to maintain the academic profile of the school and control enrolment?

A pattern begins to emerge around the period of time that school choice becomes an issue for parents. The pattern could be described as a kind of ‘school choice chaos theory’, where deliberate decisions taken by parents, concerning the question of where to send their child to secondary school, throw up seemingly unforeseen random consequences that leads to greater anxiety and ‘chaos’ for the parents. No sooner is one concern addressed than another raises its head for parents involved in the school choice process.

The stress and anxiety to make the best decision for their child is common across the social classes. However middle-class families have adapted better to this marketplace, a form of social Darwinism (Botstein 1988 cited in Brown 1997) exists and the middle-class parents see ‘the reinvestment of cultural capital for a return of educational capital’ (Ball et al 1997: 420).

8.3 Information gathering process
The information gathering process involved what could be gathered at the various open nights that potential schools hosted; what could be gathered from other ad hoc occasions where parents met; what could be garnered from what teachers said and the impact of potential friends and peers.

8.3.1 Open night
An initial response to a potential school can manifest itself after attendance at the open night; often the open night can raise more questions than it answers, like when on a roller coaster one might feel that the ride has ended only for one last downswing
to whoosh one into another freefall. One middle class ‘rookie’ mother found the open
night at a potential school for her eldest son had left her feeling more anxious. She
had gone to be convinced that this was the school for her son but after the open night
she found the culture of that potential school to be elitist. This was extremely
disappointing for the mother concerned. Her frustration came from the sense that if
her son was not a success academically or on the sporting field or on the stage, if he
did not become – in her words – an “uber kid” then he would be a second class citizen
in the school’s eyes.

“I went to [the] open night then, saying I wanted to be convinced. I really wasn’t
that convinced and I was awfully disappointed then. I think that’s where an awful lot
of my anxiety came from... I thought the culture was very elitist. The kids who are
successful are the kingpins around the school and everybody else has to cow-tow to
them. That was what I didn’t like. The captain [of one team] spoke, the captain [of
another team] spoke, the star in the musical spoke and some other ‘uber’ kid spoke”
(Laura, a middle class ‘rookie’ mother).

Another parent, a middle class ‘rookie’ father, who saw that same school as a potential
school for his child expressed a similar concern, this lead to him discounting this
school in the process of selecting a school.

“We’d heard that if kids aren’t making it on the sports teams, if they don’t slot into
the mould very easily then very quickly they are ostracised” (Kevin, a middle class
‘rookie’ father).

For Laura the apparent lack of openness with regard to subject choice and streaming,
factors which often are of more concern to middle class parents because of their long
term thinking, during the open night gave rise to further hesitancy and anxiety.
Striving to gain some answers and relieve some of her frustration, she knew where to
gain more information than was initially forthcoming from the formal part of the open
night as she quizzed a teacher as she toured the school, during the more informal and
less structured part of the open night. Unfortunately she found that this raised more
questions than it answered as no concrete answers could be provided, in the area of
subject choice.

The open nights also added to other parents growing sense of despair and unease in
the decision making process, rather than – as had initially been hoped – reassuring
them. Sean, a middle class ‘veteran’ father, found himself dismissing potential
schools as he encountered them on the respective open nights or during meetings with
prospective principals.

“Now secondary school is a different cultural event completely, not, in my view, as
advanced at all as the primary school. There are downsides to the primary school
thing, but I think in terms of training; general ethos; curriculum; the whole
professional teaching atmosphere is more relaxed and open. In secondary school the
parents are on the outside, the teachers reign in the classroom, they won’t even allow
another teacher in the classroom (laughs) let alone a parent, which is I think a
professional sickness. People who work in isolation for twenty five years tend to go a
little bit nutty, they get set in their ways.” (Sean, a middle class ‘veteran’ father)

He found cause for concern in the fixation on academic success and achievements to
the determent of moulding an integrated and rounded individual:

“We went around to [three schools] …Our impression of some of the schools was
quite poor, [the first school visited] was quite fixated on academic success and
achievements…not everybody is academically gifted.…the approval focus of the school
would be on the guys getting seven or eight As… there’s more to getting a great job
than getting straight As, you need an integrated but developed person…” (Sean, a
middle class ‘veteran’ father)

As well as the blatant cherry-picking of the ‘best’ pupils that was evident despite a
Christian ethos:

“… [the second school visited] told us quite explicitly across the interview table that
they were not recruiting children from certain areas. That struck me as a rather odd
position for a Christian establishment to adopt. They were presuming that we were on
the safe side of the social divide saying that to us…” (Sean, a middle class ‘veteran’
father)

Also the lack of openness to critique evident in his encounters with some schools;

“… [the third school visited] is about four steps ahead of itself… you could see
ourselves lose our place in [the third school] as my wife and I spoke to the
Principal,…not so open to critique…and an educational process that isn’t open to
consistent self-critique is not too good.” (Sean, a middle class ‘veteran’ father)

His preference for his daughter was to attend a co-educational school as, in his
opinion; it helps maturing, growth, relationships as well as being an education in
itself:
“Well we did look at schools… [his child] would have done well in any school she went in to… (sighs) The co-ed is a bit of a problem, it’s not that readily available around about, we were restricted… It (co-ed) helps maturing, growth, relationships; it’s an education in itself.” (Sean, a middle class ‘veteran’ father)

This, to borrow a phrase from Laura above, ‘uber’ educational consumer found himself in a conundrum with regard to where to send his daughter to secondary school. He was struggling to find a school with which to ‘match’ his daughter, complete with the evident anxieties and stress.

An over emphasis on particular extra-curricular activity during an open night for a potential secondary school turned Wendy and her husband, working class ‘veteran’ parents, off that potential school, allied to the absence of a tour of the school on the same night.

“Me and my husband went to the meetings [open night] but to be honest it was all [one extra-curricular activity], in your face [the one extra-curricular activity]… Everything was [the one extra-curricular activity], the past pupil was [the one extra-curricular activity] it was in your face too much… It is a good school but the open night just put myself and [her husband] off… There was a few children there and I was kind of saying ‘this isn’t right the children should be involved’… We didn’t get a tour of the school or anything on the night.” (Wendy, a working class ‘veteran’ mother)

For Catherine, a middle class ‘veteran’ mother, the sheer numbers present at an open night made her rethink her decision to send her son to a potential secondary school as she felt he would just be swamped and not taken as an individual. Similarly, Bernie, a middle class ‘veteran’ mother, was of the same opinion regarding another school and consequentially she decided against sending her son to that school.

Mona, a middle class ‘veteran’ mother felt herself ruling out a potential secondary school for her daughter as she toured the school and found it too run down, too shabby and too big, with a lot of writing on the walls. Arriving at an open night where the school was closed and in darkness did not inspire Clara, a middle class ‘rookie’ mother. The situation did not improve inside as she found the school old, dark and unwelcoming with no children invited to attend the open night – despite thinking beforehand that this school was a potential contender as it had a subject choice that would have suited her son. This was the second time a school which was a strong contender for her son was pushed into the shadows.
So we went in and even when we arrived it was closed – you know they weren’t even ready for it – it wasn’t welcoming you could say. And so we waited and others [parents] came along and we went it. I found it very dark – we went into a room that was all real dark wood and it was very, to me, old school looking, you know, but I’d heard lots of positive about it.” (Clara, a middle class ‘rookie’ mother)

Conversely, she had attended an open night that was warm, bright and where the potential students could attend with their parents. She found it an enjoyable night, however, there was a strong emphasis on the academic side of the school and this coupled with a subject choice that did not suit her son’s strengths left her feeling lost and dejected. Nonetheless she found herself, to use her own words; “backed into a corner” as she felt that this school still remained the first choice despite her genuine concerns about the school and its suitability for her son.

“When we went to [another open night], the first thing that happened was that we went into this bright room, this huge room full of chairs. They had everything set up, all their instruments over in the corner. There were students their playing music. There was a real buzz about it. And the first thing they did, they had students there and they split (us) all into groups and the students brought us around the school. I thought that was fantastic. So of course [her son] came out with “I want to go here”. So that was it... [The school] didn’t have [a desired subject] – that was another thing. [The school], to me, wasn’t the school for [her son]. It didn’t have the things we were looking for but I felt with this page [the common application form] put in front of us that we had to fill out, we were just backed into a corner and you didn’t have the freedom to put down what you wanted – do you know what I mean?” (Clara, a middle class ‘rookie’ mother)

The narratives of these parents reflect a school choice chaos-theory style of scenario emerging during this school choice process, whereby gathering more information does not always lend itself to a clearer decision regarding school choice.

The availability of certain option subjects like Music, Art, Home Economics, and Construction Studies provided a significant amount of assurance to parents, insofar as their child could take subject they were interested in or for which they had a flair. Conversely the lack of certain option subjects played a critical role in removing some schools from the list of potential schools.

Despite the open night causing greater frustration or angst for some parents, other parents found that it confirmed their decision and reassured them. Kevin, a middle
class ‘rookie’ father, found that the open night sealed the decision for him as to where to send his son to school. He got the sense that every one of the staff were “going to put their best foot forward” and that the principal was extremely dedicated and could be seen putting in long hours in the school. Gráinne, a middle class ‘rookie’ mother, found that meeting other parents and listening to what they had to say during a tour of the school on the open night to be most beneficial in reassuring her of her decision to send her son to that school.

The facilities of the school also were important to working-class parents more so than middle-class parents, be it the look of the computer room with the obvious costs associated with the equipping of the computer room that left an impression with Conor, a working class ‘veteran’ father, as well as the general cleanliness of the school. A number of working class parents attended few and in some cases no open nights which would be wrongly construed as a lack of engagement with the market, when in fact often the constraints are due to a lack of transport. Conor walks his children to school each morning and meets them at the end of the school day when he walks home with them. These are not the actions of a parent who is not trying to engage with the educational process, a parent who does not care about his children’s education, any constraints on his hopes for his children are external.

Also for many working-class parents they had left school early; Maeve at the age of thirteen; Wendy fifth year having “got the taste of having a job” and Doris never having attended secondary school at all, leaving after sixth class. All now experience a strong sense of regret and even guilt now about their decision. This early school leaving had an impact, whereby some working-class parents in this research had little confidence in their ability to understand the language of school:

“We got a tour of the school and [the principal] really, he was so friendly... Yeah it was, I mean I know he is a teacher, he is a principal but he wasn’t talking down to you or anything like that. He was just like he was just talking with you and being nice”
(Wendy, a working class ‘veteran mother)

Laura, a middle class ‘rookie’ mother, was also up to date on the less academic programmes being taught, as well as the student profile of other potential schools for her son. She was not the only parent observing the less obvious details of an open
night. Catherine, a middle class ‘veteran’ mother, weighed up the relative youth of one school’s teaching staff during one particular open night. Her verdict was that any concern she may have had about the staff’s teaching experience was completely outweighed by the “enthusiasm, which has been beaten out of some of the other [older] teachers… I would see it some teachers at previous parent teacher meetings where they are just doing a job” in her experience with her other older children. Sean, a middle class ‘veteran’ father, praised the IT provision, whereby both PC and Mac platforms were offered, during a visit to a potential secondary school for his daughter and was of the opinion that it reassuringly reflected a well run school where “the detail had been thought out”.

Their child’s enthusiasm about a potential secondary school brought with it a sense of relief to many parents in the decision making process. For both Clara, a middle class ‘rookie’ mother, and Bernie, a middle class ‘veteran’ mother, their sons’ enthusiasm for their secondary school of choice was a contributory factor in the process. Bernie’s son was completely taken by the school when he his mother made an appointment to see the principal – having missed the open night. Equally, Clara’s son returned home ‘buzzing’ after visiting a potential secondary school. This reaction allied to his parent’s initial positive reaction to the school’s literature and subsequent appointment to see the principal, resulted in this school being their number one choice.

Being informed and gathering information brought varying degrees of solace to parents. In addition to the formal open night process, parents sought that information primarily from other parents. Some parents took the opportunity presented by the informal part of an open night to talk with other parents and get some more information about a potential school. This took place during the less structured part of the open night when the parents were given a tour of the school. Gráinne, a middle class ‘rookie’ mother, found this particularly useful as she had, by her own admission, little knowledge of the potential secondary schools her son might attend because she was a relative new comer to the area with “no extended family who [would] have built up a lot of information about the schools.” She was keen to hear what other parents said about the school they were having the tour in and about other schools; what was not on the brochure, what could only be realised when talking with other parents –
topics like atmosphere of the school, student profile, teacher profile, right of entry, [IT] provision and so on.

The middle class parents in this research focussed on the more difficult to read nuances of potential schools. They were better able to read subtleties that sometimes were not on obvious display during the open nights; subtleties such as potential elitism, transparency, teacher profiles, student profiles, academic profiles and subject availability and were less inclined to focus purely on the facilities and physical environment of the school. Transport was less of a problem also for middle class parents. This level of engagement with the less obvious nuances of schools was not as evident in the narratives told by working class parents, echoing the findings of Gewirtz (2001), Olssen (2004) and O’Brien (2009).

8.3.2 Other sources
Two ‘veteran’ parents in this research knew how to be more informed and saw the value in becoming more involved in the life of their child’s school through their involvement with the schools parents’ council and board of management, as per the 1998 Education Act. It also allowed them to remain informed about their school for younger siblings that may attend the school in the future. Both Rebecca, a middle class ‘veteran’ mother and Ursula, a working class ‘veteran’ mother, are involved with their different school’s Board of Management and Parents’ Council and see it as playing a hugely important role in keeping themselves informed but also informing the school as to their concerns as parents.

“I am on the Parents Council, so I know all the teachers as well and I’m involved in the school as well...” (Ursula, a working class ‘veteran’ mother)

“This is my third year on the Board of Management and I was on the Parents’ Council [previously]” (Rebecca, a middle class ‘veteran’ mother)

Interestingly one of the strongest ‘active educational consumers’ in this research, Hilary, is a ‘rookie’ parent, unsurprisingly perhaps, a middle class ‘rookie’ mother. She was involved in her child’s primary school parents’ council and her husband was on the board of management of that school, reflecting their ability to be informed
about their child’s education. This involvement has been maintained as she is currently on the parents’ council of her child’s secondary school.

“When [her child] went to [primary school] I was on the parents’ council and my husband was on the board of management… I wasn’t interested in being on the Parent’s Council but [the secondary school] is one of these schools where there is a meeting nearly every week.” (Hilary, a middle class ‘rookie’ mother)

Explaining her motivation to be on a parents’ council Hilary stated that:

“You don’t need to be on the parents’ council because the school is so transparent; we know everything that is going on” (Hilary, a middle class ‘rookie’ mother)

For this middle class parent it was of paramount importance to be informed about her child’s school, reflecting how many middle class parents operate in the educational marketplace. This research found that this was not replicated amongst many working class parents, as involvement in parents’ councils and boards of management was most prominent in middle-class parents and less so amongst working class. This is worthy of further exploration and research.

Kevin, a middle class ‘rookie’ father explained his decision to become more involved with his child’s school through the parents council.

“I feel they would listen. You can talk to [the principal]. They had the first night of the Parents’ Council, the AGM, [my wife] came into that and she said it was very open, it’s small enough that they would listen to you.” (Kevin, a middle class ‘rookie’ father)

It became evident that the middle class parents consistently knew where to get further information that was not initially presented at an open night, so as to aid their decision making process of where to send their child to secondary school. Interestingly, it was not just the middle class ‘veteran’ parents who knew where to access this information but the middle class ‘rookie’ parents also. Every opportunity to harness further information on a school or about the process of decision making was harnessed. Yet again the middle class parents use their social and cultural capital to pay dividends in getting more information on their decision making process. This was less evident in the narratives of the working class parents. Laura, a middle class ‘rookie’ mother, who
found the whole process extremely stressful despite the fact that her son had right of entry to three schools, found getting more information eased her concerns. That opportunity presented itself when she was with other chaperoning parents on a tour to the UK with their child’s rugby club. This opportunity to share and exchange valued information about the school choice process and about the potential schools with another band of parents was fully harvested, as the issue of school choice was discussed over a long weekend, bringing with it peace of mind to Laura that regardless of her decision it would not be a disastrous decision as she would have further second chances should the first decision not work out. No doubt other parents on this trip had also experienced this greater peace of mind regarding their decision. None of the working class parents interviewed for this research were able to cast their nets as wide for further information.

Kevin, a middle class ‘rookie’ father, stayed somewhat informed by league tables produced in national daily newspapers that provided national and regionalised tabulated analysis on so-called ‘feeder-schools’, i.e. statistics based on the number of students each secondary school sent to third level education.

“I was aware of it and I looked at it to see who was where. I saw that [a local school] was well up there. It didn’t really bother us, if [the school chosen] was alright... I knew the [that local school] is very focused towards exams and the kids work. I would have known some parents who were on the committees up there and, by and large, they were professional people or business people, it’s an awful thing to say but if the money isn’t going into a school, whatever about free education, if money isn’t going in kids are suffering.” (Kevin, a middle class ‘rookie’ father)

By utilising his social and cultural capital Kevin was able to gain more information on potential schools. Included in his circle of friends were those who sat on school committees and were made up of either “professional people or business people”, who were actively involved in school life and aided the financing of various aspects of school life. This level of analytical information gathering and utilising similar social contacts was not evident amongst the working class parents interviewed in this research. Sean, a middle class ‘veteran’ father felt that league tables:

“…would have been there as an influence... how strong it would be I am not sure...I thing league tables of that kind are an indicator of a certain amount of stuff. What exactly they are indicating in terms of an educational process is not exactly
clear...Also what it is evaluating is in itself questionable...the academic focus of the
Leaving Certificate... is very much focused on getting the right answers to questions
you hope you can guess are coming and getting the points. You have teachers getting
students to learn stuff off by heart so ...they can reproduce it in the exam...” (Sean, a
middle class ‘veteran’ father)

This revealed an informed perspective on league tables. Not every middle class parent
had that perspective.

A school’s provision for special educational needs provided a lot of reassurance for
parents, most notably Doris and her husband Greg, whose son has special educational
needs. They, working class ‘veteran’ parents, felt that starting secondary school was a
significant change in a young person’s life and when a special need is also factored
into the situation, it can sometimes make the change all the more difficult. However
after speaking with their school of choice with regard to the provision of special
educational needs, it relieved the concerns they had for their son and reaffirmed it as
their first choice school. Greg became more involved in the transfer process to
secondary school when the issue of ensuring his son’s special educational need arose.
He, it seems, felt that this was a case of insuring whether or not the school would
provide the necessary additional supports for his son and when he had found that
information out he was satisfied and appeared to take less of a direct role as his wife
then focussed on getting her son’s uniform, books and providing continued care work
to support her son’s transition to secondary school. This seems to echo some of the

For the ‘veteran’ parents the choice of where to send their first child to school was all
important, with the consequence that for Margaret, middle class ‘veteran’ mother, she
had a sense of reassurance as she sent her youngest child to secondary school where
her two eldest children were already in attendance. When making the initial decision
Margaret based it on the school’s reputation, the proximity to both parents’ workplace
and the subject choice. Indeed she considers herself quite lucky to have gotten her
eldest into her school of choice, especially as the catchment area for that school has
increased and she feels great empathy for parents who have not got their child into that
school.
"I think I was fortunate, but to be honest with you - my husband made representation to the school through his workplace and I think that’s why my son got a place there.”
(Margaret, a middle class ‘veteran’ mother)

The ethos and atmosphere of the school, as well as the composition of the student body, became cause for concern for many parents. Some parents had expressed grave reservations about the possible negative influence peers could have on their son or daughter with regard to a blatant disregard for teachers, anti-social behaviour or, for some, a more pronounced inner city accent coming into the home. These concerns formed from what the parents witnessed themselves when they passed by the potential school or from gaining information from other parents.

For Catherine, a middle class ‘veteran’ mother, all that glitters was not gold when both she and her son began to reflect a little more on a potential secondary school. Despite being initially impressed with the school, the school’s location and IT provision resulted in this school being discounted.

This research also discovered another source of stress was the changing student profile of a school from when the parents had attended that same school. That was certainly the case for Clara, a middle class ‘rookie’ mother who had attended the local secondary school and found it:

“Brilliant... You had every kind of an option to choose from. They did sports, [a wide range of subjects], everything, absolutely everything” (Clara, middle class ‘rookie’ mother)

The school would be the closest secondary school, within walking distance and Clara’s son would have had right of entry. However she didn’t feel comfortable sending her son there as the student profile had changed and out of her son’s 6th class group only one boy was going there also. In her opinion there was an over concentration of students from a working class background, whereas when she was attended the same school, there was a mix of working class and middle class students in the school. This research found that the changing student profile of the secondary school that parents themselves had attended, and brought back happy memories of their time there, was worthy of further research as it was not as evident as other areas were in the literature.
For some parents relief came as they tried to fit their child to a school dependent on both their child’s educational profile and the school’s educational profile. They tried to match their child to a particular school. As Sean explains:

“We [both parents] would have worked quite closely together in working out where the children go to school... we have in the main tried to fit a school to the child, rather than pop them in somewhere...” (Sean, a middle class ‘veteran’ father)

His children have all attended different secondary schools as a consequence. One older child attended a local fee-paying private school; another attended a local comprehensive secondary school with a lot of students from a working class background but offered a wide range of practical subjects that Sean felt his son had an aptitude for. In addition he felt that it would be quite instructive for his son to see that not everyone had the support of both parents in their journey through secondary school and that for some of these students, secondary school would be a source of persistent difficulty. He tried to fit his youngest daughter to a school. He described his daughter as “academically very bright and is artistically talented, a lovely sense of colour and design...a very social child”, factors that influenced his choice of secondary school for his daughter. Similarly Catherine, another middle class ‘veteran’ parent, choose to send her three children to three different schools, dependent on the matching the characteristics of the school to the characteristics of her children. This mirrors what Gewirtz et al (1995) called “child matching”.

8.3.3 Teachers
Some parents spoke with their child’s sixth class teacher as to the type of school best suited to their son or daughter because they felt that the 6th class teacher was well positioned to give an alternative view of their child through a teacher’s lens. Laura, a middle class ‘rookie’ mother, explained how she included her son’s sixth class teacher in the decision making process of where to send him to secondary school:

“We also talked to his sixth class teacher and she recommended [one potential school over the other] for him. She said he needs to be watched and a close eye kept on him and she felt that he would be well watched there. These people know how your child performs; they know him in a different way to the way we’d know him.” (Laura, a middle class ‘rookie’ mother)
Laura found it of benefit to talk to her son’s sixth class teacher so as to get that teacher’s perspective on the type of secondary school that would suit her son. Again none of the working class parents, in this research, spoke to their child’s sixth class teacher, with some opting instead to talk to their primary school principal only. This specific, almost relentless, gathering of information by middle class parents was not as evident in the narratives of the working class parents.

In order to gain some reassurance that they were making the best choice for their child Catherine, a middle class ‘veteran’ mother, and Laura, a middle class ‘rookie’ mother, focussed their attention on the teaching staff, gaining encouragement by the evident experience of teachers who had “a fair whack of experience under their belt”. Equally Kevin, a middle class ‘rookie’ father gained comfort from the fact that the teachers in a potential secondary school for his child were young, enthusiastic, wanted to achieve and had not yet had the enthusiasm “beaten out of them.” Clara, a middle class ‘rookie’ parent compared it with the type of teachers that can be seen on American TV shows based in high schools.

For Rebecca, a middle class ‘veteran’ mother, the fact that she had a relationship going back nine years, with the secondary school her youngest son was going to attend, removed any thoughts of sending her son to a closer secondary school. She felt that it was of significant benefit to have already established good relationships with the teachers and also expressed a reluctance to begin establishing relationships all over again with a new cohort of teachers.

“He had a brother going into 6th year in [the school] and two previous sons went there... The other boys got on well there and I know a lot of the teachers there and they know me, I didn’t want to go back and try to get to know a load of new teachers and I knew the set up”  (Rebecca, a middle class ‘veteran’ mother)

Key moments in school can reinforce in the parents mind that they have made the correct choice for their child. A teacher making time to talk to his daughter after class, reinforced for Derek, a middle class ‘veteran’ parent the notion that she had (a) a voice and (b) that she would be listened to, thereby giving her confidence. For Wendy, a working class ‘veteran’ mother, her son’s retelling of his teacher’s delight at his success in a Business exam brought a sense of reassurance that she had made the
right choice. A maths teacher’s willingness to briefly revise a topic if one student is having difficulties with it told the working class ‘veteran’ parents, Rachel and Conor, that their daughter was in good hands. For middle class ‘rookie’ mother Clara, her family went through a difficult time in November of her son’s first year in secondary school and this had an impact on his behaviour in school. The compassionate manner of her son’s Yearhead in dealing with the issue assured Clara that her son had at least one advocate in the school.

Parents, whose children attended schools that had a Home School Community Liaison [HSCL] Coordinator, unanimously felt reassured by this scheme and valued the visit by the HSCL coordinator to their homes to see how their child was settling into first year. These parents were predominantly working class parents. Despite some parents initially thinking their child was in trouble, parents described the visit by the HSCL Coordinator to the family home, as well as the idea of a HSCL Coordinator, as “brilliant” and “fantastic”.

“When she first came to the door and said she was the home liaison officer I thought ‘Oh my God did she have [her son] sitting in the car’, like I thought he was sick or something and when she came in I thought it was fantastic. I have a few friends now and I said, ‘I had the Home Liaison Officer from the school’ and they said ‘Oh what’s wrong’ and I said, ‘There was nothing wrong’ and I said ‘She just called down to see how [her son] was getting on in school and how we were getting on with him going to school’, which I thought was fantastic. I really and truly thought and my friends thought that they came along to see where the child was coming from, what kind of atmosphere, and what kind of family, which I taught was brilliant.” (Wendy, a working class ‘veteran’ mother)

“I met her [the HSCLO] and she told me that if I ever has a problem in the school to come down to her. She said to [her daughter] if ever you’ve a problem come knock on my door; don’t wait until you go home. But I like a teacher like that, who is straight forward.” (Maeve, a working class ‘rookie’ mother)

These parents also valued the notion of having a ‘go to’ person with whom they could communicate in their child’s school, an advocate for them. This research found this scheme hugely valuable and went a little way towards a speedier invite to the table for working class parents who might have had only leftovers to choose from.
8.3.4 Peers

The potential friends their children could make as they began secondary school were another trigger for anxiety for many parents. Some parents were quite concerned that their son or daughter would end up becoming part of a peer group that potentially could engage in anti-social behaviour, most notably those who attended schools that involved transiting through the city centre en route to and from school. Laura found that she had genuine and sustained concerns around the fact that her son may have to walk through the city centre on his way home from school. She was particularly concerned about the friends he might make when in the city centre unsupervised. Both Maeve, a working class ‘rookie’ parent, and Greg, a working class ‘veteran’ father, did not want their respective children to attend a particular school because of the profile of its students. For Margaret, a middle class ‘veteran’ mother, who attended an all girls boarding school herself, the benefits of her daughter attending a co-educational secondary school included the fact that boys did not become alien and romanticised creatures, as her daughter would interact with them every day and see them as creatures made of clay. Margaret was of the opinion that in single sex girl schools, having a boyfriend was overly stressed amongst peers.

“I think that girls who go to single sex girls schools are more into the boyfriends and having a boyfriend and all that. Whereas definitely my oldest girl, they are more laid back about the whole thing... I suppose they see the boys every day (in current co-ed school) and they see them and think a lot are a pain in the neck. (Laughing)”
(Margaret, a middle class ‘veteran’ mother)

Gráinne, a middle class ‘rookie’ mother, laid great emphasis on the importance of friends with regard to the longer-term view of later life and also to promote some academic competition:

“It would be nice if you live in the city then to get to know the people you will be going to school with, to mix with them after school. In later years these friendships would be important...Schools on the lower end of educational achievement, I wouldn’t be happy. It might not be the right way to feel. I just feel he would want to be in a place where he is surrounded by people who want to achieve. Their friends are important.” (Gráinne, a, middle class ‘rookie’ mother)

Both Margaret and Grainne are thinking long term regarding their children’s education. For Margaret, she wants her daughter to grow up used to the company of boys and interacting with them so as it does not become a distraction in her education.
While Grainne wants equally ambitious friends to challenge her son as well as making social connections that will blossom in later life for her son.

### 8.4 Location, location, location

An additional cause for concern, and in some cases frustration, in the school choice process is the location of the potential secondary school relative to the family home. A working class ‘veteran’ mother, Wendy, while deciding on a potential secondary school for her son, had to rule out some schools because there was no direct public bus route to and from a potential school. Wendy also ruled out another potential secondary school because she could not afford the private bus fare, as the school was not on a public bus route. There is only one car in this family, which her husband uses for work and as a consequence she does not drive. Her choice of potential secondary schools was then frustratingly reduced. Location became an ever-increasing factor for her. She chose a secondary school for her son that was a ten minute walk away and, on wet mornings, had a direct bus route to the school, while also allowing her to walk to the school should she need to in case of emergency or if her son forgot something for school.

For Clara, a middle class ‘rookie’ mother the fact that her son’s bus to school picked him up around the corner was of great comfort. However that bus was a private bus and she was in a position to use her material capital to pay for that bus to take her son to school. The school Clara’s son attended was also the school that Wendy considered for her son but ruled it out due, in part, to the cost of the private bus, which she felt she was not in a position to afford. While technically Wendy had a choice of where to send her son to school but the reality was that because of her lack of material capital, that choice was not the same as Clara’s. Wendy’s choice of potential school was more limited than Clara and other middle class parents.

Maeve, a working class ‘rookie’ mother, would have “loved” for her daughter to go to a particular all girls secondary school, but a problem would have arisen regarding getting her daughter into the school each morning as, to quote Maeve, “You’re never sure of a bus up here”. The sporadic nature of the public bus provision, due to anti-social behaviour, in her neighbourhood prevented her daughter from attending another
school. Her daughter walks to school most mornings, occasionally a neighbour gives her a lift to school, as Maeve does not have a car. Her daughter’s current school is a two-kilometre walk. The secondary school closest to her, a matter of minutes away, was discounted after the open night, as it had left an unimpressive opinion with her as a consequence of talking to a lady she knew who was a ‘lollipop lady’ and worked in front of that school. The lollipop lady saw Maeve walking up to the school to attend the open night and the following morning warned her:

‘What’s going up there (the school) in September don’t let her go up there…do not let her up there.’ (Maeve, a working class ‘rookie’ mother)

In addition to the poor reputation the student body of the school had coupled with the location of the school and the route her daughter would have to walk through to get to the school, resulted in Maeve discounting that school.

Sometimes the location of a potential school brought reassurance to parents regarding their choice, insofar as it is within their own community. Both the Rachel and her husband Conor and Doris and her husband Greg, both working class ‘veteran’ parents placed considerable emphasis on the ease and safety of the route their children would have to walk to secondary school whereby they either do not have to cross the road once the children leave the family home or where they do cross the road, it is an area where a lollipop lady is on duty. For one working class ‘veteran’ mother, Ursula, her daughter has only to walk ten minutes on the same side of the road as the family home to her school. Her daughter can leave home at 8.30 a.m. and return home by 3.40 p.m. For Margaret, a middle class ‘veteran’ mother, the choice of where her children went to secondary school was influenced by the fact the both her workplace and her husband’s workplace were within ten minutes drive of the school. Equally Rebecca, a middle class ‘veteran’ mother, was reassured by the fact that there was a direct bus to and from the home to school from outside their front door. It was particularly reassuring for her as she worked nights and when she came home in the mornings; her sons were just setting off on the bus to school.

‘[The bus is] very convenient which would be a big factor to me...I work nights and I like to know that when I’m home at ten past eight in the morning they are going off on
Fear is another emotion that the parents interviewed experienced in the process of selecting a secondary school for their child. Parents across the social spectrum stated that they were fearful for their child’s safety most notably when they were walking home from school. Parents who chose to send their child to a secondary school in the city had serious concerns about their child’s risk of falling into anti-social behaviour or indeed their own physical safety as they made their way home from school. Many parents put in place various responses to allay these fears in the form of rules for their child, meeting them at the school at the end of the school day or having them picked up from the bus rather than walk home a particular route.

8.5 Principal

The role and, even more so, the personality of the principal reassured parents – to the extent that, for some parents, it overcame many of the reservations they may have had about the location of the school or the school’s facilities. A personable and visible principal was valued by parents, both ‘rookie’ and ‘veteran’, and ultimately became a deciding factor for both working class and middle class parents in the selection of where to send their child to school. The personality of the principal was perhaps the most common form of reassurance across all the parents interviewed in this research, underlining the importance of that role in choosing a secondary school.

Many working-class parents some of their initial anxiety was eased when they found that they could understand the language of the school and that they could engage with the principal and the school. Some parents felt anxious as they had left school early, while other parents recalled their own principals from when they were in school and felt that they would be treated the same way by their child’s principal.

“I was in fifth year, got the taste of having a job and that was it [leaving school]. Going back then now it was a stupid thing to do, you know…” (Wendy, a working class ‘veteran’ mother)

“They are very helpful now. We were down now last week, just chatting to the principal and [the principal is] very nice. The one thing you can say about it – some principals when you go into them – talking about boys now and when I was at school,
they’d be talking when you’d want to talk. But fair play now, [the principal] was listening to the conversation, listening to what we were saying and everything so you were actually getting your word in. And then they get theirs across and you be polite and you be quiet so. No, I think it’s good between parent-teacher and parent-principal… not like ‘I’m the principal, I’m up here or I’m her parents, I’m up here’. None of that like. And as I say, [his daughter] gets on very well down there anyway. Teachers have nothing bad to say about her, thank God.” (Conor, a working class ‘veteran’ father)

The role and impact of the principal was a major factor for many parents in the decision making process. Again an interesting dichotomy began to emerge. Whereas both working class and middle class parents appreciated a principal who was approachable, middle class parents were reassured by a broader set of criteria. This research found that the middle class parents cast a colder eye on the principal of their child’s potential secondary school. They were looking at the principal’s enthusiasm and where it was evident it was praised but equally where it was absent or seen as bland it was criticised. The fact that a principal would know their child and indeed his or her parents was highly commended by middle class parents, as opposed to the mechanical principal who was not lauded. Other features that a principal should possess and that left a favourable impression included an ability to lead and motivate teachers; a high visibility rather than being “stuck in an office”; the length of the principal’s working day; the foresight shown in planning for academic and pastoral issues; an openness as well as an ability to motivate students and not de-motivate them. Kevin, a middle class ‘rookie’ father, found that the open night sealed the decision for him as to where to send his son to school. He got the sense that every one of the staff were “going to put their best foot forward” and that the principal was extremely dedicated and could be seen putting in long hours in the school:

“…you’d see [the principal] there at half seven in the morning, he is putting in savage hours. If he is putting in those hours he’s not going to let it fail. He seemed to have the knack. My wife can come in and have a chat with [the principal] in the morning and she got on well with him. The school is very open and very welcoming. He comes across as being very open... if you can sort out a small problem before it becomes a big problem, you don’t have a problem.” (Kevin, a middle class ‘rookie’ father)

Perhaps the most discerning comment was made by Sean, unsurprisingly, a middle class ‘veteran’ parent who explained why he and his wife were so impressed by the principal of the school where they sent their daughter:
“We found the Principal a major draw in the educational quality of the place...he would impress us as being an educator, someone who would listen to the students, is keen for their minds to grow...he is someone who is content when there is an information flow and the students’ minds are growing as a consequence – I like that. It isn’t always the case. One thing that would be important is a really good pair of ears and in my view [the principal] would have that. They had an open night for new pupils and new parents and they had talks from the chairman of this and God knows what else...a bit of a bore...[the principal] had a go and he had some of the kids up talking about their experiences... at the end then there was a question and answer session. Question and answer sessions are very telling...this was a genuine questions and answer session and some of the parents asked questions and so on and a great number of the children who were there asked him questions which was very nice. And he answered them and there was a backwards and forwards between them, which I thought was very good...There was a parents meeting recently and some suggestion was made to him about some election procedure and it was heard and responded to, there was no having to consult a committee. It was a good idea, bang, it was taken up there.” (Sean, a middle class ‘veteran’ father)

This research found that many of the middle class parents made an appointment to meet the principal during the decision making process, however none of the working class parents did likewise. Via a greater cultural capital middle class parents exuded a much deeper analysis of the principal, as well as a greater expectation of the role of principal, than their working class counterparts. They are in the words of Gewirtz (2001) extremely ‘active consumers’.

8.6 Using connections

Knowing how to mount your case is a key component in maintaining the advantage middle class parents have over working class parents. Efforts to bridge the gap between the culturally, materially and socially advantaged middle class parents and their disadvantaged working class counterparts have not always been successful, as often working class parents do not have recourse to the same social and cultural network as middle class parents. Nonetheless, this research found an interesting example of a successful effort by a working class father in insuring his son got into the secondary school of his choice by knowing how to mount his case. Greg, a ‘veteran’ working class father, on advice received in his workplace, approached his local TD, to ensure his son got the secondary school of his choice, as he was anxious that his son would not get his number one choice of school. In this case Greg had the added cultural and social capital of his work environment. What is interesting here is that the working-class ‘veteran’ parent, Greg, acted in the same way as the middle-class ‘veteran’ parent, Margaret, whose husband made representations to the school of
their choice through his employer and Margaret is of the opinion that that approach was the reason her eldest daughter got her school of choice. The importance of employment in broadening a parent’s social networks and adding to a parent’s cultural capital is evident here, and is worthy of further research, as is the consequential prevention of accessing this type of capital within many working class areas due to traditional levels of higher unemployment.

8.7 Getting notification

When the parents received letters of acceptance from their chosen secondary school, the sense of relief for parents, both ‘rookie’ and ‘veteran’, was proportionately intense to the earlier levels of stress and anxiety they experienced as they began to engage with the school choice process. It was as if life, which had been on hold, could be returned to normal and other issues could dominate the household.

_When eventually I got the envelope and she got her place it was like a weight lifted off me”_ (Maeve, a working class ‘rookie’ mother)

_“We found it very daunting... when we got the [acceptance] letter it took a lot of pressure off”_ (Doris and Greg, working class ‘veteran’ parents)

It was a feature of this research that this over riding sense of relief, that the letter of acceptance brings, was most keenly felt among working class families more so than middle class families. The middle class families in this research seemed to have a greater set of alternative Plan B’s, primarily as a consequence of their greater cultural and material capital.

8.8 Second guessing

This research found also that there were subtleties within the levels of ‘active consumerism’ exhibited by middle class parents. For two different sets of parents, Derek and Mona, there was added stress as they were unhappy with their initial choice of secondary school. Both Derek and Mona were middle class ‘veteran’ parents who chose to send their respective youngest daughters to the same school their respective eldest daughters had attended in previous years. Derek had not attended any open night and presumed that the same school his eldest daughter attended would be
suitable for his youngest daughter, while Mona did attend the open night for her
daughter. Later on both Derek and Mona were of the opinion that these schools were
no longer the schools they wished their daughters to be educated in. Derek now feels
that not attending the open night of the school was an error on his part and that it is
imperative to keep well informed about the school your child may attend. However
neither Derek’s youngest daughter nor Mona’s youngest daughter settled in these
different schools, leaving both sets of parents feeling panicked and nervous about
whether their daughters would get a school as it was early September and the
academic year was under way.

“The biggest problem was we were into September and it’s very hard to get a child in
then, we made a few inquiries... we were in such a panic, we were grasping at any
straws really...” (Derek, a middle class ‘veteran’ father)

“So I went from there [first choice school] up to [second chance school]. I was
nervous. I didn’t know whether they’d accept her...” (Mona, a middle class ‘veteran’
mother)

Fortunately for both sets of parents the situation has resolved itself, despite the added
costs.

Mona and Derek, both middle class ‘veteran’ parents, were able to use their material
and cultural capital to facilitate a change in their children’s first choice of secondary
school. In the intervening years since their eldest daughters had attended these
secondary schools both parents were no longer as involved in the schools, they were
not as diligent and as ‘active consumers’ as they could have been. They were able to
recover from this situation through their material and cultural capital. Nonetheless
they were not as effective ‘active consumers’ as another middle class ‘veteran’
mother, Catherine, who kept well informed about the potential schools her daughter
might attend and those she might not attend, thereby avoiding the extra expense and
stress that both Derek and Mona had to endure.

It is worthy of further exploration to see if that same level of choice – a second chance
so to speak – would be available to working class parents, not least because of the
additional costs regarding uniform, books and transport. The experiences of the
Derek’s family and Mona’s family, as they reposition themselves as educational
consumers within the marketplace, were exclusive to two middle class families in this research. This material and cultural capital reinvested by the two families echoes the findings of (Gewirtz et al 1995; Ball, S.J., Bowe, R. and Gewirtz, S. 1997; Whitty, Power and Halpin 1998; Vincent 2001; Apple 2001 & 2009).

8.9 Conclusion

This research has found that without doubt the time from when parents first enter into the decision making process of where to send their child to secondary school until that process reaches its conclusion, when the letter of acceptance drops in through the letter box, is a time fraught with a roller coaster of emotions. The process is complete with both terrifying downswings coupled with occasional upswings of respite and like all the memorable roller coaster rides it certainly leaves an impression. This research has found that the area of parental emotional response to school choice has not been sufficiently addressed in the research done into school choice nationally and internationally. O’Brien and Flynn (2007), exploring the impact of care and emotions in education, state that the care and emotional work “carried out by mothers in the educational field suggest that mothers’ care is shaped by schooling in ways that systematically privilege some and disadvantage others” (O’Brien and Flynn 2007: 82-83). It is vital that policymakers and educators recognise the “hidden work of care that supports schooling” in order to address the area of educational inequality (O’Brien and Flynn 2007: 83).

From this research it has become evident that both working class and middle class parents experience similar emotions at similar times of this process. However some parents are better equipped to deal with this journey, they possess an advantage, materially and culturally – consequently other parents are at a disadvantage (Kellaghan 1999; Clancy 1995, 2001; Bernstein 1977, 1997; Bourdieu 1984, 1986, 1999 cited by O’Brien and Flynn 2007, p.70). The following chapters will explore how, despite being at a disadvantage, many working class parents strive to plot a way through this disadvantage, whereas middle class parents are in a position of advantage because of their greater material and cultural capital. Given the changing educational landscape as the end of the first decade in the 21st century draws to a close, this
becomes an even more precarious and difficult time to be a working class parent deciding where to send their child to secondary school.
Chapter 9

Getting on – Coping with the Snowballing Costs of ‘Free Education’

9.1 Introduction

As the dust begins to settle from the emotional storm that choosing a school for their child became, a clearer picture began to emerge of the economic impact on parents in this research. Despite Donagh O’Malley’s introduction of free secondary education in Ireland in 1967, the reality is that having a child in secondary school is a costly undertaking – a costly undertaking that not all parents can meet equally. In fact starting a child in first year of secondary school in Ireland is estimated to be over €800 in 2010 (Barnados 2010). The fact that 91 per cent of respondents in a Sunday Independent/ Quantum Research poll want the back-to-school costs of uniforms and books regulated (McConnell 2010), is also an example of how many parents in Ireland are groaning financially under this snowballing economic burden. The 20 per cent increase in applications for the Back-to-School Clothing and Footwear Allowance and consequent delay in the processing of payments, requiring extra staff to be drafted in by the HSE in the west and mid-west of Ireland (Gartland 2010, Carberry 2010), adds further weight to the difficulty many parents face in meeting the significant cost associated with equipping their child for secondary school. While every parent interviewed in this research felt that having a child in secondary school was a significant expense, each parent felt that it was also a worthwhile expense – even if they could not afford it and would express regret or anxiety around not being able to afford something that would benefit their child’s education. However for middle class parents their greater material capital revealed how they could better cope with the expense of having children in secondary school and invest more in their child’s education than could the majority of working class parents. This research found that it is doubtful that many working class parents could readily afford that initial bottleneck expense in September, as these expenses are simply not even on the horizon for many working class parents because of other more immediate expenses in the family home.
A distinct and inequitable economic hierarchy of parents choosing a secondary school for their children surfaced during this research. The middle class ‘veteran’ and ‘rookie’ parents were able to use their greater economic clout to ensure their children were in the best position in the educational marketplace, even those middle class ‘rookie’ parents, debuting in the school choice process, quickly adapted to this new stage in their child’s education. The initial emotions experienced by both middle class and working class parents as a consequence of the school choice process were quite similar as described in the previous chapter. However any similarities of experience dissolved when this research compared the material resources of middle class and working class parents, with the majority of working class parents finding themselves at the bottom of this distinct and inequitable economic parental hierarchy of school choice.

This chapter will look at the economic impact that having a child start secondary school has on parents, centring on the costs associated with buying books; buying uniforms; accessing the internet; availing of extra-curricular activities; as well as discussing the parental supports available and the impact of parents giving up work as a consequence of their material capital.

9.2 Books

The cost involved in purchasing school books was an area many parents extremely strongly about across the social spectrum. However the greatest economic pain and hardship was felt by working class parents. Her debut as a parent of a secondary school child has left, Maeve, a working class ‘rookie’ mother, reeling at what she saw as the various errors she made. Looking back she felt she made what she regarded as foolish mistakes in not picking up some of her daughter’s school books during the summer. She also felt regret that she did not know more about state aid for schoolbooks that other mothers in a similar situation got. When her daughter started secondary school in September, Maeve borrowed €200 to pay for her daughter’s school books which left her feeling quite annoyed at the situation:

*But I was a fool, I should have picked up a few books during the summer but I didn’t know. Do you know, it being my first time to send a child to secondary? They went*
back to school in September and about two weeks after I said ‘Is there any signs of you getting a book?’ She said ‘No Mam, such a girl got her books and such a girl books’. I said it to my sister and she lifted me about that height... she asked why didn’t I pick her up a few books, that [Maeve’s daughter] would fall behind...So I went away and borrowed the money to get her her school books, €189 it cost me for school books, I borrowed €200 to get her her books. One book [is all that] my child got from the school, I was disappointed in that! I met other mothers who are in the same situation as me and told me they got all their child’s books...I didn’t know anything about that (getting state grants for schoolbooks).” (Maeve, a working class ’rookie’ mother)

Similarly, Wendy, a working class ‘veteran’ mother, found school books a significant cost, noting that for her as her son entered first year, this was “the hardest [time] because you’re starting from scratch unless you had another child in the school that you would keep books, you know you could just pass them down.” Wendy’s daughter is in fifth year in a different secondary school. However unlike Maeve, Wendy does use her greater experience of already having a child in secondary school to plan for the expense involved in buying her son’s school books. She started buying her son’s books in May and continued to do so over the next four months, buying a book every week or two weeks until she had bought all the necessary school books. This removed a lot of the financial and emotional stress that Maeve had experienced as she could control her household expenditure and include the cost of her son’s schoolbooks gradually without any financial bottleneck in September.

[Her son’s school] then done a fantastic thing this year when you went to the meeting [for incoming first years in May] you got a school book list and everything was priced which I thought was fantastic, it gave you the price so you could say well this is the price I am going to have to spend, and you had from May to September so every week you would get a book or every two weeks. (Wendy, a working class ‘rookie’ mother)

Equally, Rachel and Conor, working class ‘veteran’ parents, held the same view as Wendy in that they bought their daughter’s schoolbooks on a weekly basis over a number of months. It was also not financially possible for them to pay out €300-€400 in one payment for schoolbooks.

“You have to buy them [schoolbooks] weekly, you couldn’t afford it, it’s impossible to go down and say ‘there’s a list, give me all that’, sure you’re talking three or four hundred quid...not unless you’ve the lotto in your back pocket like Dolores [a Euromillions Lotto winner]” (Conor, a working class ‘veteran’ father)

Rachel had also learnt from experience not to throw away any books her older children might have used in the past until the book list arrived from the school

Another worry for some of the working class parents in this research was, having struggled to equip their child for secondary school, the fact remained that many of them would have to face the same expense again the following year because of another child entering first year brought increased anxiety to these parents. Ursula, a working class ‘veteran’ mother, felt that having spent nearly €400 this year on books she would have “big problem next year because [she was] going to have to buy the same set of books all over for [her next daughter], even though they are using the same books.” Maeve echoed this sentiment feeling that the following year she would have “two of them in secondary. I’m going to be robbed.” Having struggled to overcome this significant financial heartache this year, Maeve acknowledges that already the costs to equip her next (second eldest) daughter for her fast approaching first year in secondary school is causing her concern.

Rebecca, as a member of the best socially-equipped group within this research, a middle class ‘veteran’ mother, bought her son’s books for €150 second hand. She has always bought her sons’ school books second hand, as she has five sons. She feels that she saved approximately €200 on her son’s books in first year by buying them second hand, displaying her strength in this educational marketplace, in sharp contrast to Maeve.

“It’s got more expensive [to have a child in secondary school]...the booklist new...came to €350 new...so I was able to get my books second hand for €150 or something, it was less than half...I would have always got my books second-hand, you can get very good second hand books in Tony Clarke’s...having five children [laughing]!!” (Rebecca, a middle class ‘veteran’ mother)

Interestingly Rachel, a working class ‘veteran’ mother, did not like buying second hand books because of a previous experience with her eldest son when she bought his maths book second hand which they later discovered was missing too many pages. She then had the added outlay of buying the new maths book for her son. Rachel had decided that she would only buy new schoolbooks for her daughter in first year. She would try and recoup the costs by selling them to the bookshop as second hand when
her daughter was finished with them. However Rebecca, who saved approximately €200, felt that you can get very good quality books second hand. The fact that one of the strongest ‘consumers’ in this research, Rebecca, is prepared to buy second hand books rather than buying them new, would suggest that she, like so many other middle class parents, uses her greater material and cultural capital to see potential downfalls to paying the full amount for new school books. These potential downfalls include the high risk strategy of predicting the future. Syllabi may change, school book lists may change, or the books may become misplaced, thereby removing any potential recouping of initial outlay. Perhaps also this anomaly suggests a type of sensitivity around the area of socio-economic status for some working class parents who wish to mask a lack of material capital, as well as a desire that they do not want their children thought of as in any way inferior, preferring to be on a par with anyone in their school regardless of socio-economic background, they simply want to appear equal. Middle class parents, because of their obvious material capital, do not seem to have that same self-consciousness. This anomaly is worthy of further discussion.

For middle class parents the concern over the cost of schoolbooks for their children also provided a degree of concern. Kevin, a middle class ‘rookie’ father, had, in his words, “a huge gripe” over the costs of schoolbooks. The fact that many textbooks then had associated workbooks caused him no end of distress.

*It’s a huge gripe I have. Say for arguments sake for books say for science they have three books and three hard covered notebooks. Every major book has a workbook to go with it, it doesn’t make sense.* (Kevin, a middle class ‘rookie’ father)

He paid €280 for his son’s school books in first year and that was where there was a book rental scheme in operation in his son’s school. Kevin felt that for the publishers it was a “money making scheme” with new editions being printed where there were only minor changes, which meant that his son entering first year could not use previous editions that his older siblings had used in school. While Kay, a middle class ‘veteran’ mother, felt that the phrase ‘free education’ was a misnomer, as she spent almost €500 on books for her daughter entering first year.
“Free education my backside! She started in first year last year with her booklist it was nearly €500, it’s ridiculous...I think every school should have a rental scheme, the price of books is ridiculous.” (Kay, a middle class ‘veteran’ mother)

Clara, a middle class ‘rookie’ mother, was thrilled with the arrangement her son’s school had where the schoolbooks were hired for the school year, thereby reducing a significant part of the financial outlay. Clara also found it cost effective that her son’s school had a hire scheme in place for his schoolbooks. For the cost of €100 and another €100 deposit, returned at the end of the school year if the books remain in good condition, her son could hire his books for the year.

A primary concern for some parents like Sean, a middle class ‘veteran’ parent, is the time constraints of a working day for both parents, who both work, when trying to buy schoolbooks. He was delighted that his daughter’s school were, he felt, quite efficient in that they order the school books in bulk and the parents then pay the school directly, at a slightly cheaper price than the price in the bookshops. Sean described the expenses he found in having a child in secondary school:

“…you buy the kit and not just the sports kit, there are voluntary contributions to be made, then there are the various tours and various things we finance, it is not a free education system...The running of your child’s education is quite expensive.” (Sean, a middle class ‘veteran’ father)

It is worth noticing that the middle class parents interviewed in this research whose older children are attending third level felt that while secondary school was expensive, it pales in comparison to the expenses involved in third level.

“[Secondary school] is not half as expensive as having them in third level. That’d bleed you dry. We had two of them [living] out of Limerick and that [cost] is an arm and a leg. [One adult child] wants to go on and do another course after her Masters, which is another two years and €10,000 a year. [Another adult child] is off my hands now thank God, he’s moved out, bought his [own] house.” (Catherine, a middle class ‘veteran’ mother)

However without the investment at second level, and continuing onto third level, outlined in this chapter, the opportunity these middle class parents have in sending their children to third level is somewhat diminished. Ball et al (1997) highlight that for the middle-class families the marketplace in education involves:
9.3 Uniforms

Where there are costs for schoolbooks there are also inevitably costs for school uniforms. Ursula, a working class ‘veteran’ mother, felt their “uniform was worth every penny because they [her daughters] get the wear out of it and it saves all the heartache in the morning looking for clothes” and Conor, a working class ‘veteran’ father, considered it a relief that his daughter’s uniform could be bought on credit from the shop that supplied the uniforms. The relief came from the point of view of cash flow within the household budget as his wife explained, “you’d be living on bread and water” if they had to pay for their daughter’s full uniform in one payment. Contrasting this viewpoint, Clara, a middle class ‘rookie’ mother, the extra expense of a blazer as part of her son’s uniform was worthwhile because she liked what the positive connotation the blazer said about her son’s school and the fact that “a lot of people do comment on how smart they look - you can spot them, you know, and that they look well”.

For Doris, a working class ‘veteran’ parent, experience had taught her to buy a better quality school jumper for her son beginning first year, as previously she had bought a poorer quality jumper which had to be replaced earlier in the school year than anticipated. She felt that spending €50 on a good quality jumper was worthwhile, rather than the initially cheaper purchase but one that would prove more expensive in the longer term.

For two middle class veteran parents their daughters’ initial experience of first year resulted in a need for the two families to change the secondary school their daughter’s attended. Because of their greater material capital, as well as cultural capital, these changes were possible. Both sets of parents were able to articulate their case to the new schools and both sets of parents were able also to afford the various ancillary costs involved regarding new uniforms and new textbooks. Derek, who also felt the need to change his daughter’s secondary school, found it a similarly expensive time, but felt that “you’d put up with that” Mona, who wanted to change her daughter’s...
secondary school, spent “the bones of €1000” on the change. The costs included the original uniform and books for the first secondary school she attended and then the new uniform and the new books for the second school. Mona was prepared to send her daughter to a private school should her daughter not secure a place in her second secondary school. However she made a successful application to the new secondary school.

_It did cost me a lot of money because I automatically bought all her new books for [the first school] and I wouldn’t buy second hand books because the child has a complex for second hand things, so I had no trouble doing that. Then when I took the schoolbooks back to [the bookshop] I thought they might buy some of them back of me...she said these books might not even come on the agenda for next year. So that was that it was €300 for those books, when I went back to get her her new books the second set of books came to nearly €300 again. Then we had to go down to [a clothes shop] for her uniform, I think that was over €200 and then you’ve an entrance fee, and they only charged me half because she was only after getting in half term if you like. I think that was only 50 euro or something like that...I think to send [my daughter] to school this year it cost me the bones of a €1000 and I don’t even think it stopped at that.” (Mona, a middle class ‘veteran’ mother)

Whilst some working class parents interviewed in the course of this research were dissatisfied with certain aspects of their child’s school, none of these working class parents felt the need to change their child’s secondary school. One can only wonder if that need for change arose, would those working class parents have the material capital to ensure that change. As their child’s journey through secondary school continues inevitably like many relationships, there can be moments of frustration. The sources of frustration can be varied as can the solutions. The middle class parents yet again seem better placed to overcome these frustrations than their working class counterparts.

Conor, a working class ‘veteran’ father, found that something else focused his annoyance – unnecessary costs; not knowing the unwritten rules of the school, as it were. Looking back on it, despite carefully planning for their daughter’s schoolbooks, Conor and his wife Rachel still managed to spend more money than they needed to spend. Conor particularly felt aggrieved at spending money on an atlas that was on the book list but was “not even opened” by his daughter, as well as spending money on hardback copies that their daughter was told she needed but remained unused throughout the year. Equally, the most vulnerable of parents in this research
experienced hardship again. Maeve, a working class ‘rookie’ mother, also was
unaware of the unwritten rules of her daughter’s school but paid a heaver financial
price than Rachel and Conor. At the open night she had heard the principal say to the
parents present that it was preferable for the parents to spend €100 on good quality
footwear as part of the uniform. Being the diligent mother and wanting the best for
her daughter, Maeve spent €100 on the shoes for her daughter. However having gone
through the experience she is adamant that she would not spend €100 on shoes as part
of the uniform again, especially when she met other mothers who had spent €25 on
shoes for their daughters’ shoes. The unnecessary spending did not stop there. A scarf
for €15 and a school jacket costing €50 were worn once on the first day and spent the
remainder of the year in her daughter’s wardrobe. Maeve got €310 from the Back to
School Clothing and Footwear Allowance which only paid for her eldest daughter’s
first year uniforms despite the money being allocated for her three children.

“The uniform alone is €170 –180 euro, an O’Neill’s tracksuit bottoms for €45-50
euros, a top, tacies (trainers), a shirt, this thing about a scarf for the school for €15,
the scarf is above in the wardrobe, she never put it on her neck, a jacket with a crest
on it €50, wore it the first day and it’s up in the wardrobe hanging – the young one
[next daughter to go to secondary school] will wear it in September. They’d want to
make it compulsory for them to wear it... I met people who paid €25 euro in Dunnes
[Stores] for them. The night of the open night the principal said they’d much prefer if
they had the good decks as the cheap ones won’t last.” (Maeve, a ‘rookie’ working
class mother)

Maeve spent over €400 in total on her daughter’s uniform for first year in secondary
school, when with hindsight she could have reduced that expense by €140, a potential
significant savings of 35%. It was a harsh lesson for Maeve to learn and one that she
still feels upset about and one she seems determined not to repeat. If only she had
known this before the cost of her eldest daughter’s schooling began to snowball.

Sean and Catherine, two middle class ‘veteran’ parents who ‘child-matched’ (Gewirtz
et al 1995) their respective daughters to particular schools, as described in the
previous chapter, naturally faced significantly extra costs. Sean sent his three children
to three different schools, complete with three different sets of books and three
different sets of uniforms. Catherine also sent her three children to three different
schools with the same additional expense. Both Sean and Catherine were able to
choose a school that best suited each child’s personality and interests and because of
their material capital this decision proved easy to put into action. However working class parents, not having equal material capital as middle class parents, have to strategically plan their household budgets or indeed borrow money in order to meet the payments for books and uniforms. These parents simply do not have the additional income to match each of their children to a different school in an equitable manner to their middle class counterparts.

9.4 A new dimension of educational inequality

With the advent of the Internet as an additional educational tool all the parents in this research saw the merit in having Internet access in their homes, however not all the parents were in a position to afford the Internet. An interesting dynamic began to emerge in relation to the availability of the Internet in the family home. A seemingly new dimension of inequality surfaces within what Downes and Gilligan refer to as “this stubborn and complex problem that has been designated as ‘educational disadvantage’” (Downes and Gilligan: 2007: xiii).

 Whereas all the middle class parents interviewed in this research have internet access in their homes, the majority with high speed broadband, conversely many working class parents have struggled with the expense associated with having internet access in their homes, some have not been able to afford this. For Doris and Greg, working class ‘veteran’ parents, the fact that Greg got a computer through his workplace and the fact that he is engaged in further education at university, facilitated them in recently getting internet access in the family home. Both he and his wife were delighted with this development. Again as mentioned earlier, the positive influence and support, the supplementary capital, that a workplace can have on a child’s education is clearly illustrated here. Equally for Wendy’s, a working class ‘veteran’ mother, family, the fact that her husband is employed made it possible for the family to get Internet access. This resulted in a palpable sense of relief as their children could benefit from using the Internet. Rachel and Conor, working class ‘veteran’ parents, had decided that they would “get the house phone in so they [the children] can go onto the Internet”. It was with a sense of joy that Ursula, a working class ‘veteran’ mother, told this researcher that they had wireless broadband in their home. However,
it is not an equal tide that raises all boats in this instance. For the most vulnerable parent in this research, Maeve, a working class ‘rookie’ parent who is also unemployed and separated, does not get a timely invite to the table that Derman Sparks and Fite (2007) speak of, as she does not have a phone landline and cannot afford the costs involved in maintaining internet access in her home:

“There’s no Internet, I wouldn’t have it because of the cost, I’d be lucky to have the [cost of the mobile] phone.” (Maeve, a working class ‘rookie’ mother)

While the Department of Education and Science has stated as one of its goals for the future in relation to the provision of Information and Communications Technology (ICT) in schools is the desire that:

“ICT should be used seamlessly within the curriculum at both primary and post-primary. Students must be encouraged to use technology in a multi-faceted way, to research and reinforce their subjects, to present their knowledge through multimedia presentations and digital video and finally, to submit personal project work for official assessment as part of state examinations.” (DES: 2008a: 12)

The Department of Education and Science also recommend that teachers:

“...should exploit the potential of ICT to develop as wide a range of students’ skills as possible, including higher-order skills of problem-solving, synthesis, analysis and evaluation.” (DES: 2008b: xix)

Some homes are better equipped than others to realise this hope. One wonders how this fits into the reality of Maeve’s life and the many other working class parents whose circumstances echo hers. It seems educational inequality continues unabated.

With the recent advent of online sites such as www.skoool.ie, www.scoilnet.ie, www.teachnet.ie, www.e-xamit.ie a raft of resources are available to students and parents to aid and support their learning, however many families do not have access to these supports in their family home due to insufficient material capital. Furthermore with fewer and fewer subjects being examined solely via a terminal state exam and a concerted move toward project based assessments, parents who have internet access in their homes will find their children gain better advantages due to greater material capital. Book companies are now offering online versions of school textbooks which
can be accessed at home and thereby lessening the weight of school bags or for those parents who can afford it, they can purchase the electronic version of a textbook to supplement their child’s learning. The State Examinations Commission’s website, www.examinations.ie provides a valuable pool of information on the state exams including the marking scheme of past Junior and Leaving Certificate examinations, timetables and so forth. Add in downloadable pod-casts in various subjects and more and more benefits accrue to those parents whose children have access to the Internet at home. Virtual Learning Environments (VLEs) are being set up by many schools so as students can now submit work, view assignments and subject material online – thereby promoting a greater student voice and student ownership of their work. Equally the impact of advocacy and support sites for parents such as the Irish www.schooldays.ie and in the UK www.schoolappeals.org.uk and www.attheschoolgates.co.uk is inevitably diluted. The ICT table is creaking under the weight of recent advances and many parents are getting to that table first while others will merely be dining on the leftovers.

9.5 Extra-curricular

This research found that many parents, middle class and working class, valued their child’s involvement in extra-curricular activities, but yet again when examined a little more closely the middle class parents were thinking more strategically and long term than working class parents. The only child, in this research, not involved in extracurricular activities was Maeve’s daughter, the most vulnerable parent in this research. Other working class parents had their children involved in extra-curricular activities, such as Conor whose daughter was involved in the school choir and Ursula whose daughter was involved in sports and in Gaisce – the Irish President’s Award for young people aged between fifteen and twenty-five years of age. Interestingly though both of these parents are ‘veteran’ parents who are not making their maiden voyage in the area of secondary school. Ursula is heavily involved in her daughters’ secondary school as she is on the Parents’ Council in the school. She is also a past pupil of the school and has very fond memories of her time there, which included a very active participation in extra-curricular activities, whereas Maeve left school at the age of thirteen and does not have that bank of memories or experiences. Given that
traditionally the highest participation rates amongst students in the area of extra-curricular activities is often in first year as they try new things, after which there can be a fall off in participation rates, (Lunn 2010, Lunn & Layte 2008), it may be unlikely that Maeve’s daughter will reap many of the benefits from involvement in extra-curricular activities. Conversely for many middle class ‘rookie’ parents their child’s involvement in extra-curricular activities is actively encouraged and supported as the norm. For the following middle class ‘rookie’ parents the value they place on extra-curricular activities is evident. Laura, a middle class ‘rookie’ mother, felt that a holistic approach within a school was something she valued, where her son could develop more roundly and she was completely taken by one potential school’s long tradition of taking away students on overnight extra-curricular activities trips and retreats and so on. She also felt that while it does cost money to be involved in extra-curricular activities that she was “comfortably middle class relative to a lot of people “ she would see it as a priority and a justifiable expense to spend money on education and extra-curricular activities including the necessary gear and books. For Kevin, a middle class ‘rookie’ father, the fact that his son’s school were so encouraging of his son to become involved in a multitude of extra-curricular activities, regardless of his previous experience or skill level pleased him greatly:

“He’s being drawn into things like [a variety of sports] whereas he wouldn’t get a second glance in other schools. I know a crop of the lads who went from [the same primary school] to [another secondary school] this year … they are struggling to make teams. They’d make any team ahead of [my son] but because the numbers here are smaller, he is being dragged into teams. That’s a bonus.” (Kevin, a middle class ‘rookie’ father)

Gráinne, a middle class ‘rookie’ mother, articulated clearly the benefits she saw to the financial and time commitment required by parents when their child is involved in extra-curricular activities, displaying a typical middle class longer term view:

“It would be nice to get to know the people you will be going to school with, to mix with them after school. In later years these friendships would be important… Their friends are important. It would really be the after school activities that are expensive, every club have a fee… We have more income at our disposal and children are able to avail of more trips and clubs” (Gráinne, a middle class ‘rookie’ mother)

Similarly Bernie, a middle class ‘veteran’ mother, believed that though there was an unavoidably high cost in having a child in secondary school, the benefits of
interacting with their peers and partaking in school trips made these expenses worthwhile. Her son would be visiting the same European city for the third time on his school trip, having been there twice before with his family. He also spent three weeks in the Gaeltacht improving his Irish and making friends. Maeve, a working class ‘rookie’ mother, tried to match this type of educational experience for her daughter when her daughter’s school went to Europe as a follow on to what her daughter had studied in school. For Maeve this proved a most difficult and stressful time. It was her daughter’s first time away from home, as well as being her first time outside of Ireland. Maeve describes the experience as she:

“…struggled to get her there to be quite honest, but got her there...She cost me a fortune, suitcases, clothes, money, fares; it didn’t stop at €500. €50 for her hair, I wouldn’t get my own her done for that, that’s beside the point. You have to give it to them.” (Maeve, a working class ‘rookie’ mother)

Maeve did not want her daughter to miss out on any potential educational experience however it would seem that this type of self sacrifice by Maeve is unsustainable, from a financial perspective, through her daughter’s secondary school education. This trip to Europe was a one off attempt to flex some degree of material capital muscle by Maeve rather than the toned flexing of their frequent material capital muscle that many middle class parents see as a fundamental part of their child’s education.

Kevin decided enough was enough with regard to the ever increasing spiral of costs associated with his son’s education. Having paid for his son’s uniform, school books and a school trip to another European city, he drew the line at spending €600 for Irish College for his son. He felt the costs were snowballing and it needed to be addressed.

[The expense] just all seems to be coming at once. It’s hugely expensive. It’s all just snowballing, we just had to say stop because [my son] was keen to go to the Irish School for the summer and we said look you can’t go to that, we are not spending €600 to go on that. It has to stop there. I wasn’t prepared for the expense of it. I think if we had gone to [a private school], I don’t know where I’d be now.” (Kevin, a middle class ‘rookie’ father)

Interestingly where many parents were in agreement across the socio-economic spectrum was when a potential secondary school put too strong an emphasis on one extra-curricular activity above all others at an open night. Wendy and Kay, both
working class ‘veteran’ mothers, as well as Laura and Clara, both middle class ‘rookie’ mothers, balked at this focus as they feared their child would be alienated if they did not succeed in this area.

9.6 Parental supports

A source of support for ‘veteran’ parents came in the guise of assistance from older siblings. For Rebecca, a middle class ‘veteran’ mother, that support came from her eldest son who was studying engineering at university and was living at home. The eldest son was in a position to bridge the gap in his mother’s mathematical knowledge and tutor his younger brother. This was echoed by Wendy, a working class ‘veteran’ mother, whose daughter was able to tutor her younger brother in French and thereby make up the gap in her mother’s knowledge in French. ‘Rookie’ parents whose eldest child was beginning their secondary school career did not have this support. Primarily that role fell on the laps of the parents themselves. This then lead to a difference in the level of support open to ‘rookie’ parents, where a parent’s own education and ability to pay for extra tuition, in the form of grinds, impacted on the level of support available to their child.

Clara, a middle class ‘rookie’ mother, was concerned that her son was struggling with his maths in sixth class. She was fearful of the impact a poor performance in maths might have on her son’s opportunity of attending the then school of choice, she was in a position to utilise her material capital to get her son extra tuition in maths, mirroring Sean, a middle class ‘veteran’ father, who paid for his daughter to have extra tuition in Irish while in sixth class. This research found that not all parents were in a position to do this. For ‘veteran’ working class parents, Doris and Greg, they would hope that in the future they would be able to afford grinds for their son as he has a special educational need and they felt he would need more help than other students. However it is by no means a guaranteed source of support. While Ursula, a working class ‘veteran’ mother, was of the opinion that grinds should not be required “if the child is doing what they are supposed to do.”
Having a support network of extended family living nearby brought additional supports to some mothers. Wendy, a working class ‘veteran’ mother, and Bernie, a middle class ‘veteran’ mother, both drew solace from the fact that there was a strong family support network living locally which collectively aided the decision making process and also provided an ad hoc collective care team for their sons. Wendy, whose mother and aunt lived in the same area, in addition to her mother-in-law and her own sisters living nearby, found it a benefit that she could draw on the opinions and advice of up to five close members of her family. Also this ‘team’ could be called on to help out and support her in an emergency, which brought its own comfort. Similarly, Bernie found that, following the breakup of her marriage, she could turn to the support network offered by her own sister and mother, as she moved house back to the area in which her family lived. She felt that the level of support offered by family would be more than that offered by her friends, that there was a limit in what you could ask friends to do whereas it is easier to ask family for support. Conversely Gráinne, a middle class ‘rookie’ mother, found that she could only rely on friends as her family lived in a different part of the country. She also stated that she had less of a sense of her locality as she had only lived there for a short period of time, unlike many of the other mothers who had grown up in the area. This resonates with the research carried out by Gewirtz et al (1995); Ball, S.J., Bowe, R. and Gewirtz, S. (1997).

9.7 Parents giving up work

Having greater financial stability and by using this material capital, allied to their cultural capital, reassured some middle class parents that their child was in as strong a position educationally as they moved into secondary school (Gewirtz et al 1995; Ball, S.J., Bowe, R. and Gewirtz, S. 1997; Whitty, Power and Halpin 1998; Vincent 2001; Apple 2001 & 2009).

For some mothers, undoubted benefit accrued from their decision to stop working outside the family home and focus their attentions on raising a family. Only those parents who were in a financially secure position were in a place to do this and these parents were exclusively middle class. Rebecca, a middle class ‘veteran’ mother, was not working outside the home when her children were in primary school. She felt it
was more important to be at home when her children came in from primary school and settle them into a routine around homework and help them with their homework. Her daughter is now a qualified doctor, as well as having two older sons at university and would see her role in helping them when they were in primary school as an important stage in laying foundations for future academic success.

“What I find was the main thing that helped them was that when they come home from school in primary they sit down and did their lessons; that to me was the main thing, the routine. At the time I wasn’t working when they were all smaller...I did help them when they were in primary school” (Rebecca, a middle class ‘veteran’ mother)

Equally, Hilary’s, a middle class ‘rookie’ mother, story echoes Rebecca’s above. Hilary gave up work once her children were born and has not returned to work some twelve years later as she too holds a premium on the role she can play in their education. Displaying a long term viewpoint that is not always there in some working class families, and which echoes what Ball et al (1997) wrote, Hilary took her children out to the local university and brought them with her to the university library so as they could familiarise themselves with that environment. Hilary spoke of spending hours playing with her children on the floor, using building blocks, reading with them, speaking Irish to them:

“I used to get language books and they’d play the CD, fun books. They’d be able to count to ten in German and stuff like that. It gave them confidence, they know they can do it... they were reading books and using building blocks. I spent most of my life on the floor with them when they were babies. I would speak Irish to them” (Hilary, a middle class ‘rookie’ mother)

Perhaps unsurprisingly with this level of support, Hilary’s children were reading perfectly at the age of three. She also kept the television in a cabinet and her children did not see a television until they were five years old, Hilary wanted to keep their focus on reading and developing their language instead. She was able to save and invest her children’s allowance since the day her children were born and now spends it exclusively on their education. None of the working class parents in this research were able to invest the same amount of finances and time as Hilary or Rebecca. Here can be seen what Bourdieu (1986 cited in O’Brien and Flynn 2007: 77) refers to as “the capacity to access and activate dominant forms of cultural capital from within the habitus.” Furthermore Walkerdine and Lucey’s publication _Democracy in the Kitchen_
puts forward the theory that middle class mothers, like Rebecca and Hilary above, who do not have to work outside the home have more time and energy to aid the educational development of their children. This material capital, allied to the middle class habitus, allows these mothers to see the home as “an extended site for educational care work; where baking becomes a maths lesson, and gardening a science lesson” (Walkerdine and Lucey 1989 cited in O’Brien and Flynn 2007:77). An obvious advantage began to emerge in this research as for many working class parents this “extended site” is not available due to a dearth of economic and cultural capital in the home. Reay makes a valid conclusion from her work in that “the emotional caring efforts of working-class mothers are extensive but less effective from a schooling perspective” (Reay 1998, 2000 cited in cited in O’Brien and Flynn 2007: 78). Hilary and Rebecca, and Laura and Grainne earlier, all middle class mothers, echo Bloom’s comprehensive model of the home that promotes school learning (Cited in Kellaghan 1993), whereby these four middle class mothers have a structured routine at home, where educational activities win out over other activities; academic support and guidance is provided; their children are stimulated and the families’ activities are often opportunities for extending the classroom; similar language is used at home and in school and finally, where there are clear academic aspirations – all in all, a perfect storm of parenting attributes that ensures success in the educational marketplace. Not all working class parents are in a position to mirror this, thereby exacerbating educational inequality.

This advantage that Rebecca, a middle class ‘veteran’ mother and Hilary, a middle class ‘rookie’ were able to give their children contrasts sharply with another mother, Maeve, a working class ‘rookie’ mother. The informal but crucially important early childhood care, which continued throughout primary school, which Rebecca and Hilary’s children received, undoubtedly puts their children at an advantage over Maeve’s children. Maeve, and other working class, unemployed, lone parent, ‘rookie’, and indeed ‘veteran’, mothers, will face the biggest difficulty in striving to give her children equally thorough levels of educational support as Rebecca and Hilary gave their children, as a consequence of being at a higher risk of poverty (CPA 2006; Downes & Gilligan; 2007 CPA 2008; EU-SILC 2007). In her desire to sate her children’s appetite for new clothes and runners, Maeve spent her redundancy package
received over eight years ago. She wistfully remembers that time as an occasion when she had money and if she bought something for one child she bought something for her two other children also.

“They want everything today, if I can afford to give it to them I give it to them, if I can’t I can’t. There was a time when I had money, I came out on redundancy eight years ago, it’s gone now, I gave them everything, if [my eldest daughter] got a pair of Nike tacies, then [my youngest] got a pair of Nike tacies [runners]...for the last four weeks I’m buying their clothes every week for the confirmation [of middle child] for Saturday, bit by bit. It cost me €500 euro to dress my daughter for her confirmation...there’s no fancy meals or barbeques or anything like that here. They’ll have their dinner when they come home and I’ll treat them to a curry. There’ll be no drink or nothing like that.” (Maeve, a working class ‘rookie’ mother)

Maeve has struggled to equip her daughter for secondary school and has borrowed money to cover the costs of books and the uniform.

For Hilary and Rebecca above, their experience echoes many of the middle-class mothers that O’Brien (2005) interviewed in her study. Fifty percent of the middle-class mothers in the study gave up work or “had changed jobs so that they would be at home when their children returned from school” (Duncan et al 2003 cited in O’Brien 2005: 230).

9.8 Conclusion

The significant cost of having a child enter secondary school belies the notion of ‘free education’. Given the sums mentioned in this chapter of approximately €800 (Barnardos 2010), the strain that this puts on working class families is much more severe than the impact it has on middle class families and plays a key role in sustaining educational inequality. A 2010 Higher Education Authority (HEA) study, which focussed on the low rate of participation in higher education by those from the ‘Non-Manual’ category, the largest social group in Ireland, found that in the instances where students whose parents did not have experience of higher education, and whose brothers and sisters as well as their peers did not experience higher education, that these students needed the support and encouragement of their school (McCoy et al: 2010). Hence the choice of school becomes hugely important for both students and parents. While many of the middle class parents mentioned in this research support
their children’s education through their greater material, and cultural, capital, as well as being ‘active consumers’ within the education marketplace, many working class parents are not in a position to provide an equitable level of support. The HEA study also found that many students within this group had negative experiences of education with low teacher expectations and inadequate guidance in the area of subject choice. For the middle class parents in this research, be they ‘veteran’ or ‘rookie’ parents, any dearth in the area of subject choice was made up for by the parents own material, educational and cultural capital. This was not the case with working class parents.
Chapter 10
Getting Through – Possessing the Cultural Capital Roadmap

10.1 Prologue

This scene is set in the canteen of Springfield Elementary School where Homer Simpson has observed with amazement Noah’s mother’s interaction with her son.

Homer: Wow he’s terrified of you!

Noah’s Mother: That’s why I am here – to make sure he gets good grades…

You have to hover over your kid’s shoulder, to force ‘em to succeed. It’s called helicopter parenting!

Later on in the same episode, Homer walks through the halls of Springfield Elementary School, fascinated by the ‘helicopter parents’, as well as comparatively looking out for his own son, Bart.

Homer: Look at all these helicopter parents. I hope Bart is doing ok on his own…

After supplying Bart with the idea to build a model of the Washington Monument for a competition, Homer feels flushed with success as a bona fide ‘helicopter parent’.

I did it! I helped my son! Helicopter Homer away!

Homer rotates across the hall mimicking a helicopter until he crashes into the students’ lockers.

Black hawk down, black hawk down…

(The Simpsons: 2010)
10.2 Introduction

Possession of abundant material capital is a key ingredient in operating successfully within the neoliberal educational marketplace. However the second, and what this research believes is the crucial ‘king-making’ ingredient, is the possession of plentiful cultural capital. While material capital can be quite evident, this research found that cultural capital is less obvious but crucially bestows, it appears, the greatest advantage. Adding to the distinct and inequitable economic hierarchy of parents choosing a secondary school for their son or daughter, an equally distinct and inequitable cultural capital hierarchy also surfaced during this research. This chapter hopes to illustrate where by dint of their greater cultural capital, middle class parents are advantaged, whereas working class parents are disadvantaged.

It became apparent, in this research, that each set of parents had similar hopes and ambitions for their child; with some parents holding a roadmap, allowing these parents to become better equipped to realise those aspirations than other parents. The ‘helicopter parents’, that Noah’s Mother describes in the above prologue, are not unique to Springfield Elementary School nor are those parents whose flight path was curtailed through no fault of their own. What became evident in this research is that the parents in the strongest position within this educational marketplace were the middle-class ‘veteran’ parents who had in their possession a detailed and well worn roadmap as a consequence of their greater experience in the process of school choice. Their greater cultural capital, allied to their material capital, meant that they came out on top of any process of social Darwinism (Botstein 1988 cited in Brown 1997). Conversely, the parent who did not have the same level of success in this educational marketplace, who found it daunting and was not in possession of any roadmap, was the working-class ‘rookie’ parent. While the middle-class ‘rookie’ parents were also setting out on the process of selecting a school for their child and equally had no previous experience to draw on, their greater cultural, and material, capital saw them bridge any gap in their knowledge of school choice much more efficiently and successfully than the working-class ‘rookie’ parent. The working-class ‘veteran’ parents through their previous experience of school choice became much more
informed and aware of the process – to quote Bart Simpson, who quoted the words of Oscar Wilde, later in the episode of *The Simpsons* used in the prologue above:

“*Experience is simply the name we give to our mistakes*” (The Simpsons: 2010)

### 10.3 Knowing about choices

The choice of where to send a child to secondary school is fraught with anxiety and stress for parents, as explained earlier in this research. However, once a child has entered first year in secondary school, the choice for parents does not stop. These choices include what subjects to take from the school’s subject option list; what level to take each subject at, be it higher level or ordinary level and how to interact successfully with the school when the need arises. These further choices and how parents react to them reveals further inequality within the educational marketplace. The neoliberal educational marketplace demands ‘active consumerism’ by parents, however not all parents have the cultural resources to operate successfully in this educational marketplace. The most active and successful consumers in this research were middle class parents, who monitor the school, as well as using their social capital confidently and assuredly (Gewirtz 2001), as can be evidenced her by the following narratives.

Hilary, a middle class ‘rookie’ mother, followed the requirements of this educational marketplace as she actively sought to stay involved and informed about her children’s education. Hilary’s actions echo the conduct of Noah’s mother from this chapter’s prologue. She explained to this researcher that it is not just on the school’s open night that the principal is under observation.

“...you would come to every meeting because you want to show interest and [the principal] gets to see that I’m always watching him [the principal]. If [the principal] ever feels like slipping, I’m on his back.” (Hilary, a middle class ‘rookie’ mother)

Hilary’s helicopter parenting is maintained throughout her child’s first year in secondary school and will, no doubt, remain in place though the coming years. Hilary gave up her job once her children were born and can thereby devote all her resources to her children’s education, including closely monitoring the performance of the
principal. However the opportunity to helicopter parent is not evident from the narratives of the working class parents as the majority of working class parents are occupied with household budgeting and may lack the cultural resources to remain as informed as Hilary. This in turn leads to an unequal experience of education in the lives of working class children.

10.3.1 Knowing about subjects

When a student enters first year of secondary school the majority of schools afford the student an opportunity to sample the school’s range of optional subjects from which the student, and their parents, generally picks two option subjects to study for their Junior Certificate. The list of option subjects can include Art, Music, Home Economics, Business Studies, Materials Technology (Wood), Metalwork, Technical Drawing, Technology and Typewriting. The time frame for this sampling period can vary from the entire first term to just part of the first term of first year. When this sampling period ends the students and their parents select their two option subjects. A significant disparity and inequality emerged when the area of subject choice was examined. Middle class parents think long term when making this choice. They think about how the subject choice made at junior cycle impact on subject choice at senior cycle where the Leaving Certificate dominates, they think about the necessary skills needed by their child to succeed in the various option subjects, they think about implications for third level and future careers.

“To do music successfully, say to Leaving Cert you have to be very musical; to do art to the Leaving Cert successfully, you have to be very artistic; to do Technical Drawing successfully, you have to have great spatial awareness and also be very good at maths.” (Laura, a middle class ‘rookie’ mother)

“I want to see him going through secondary school picking a subject that he wants to do in university and that he’ll be happy at, as well as making a living.” (Catherine, a middle class ‘veteran’ mother)

“Well I just felt that business is a good subject and gives you three options for Leaving Cert [Business, Economics and Accounting] and it is a very good basis to have anyway and so I think it is a very valuable subject.” (Margaret, a middle class ‘veteran’ mother)
Whereas working class parents are more short term in their thinking. They think about their own experience of the subject, their child’s immediate happiness in relation to the subject – sometimes the desire to be in a friend’s class takes precedence. For Conor, a working class ‘veteran’ father he allowed his child drop science as it was the only subject she was having difficulty with:

“The one she was caught on was science but she’s dropped science now.” (Conor, a working class ‘veteran father’)

This raises an interesting difference on how parents view subjects. For the three middle class mothers above, Laura, Catherine and Margaret, their view was long term, incorporating the Leaving Certificate and third level. While for Conor the view is more immediate. The fact that Science, like Business Studies, splits into three different subjects at senior cycle – Physics, Chemistry and Biology, does not appear to be as strong a factor in his decision making process.

Laura, a middle class ‘rookie’ mother, also had concerns around the area of, in her opinion, poor subject option choice in a potential school for her child. Laura displayed a well thought-out, strategic understanding around the multiple intelligences required for each option subject:

“I also thought their range of subjects were really poor. There [number of] options, you do them all in first year, you do [limited range of option subjects]. To do [each subject] successfully, say to Leaving Cert [you need a variety of intelligences].” (Laura, a middle class ‘rookie’ mother)

She felt that her child could not succeed in any of the option subjects because she was of the opinion that he did not possess the innate skill set required for the disparate subject choices. While he might cope with these subjects for the Junior Certificate, Laura thought that he would struggle in these subject areas for the Leaving Certificate. Laura displayed a strategic, long-term view in relation to subject choice that is more apparent in middle class parents than in working class parents.

This contrast could be seen in Ursula’s opinion on subject choice, which varied radically from Laura’s. Ursula, a working class ‘veteran’ mother, who had been through the issue of subject choice before with her older child and was also on the
parents’ council of her children’s secondary school, did not display the long term, informed, strategic thinking that Laura had. Ursula was dissatisfied with the performance of her child’s French teacher. To resolve the issue, Ursula decided to drop French from her child’s subject list:

“She’s teaching French, if it had been English or Maths I’d definitely be doing something about it, whereas French for me is something you can take it or leave it, they don’t need it, it’s like Irish they don’t need it.” (Ursula, a working class ‘veteran’ mother)

Ursula did not approach the school about her concerns regarding her daughter’s French teacher, as she felt that French, like Irish, was not an important subject in the scheme of things for her daughter, unlike English and Maths – in her opinion. However looking at her child’s future long term, her child’s ability in both Irish and French will have an impact on any potential university application because many Irish universities require either a Leaving Certificate qualification in Irish and a European language or a Leaving Certificate qualification in Irish or a European language. Without French, Ursula’s child may find her choices after school limited by a decision that was made years previously.

Laura was well informed about other the subject choice and programmes being run in other potential schools, as well as where to find information that was not forthcoming formally during open nights. This level of engagement with the less obvious nuances of schools was not as evident in the narratives told by working class parents, echoing the findings of Gewirtz (2001), Olssen (2004) and O’Brien (2009).

10.3.2 Knowing about subject level – higher level and ordinary level

As their child progresses through secondary school, parents will see their child allocated a class according to their ability. Their child may be allocated a higher level class or an ordinary level class, or as is often referred to by the parents in this research as an honours class and a pass class, by the child’s school. This may happen as early as first year. This research found a difference in how middle class parents and working class parents responded to this change in their child’s schooling. Yet again the more sophisticated ‘privileged/skilled choosers’, the middle class parents, view things in the longer term. When a change occurs in their child’s education the middle
class ‘veteran’ parent is often the better prepared and quicker to react to that change than the working class ‘rookie’ parent. This research found two contrasting ways with which two mothers, Margaret - a middle class ‘veteran’ mother and Maeve - a working class ‘rookie’ mother, reacted to their daughters moving from a top stream class.

Margaret’s story:

“I had a problem this year with one of my daughters. She got a D in honours English in the Junior Cert and I was assured in Transition Year that there would be no problem with her doing honours English for her Leaving Certificate but then when it came to it she was excluded and I went in the following day. We got a form to sign explaining to us that only those with a C or over got into the higher honours English and that she still had a chance to get in at Christmas time if she did well but I wasn’t happy with that at all, so I went in and spoke to the head of the English Department and then I spoke to the principal and it was sorted out.” (Margaret, a middle class ‘veteran’ mother)

There are a number of points worthy of exploration in Margaret’s story. Firstly, Margaret went in to speak to the head of the English Department the day after she became aware of the problem and then also spoke with the principal about the issue and the situation was then resolved to Margaret’s satisfaction. This was a speedy and reassured performance from a mother well versed as a ‘high cohort’ parent in the educational marketplace, prepared to take her concern directly to the principal of the school. Secondly, the language Margaret used in describing the problem, “when it came to it she was excluded…” The use of the word ‘excluded’ was well chosen and particularly powerful – a fact this researcher felt was not lost on the principal. Finally, Margaret’s daughter undoubtedly got a second chance at taking Higher Level English for her Leaving Certificate on the back of having done Transition Year. This extra year provided her daughter an opportunity in a non exam setting to develop her ability around English as well developing her multiple intelligences. It is worth noting that not all students are in a position to take up Transition Year, often because it is not run in their school or because it is too expensive. Students, like Margaret’s daughter, who do Transition Year can expect, on average, to get forty more points in their Leaving Certificate, than those who do not do Transition Year, whereas poorer children are not as likely to do Transition Year (Collins 2009).
In contrast to Margaret’s positive and successful experience as an active consumer, this research found Maeve’s story to highlight the difficulties experienced by the most vulnerable of parents, the working class ‘rookie’ parent.

Maeve’s story:

“She got put into [the top stream class] then, that was an honours class, she was inside in the class for two weeks and the principal sent for me to say they were dropping her down, no three weeks she was in there, after I paying €189 for her books. That’s all that was worrying me, paying €189 for books and they were dropping her down. They said she was struggling with her work. She came home here when she was in [the top stream class] and she was flying through her work… At the beginning I said maybe she did need to be in [lowest stream class] but then listening to other parents then they said you should have insisted she stay in [the top stream class]. I think you’re a fool, you don’t know what you’re doing [when you’re a ‘rookie’ parent in the secondary school system].” (Maeve, a working class ‘rookie’ mother)

Maeve’s response to this change is in marked contrast to Margaret’s response. Firstly, whereas Margaret’s response was immediate and reassured, Maeve’s response was delayed and uncertain, no doubt distracted by the initial primary concern over the potential costs involved in purchasing new text books, a concern that was not mentioned by Margaret. Maeve’s doubts had been immediate as she felt her daughter had been achieving in the top stream class; nonetheless Maeve bowed to the school’s knowledge. However, as with most things in life, experience and hindsight has given her experience. Having spoken with other parents and drawn on their experience, she deeply regretted not approaching the school and challenging this decision. The moment, she felt, had passed when she realised this. Secondly her use of language reveals a lot; “I think you’re a fool.” As a rookie parent she felt unsure and somewhat out of her depth on her maiden voyage in the new world of secondary school. The use of the word ‘fool’ is powerful in revealing how she felt around this time of change. Maeve also did express her concerns to this researcher about her daughter receiving less homework as a consequence of being moved to a lower stream class, “she’s in a class now and she’s getting no homework” compared to when she was in the top stream class. Maeve regrets not tackling this situation rather than accepting it. It is unlikely a middle class parent would let such a decision go unchallenged.
Parental responses on the issue of streaming were elucidating. Rebecca, a middle class ‘veteran’ mother, was delighted that her son had been allocated a place in the top stream class. She showed an extremely keen awareness of her son’s ability. It is worth remembering that Rebecca was in a position to give up her job when her children were in primary school, as she wanted to be there when they came home and help them with their routines around homework and the homework itself.

“[The top stream] was on the envelope, so you know then...I was delighted... The class he got into when he went there was the top class in there so I knew there wouldn’t be that many messers [in that class]... so at least now he had some chance. He needs competition and there are a couple of guys in his class who are way better than him... and that’s good for him...He is easily led...at least in that class...he is pushed to do good.” (Rebecca, a middle class ‘veteran’ mother)

Wendy couldn’t believe her son had been put in the top stream class in his school. She has seen him improve over the course of the year. She is nonetheless extremely sympathetic of a friend of her son’s who is in the lowest stream class, as she can see that this child has had a difficult first year:

“He got [the top stream class], myself and [my husband] sat down and we were ‘I can’t believe it he got the top class’. They have improved loads [since the start of the school year]. he has a friend that is in [the lowest stream class] and I know the boy pretty well and I feel sorry for him and he is getting into a little bit of trouble above in the school ...but I am quite content that [my son] is up there [in the top stream] ” (Wendy, a middle class ‘veteran’ mother)

For Doris, a working class ‘veteran’ mother, she is hoping her son might be able to move to a higher stream class than he is currently in next year by virtue of hard work. Her desire is prompted by the apparent dilution of teaching time in her son’s current class.

“The teachers did tell me there was a lot of messers that have no interest and I know there is another class below that again but I was saying if he really did put his heart and soul into it [the work] that he might get to go to the next level [second highest class] and there’d be no messers inside in that class and that he could get on that bit better...and you feel sorry for the teachers they’ve enough to do, one teacher told me ’You’re trying to keep this lot going here and you know they’ve no interest’...”(Doris, a working class ‘veteran’ mother)

This researcher cannot but help wonder what a middle class parent’s reaction to this situation might be. Again the characteristics of what Vincent (2001) would categorise
as ‘low cohorts’ or as what Gewirtz, Ball and Bowe (1995) would describe as ‘disconnected choosers’ is evident in the above narratives.

10.3.3 Knowing how to interact with the school

It is natural in the field of human relationships that varying degrees of conflict arise and a parent’s relationship with their child’s school is no different. Following on from this, it is important that parents need to be successful in articulating their point of view so as to ensure a successful outcome for both parents and children. While the majority of parents feel that the transition from primary school to secondary school was a significant and sometimes difficult milestone for their children, Wendy, a working class ‘veteran’ mother, probably best articulated one of the main differences between being a parent of a primary school child and being a parent of a secondary school child:

“But in primary school you know the teachers because you are constantly up and down you are in the yard. You know the teachers and you always meet the teachers so you know who is who... But in secondary school you don’t do that. So the only time you see the teachers is if you have a problem or the parents teachers meetings... but it would be nice if you kind of knew the teachers cause I kind of won’t know the teachers until I go to his first parents teachers meeting” (Wendy, a working class ‘veteran’ mother)

This research found that many middle class parents were better able to bridge this communication gap through their greater cultural capital whereby they had no hesitation in contacting the school or calling into the school in person to discuss an issue of particular concern to their child, whereas many working class parents did not bridge this gap as easily. The majority of working class parents in this research had little knowledge of the education system and had minimal interaction with the school, unless it was initiated by the school, echoing Vincent (2001).

A telling incident occurred early in Maeve’s daughter’s first year in secondary school. Following an earlier incident of bullying towards her daughter, Maeve, a working class ‘rookie’ mother, was wary about going into the school and happy to let the school deal with it, what Vincent (2001) described as ‘trust forced’. However upon a second incident of bullying Maeve went into the school the following morning to speak to the deputy principal over the issue. The speed with which she responded to
this incident was in stark contrast to the lack of action she took over her daughter being moved out of the top stream class. This researcher feels that, looking back, she was far more upset over the move from the top stream class to a lower stream class than over the two incidents where her daughter was bullied. Yet she did not feel knowledgeable enough to respond to that move at that time. Whereas she did seem to respond in a very obviously maternal way to her daughter’s safety in relation to the bullying incident, she did not seem to possess the cultural capital necessary to ‘protect’ her daughter from the move to a lower stream class. Compare this to another working class mother but a mother with a number of years experience as a parent of a child in secondary school – Ursula. She was concerned that her daughter was finding the initial stages of first year quite difficult, particularly the change from primary school with one teacher to secondary school with up to nine different teachers in a school day, as well as physically finding her way to each different class. The amount of time her daughter was spending on homework was also a source of exasperation for her as her daughter was completely overwhelmed with the workload. Ursula felt there was a lack of joined up thinking in the school about the level of homework given out to the first year students. She had, by then, enough cultural capital to approach the school and speak to the principal regarding her unease and have the issue resolved to her satisfaction. Perhaps in time Maeve will too gain some measure of cultural capital to approach her daughter’s secondary school with the speed and confidence of Ursula. She has seemed to have learnt a lot as a consequence of going through the year with her eldest daughter but at a cost to both herself and her eldest daughter. She now possesses some degree of knowledge and cultural capital regarding the workings of secondary school and as she prepares to send her next daughter to secondary school she has learnt from her mistakes. This research has found that a greater advocacy for parents, especially the first time ‘rookie’ parents from working class backgrounds, will go some way towards bridging this gap.

Unfortunately this was not the only time Maeve felt like this type of regret and upset at making ‘rookie’ errors. She was unaware of the situation in getting state grants in relation to her daughter’s schoolbooks and also paid the full amount of the voluntary contribution to her daughter’s secondary school, whereas a neighbour paid only half
the amount as she had a medical card. Maeve also has a medical card but did not feel comfortable going back to the school asking for half the money back:

“I met a woman and she says to me, ‘Did you pay your [voluntary contribution]?’

I says ‘I did.’

‘What a fool you are!’ she says to me.

‘But you have to pay these things!’ I said.

She said, ‘I only paid [half] because I told them at the desk I had a medical card and they said [half] will do!’

That should be highlighted...I paid [the full amount] and that women could turn around and tell me she [paid half] because she had a medical card for her child.... I wouldn’t ask for it back...I’m going to ring the school tomorrow morning and I’m not going to pay it until the following week.” (Maeve, a working class ‘rookie’ mother)

This research has found that at virtually every step Maeve has made an error she deeply regrets and feels deeply annoyed about. It seems an unnecessarily costly year for Maeve. She once again was enduring unnecessary hardship and was most in need of a timely invite to the table that Derman-Sparks and Fife (2007) spoke of:

Disadvantage is what you get after advantage has happened, the leftovers from the table of the advantaged society. So, who gets to the table first and eats most of the meal? Who sets the table and invites the guests, and who decides where to toss the leftovers? When we identify the advantage, we can also identify the disadvantage.”

(Derman-Sparkes and Fife 2007:48)

The greater ability to decode the school system displayed by the ‘veteran’ middle class mother, in that she knew how to approach the school and mount a case for her daughter to remain in higher level English, indicates the ability middle-class families have in reading the roadmap. This contrasts with the most vulnerable ‘rookie’ mother, Maeve, who does not possess the cultural capital to operate at the same level of influence as a ‘veteran’ mother, like Margaret, in her dealings with the school.

10.4 Expectations and aspirations of parents

As mentioned in the introduction to this chapter, all the parents in this research have varying expectations and aspirations for their child entering first year in secondary school. The importance of education was clearly felt by all parents. For Rachel and her husband Conor, working class ‘veteran’ parents, they stressed the importance of their
daughter getting her Leaving Certificate as, in their opinion; it was an absolute minimum requirement to secure a job in today’s job market. Their biggest fear was that their children would leave school at fifteen years of age, and be unemployed. Conor sought to put something in place so their eldest child would be able to get a trade of some kind.

“They’ll all be doing their Leaving...there’s nothing out there now job wise but you have to have your Leaving. You don’t want to see them coming out of school at fifteen and walking the streets” (Rachel, a working class ‘veteran’ mother)

“By the time they come out of school the jobs probably will be harder again to get...the one thing you’d be looking for [her eldest child] would be to get a trade of some kind and to get to know someone [who’d take him on]. I even put the word out even though its two or three years away, you have to do it...If they don’t have the determination to do it then they’ll only end up walking around the streets.” (Conor, a working class ‘veteran’ father)

Whereas middle class parents equally had aspirations for their children, these broader aspirations were however ensuring that their child was engaged in lifelong learning – that the final secondary school exam, the Leaving Certificate, was not the final stop on their educational journey, that in fact the Leaving Certificate was a gateway. Catherine, a middle class ‘veteran’ mother, felt strongly that education came first in her home that everything else came second to, for example, going on a foreign exchange or going to Irish college.

“In our house education comes first, there’s just no negotiating anything else. If it’s a choice between studying and something else, going to an Irish college, going on an exchange, that will always win out.” (Catherine, a middle class ‘veteran’ mother)

For Laura, a middle class ‘rookie’ mother, one of her principal hopes for her son as he journeyed through secondary school was that he developed into an independent person.

“I think that a huge part of what happens to somebody in secondary school is that they develop into their own independent people” (Laura, a middle class ‘rookie’ mother)

As can be seen from these chapters, each set of parents in this research had differing aspirations for their child, with some parents better equipped to realise those
aspirations than others. Maureen Gaffney, chairwoman of the NESF, speaking at the publication of the NESF draft report on child literacy in June 2009 also stated that:

“One of the most revealing findings was that there was little difference between the aspirations of working class and middle-class families for their young... The big difference is that middle-class parents are equipped with a road map; they know what it takes to get child [sic] successfully through school, through reading to them, encouraging them to do homework.” (O’Brien: 2009)

The issue of being in the top stream class in first year became less important for another working class ‘veteran’ mother, Ursula, as she was more concerned that her daughter would have friends in her class even if she had to move from the top stream class to be with her friends.

“The only thing I was anxious about when she went in was...the school is broken into [various] classes [top stream], [middle streams] and [bottom stream]. When she went into first year she was allocated [top stream] and all her friends went to [middle and bottom streams]. I was a bit concerned because she was the only one who went into [top stream] which meant she wasn’t with any of her friends that she grew up with through the whole of primary school. I was a bit anxious then. I was saying she mightn’t fit in as well...she was put out about it herself, even if she had one of her friends going with her she’d be fine.” (Ursula, a working class ‘veteran’ mother)

This was of paramount concern to this mother, as she was anxious her daughter would not fit in, the daughter herself was upset by this development. This working class ‘veteran’ mother placed greater emphasis on her daughter having her friends from primary school in her class than being in the top stream class – a view that was not echoed elsewhere amongst middle class parents in this research. As it turned out Ursula’s daughter settled into the top stream class in her school and did not move from that class, but if her daughter had not settled in that top stream class, she possibly could have moved out of the top stream class.

This research has found that middle class parents are keen that their child remains challenged in school whereas for many working class parents their main hope is that their son or daughter is happy in school. Some working class parents would not like to have their children pushed too much to such an extent that they feel unhappy. Maeve, a working class ‘rookie’ mother, would never pressure her daughter to bring home an A instead stressing that her daughter just do what she can.
“But I’d never ever pressure them like ‘make sure you get an A’, just do what you can.” (Maeve, a working class ‘rookie’ mother)

While Wendy, a working class ‘veteran’ mother, was very happy with her son’s results throughout first year which were in the 70 per cent range.

“The majority of the subjects he is getting tests every week and his results are good, they are in the 70s (per cent range) which to me is fairly good.” (Wendy, a working class ‘veteran’ mother)

However, Hilary, a middle class ‘rookie’ mother, was not of the same opinion. While stressing, academically, that the only thing she expected her daughter to do was to do well, she also stated that they would be afraid to bring home anything less than an A grade.

“The only thing is I’d expect her to do well, 85%, anything below that she’d be afraid to bring home” (Hilary, a middle class ‘rookie’ mother)

Analysing the three working class mothers above, Ursula, Maeve and Wendy, their hopes are primarily focused on their children’s happiness in school, their children being in the same class as their friends and not putting pressure on their children. However, middle class ‘rookie’ mother, Hilary, has an all together different viewpoint when compared to the three working class mothers – she wants her child to bring home A grades.

Rebecca, a middle class ‘veteran’ mother, had a different perspective to the ‘rookie’ middle class mother, Hilary, - a perspective perhaps hewn out of her own sense of regret when she looks back at her own education. Rebecca completed her Leaving Certificate but felt she could have done more when she was a secondary school student but, because of the huge class sizes of over forty, she felt like she slipped anonymously through the cracks. Rebecca advised her children that they should finish school in 6th year without regrets and be able to say they could not have done anymore. This view may also have developed over the nine years that Rebecca had the experience of being a parent of children in her chosen secondary school.
The only thing you should come out with in 6th Year is...don’t have regrets, just say look I couldn’t have done anymore.” (Rebecca, a middle class ‘veteran’ mother)

Maeve seems to contradict much of what popular commentary says about working class parents not caring about education. For Maeve, a working class ‘rookie’ mother, success stemmed from indirect praise from the school towards her parenting. The school had commended her daughter as “she was the only one in the class that [got] her journal signed every night.” Her children’s academic success also made Maeve almost burst with pride as evident when she told this researcher that:

“I nearly died the other day when she said she was on second year work already...I must be doing something good for her!” (Maeve, a working class ‘rookie’ mother)

“One thing, their homework is done every night... [Her second eldest child] got a voucher in [6th class] for the most improved child since she went in there [to 6th class].” (Maeve, a working class ‘rookie’ mother)

Equally Wendy, a working class ‘veteran’ mother, was delighted with the praise that her son had received from one of her son’s teachers:

“[Her son’s] [particular subject] teacher, the first week when they were there, you know now the first week they would be all chatting and whatever and she turned around and said to him, ‘Shane will I have to keep an eye on you?’ and Shane came home and said this to us and I said Shane what did you do and he said I just turned around and talked and I said but you can’t do that inside in school it is not like primary school it is completely different. A week later they got an exam and she turned around to Shane and she said, ‘You are after shocking me,’ she said, ‘I thought you were going to be a different boy inside in the class [due to talking out of turn] and when he came home he said, ‘Mam, the teacher was delighted with me’ and the whole lot and I was saying isn’t that great.” (Wendy, a working class ‘veteran’ mother)

This research found that the importance of praise, especially for the most vulnerable of parents from the school is something to be commended and encouraged. Too often in human nature, there is a tendency to focus on negative behaviour at the expense of acknowledging positive behaviour. This dialogue and the confidence gained by Maeve will encourage her to engage more with the school, as well as reaffirming for Wendy that her son is doing well in secondary school. This sense of pride was borne out for a middle class ‘veteran’ mother when her youngest son received written correspondence from the school reaffirming that he was getting on well in the school. Rebecca, who had seen it all before having had three older sons succeed in the same
school, was reassured when one of her son’s teachers sent out two ‘merit’ notes to the family home.

“He got two merit cards home to say he was doing very well in [particular subject]...given for behaviour wise, attitude, punctuality and so on. It’s signed by the teacher...Reaffirming [for the family] that he’s getting on well with the teacher”
(Rebecca, a middle class ‘veteran’ mother)

Needless to say, and echoing Maureen Gaffney’s words above this research found that both middle class and working class parents, whether ‘rookie’ or ‘veteran’, want their children to do well in secondary school and take solace from their child’s successes at school. In many ways these successes act as a balm for the stress induced by the decision making process described in the previous chapter.

When discussing the role of parent-teacher meetings it became evident to this researcher that the middle class parents possessed the ability to look at the information received from the school about their child’s education in greater detail than the working class parents. While Doris and Ursula, both working class ‘veteran’ mothers, stressed how nice the teachers were and expressed relief that their child was not misbehaving, Catherine, a middle class ‘veteran’ mother was more analytical. She was able to ascertain how well the teachers actually knew her son and thereby she felt reassured by the teachers in that they had a good understanding of her son’s personality; they had a record of her son’s progress via class and school exams and assignments; they could relay how well he was integrating with his peers and how he was doing in extra-curricular activities. Derek’s, a middle class ‘veteran’ father, view on the importance of parent-teacher meetings could be seen in the fact that he took time off work as he felt any time a parent has an opportunity to go into the school and talk to the teachers, they should take it.

The relative ease with which her son settled into his routine around homework every evening brought a sense of relief to Wendy, a working class ‘veteran’ mother. Any anxieties about his ability to cope with life in secondary school were alleviated when she witnessed her son spending an hour and a half on his homework without complaint and enjoying the challenge presented by the different subjects. Similarly, Sean, a middle class ‘veteran’ father, felt reassured by his daughter’s application to
her homework when she began secondary school, even though it did not surprise him as she had always liked the challenge of homework; he nonetheless was happy with her continued diligence in this area. Other parents, across the socio-economic spectrum, whose children had settled into a routine around secondary school life; be it going to school in the morning or doing homework in the evening, found it a significant relief that their child had established this pattern.

Middle class parents were the most ‘active consumers’ within this educational marketplace. Within this grouping Sean, a middle class ‘veteran’ father, was amongst the most experienced and informed of ‘skilled choosers’, who child matched each of his children to a school that matched each child’s attributes. Explaining his outlook on education, as well as his hopes and aspirations Sean concluded that

“Both of us [parents] have third level education... so education would be important to both of us and not just as a key to society but as a key to the mind. We would encourage the children to enjoy what they do and to do it well. We wouldn’t be pushing them in the direction of you got to be an accountant or you got to be a lawyer or climb the social ladder...We would be both of a mind that it’s the child’s inner dynamic that needs to be fostered here. We would be two independent people too in many ways, we have not got standard careers [both Sean and his wife have moved into areas other than those they studied at third level] ...These things would be there in the air, books in the house, we would discuss things...the children would argue the lug of a bucket...We’d be very supportive of them no matter what they wanted to do” (Sean, middle class ‘veteran’ father).

He displayed a more informed and somewhat rounder and without doubt unique view of the school choice process. He had sent his eldest child to a private school and the middle child to a state school. Below he explains his thinking on why he sent his son to a state school.

“We agonised over that, in that [the school] is a school with [some disadvantaged students], it is actually an extremely good school... He comes from a middle class background and for him to see children who are not so supported by their parents and who are quite patently making a mess of the learning process and who are going to end up at the end of their education not hugely advanced on where they were at the beginning, if not backwards. That has been a cautionary thing for him. He has made good pals there, they have good facilities, and the principal there is really excellent.” (Sean, a middle class ‘veteran’ father)

Perhaps Sean has given a glimpse of the imagined future – where schools no longer move assiduously to ensure a student profile that will maintain its high academic
profile, leaving an unfair and unequal imbalance in schools that have a more open enrolment policy, as well as a glimpse of a more ‘ethical consumer’ rather than an ‘active consumer’.

10.5 Conclusion

Derman-Sparks and Fite (2007: 48) write that “the meaning of advantage is the ghost that lurks within the meaning of disadvantage”, as they explore the relationship between those who do not experience educational disadvantage and those that do. Using the metaphor of a meal, they continue (ibid) “disadvantage is what you get after advantage has happened, the leftovers from the table of the advantaged society.” Borrowing this metaphor, this chapter has explored the stories, from this research, of those who have come to the table – those that get there first and those who arrive later and subsequently trail behind. In defining educational disadvantage the Combat Poverty Agency state that “it is a relative term. Individuals are educationally disadvantaged relative to others” (CPA: 2003: 2).

Middle class families are better equipped and have the necessary set of attributes to outperform working class families in school, as well as being able to ‘decode’ the school systems as a consequence of having the necessary material and cultural capital to adjust to any change within the system (Gewirtz, Ball and Bowe 1995; Vincent 2001; Olssen 2004; O’Brien 2009).

Somewhat clear differences begin to emerge between the classes within the operation of the market as to what kind of information was valuable. For working class parents, be they a ‘rookie’ or a ‘veteran’ in the process of choosing a school for their child, their focus is primarily on the location of the school; the school’s facilities; the ease of transport to and from the school; and they are less inclined to engage with the market, seeing little difference between the schools, as well as having little confidence in their ability to engage with the school as a consequence of their own leaving school early. Gewirtz, Ball and Bowe (1995) refer to these parents as ‘disconnected choosers’ while Vincent (2001) referred to them as ‘low cohort’ in attempting to characterise these
parents. “Class-choosing of a different kind” (Gewirtz, Ball and Bowe: 1995) then becomes evident

Conversely, the working class families are, disproportionately, not as equipped with the same levels of cultural and material capital to compete in this marketplace; the school systems are more difficult to decode, chance plays a greater role in the choice of secondary school and as ‘bad’ educational consumerists they have only themselves to blame (Bernstein 1971; Gewirtz 2001; Gewirtz 1995; Drudy & Lynch 1993; Bosetti 2004; Apple 2001; Whitty, Power and Halpin 1998; Vincent 2001). Substantially less young people from the lowest income group access third-level education, in an almost polar opposite image of those from the highest income backgrounds. (Ireland 2003 cited in Bassett and Haran 2006). Despite this evident educational inequality there has been an almost “normalisation of poverty and inequality” in the education system (Lynch 2008 cited in Holland 2008).

An ability to decode the language of the school system, in addition to possessing a roadmap to aid the navigation of choice, allows middle-class parents use this knowledge to become the kingmakers in the decision making process (Gewirtz 2001; Olssen 2004; O’Brien 2009). Working-class parents do not have access to these resources, especially lone working-class mothers. They are meant to engage in the middle-class model of being an active consumer of education; reading with their child, arranging educational visits, making choices and overseeing homework and at the same time bring in a wage. As the lone, working-class mother struggles to cope with both, any failure could be deemed as evidence of inadequate parenting (Gewirtz: 2001). A Higher Education Authority report stated that “not one student entering university courses in pharmacy or medicine in 2008/2009 came from an unskilled background” (Flynn: 2009: 7). The report highlights how students from professional backgrounds dominate the “blue-chip” CAO courses and children from both higher professional and lower professional families are over-represented at third level (Flynn: 2009).

The most vulnerable parent, found in this research, is Maeve – an unemployed, working class ‘rookie’, lone mother experiencing the most hardship and encountering
the biggest difficulty in harnessing the potential of the education system, echoing what has been written in the research (CPA 2006; CPA 2008; EU-SILC 2007). This category of parent – the working class ‘rookie’ parent – consequently is most disadvantaged because of the various material and cultural capital advantages the middle class parents have over them and is most in need of an earlier invite to the table of advantage.

The narrative that resonates most from this research is that of the most vulnerable parent, the parent who has struggled to operate in the neoliberal educational marketplace. This parent is Maeve, the working class ‘rookie’ mother. Her narrative involves (a) significant anxiety regarding getting in to her school of choice, (b) severe regret over ‘rookie errors made in budgeting for books and uniforms, (c) further regret over not challenging her daughter’s move to a lower stream class, (d) the basic protection instinct resulted in a confident interaction with the school but need that confident interaction for three earlier cases, (e) her delight at receiving praise from the school. For this working-class ‘rookie’ mother in this research her story of school choice illustrated the vulnerabilities of the most at risk parent in this research, a parent who, by her own admission, made a number of mistakes in the school choice process for her eldest daughter, mistakes she is determined not to make with her next daughter, when that daughter goes to secondary school. While the majority of middle class parents in this research resemble aspects of Noah’s ‘helicoptering’ mother, mentioned in the prologue above, many working class parents experience their own ‘Black Hawk Down’ moments in this polarised and unequal process of school choice. The perverse nature of the market system is highlighted ‘in that, children are rewarded largely in proportion to the skill and interest of their parents’ (Gewirtz et al 1995: 189). It is timely in that 2010 is the European Year for Combating Poverty and Social Exclusion, as decided by the European Commission. The coming chapters will strive to illustrate some potential solutions.
Chapter 11
Conclusions and Recommendations

11.1 Introduction

The 1980s saw significant change take place in the political philosophy in the Western World with ‘conservative modernisation’, which focussed more on choice, accountability, quality and standards, steadily became the norm (Ball 2003, Apple 2001, Ball et al 1997, Gewirtz et al 1995). With the spread of neoliberal and neoconservative policies across the predominantly anglophile world in the 1980s, it was only a matter of time before the liberal 1960’s ideology of equal opportunities and egalitarianism was replaced by these neoliberal policies, and this in turn impacted on the educational system (Apple 2009, 2001, Halsey et al 2003). This marketisation of education is characterized by a focus on quality, competition, consumer choice and accountability (Ball 2003, Apple 2001, Ball et al 1997, Gewirtz et al 1995). As part of the New Right agenda choice became popular with parents allowed to make real choices about their children’s education (Olssen et al: 2004).

However this marketisation of education lead to educational inequality, where middle class parents used their greater cultural, material and social capital to gain an advantage over working class parents in the area of school choice (BBC 2010a, Apple 2009, Derman-Sparks and Fite 2007, Reay 2006, Bosetti 2004, Toynbee 2002 cited in Olssen et al 2004, Ball et al 1997), which Hirsch (1995 cited in Gordon & Whitty: 1997) referred to as “the other side of choice”. Middle class parents were in a position of advantage whereby they were equipped with a roadmap which allowed them to navigate effectively through the complex school choice process, whereas working class parents did not possess such a roadmap (Apple 2009 and 2001, Ball 2003, Ball et al 1997, Brown 1997, Gewirtz et al 1995). A process of ‘social Darwinism’ occurs with the middle class parents dominating (Botstein 1998 cited in Brown 1997), as evidenced by their more strategic long term view of educational and the fact that they have an ability to decode the schooling process – all of which creates ideal conditions for their children to ‘succeed’ in the area of educational attainment (Ball et al 1997, Gewirtz et al. 1995).
Both the home environment and the school environment influence educational attainment (Flynn 2007, Lynch and Lodge 2002, Smyth 1999, Kellaghan et al 1993, Drudy and Lynch 1993, Rogers 1986, Bloom 1981, Bernstein 1975), with schools replicating the style of language used in middle class homes, further adding to the already advantaged middle class families ( Bernstein 1975). The significant costs associated with equipping a child for their first year in secondary school places additional strain on working class parents (Barnardos 2010). Schools also play an influential role in determining educational attainment, not least the negative impact streaming can have on students, with significantly higher levels of students in lower stream classes dropping out of school compared to their counterparts in higher streams (Byrne and Smyth 2010, Lynch and Lodge 2002, Smyth 1999, Drudy and Lynch 1993). Teachers can also be significantly influential as a consequence of their preconceived notions of a student’s ability (Rogers 1986).

The concept of parental choice has been enshrined in the Irish constitution, Bunreacht na hÉireann, since 1937, with the shadow of the Catholic Church dominant (Coolahan 1981). The Catholic Church’s once dominant influence in Irish education is becoming more diluted in wake of the Catholic Church’s handling of the various sexual abuse scandals, with changes taking place in the Catholic Church’s patronage of Irish schools (Collins 2010a, Farrell 2010, Whyte 1971). Nonetheless the New Right policies, which had largely been avoided in Ireland, have now emerged through the Department of Education’s use of the terms ‘clients’ and ‘customers’ in 2005, the annual publication in The Irish Times and Irish Independent of ‘feeder school list’ since 2005, the publication of ‘Whole School Evaluation’ and ‘Subject Inspection’ reports on the Department of Education’s website since 2006 but alarmingly the information obtained by the national media has also pointed to a segregated educational system in operation where schools have used restrictive enrolment policies (Flynn 2010, 2009, 2005 a-g and 2005 i-l, Tormey 2007).

Programmes have been introduced to combat educational inequality including the designation of schools as being in areas of disadvantage (DAS) scheme, the Home School Community Liaison (HSCL) scheme, the Early Start initiative, the School Completion, the Teacher/Counsellor Project, Breaking the Cycle, the Giving Children
an Even Break, the Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS) but these programmes are disparate and often contradictory (Tormey 2007).

This research has examined how middle class parents have mobilised themselves as active consumers in the educational marketplace, providing empirical evidence that educational markets work to the advantage of middle class parents and to the disadvantage of working class parents. This research makes some interesting findings that may not have been dealt with in the literature on educational inequality previously, namely that (i) there appears to be a dearth of knowledge, in an Irish context, into parental choice of secondary school, something this research may begin to fill, as the voice of those affected by educational inequality is not listened to often enough (Spring 2007); (ii) the plight of the most vulnerable of parents – the ‘rookie’ working class parent, the first time parent entering this educational marketplace as a novice – needs to be (a) heard and (b) supported; (iii) perhaps it is time for a transparent and equitable enrolment of students from all social classes into secondary schools to replace evident selection policies that are operated in some schools (Downes 2004), (iv) that not enough account has been taken of the emotional impact of school choice and the value that a mother’s love has in the educational market (O’Brien and Flynn 2007), (v) can teacher training programmes play a role in reducing the impact of teacher-expectancy?

This research used a qualitative approach by conducting eighteen in-depth interviews with parents of children entering or having recently entered first year in secondary school in Limerick city, complete with its unique Common Application Process, this research allowed the seldom heard voice of parents (Spring 2007), tell their own narratives of the school choice process in Limerick city where an evident parental hierarchy emerges.

The parents’ narratives tell of a hierarchical school choice process operating in Ireland that results in an exacerbated educational inequality between the social classes at distinct variance to neoliberal claims. However the real crisis is if this scenario is merely accepted and not challenged. It is also timely in that 2010 is the European Year for Combating Poverty and Social Exclusion, as it seems that “…access to
education, which was identified by the UN as a human right, was ‘becoming contingent on the ability to pay” (Lynch 2008 cited in Holland 2008). In a statement on the Renewed Programme for Government in October 2009 the Taoiseach stated that:

“The best investment with the greatest return any Government can make is in education. It empowers the individual, strengthens society and is truly transformational. In the savings that must be made, we will protect our children's education insofar as we can.” (Department of the Taoiseach 2009)

Alarmingly, there's many a slip 'twixt the cup and the lip.

Set out below are the conclusions found in this research into the area of how parents in Ireland choose where to send their child to secondary school, within a social class context, followed by some recommendations.

11.2 School choice is an emotional rollercoaster for parents regardless of social class

Without doubt, from the time parents enter into the decision making process of where to send their child to secondary school, to the time the acceptance letter drops through their letterbox is a time that every parent in this research described as “stressful”, “most daunting”, “worrying”, “all-consuming”, “nerve-wrecking” and a time when they experienced “a sick feeling in the pit of [their] stomach”, these experiences impact on all parents regardless of their socio-economic status. This stress and anxiety is most acutely felt by first time ‘rookie’ parents as they set out on their maiden voyage of choosing a school for their child. The anxiety experienced by these ‘rookie’ parents is what most immediately comes to mind when they recall the decision making process. Some ‘rookie’ parents recall and acknowledge their irrational behaviour during this time in their child’s educational journey. This research has found that the all consuming stress and anxiety associated with the choice of where to send their child to secondary school is just as prevalent with working class parents as it is with middle class parents because working class parents do care; do want their child to do well; do value education contrary to what the market might believe (Gewirtz 2001; Reay 2006) – that they are not active enough consumers because of a lack of interest.
While material capital and cultural capital have been prominent in the discourse on educational inequality, it appears little emphasis has been placed on emotions as another form of capital (O’Brien and Flynn 2007). It seems that parental love is not legitimised by the marketplace where the extensive emotional caring done by working class mothers does not reap a proportionate reward from the point of view of schooling (O’Brien and Flynn 2007). Maeve, an unemployed, working class, ‘rookie’ lone parent was hugely interested in her daughter’s education as could be seen by the fact that, as well as equipping her for her first year in secondary school, she made the significant financial outlay to pay for her daughter’s school trip to a European city, forgoing expenses on herself – this type of parental love is not legitimised by the neoliberal marketplace.

11.2.1 Recommendations

Bearing all of this in mind, this researcher feels that the role of emotional care needs to hold a higher place of prominence in the dialogue on educational inequality. Given that the school choice process for parents is a time fraught with stress, anxiety coupled with sometimes irrational behaviour; given that the emotions associated with this process seems to negatively impact on working class parents more so than on middle class parents; given that this gap plays a role in educational inequality – then the area of emotions and emotional intelligence needs to hold a more prominent role in the dialogue about educational inequality by both researchers as well as by government and policy makers.

11.3 Parental hierarchy reinforces inequality in the school choice process

The importance of education was felt by all parents in this research and consequently brought with it hopes and aspirations for their children’s education as they moved to secondary school. Irrespective of social class, parents want their children to do well in secondary school. During the course of this research, it became apparent that both middle class and working class parents have aspirations and hopes for their children. However while some parents hold a roadmap to help them chart a direct route to these aspirations, other parents do not possess such a roadmap to guide them (O’Brien
This research found that inevitably the parents in possession of this helpful roadmap were middle class parents. Also holding something of a roadmap were the ‘veteran’ working class parents who earned their roadmap from their experiences during previous campaigns. Looking further into the evidence of this research, what became apparent in this research is that there is what could be described as a hierarchy of ‘active consumers’ in the educational marketplace, a hierarchy that seemed to promote inequality, as it left some parents in a place of advantage and conversely, other parents in a place of disadvantage. This research found that this parental hierarchy can be broken down as follows:

- **Middle class ‘veteran’ parents** are the parents who are in the strongest position, the position of most advantage within this educational marketplace, complete with their detailed roadmap and their greater experience in this marketplace of school choice. Add in their greater material and cultural capital and they came out on top of any process of social Darwinism (Botstein 1988 cited in Brown 1997). Middle class families are better equipped and, as a consequence of having used and benefited from a generational roadmap to travel this tried and trusted route before, are keenly motivated to replicate this journey for their children. Thereby middle class families have the necessary set of attributes to outperform working class families in the school choice process.

- **Middle-class ‘rookie’ parents** are also in a position of advantage in this marketplace, more so than the working class ‘veteran’ parents, who have been through this campaign before. Albeit setting out on their maiden voyage in the process of selecting a school for their child and without any previous experience to draw on, the middle class ‘rookie’ parents out manoeuvre their working class counterparts, be they ‘veteran’ or ‘rookie parents, by virtue of their greater cultural, material capital and social capital allowing them efficiently and successfully bridge any gap in their knowledge of the school choice process.

- **Working-class ‘veteran’ parents**, through their previous experience of school choice became more informed and aware of the process, as well as gaining
some experience through mistakes that they made on their first encounter with this market place. Despite this hard won experience, the working class ‘veteran’ parents do not sit in a position of advantage as they are out manoeuvred in this marketplace by the most ‘active consumers’ – the middle class, both ‘veteran’ and ‘rookie’ parents.

- Working class ‘rookie’ parents are in the weakest position in this educational marketplace; they are the parents who experience the most disadvantage, the most inequality. These parents experience the inequality of the educational marketplace, a place they described as a daunting to operate in and a place in which they do not have the same level of success, as well as not being in possession of any roadmap. This research found that the most vulnerable parent, the one who experiences the most hardship and encounters the biggest difficulty in harnessing the potential of the education system, is the working class, unemployed, lone parent, ‘rookie’ mother who has to overcome innumerable obstacles to operate in this educational marketplace.

There exists also a way of knowing the route through the complex school choice process. Knowing the route will make the entire process more accessible and ultimately improve a child’s chances of educational attainment.

11.3.1 Recommendations

The majority of working class parents in this research expressed varying degrees of anxiety in their interaction with their child’s secondary school; many had left school early with no qualifications and felt anxious and unsure as to interact with their school. Schools, through the Principal and Home School Community Liaison Officer, should actively seek to encourage every interaction with parents so as to overcome this anxiety and establish a full and clear two-way dialogue path. Schools should in particular seek to establish a good rapport with working class ‘rookie’ parents by inviting them into the school on an individual basis to meet the Principal and HSCLO – a role that, this research found, middle class parents readily took upon themselves. This could evolve into a support network between the NEWB, principals, HSCL co-ordinators and local parent groups as a means of sharing information and discussing
aspects of educational attainment, thereby providing a reassuring roadmap for many working class parents who are unsure how to interact with the schools. This research has found that in many cases, working class parents are looking for information and advice. This is one way in which the roadmap could become more explicit for working class parents as these various educational actors could play a part in guiding working class parents through the potential minefield that is subject choice and the long term view; streaming; responding to change; decoding the unwritten rules; knowing how to interact with the school; viewing open night and parent teacher meetings strategically; spreading the costs of schooling over a period of time; the benefits of extra-curricular activities, so as to assist those parents who are not at the top of the inequitable parental hierarchal structure found in this research.

11.4 How free is ‘free education’?

Consistently both ‘veteran’ and ‘rookie’ middle class parents in this research were able to use their greater financial muscle to give their children the best possible opportunity of succeeding in secondary school, more so than the ‘veteran’ and ‘rookie’ working class parents (Ball 2003, Apple 2001, Ball et al 1997, Gewirtz et al 1995). The points outlined below illustrate how the middle class parents maintained their position of advantage in the educational marketplace as a consequence of their greater material capital.

11.4.1 The bottleneck cost of books – middle class and working class perspectives

While both middle class and working class parents were aggrieved at the cost of school books for their children, differences inevitably came to light. These differences found the working class parents once again in a place of disadvantage. The seasoned working class ‘veteran’ parents spread the financial bubble incrementally across the months of May and September insuring liquidity in their household. However, the working class parent ‘rookie’ could not benefit from that experience resulting in a significantly increased financial bottleneck and consequential emotional burden in the September of their child’s first year in secondary school, the upshot of which meant further borrowing for the working class ‘rookie’ parent and a place at the bottom of this parental hierarchy.
Conversely this expense had a far less significant impact on the ‘veteran’ middle class parent who maintained their position at the top of this parental hierarchy. Indeed experience had shown this parent that purchasing second hand books could halve the total cost of their child’s books. Interestingly they had no qualms about their child having second hand books in class, unlike some ‘veteran’ working class parents who did not purchase second hand books because of the inferior quality and also because they did not want their child to feel inferior in the classroom. The ‘rookie’ middle class parent also did not experience significant hardship due to their greater material capital. Many middle class parents expressed further delight that their school operated a school book rental scheme at a consequentially significant lower cost to parents.

The ‘veteran’ middle class parent interviewed in this research felt that while secondary school was expensive, it pales in comparison to the expenses involved in third level, thereby by viewing the initial financial investment in secondary school as ultimately a part of a sequence of well planned investments to a better future for their child.

11.4.2 The bottleneck cost of uniforms – middle class and working class perspectives

In addition to the financial outlay required for school books, many working class parents also had to rely on credit from the shops that supplied the uniforms. There was even a sense of relief that their household cash flow did not expire by having to purchase their child’s uniform in one payment. This was not a feature of any of the middle class parents in this research. Indeed for some middle class parents, the further expense for additional uniform extras was acceptable to them as they liked what it said about their choice of where to send their child to secondary school. Interestingly the experience of ‘veteran’ parents was hard won with regard to how they spent their money on uniforms. Many working class ‘veteran’ parents regretted previous spending habits as they could now see the poor value for money choices they had made.
11.4.3 Cost of extracurricular trips – differing experiences

With more and more schools offering overseas trips as part of their growing extracurricular programme, some working class parents wanted their child to participate in and benefit from the overseas trips, even though they were coming from a place of disadvantage in terms of material capital. Visiting certain European cities with their school for many middle class children in this research was something they had already experienced on previous family holidays. Contrastingly, for some working class children in this study it was their first time outside of Ireland. The degree of difficulty in financing these trips was instructive in that for working class families it was a significant effort to get the money together whereas for some middle class families the money came from a dedicated educational fund for their children.

11.4.4 No respite - annual cycle of expense

Many working class parents in this research had no respite from the financial headache of equipping their child for first year in secondary school because of another younger sibling who was about to start this process the following year. Having struggled to finance their child as they entered first year the storm clouds began to loom quickly again, bringing increased anxiety to these parents. This issue did not arise for middle class parents.

11.4.5 Second chances more open to the middle class parents

When a child begins first year in September and experiences secondary school first hand a parent often obtains the greatest level information regarding their choice of school for their child. If the experience is negative parents may wish to revisit their original choice. However given the considerable financial outlay it would require with regards to additional uniforms, books and transport, this research found that this second chance is more open to middle class parents. It seems that not every parent would be in a position to equally avail of these second chances.

11.4.6 Greater middle class material capital reaps benefits in the home

This research found that some middle class parents, both ‘rookie’ and ‘veteran’, were in a financially secure position that allowed the mother to stop working outside the family home and focus her attentions on raising a family, thereby, they believed,
providing stronger emotional care for their children as a result. Furthermore this allowed the home to become an extended classroom whereby the middle class habitus ensured a distinct advantage for the middle class child. This arrangement was not evident in working class homes thereby reproducing inequality, as working class mothers often had to work outside the family home because of financial necessity.

11.4.7 Location as an influencing factor
The location of a potential secondary school was a factor for both middle and working class parents in the school choice process. However the decision around location was inevitably tempered by the issue of affordability for both ‘rookie’ and ‘veteran’ working class parents. They had their school choice influenced by transport costs, whereby the cost of a private bus was prohibitive or the parents did not have a family car. Another variant in the location of the school for working class parents was a direct public transport route with the absence of such a route an eliminating factor in the school choice process. No such limitations of school choice were found amongst either the ‘veteran’ or ‘rookie’ middle class parents. More and more where a working class parent decides to send their child to school is influenced by their ability to pay ever increasing transport costs.

This research also found that some working-class parents placed a significant importance on the location of the school, insofar as it is within their own community, with the provision of extended family support a factor in their process of choosing a secondary school.

11.4.8 A new dimension of educational inequality
A seemingly new dimension of inequality surfaces in this research. The emergence of the Internet as a valuable additional educational tool was valued by all the parents. However it is contingent on the ability to pay. Many working class parents in this research did not have fixed phone landlines, instead they used their mobile phones to make and receive calls. Many working class parents expressed regret at not being able to afford a fixed landline which would allow for Internet access for their children. While the Department of Education and Skills promote the use of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) in teaching and learning, just two per cent of
schools have access to high speed broadband (Flynn 2011d), thereby any potential narrowing of the gap between working class homes and middle class homes is negated. The middle class homes predominantly had broadband and multiple access points for their children in the family homes. This could be viewed as a metaphor for the complex stubbornness of educational inequality.

11.4.9 Recommendations
The considerable, unnecessary and unsustainable costs for parents associated with their child entering first year in secondary school needs to be addressed, especially for working class parents. As access to education is a human right, no family should be financially less well off as a consequence of accessing this right. A major cost for parents is the school uniform, especially for the working class parents. Schools could move towards a more cost conscious method whereby parents can purchase a generic uniform and have the school crest stitched on afterwards. Schools need to review their ancillary extras also that increase the financial burden to parents, as yet again these hidden costs impact more on working class families. Indeed if one looks further afield across many of the non-English speaking countries of Europe, very few of these countries have school uniforms (Kallen 1997).

An examination of the role of profit driven book companies is also necessary. New curriculum change, as well as slightly revised editions of textbooks, should not be an opportunity for costly new editions of textbooks, this should be done in a cost effective way. Perhaps it is also time for a national book rental scheme for secondary school students that would replace the current effective yet ad hoc situation operated by some secondary schools – more often than not secondary schools with a predominant middle class profile. This may also remove the stigma some working class parents feel about their children having second hand textbooks in class. As well as addressing the significant costs involved in equipping a child for first year in secondary school, there remains a need to look at a system whereby the bottleneck cost of books and uniforms is eased. This researcher would also suggest that a more even handed method of spreading payments over a more manageable time frame, in addition to a calendar highlighting the times of the year where (the now reduced) expenses are, so it is flagged up front for parents. These recommendations may also
see a reduction in the annual cycle of expense many working class parents in this research mentioned as they prepare to send the next child to secondary school. The second chances that were more open to the middle class parents, and conversely were not open to working class parents due to the excessive costs, may become an option for working class parents if the generic uniforms and a national book rental scheme, suggested above, were operationalised.

With middle class children having higher participation rates in extra-curricular activities than working class children, is it acceptable that a child’s experience of school life through their involvement in extra-curricular activities is dependent on their ability to pay? This inequity needs to be examined. Where a parent decides to send their child to school is often influenced by their ability to pay transport costs. A review of the transport costs is needed, as these costs are rising annually. An improved Information Technology (IT) provision in secondary schools may narrow the gap between middle class and working class children experience of the internet as an additional educational resource. However the fact that middle class families are in a financially stronger position than working class families, allows the middle class families to extend the learning environment into the family home and this perhaps may prove more difficult to solve.

11.5 The crucial second part of the advantage formula – cultural capital

The advantages that accrue from greater material capital amongst the middle class parents in this research are underpinned by their cultural capital. According to the parents’ narratives in this research, it seems that while material capital gives many advantages to the middle class parents, their cultural capital ensures even more advantages to the middle class parents. It appears that cultural capital is the crucial second part of the advantage formula, a formula that perpetuates educational inequality.

11.5.1 Middle class parents more strategic and analytical

The long term, strategic and analytical thinking that characterises much of the middle class engagement with the educational marketplace, in evidence throughout this
research, meant that no opportunity to further their interaction went unharnessed by the middle class parents (Ball 2003, Apple 2001, Ball et al 1997, Gewirtz et al 1995) This was significantly less evident amongst the working class parents interviewed in this research, their focus primarily centred on their child’s emotional well being in their new secondary school. Below are some areas where the more strategic and analytical of the middle class parents were in evidence:

- **The importance of potential friends**
  Academically able friends was seen as important by some middle class ‘rookie’ and ‘veteran’ parents because they would keep their own child motivated to achieve. While for many working class parents their main hope is that their son or daughter is happy in school and has friends, neither ‘veteran’ or ‘rookie’ working class parents reflected as strategically as the middle class parents when it came to friendships formed in first year.

- **Extracurricular activities**
  Both ‘veteran’ and ‘rookie’ middle class parents saw extracurricular activities as providing a rounder education in addition to providing broader social ties that may benefit their children in the years to come, thereby giving middle class parents an advantage over their working class counterparts. The middle class parents viewed their child’s involvement in extracurricular activities as a worthwhile experience and money well spent. This research found that working class children were involved in fewer extracurricular activities than middle class children.

- **Parent teacher meetings**
  When discussing the role of parent-teacher meetings it became evident to this researcher that the middle class parents possessed the ability to look at the information received from the school about their child’s education in an extremely strategic and analytical way, more so than the working class parents.
• Playing the long game

Those middle class parents that held university qualifications were particularly clear on how first year subject choice fitted into the long term education path of their child. Whereas this was not evident amongst working class parents whose view of first year subject choice was short term in its focus and based more on intuition.

11.5.2 Differing parental responses to the open night

This research found that the open nights, during which prospective parents visit potential schools to gain more information about each school – the usual format involves a formal address by the principal, followed by a less formal tour of the school, can lead to an information overload and with both middle class and working class parents trying to decipher the avalanche of information, it emerged that how middle class and working class parents processed this information differed. Middle class parents were better able to read nuances that shed further light on the school during the open nights whereas working class parents tended to look more at the physical environment of the school.

Interestingly where many parents were in agreement across the socio-economic spectrum was when a potential secondary school put too strong an emphasis on one extra-curricular activity above all others at an open night. The concern amongst parents was the fear that their child would be left out if they did not succeed in this area.

11.5.3 Knowledge leads to assured middle class performances

Parents are rewarded if they have knowledge of how the school system works; how to decode that system; how to get information about a potential school; as well as how mount a case to the school. Both middle class ‘veteran’ and ‘rookie’ parents gave assured performances when they interacted with their child’s school, while for the working class parents, most notably the working class ‘rookie’ parents, their performances were less assured and consequently less satisfactory, this research found. What follows are some illustrative examples of this:
• **Differing parental responses to change in their child’s education**

When a change occurs in their child’s education the middle class ‘veteran’ parent is often better prepared and quicker to react to that change than the working class rookie parent. This research found that the middle class parents react to change in a more assured and confident way, unlike working class parents, who react in a less assured and less confident manner, leaving a legacy of frustration and regret for the working class ‘rookie’ parent as they reflect on the incident.

• **Decoding unwritten rules**

Many working class parents, both ‘veteran’ and ‘rookie’ parents, struggled in deciphering the unwritten rules that emanated from the school. This resulted in unnecessary additional costs for ancillary uniform pieces, ancillary schoolbooks and materials, leaving a sense of frustration at the end of the school year at the unnecessary additional expense. These concerns did not emerge from the middle class parents.

• **A desire to stay in touch**

The opportunity to meet their child’s primary school teacher in the schoolyard when dropping off or collecting their child in primary school was valued by parents, especially working class parents. With the transition to secondary school this opportunity vanished overnight. This research found that many middle class parents were better able to bridge this communication gap through their greater cultural capital whereby they had no hesitation in contacting the school to make an appointment or calling into the school in person to discuss an issue of particular concern to their child. However few working class parents felt assured enough to bridge this gap despite a desire to do so, leaving many working class parents at a disadvantage.

• **Knowing how to get as much information as possible**

It became evident in this research that the middle class parents consistently knew where to get further information so as to aid their decision making process of where to send their child to secondary school. It was not just the middle class ‘veteran’ parents who knew where to access this information but the middle class
‘rookie’ parents as they availed of every formal and informal opportunity to harvest information. This was not the case for many working class parents who did not have the same level of information.

11.5.4 Interacting with the school principal – differing approaches
While an approachable and amiable principal was appreciated across the socioeconomic divide, there remained a significant difference in how the middle class and working class parents viewed the principal. This research found that many of the middle class parents made an appointment to meet the principal during the decision making process, sometimes in addition to attending the open night and sometimes as a consequence of being unable to do so, thus utilising their greater cultural capital. However none of the working class parents did likewise. Many working class parents felt reassured primarily by a principal they saw at the open night who they could relate to and who did not patronise them. In addition to this, as ‘active consumers’, some middle class parents, both ‘rookie’ and ‘veteran’, quickly replaced their sense of relief at being accepted in to their school of choice by a desire to monitor the school in relation to their child’s progress, hovering metaphorically over the principal so as to ensure they remained informed as to their child’s progress but also to remind the principal that they are monitoring him or her. Only with middle class parents were schools not considered because parents felt the principal lacked the requisite enthusiasm.

11.5.5 Child matching
The incidents of ‘child matching’ (Gewirtz et al 1995) were found solely amongst middle class parents, whereby different children within a family could be sent to different schools in an effort to best ‘match’ each child with a school. The further costs required by multiple school uniforms, various books, varying transport were seen as an investment that should reap dividend later in life by the middle class families who opted for this choice. This type of ‘active consumerism’ was not seen within working class families in this research. As a consequence of their greater cultural capital, middle class families had a greater choice of where to send their child to secondary school.
11.5.6 Veteran lessons yet to be learnt by rookie

Emerging also from this research within the working class parents was the vulnerability of the ‘rookie’ parent who had yet to learn the harsh lessons of the ‘veteran’ working class parent. Errors made by ‘veteran’ working class parents had been learnt with experience but it seems the ‘rookie’ parent only learnt these lessons through experience over the course of a difficult year.

11.5.7 Various forms of reassurance

Reassurance that they had made the best decision in the school choice process came at different times in diverse guises to the parents during the decision making process. Some middle class ‘veteran’ parents and some working class ‘veteran’ gained reassurance through their membership of Parents’ Council or Board of Management of their child’s school.

Furthermore by dint of the fact that older siblings could help their younger siblings with their homework provided added reassurance that obstacles could be overcome. This opportunity was not afforded to the ‘rookie’ parents whose eldest child was beginning their secondary school career. Primarily that role fell on the laps of the parents themselves. This then lead to a difference in the level of support open to ‘rookie’ parents, where a parent’s own education and ability to pay for extra tuition, in the form of grinds, impacted on the level of support available to their child.

11.5.8 Subtleties within the active middle class consumers

There were subtleties within the levels of ‘active consumerism’ exhibited by middle class parents. While some middle class parents were afforded a second chance to remedy their first erroneous choice, the more astute middle class parents would argue that it is imperative to keep extremely well informed about the school your child may attend.

11.5.9 Some positives for the working class parents

During this research the lot of the working class parent was at times a difficult one, even more so when compared the lot of the middle class parent. Nonetheless there were some positive moments, including some unexpected sources of support:
• **Home School Community Liaison Officer (HSCLO)**

Parents whose home had been visited by the HSCLO from their child’s school found this scheme hugely valuable and went a little way towards a speedier invite to the table for working class parents who might have had only leftovers to choose from.

• **Praise matters to parents**

While no doubt all parents like praise, the importance of affirmation of a parent’s parenting skills from the school offers significant support to working class parents, most notably working class ‘rookie’ parents.

• **Broadening social network through workplace capital**

An unexpected source of support for working class parents came in the guise of employment in broadening a parent’s social networks and adding to a parent’s cultural capital and is worthy of further research, as is the consequential possible prevention of accessing this type of capital within many working class areas due to traditional levels of higher unemployment.

**11.5.10 Recommendations**

In order to counteract the growing number of schools in the State that are cherry picking students in order to keep the school’s educational achievement profile high (Flynn 2009b, 2009c, 2005k), measures should be introduce to ensure a transparent and equitable enrolment of students from all social classes. Many of the schools that operate this inequitable, selective system are Christian run schools, perhaps it is time for these schools to reflect on their original ethos. Now, it seems, is the time to take away the choice of school altogether and operate an equitable and fairer system whereby if a family live in a given area then their children are centrally assigned to a school. Schools then will become more socially mixed rather than a situation where there is an imbalance of classes in a school. This system is in place in the state school sector in parts of the UK; Kent is one example of this (Turner and Hohler 2010).

When there is advantage for some it follows that there is disadvantage for others. Perhaps the thirty metre head start that Allen (2008) spoke of could be significantly
reduced by ending the practice of streaming in schools, with all students beginning from the same starting point of mixed ability classes, thereby ending the significantly negative impact of streaming and its self-fulfilling prophetical nature that has been highlighted on these pages.

Middle class parents are more strategic and long term in their thinking around education (Ball 2003, Apple 2001, Ball et al 1997, Gewirtz et al 1995). When the time comes in first year of secondary school for their children to choose which option subject to pick for the Junior Certificate, this research found that middle class parents adopt a long term view whereas working class parents, in this research, tend to look at this process in the short term and base decisions more on intuition. In order to address this perhaps a common programme for all students in the Junior Cycle could be adopted thereby redistributing any potential disadvantage that may accrue to working class children, in a similar fashion to the system in operation in French junior second level schools.

The analytical nature of the middle class parents interviewed as part of this research when describing the open nights and parent teacher meetings they attended was in somewhat stark contrast to the view working class parents, in this research, had on these important exchanges with school life. There may be a role for the Home School Community Liaison Officer, when visiting working class families, to explain to the parents how to view a potential secondary school on an open night and how best to gauge from the parent teacher meetings how their child is doing in school. However this is not a perfect solution as cognisance needs to be taken of the fact that the majority of children from disadvantaged backgrounds are attending schools that are not designated disadvantaged schools and therefore a flaw exists in the targeting of supports to disadvantaged students (Carberry 2009).

Perhaps there is need for a specific co-ordinated role involving senior management in schools, boards of management, parents councils, local education centres to address the inequality that exists between how middle class parents and working class access the educational marketplace. A co-ordinated approach could provide a mechanism whereby the more vulnerable parents, in this research it was Maeve – the unemployed,
working class, and ‘rookie’ lone parent – could be provided with information in an accessible format that would allow parents like Maeve to enter the school choice process armed with the necessary information, rather than having to ‘earn her stripes’, as it were, by learning from her mistakes. This would also significantly reduce the levels of stress and anxiety often borne out of a sense of helplessness many working class ‘rookie’ parents experience through the school choice process, as well as establishing pathways through which working class parents can interact with schools in a way that would equal the interaction middle class parents already have with schools. There is a need to continue to examine other ways in which the parental hierarchy, described in this research, can be levelled out to produce a more equitable educational system, perhaps even examining ways in which the middle class could give up some of their advantage over the working class. Many middle class parents interviewed as part of this research, spoke of their awareness of the privileged position they hold in society. Perhaps the voice of the experienced middle class parent could be shared with the working class parents, both ‘veteran’ and ‘rookie’, in ensuring that the scales are tipped in a more equitable direction. Schools, through senior management, boards of management and parents councils could identify incoming parents who may be most in need of support, namely working class ‘rookie’ parents and establish a dialogue with them and seek to support them as they prepare to send their child to secondary school. These supports could be put in place from the time a parent accepts a place in the school allowing a lead in time of between three and four months for these parents until their child enters first year in September.

This research found that the importance of praise from the school, especially for the most vulnerable of parents, is something to be encouraged. The powerful affirmation offered by a school to a parent’s parenting skills is not something that should be viewed lightly by any school or by any policy makers. Furthermore the Home School Community Liaison Scheme should be ring-fenced from any potential cuts in Government budgetary decisions, as this scheme was, according to this research, an example of a highly valued interaction with their child’s school. There would be a role for expanding this scheme out to all schools in the future, in times of better economic stability, so as all students can access this scheme.
Schools on their own cannot reduce inequality and its links to poverty. What is required is a scenario whereby there are multiple roles for schools, policy makers, researchers, educators, government and local communities working as an organic alliance nationally to reduce educational inequality, so that every child can have access to, benefit from and participate in education equally and realise their unique potential. Programmes like the Tallaght West Childhood Development Initiative and the Sligo Family Support Ltd have lain down something of a template of what can be achieved in a localised setting (Zappone 2007, Flynn 2007). It is now time for the Irish State to step in and achieve this nationally.

Possessing material capital bestows significant advantage on parents but cultural capital, it seems, gives more advantage to those parents who possess it in the neoliberal educational marketplace. It therefore appears logical that focusing on cultural capital, in aiming to eliminate educational inequality, is a rational step. The complex, illusive and nuanced dynamics of cultural capital makes this difficult. However just because something could be difficult is not reason enough not to attempt to address it. A change in public perception is needed. While reassuring headlines can be grabbed with economic investments in education, a clearer picture of how crucial a role cultural capital plays in educational disadvantage in Irish society is needed.

It is vital that as newly qualified teachers graduate, they do so having a clear understanding of the differing social classes they may teach and the associated inequality. As the majority of these newly qualified teachers’ habitus is middle class, it is inevitable that not all of their pupils will have the same habitus. Therefore it is imperative that the issue of educational inequality is a prominent feature in all teacher-training programmes, as well as being a part of in-service for existing teachers through their careers. The Teaching Council of Ireland, a statutory body established in March 2006 to promote teaching as a profession and professional development of teachers, as well as regulating the profession, designed ‘Codes of Professional Conduct for Teachers, in which was a section entitled ‘Code of Professional Practice’ (Teaching Council of Ireland 2007). Under this section, ‘Code of Professional Practice’, reference is made to recognising “that difference in students’ backgrounds and identities can shape experience and impact on learning”, reference is also made to
reflective practices, lifelong learning and professional development (Teaching Council of Ireland 2007: 15). However this is once the teacher is qualified but nowhere, it seems, does it explicitly state the educational inequality and its impact on educational attainment should be part of teacher training programmes. This is something that may be worth changing.

There remains a need to challenge the relentless neoliberal march across the pastures of education that can be seen in various educational initiatives like Race to the Top and No Child Left Behind in the USA and Pupil Premium in UK, as it inevitably will result in further polarisation between the social classes, sadly echoing the health system.

This research has found that, contrary to some long held discriminatory neoliberal beliefs, working class parents do care about education; that they do want information about schooling; that they do want to interact with their child’s school. There now exists a need to sate that information vacuum for many working class parents – a national advocacy system for working class parents may do just that. This advocacy system could inform those working class parents who, this research has found, do not necessarily think long term about their child’s education, unlike the majority of middle class parents. An all encompassing national advocacy system is needed for the most vulnerable of parents especially during the school choice process, interventions that would eliminate the mistakes made by ‘rookie’ parents, most notably working class ‘rookie’ parents. This national system, perhaps operated through regional areas via local education centres, would also reduce the deep sense of regret experienced by parents. By supporting parents at crucial times in their child’s second level education like in the areas of school choice; harvesting opportunities like open nights and parent teacher meetings; implications regarding subject choice and streaming; decoding a school’s unwritten rules; maintaining focus on pathways to further education, this may lead to a reduction in the information deficit between the classes as well as ensuring a more assured performance by working class parents, with fewer regrets. At community level this advocacy system could also include the shared experience of the working class ‘veteran’ parent who has gained knowledge through their previous experience in the educational marketplace. The strongest parent, the middle class
'veteran’ parent, operating in this marketplace could also provide their insights into functioning in this environment. This shared experience, with fellow parents at its core, may promote greater ‘buy-in’ from the most vulnerable of parents in this marketplace. This could be modelled on the successful community support organisation *Southwark Circle* which operates in Southwark, south London, but tailored to be seen through an educational lens (Hennessy 2010). All of this in turn could see more involvement by working class parents in boards of management and parents associations of their schools. It is noteworthy that in the current economic climate in Ireland volunteerism has increased markedly.

11.6 Further research

Areas worthy of further research include:

- A comparative research project should be undertaken to provide accurate statistics on the percentage of household income that is spent on the costs associated with secondary school in both the working class and middle class homes
- A cost benefit analysis of the recent cutbacks in education, paying particular attention to the impact on working class children
- The importance of the workplace as a provider of added cultural capital for those marginalised in society
- The lessons ‘veteran’ working class parents have learnt from their experience in the educational marketplace and how those lessons could benefit others
- The reasons why working class children were involved in fewer extracurricular activities than middle class children
- Is it time for something radical? There is a need to counteract cherry picking that operates in many schools that perpetuates educational inequality. Ross Higgins of the school of histories and humanities, Trinity College, Dublin suggests examining the Texan system where state legislature passed House Bill 588 or the “10% Rule” in 1997, requiring “the top 10 per cent of graduates
from every high school be offered automatic admission to a Texas state-funded university” (Higgins 2010)

11.7 Conclusion: A time of change and a time for change

Ireland in 2010 is a country experiencing a time of drastic change; change in its traditional powerful structures of leadership whereby the Catholic Church, the political establishment and the financial sector – traditionally at the pinnacle of Irish society’s hierarchy, are now enduring a withering crisis of authority. Perhaps now is the time also for change. Change in how educational inequality is addressed because the occupation of a child’s parents has an overly significant impact on the educational attainment for that child in Ireland; because despite the unprecedented economic growth in Ireland during the Celtic Tiger years, levels of poverty have remained stubbornly high; because succeeding at school is becoming increasingly contingent on the parents’ ability to pay; because not all parents have a roadmap to navigate their way through the educational marketplace; because literacy problems still persist despite over a quarter of a century of educational programmes; because ‘conservative modernisation’ is subtly weaving its message into educational systems across the world; because a belief remains that working class parents are less interested, less engaged with their child’s education than their middle class counterpart; because the Irish State does not provide a universal pre-school education; because the voice of those most marginalised, by the evident two tier education system in operation in Ireland, are not included sufficiently in educational research by the policy makers; because it is now time to change the status quo and consider all Irish parents as citizens and not consumers.
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Appendices
Appendix 1

Limerick Area Post-Primary Schools Common Application Form 2011-2012
Limerick Area
Post-Primary Schools
Common Application Form
2011-2012

Applicant Details

Surname: ___________________________ First Name: ___________________________

Date of Birth: ___________________________ Gender: ___________________________

P.P.S. Number: ___________________________ Religion: ___________________________

Nationality: ___________________________ Parish in which you live: ___________________________

Address: (all correspondence will issue to this address)
____________________________________
____________________________________

Primary School

Section II:
Please state the name of any brothers or sisters currently attending any of the post-primary schools listed overleaf.

Name: ___________________________ School: ___________________________

Name: ___________________________ School: ___________________________

Name: ___________________________ School: ___________________________

Please state the name of brothers or sisters who previously attended any of the schools listed overleaf.

Name: ___________________________ School: ___________________________ Years of Attendance: ___________________________

Name: ___________________________ School: ___________________________ Years of Attendance: ___________________________

Name: ___________________________ School: ___________________________ Years of Attendance: ___________________________

Please provide details if parents/guardians previously attended any school listed overleaf:

Name: ___________________________ School: ___________________________ Years of Attendance: ___________________________

Name: ___________________________ School: ___________________________ Years of Attendance: ___________________________

P.T.O. >>>
Any Other Information

Please provide any other information, which you feel, may be relevant to this application.

By submitting this application, we hereby agree that the applicant student will take part fully in every aspect of the school curriculum and will follow the Code of Behaviour of the School. We have read and accept the Admission and Enrolment Policies of the relevant schools.

Father's / Guardian's Signature

Mother's / Guardian's Signature

Date: ___________________________  Date: ___________________________

List of Limerick Area Post-Primary Schools

It is MOST IMPORTANT for parents to indicate on this form at least 2 schools to which they are applying in genuine, descending order of choice. Only those schools identified in order of choice will be empowered to consider your application. A Statement of your genuine order of choice will not mitigate against your child. If your child is unsuccessful in obtaining the first choice, this will have no effect on his/her chances of obtaining a place in one of the lower choices. By submitting this form a parent acknowledges that failure to identify a sufficient number of choices may result in your child not being offered any school place should the schools applied to be over-subscribed or should your child not meet the criteria in the admissions policies of those schools identified. For these reasons your child's interests will be best served where a minimum of nine schools are listed in order of your choice and parents are strongly advised to co-operate in this regard. Forms will be returned if 9 choices are not filled in. Schools will share the information for your preferences with other schools if relevant.

Please return the completed Application Form to the Principal at the Number 1 School of your choice by 12.30pm on 14th January 2011. Please enclose a stamped self-addressed envelope.

Please fill in your 1 to 9 choices

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School Name</th>
<th>Location</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ardscoil Mhuire (girls)</td>
<td>Corbally, Limerick.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ardscoil Ris (boys)</td>
<td>North Circular Road, Limerick.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Castletroy College (co-ed)</td>
<td>Newtown, Castletroy, Co. Limerick.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coláiste Chiaráin (co-ed)</td>
<td>Croom, Co. Limerick.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coláiste Mhichil (boys)</td>
<td>Sexton Street, Limerick.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Crescent College Comprehensive S.J. (co-ed)</td>
<td>Dooradoyle, Limerick.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gaelscoláiste Luimnigh (co-ed, All Irish)</td>
<td>Sir Harry’s Mall, Limerick.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Laurel Hill Coláiste F.C.J. (girls, All Irish)</td>
<td>South Circular Road, Limerick.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Laurel Hill Secondary School F.C.J. (girls)</td>
<td>South Circular Road, Limerick.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Presentation Secondary School (girls)</td>
<td>Sexton Street, Limerick.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>St. Clements College (boys)</td>
<td>South Circular Road, Limerick.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>St. Enda’s Community College (co-ed)</td>
<td>Kilmallock Road, Limerick.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>St. Munchin’s College (boys)</td>
<td>Corbally, Limerick.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>St. Nessan’s Community College (co-ed)</td>
<td>Moylish Park, Limerick.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Salesian Secondary College (co-ed)</td>
<td>Pallaskenry, Co. Limerick.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Salesian Secondary School (girls)</td>
<td>Fernbank, North Circular Road, Limerick.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scoil Carmel Secondary School (girls)</td>
<td>O’Connell Avenue, Limerick.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Villiers Secondary School (co-ed, Fee Paying)</td>
<td>North Circular Road, Limerick.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
## Appendix 2

**INTERVIEW GUIDE**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Opening Questions: Primary school experience – where/+-</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>How did you come to choose ______ as your child’s secondary school?</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Steps involved – Open Nights – Making sense of info – Schools not considered.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Who involved in process – child’s input – emotions – do you feel like you had a choice.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Were you aware of media ratings of schools, Leader etc – did that influence you.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Application process – 10 weeks in, happy with choice made – critical incident +/-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How do you feel now/child feel now – how does child get on with teachers.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Your relationship with the school, a voice, problem addresses – how often go to school.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PTM, who will attend – Subject choice, options – information received from school.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Society changed – is it more difficult to raise a child – school support you &amp; vice versa.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Influence of peers/friends – what type of class is child in – happy with that class – HLOL.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Is it expensive having a child in sec school – what are costliest – extra help/grinds?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What do you want out of education – how would you describe the culture of the school?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What would be the downsides of school?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Can you tell me about your own educational experience?**

<p>| Where did you go to school – describe the experience – your experience influence |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>your choice of secondary school for your child? – How?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Can you tell me about your child’s typical routine when they come home from school?</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Travel to &amp; from – extra curr – Typically after arrive home from school do what.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Where does child do H/W? – How long? – What is your role in H/W?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do you have a computer? – Do you have the internet? – Does your child use PC/Net?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Is it used for H/W - What are your computer skills like?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>How would you describe your role in your child’s education and school life?</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PTM – Who attends – other contact with school – school environment -</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>After child completes secondary school? What would be success for you?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Is there <strong>anything else</strong> that you feel is important to add that we have not discussed during this interview?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Snowballing</strong> – that was really interesting – any other parents of first years might be interested</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

How Who What Why Where When?