

**FACTORS THAT INFLUENCE PARENTAL
CHOICE OF SCHOOL AND EXPERIENCES
IN A RURAL EDUCATION MARKET**

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Declaration

I hereby declare that this dissertation is my own original work, and has not been submitted to any other third level institution as part of a masters degree.

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Date: 25th July 2003

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*“This thesis is dedicated to my first and best teacher,
my father and mother, David and Julia McEvoy,
For their help, support and encouragement throughout the years”*

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Abstract

The policy of encouraging schools to compete against each other in education markets internationally has been justified on the grounds of raising levels of attainment and widening choice. Although there has been little research on Irish education markets, it is becoming increasingly evident that parents from different social backgrounds are unable to compete on an equal basis and exercise the same level of choice. This thesis presents the views of parents from middle and working class backgrounds in a rural community on the factors which influence their choice and experiences of school.

Focus groups were conducted with parents from different social groups, some of whom sent their children to the local school and some who choose schools outside the local area. Interviews were also held with primary school principals from local feeder schools. The findings reveal that parental choice and experience of school is closely related to the amount of social, cultural and economic capital they possess. It emerged from the focus groups that working class parents did not have the same ability to make choices between schools as professional parents. Working class parents did not possess high levels of financial resources and knowledge on the functioning of some schools to enable them make active choices.

The findings also demonstrate that parents' vision of education for their children and their relationships with school personnel also impact on their experiences and choices. Professional and working class parents come from diverse cultural backgrounds and have different expectations for their children's futures. This cultural diversity also effects parents' and students' relationship with school personnel. All these factors impacted on the type of school which children attended, and hence influenced the success or failure of schools competing in the Irish education market.

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background

According to Ball (1993), privileged groups tend to be better able to use the education system in such a way as to ensure optimum benefit for their own children, thus maintaining class stratification. Today the determining role of family property and inheritance on social class has been replaced by educational skills and credentials which influence occupation. As the importance of education increases, it is becoming increasingly apparent that education may be a factor causing, rather than solving, social class inequality.

Although there has been much discussion concerning education markets in the international context with increased competition between schools and pupils, there has been little research carried out on the existence of education markets in the Irish context. The effect of competition between Irish second level schools on pupils' access, participation and achievement in education has been somewhat understated. The type of school that a pupil attends may determine their level of success in the education system. Pupils who attend schools with a high intake of pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds, are more likely to drop out of school before the Leaving Certificate examinations, compared to those in other schools, an effect which operates over and above that of individual social background (Smyth and Hannon, 2000).

Schools competing in the market place consider professional/middle class students to be a more desirable clientele as they perform better in examinations and hence, contribute to the schools' success. School management teams talk openly about not getting swamped with too many working-class pupils, while many middle-

class parents, refer euphemistically to avoiding schools with rougher elements (Ball et al., 1996, cited in Reay, 1997).

The net effect of the education markets has been the segregation of pupils according to social class, into schools which provide different educational functions. According to Carroll and Walford (1996), the opening up of the education markets and school choice has made parental, financial and cultural capital a more significant factor in assessing schools (Lynch and Lodge, 2002). It is important to question the extent to which these factors influence parental choice and experiences of school.

1.2 Context

The study school, [St. David's], where the research was carried out, is a 'stand alone' school in a country town surrounded by a large rural hinterland. Although St. David's is a vocational school, it traditionally received a mixed clientele of students from diverse social backgrounds within the local area. In recent years however, the school has experienced the increased impact of an education market. St. David's is now competing with schools in a fifteen to twenty mile radius, as some parent's ability to choose schools outside their local area has increased.

1.3 Rationale

Falling numbers of students from feeder schools, especially those from professional/middle class backgrounds, and threatened reductions in staff numbers, were the main rationale for the study. Reduced numbers of students will impact on the subject choices and programmes available and so have a cumulative effect on the success of the school. Of those students who choose not to attend St. David's, some

travelled long distances to boarding school, but most attend single sex secondary schools in a large town approximately fifteen miles away. Finding out what factors influenced the choice of school for parents would assist St. David's in planning for the future to address the shortfall between it and other schools in the local education market.

1.4 Aims and Objectives

The main aim of this study was to examine the process of school choice and to discover the main factors that influence parents and pupils in the catchment area of the researcher's school, St. Davids, when selecting a second-level school. The researcher also felt that it was important to investigate parents' experiences during their children's education and to ascertain what they want from a school.

The researcher set down five main objectives to investigate:

1. what were the main factors which caused parents to send their children to the local study school;
2. what were the main factors which caused parents not to send their children to the local study school;
3. what were the main factors which caused parents to send their children to schools outside the local area;
4. what was the relationship between social class and parental choice of school;
5. how did parents perceive school-related factors to impact on their children's educational experiences.

1.5 Methodology

The main methods of research used in the study were focus groups and interviews. The target populations for the research were parents (who sent their children to St. David's, and to schools outside the local area) and principals of local feeder primary schools. The researcher conducted five focus groups in all: four focus groups with parents from various social backgrounds whose children attended St. David's and one focus group with parents who sent their children to schools outside the local area. There were four one-to-one interviews with primary school principals from local feeder primary schools.

The results of this study should enable school management and staff to examine whether it is necessary to initiate changes in St. David's. Management and staff of the school may use the information presented to better meet the expectations and needs of pupils and parents.

1.6 Structure of the Study

Chapter 1: The introduction gives a brief background, context and rationale for the study. It outlines the main aims and objectives of the study as well as giving a brief description of the methodology used and the structure of the study.

Chapter 2: This chapter provides a review of some of the extensive literature on the topic of school choice. The literature review begins by examining education markets. Due to a lack of research on the Irish education market, the researcher concentrates on education markets in the international context. The rationale behind the establishment of an open education market is outlined and the effects of competition on the success

and failure of schools is discussed. The researcher looks at the impact that markets can have on the ability of parents and students from various social backgrounds to choose schools. This chapter also looks at the historical origins of Irish second level education. It mainly concentrates on the development of secondary and vocational education. The type of education these schools traditionally provided and the effect it had on the choices of parents from various social classes is examined. Finally this chapter examines equality in the Irish education system under three main headings, parental ability to choose schools, their vision of education and home-school relationships. The researcher considers the connection between the level of cultural, social and economic capital that parents possessed and the type of school which their children attend.

Chapter 3: This chapter outlines the methodology to be used in the study. The research was mainly qualitative, and focus groups and interviews were the main methods used. Four focus groups were carried out with parents from various social classes whose children attended St. David's and one focus group was carried out with parents who sent their children to schools outside the local area. Four interviews with the principals of local feeder primary schools were also conducted. Findings from previous studies in the literature were used to highlight factors which might influence parents when choosing school, such as academic record, curriculum, location and their children's happiness. These formed the main topics for discussion in the focus groups and questions in the primary school principal interviews.

Chapter 4: The findings of the study are presented in this chapter in four sections. First the findings highlight factors which influenced parental ability to choose a

school for their children such as cultural, social and economic factors. Then they outline what parents consider to be a suitable education for their children, and finally the relationships which existed between parents and teachers is presented. Direct quotes from the focus groups and interviews are used to emphasise the feelings and opinions of parents and primary school principals.

Chapter 5: This chapter offers the conclusion and recommendations of the study. Initially, the chapter presents an overview of the main findings of the study. The results are then discussed in the light of the main factors analysed in the literature review. Finally, conclusions are drawn from the analysis of the data and recommendations are outlined for the future.

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Education Markets

Although there has been increased discussion about education markets in the international context, there has been relatively little research on the growth of Irish education markets. The international market model highlights the increased competition that exists between schools for pupils, and how some schools will prosper at the expense of others. In contrast to this the competition that exists between schools in the Irish education market has been played down somewhat. A survey carried out by Smyth et al. (1996), of Junior Cert pupils indicated that almost half were not attending their nearest, and most accessible school (cited in Smyth and Hannon, 2000). This indicates an active degree of selection among Irish parents and students. In order to examine the rationale behind the establishment of education markets, and to observe how they operate the researcher will look at the evidence from the international context and apply this to the Irish situation.

Education is seen throughout the developed world as the royal road to economic competitiveness in the twenty-first century. It is brain power not brawn which generates greater added value; the more educated individuals are the more it will add to a nation's prosperity in the global economy (Llauer et al., 1999, p4).

Linked to the increased importance of education internationally is the growing awareness of education markets, and the belief that market forces can raise the performance of a country's education system. Evidence of education markets began to emerge as some nation's economic survival was threatened. The late seventies and early eighties were a period of economic stagnation, and many right wing governments believed that the education systems were contributing to state induced dependency among the population.

The Thatcher and Regan administrations in Britain and the United States, believed in the use of markets for free enterprise to produce and distribute the goods and services required by consumers of education. Education was intended to be a commodity with parents supposedly free to choose the quality, location and amount and the best quality education was as in pre-war Britain to be competitively sought (Tomlinson, 2001, p27). State interference in education was seen as stifling initiative and competition was needed to stimulate this again and raise school performances.

State education insulated schools from competition because most had zones or catchment areas which guaranteed them a supply of students irrespective of how they performed. Critics of the comprehensive system argued that the lack of competition was the root cause of the decline of state education (Lauder et al., 1999, p7).

In the United States the aim of the education market was to improve the education of all children, especially those from disadvantaged backgrounds, and to give parents control over the type of education their children received. In America, children were allocated to zones according to the area in which they resided, and these zones largely determined which schools children attended. As a result disadvantaged children were frequently trapped in inner city schools because of the zones which they were allocated to. Concentrating disadvantaged children in local schools only compounded the problem. By creating education markets and “removing the zones it was hoped that some children would move to schools beyond their local area, thereby decreasing segregation. It was anticipated that choice would empower parents to take heart and hope in their children’s education” (Lauder et al., 1999, p10).

In Britain, the Thatcher administration believed that the aspirant middle class could not gain access to a privileged education under the existing system. It was

believed that an open education market would have allowed these people to access an education they deserved and one, which enabled them to achieve their goals.

It is my passionate belief that what had gone wrong with British education is that since the war we have strangled the middle way. Direct grant and grammar schools provided the means for people like me to get on equal terms with those from well off backgrounds (Thatcher, 1993, cited in Tomlinson, 2001, p28).

It was also argued that choice of school allowed the expression of individuality where parents and students can select school on the basis of a best fit between what the school provides and the student's personality. This was seen to assist the development of diverse schools to serve particular niche markets.

The advocates of educational markets in Britain and the United States assumed a number of hypotheses in their research on education markets. These were summarised by Lauder,

1. parents will have equal knowledge about schools and power to enable them to send their children to the school of their choice;
 2. schools will become more ethnically and socially mixed as less well off parents will escape the iron cage of zoning;
 3. schools will become more diverse as they accommodate diverse parental demands;
 4. education markets will drive up many schools performances, through competition for students;
 5. the quality of teaching will be raised in an education market. Bad teachers will be dismissed while good teachers' morale motivation and performance will be raised.
- (Lauder, 1999).

Initially there was large support for education markets, especially by right wing administrations, however the creation of education markets did not equally realise the educational opportunities of all students. A market in education driven by the self-interest of knowledgeable parents and the competitive strategies of schools, which had been forced to attract desirable customers, was ensuring different standards of education for different children. In Britain, the Children Poverty Action Group examined access to education resources and access to provision by choice policies. The outcomes of education and the costs to families demonstrated that the much hyped policies of choice and diversity were being translated into divisions and inequalities in provision and attainment.

It concluded that most children in poor areas continued to receive far less than a first class education (Smith and Noble, 1995, cited in Tomlinson, 2001). According to Phil Browne (1997) the main reasons education markets were introduced was to change the rules of competition in the light of greater insecurities facing middle class children. With the introduction of the markets system, the principle of selection to schools changed from one of meritocracy to “one where selection is determined by the wealth and wishes of parents, what Browne (1997) calls the ideology of parentocracy” (Lauder, 1999, p29).

Within the education markets, cultural capital is required so parents can determine the best school and material capital required to cover the transport and financial costs of sending children to school. Ball et al., (1995) argued that middle class parents took full advantage of the market to sustain their class advantage. They found that along with their financial capital “ the knowledge of the system is part of

the cultural capital that immediately separates out many middle-class parents and orientates them differently to school choice” (Ball et al., 1995, p57).

Critics of the education market suggest that educational opportunities may become polarised just as incomes have become polarised between the socio economic groups. This might occur if middle class families use their advantage in the market place to send their children to the most popular schools because they perceive children from similar backgrounds attend these schools. This leaves a homogenous social mix of working class children in the ‘undesirable ghetto schools’. Overall, it was found that parents required the cultural capital and educational knowledge for them to emerge as winners in local school markets. Market reform in education is essentially a middle class strategy which results in the reproduction of social class advantages and disadvantages.

Lauder has summarised what the critics of education markets suggest about the future

1. choice in education markets will be determined mainly by social class, gender and ethnicity;
2. education markets will polarise school intake, to the detriment of students in the lower socio-economic groups;
3. polarization will cause schools in working class areas to enter into decline as better off students leave for middle class schools. In turn this will cause a decline in funding, teacher and student morale and, therefore school performance;
4. polarization of school intakes will, therefore lead to a decline in achievement for the children from working class backgrounds;

5. where demand for popular schools exceeds supply and schools are able to choose their students, they will do so on the basis of social class and ethnicity;
 6. for blue collar and unemployed parents, choice of school will not add to their involvement in their children's education because they will have in effect, little choice;
 7. schools will not become more diverse. As the diploma disease intensifies, schools will be judged mainly on their credential outcomes;
- (Lauder, 1999).

Lauder's findings from research in New Zealand concur with those of other international research on education markets. Students from professional and managerial middle class backgrounds are able to exercise greater choice and are more likely to travel greater distances to enter schools with high socio-economic status mixes. The research also found that the choice to travel away from local working class schools is more likely to be made by those from the upper end of each social class group. The effect of this movement has been to exacerbate the polarisation in schools' intakes that already existed on the basis of residential segregation (Lauder, 1999).

Parental choice and experience of school in Ireland is largely determined by their ability to compete in the education market. Choice of school is closely related to social class, and those from working class backgrounds are least likely to make active decisions concerning choice of school (Lyons, et al., 2003). A number of factors have impacted significantly on parental choice of school they include, schools historical origins and traditions, subjects offered, disciplinary climate and pupil-teacher

interactions. All of these factors influence the type school, which students attend, and thus the schools success in the education markets.

2.2 Historical Origins Of Irish Second Level Education

Like many other European countries, Ireland has a number of parallel second level school systems, each of which has distinct historical origins and different educational functions (Elvin, 1981, cited in Hannon and Boyle, 1987). The main differences lie between the publicly owned and maintained schools, most of which are of recent origin - vocational, community and comprehensive schools – and the much older independent, privately owned and now almost entirely publicly funded secondary schools.

Traditionally “secondary schools emphasise an academic education and provide the traditional avenue to third level education and to a variety of white collar occupations” (Andrews, 1979, cited in Greaney and Kellaghan, 1984, p11). For decades in Ireland, the alternative to the church-controlled secondary schools was the vocational school. The vocational school offered a different type of education to that offered by the academic secondary school. In contrast, the vocational school emphasised practical training for its student’s in preparation for, skilled and semi-skilled manual occupations for boys and commercial courses and domestic economy for girls (Clancy et. al., 1995).

The type of education provided by different second-level schools is a result of the interaction of a number of variables, which influence the charters and other characteristics of these schools. Different types of schools have different charters, vary systematically in their pupil intake, and have chosen or acquired different educational and social placement functions. It is necessary to look at the history of the

two main different types of school that existed in Ireland in order to understand the diversities that exist in their school processes.

2.2.1 Secondary Education

Secondary education in Ireland was historically a privilege associated with the upper middle classes. Prior to the relaxation of the Penal laws in the 1780s, secondary education in Ireland was controlled exclusively by the Anglican Church, and only the elite Protestant classes had access to it.

The small number of Protestant schools in the country catered for the Protestant upper and upper-middle class, providing a classical grammar school type of education which, besides preparing people for orders, taught for entry to professional and Government services as well as solidifying the religious and cultural position of the upper middle class (Hannon and Boyle, 1987, p28-29).

The end of the penal laws saw the emergence of Catholic schools but this did not bring equality in the access and participation in education of all Irish social classes.

Throughout the nineteenth century there was a fear that education might become a state monopoly, which the Catholic Church regarded as anti-Catholic and anti-Irish. This was one of the reasons for the establishment and expansion, of many religious orders in the nineteenth century, which led to the growth of primary and secondary education for the population of Ireland. This growth in the number of secondary schools “ strengthened the resolve of the hierarchy in the defence of the denominational principle and ultimately influenced the nature of the Intermediate Education Act of 1878” (O’Buachalla, 1988, p30). Although there was growth in the number of secondary schools established in Ireland, second level education was still a commodity which only a small number of upper class parents could afford to buy.

The Intermediate Education bill became law in August 1878 and established the first solid foundation for second level education in Ireland. The Act centralised and standardised the curriculum and examinations, which were controlled by the State. At the same time, the State, through keeping an 'arms length' relationship with the religious school authorities, left schools almost totally under the control of these religious orders. This peculiar relationship between secondary schools and the State remains up to the present day. Once secondary schools conform to the rules and regulations set down by the State they remain publicly funded but privately controlled.

Examination success became central to the activities of teachers and students in secondary schools at that time. Under the Payment by Results system, the schools' income depended on both the teachers' and pupils' performance.

The reliance upon examination success as a basis for the award of school grants encouraged a keen, but educationally unhealthy competitive spirit between schools. Examination results became the final criteria for educational performance and consequently schools tended to select for presentation only those pupils on whose examination pawns they could depend (O'Buachalla, 1988, p32).

The absence of a central authority and the importance placed on examinations meant there was little attention paid to who was educated, where they were educated and how they were educated. The result was substantial social class and ability selectivities occurring amongst schools. This created large inequalities between working class children and those from higher social strata.

The establishment of the new State in 1922 brought little change to the existing Intermediate system. The main emphasis of educational policy in Ireland in the twenties was curricular rather than structural. There were only slight changes to

the status quo, where preservation of the system was more important than reform and the provision of equal educational opportunities to all social classes. According to O’Buachalla (1988) the watchword of MacNeill, the minister at the time, was not ‘reform’ but ‘coordination’ implying an automatic preservation of the system with only slight modifications.

Although the new government was primarily concerned with curricular changes and the revival of the Irish language at this time, some positive steps were taken to improve equality in education. The government abolished payment by results in secondary schools and introduced an act for compulsory schooling between the ages of 6-14 years.

Despite the expressions of social concern that accompanied many political statements in the period, and the commitment to equality of opportunity in education which was proclaimed and advocated, access to education beyond the primary stage outside urban areas, was available only to about 8% of the age group. The school attendance act which became law in October 1926 made compulsory attendance mandatory for those between 4-16 years of age and raised the average rate of attendance (O’Buachalla, 1988, p62).

Up to the 1920’s some steps had been taken to promote education and increase participation of students from working class backgrounds in Intermediate education, but large discrepancies still existed. Within this period from the late 1700s to the early 1900s, it was mainly the religious denominations that sought and attained the development of a religiously segregated Intermediate education system. Although there was a wide variation both organisationally and ideologically amongst the religious authorities running schools, they were similar in that they provided an academic education to the upper middle class of Irish society at the time, and the needs of working class were largely ignored. In the 1920s, growing criticism of the

type of education provided at second level emerged and there were demands for increased provision in technical education.

2.2.2 Technical Education

Up until the end of the nineteenth century, technical education was considered the 'poor relation' of the Irish education system. One of the first calls for technical education in Ireland came from the report of the Recess Committee 1896.

It urged a new type of post-primary school for agriculture and practical industry .It sought the establishment of evening and continuation classes for those engaged at work during the day and the setting up of higher technical colleges (Coolahan, 1981, p87).

But the great breakthrough came in 1899 when the Agriculture and Technical Instruction Act resulted in the establishment of the Irish Department of Agriculture and Technical Instruction. The department controlled some schools of its own, and also carried out some agricultural extension work but its most important function was providing grants to Intermediate schools who taught practical science or drawing.

Because the intermediate education commissioners were very short of funds, they permitted science and drawing in the Intermediate schools to be taught under the hegemony of the department of Agriculture and Technical Instruction (Akenson, 1975, p14-15).

The Act also established a Board of Technical Instruction, which advised the department. The new department worked alongside, not in competition with, the existing Intermediate system. Its main purpose was to complement the existing academic education offered by the Intermediate system by increasing the technical, and industrial skills within a particular area. This established a dual system where an academic education was provided for the upper middle classes and a practical education was provided for the working classes.

Although there were problems in the early 1900s about school buildings and equipment, by 1918 the situation had changed and the structural position of technical schools had greatly improved. Many of the old technical school buildings had been replaced with new ones and the foundations of the system were becoming more secure. The technical education system continued to grow and develop, as did the Catholic Churches suspicions towards it. This was the first time in the history of Irish education that local and civic authorities controlled schools.

In addition to the problems of finance and structure, there were also difficulties relating to the social standing of technical schools. According to Coolahan, “there was a strong prejudice against technical education among the general public, and many parents were anxious that their children should gain white collar employment and they tended to regard practical and manual work, and the preparation for it as inferior”(Coolahan, 1981, p92). With the establishment of the Irish Free State in 1922, the Department of Agriculture took control of technical education. This continued until 1924 when Technical, National and Intermediate education became branches of the Department of Education.

2.2.3 Development of Intermediate and Technical Education 1924-1990s

During the 1920s there was increased criticism of the established education system and demands were made for the coherent provision of technical education. In 1926 the department of education set up a full-scale commission to investigate called the Commission on Technical Education. The report of this commission offered a detailed analysis of existing technical education, and made trenchant criticism of many aspects of primary, secondary and general education policy (O’Buachalla,

1988). The main elements of this report formed the basis of the Vocational Education Act 1930.

The report also influenced the Apprenticeship Act of 1931, which called for continued practical education classes for fourteen to sixteen year olds. As well as providing full time study, it was envisaged that the vocational schools would also provide continuation education for students, especially those from working class backgrounds who wished to gain a practical skills. Under the 1930 Act, vocational schools were seen to continue and supplement education provided in elementary schools. Continuation education included general and practical training in preparation for employment in trades etc. and also general and practical training for improvement of young persons in the early stages of employment (Coolahan, 1981).

Despite some negative comments concerning the Vocational Act, there was no official objection from the Catholic Church. The acceptance of vocational schools by the church, was due to the assurance given to the bishops by the government, that the vocational schools “would not be allowed to develop so as to impinge upon the field covered by the denominationally run secondary schools” (Whyte, J.H, 1971 cited in O’Buachalla, 1988, p64). This meant that vocational schools would not be competing with secondary schools for the upper middle class students who wished to gain an academic education. This meant that these schools could not prepare students for entry to universities or white-collar employment. This immediately therefore inflated the social class distinction between secondary and vocational schools.

In 1932, Eamon de Valera and the Fianna Fail party came to power. De Valera was conservative and cautious in his approach to education. He wanted to maintain the delicate equilibrium that existed between the Catholic Church and the State. De Valera showed no great concern for the inequalities among the social classes which existed in the dual education system at the time.

He viewed the socially stratified participation in the system as answering to the future role structure of society; while he expressed satisfaction with the secondary system which trained the future leaders of society he was not so sure if the vocational system which extended opportunity to rural areas was worthy of the public money expended on it (O’Buachalla, 1988, p66).

As Ireland entered the 1950s, after years of economic difficulties and educational problems, the number of secondary and vocational schools increased, as did the number of students enrolled in these schools. The 1960s was a decade of expansion where, economic, social and political factors combined to make it possible.

Up until 1966 a quite separate curriculum and examination structure existed for vocational schools. Vocational schools were not allowed to provide the more academic Intermediate and Leaving Certificate courses (Hannon and Boyle, 1987) The publication of *Investment in Education* in 1966 marked a distinct development in Irish education. It looked at structural and organisational problems within the educational system,

A major preoccupation of the report was with labour market needs; it was suggested that there would be shortages of technically qualified personnel unless remedial action was taken. Concern was expressed that the post-primary curriculum was unsuited to the needs of a rapidly changing society (Clancy et. al., 1995, p479).

The *Investment in Education* report illustrated the nature and the extent of inequality in the Irish education system. It drew attention to the low rate of

participation in post-compulsory education by children of lower social groups, and to the high rates of early leaving from vocational schools. It also highlighted, the small proportion of students from these schools entering higher education. According to O’Buachalla, (1988), social groups A, B and C formed approximately 45% of the Irish population, their children formed 64% of the entrants to secondary school, 68% of those sitting the Leaving Certificate and 85% of University entrants. The report resulted in the announcement of ‘free’ second level education by Minister O’Malley in 1967. From this point until the 1980s the main focus within the Irish education system was increased participation in second level education. Enrolment in vocational and secondary schools accelerated, as did the inequalities between the social classes.

2.3 Equality in the Secondary Education System

From the 1960s, there was an extensive provision of second level education across Ireland. As the numbers attending second level increased there was a simultaneous increase in inequalities between these pupils and schools, especially in relation to social class. Within local education markets, vocational and secondary schools were in direct competition with each other. Clientele, self-selection, and the more selective/competitive position of local secondary schools, meant that vocational schools tended to attract a disproportionate intake from lower socio-economic groups as well as the least academically able pupils (Hannon and Boyle, 1987). Sometimes, vocational schools were used as a stopover until something else turned up for that student.

Many factors influenced parental choice of second level school in the past and today. This choice is strongly related to social class and determined by financial, academic and cultural factors. Some of the dominant factors which influence parents in their choice of school include the ability of parents from certain social groups to make an active choice of school, parental vision of what is a suitable education for their children and the relationships which exist between parents, pupils and the school.

2.4 Parental Ability To Make Choices Between Schools

Today, most Irish schools are still characterised by the social class homogeneity of their student intake. This seems like an unusual occurrence in a country that has established free second level education since 1967, where each parent can send their child to the school of their choice and where schools are not allowed to select on an academic basis. As previously outlined, there are significantly lower numbers of working class students in secondary schools than in other state funded schools. Breen (1986) indicated that, “at the end of the junior Cycle 29 per cent of male secondary school pupils are from working class backgrounds, while the figure is 63 per cent in vocational schools and 53 per cent in community schools” (Drudy and Lynch, 1993, p145). This relationship between social class and type of school is often a result of parents’ ability to make an informed decision on the type of school they wish to send their children to.

Parents differ significantly in the amount of cultural and economic capital they possess. Professional parents tend to have higher levels of in-depth knowledge of the education system than working class parents do and so have the ability to actively choose a school. Professional parents do not feel intimidated approaching a school, if they need to obtain relevant information before making a choice for their children.

Lyons et al., (2003) found that,

insider parents demonstrated both a strong inclination to choose a school other than their local one and a strong capacity to utilise the possibilities of choice. They possessed the economic and cultural capital needed to gain inside information on the schools¹ (Lyons, 2003, p332).

¹ Insiders are professional parents which possessed in-depth knowledge of the education system, had high levels of education themselves and intervened in their childrens education.

For most professional parents their primary concern is finding a school that best suited their childrens needs. They frequently considered the best school to be one which would provide an academic education and help generally in the personal development of the child. As a result many professional/ middle class parents send their children to secondary schools which they traditionally perceived to provide a more academic education than vocational schools.

As stated above working class parents do not possess the same levels of cultural capital as professional/middle class parents. As a result, they were considered less likely to engage in active decision making in the education market. According to Reay and Ball, working class decision-making in education “is infused by ambivalence, fear and reluctance to invest too much in an area where failure is still a common working class experience”(Reay and Ball, 1997, p89). Reay and Ball (1997) found that for working class parents, to refuse to choose what is not permitted is an easier option, than to risk the humiliation of failure and rejection by attending high reputation popular schools.

The financial capital parents possess also influences choice of school. All Irish schools now receive funding from the State for major expenses and many often ask for voluntary contributions from parents also. These contributions create a boundary between the different social groups:

The existence of voluntary contributions can and does operate as a social barrier when parents are unfamiliar with the school and unsure of what they will be asked to pay... certain parents would feel that their children would be disadvantaged in a school if they could not pay the voluntary contribution (Lynch and Lodge, 2002, p42).

Along with the voluntary contribution, some working class parents also find the costs such as books, uniform and transport act as barriers to entry and influences their ability to choose certain schools. This is demonstrated in Cathleen O'Neill's study of working class people in Kilmount, Dublin. One parent commented in relation to the uniform "It's hard enough to get them to wear sensible shoes without worrying about colour as well"(O'Neill, 1992, p97). Uniform portrays a certain image of the school and is a signal to the public about the class structure and culture of the school. It acts as an informal selector of students from different social classes to the school. If they can't afford the uniform they are not suitable for entry to the school:

It operated as an indirect cost barrier to parents on low income discretely serving to discourage them from 'choosing' that school. It had the opposite effect on middle class parents, serving as an indicator of both the higher status of the school and of the likelihood that there would be fewer students from working class backgrounds attending (Lynch and Lodge, 2002, p45).

The availability of transport has a significant impact on parents ability to choose school. Lynch and Lodge (2002) found that students from the higher social classes were least likely of all students to walk to school which showed they were able to commute to schools well outside their areas. They also found that car usage was far higher among the higher social classes, "in classes 1 and 2: over one third (36 per cent) went to school most days by car compared with less than 20 per cent in all other classes"(Lynch and Lodge, 2002, p46).

Working class parents value schools in their locality, as travel and family organisation are tightly tied into their choice of school. Access to a car, the pattern of bus, tube and train routes, the local transport timetables, the pattern of busy roads and open spaces, and the physical location of schools all affect the possibility and

perception of choice (Ball et al., 1995). Students whose parents can afford private transport have the choice of attending 'elite schools' outside their immediate area, while students whose parents can not afford private transport are forced to attend their nearest school.

In addition to transport costs, the high cost of school books and other expenses is an issue for a large number of families. In O'Neill's study of working class parents, 56% expressed hardship in paying for books and they said the book grant operated by most primary and second level schools was totally inadequate (1992, p95). Other additional school costs and their consistency throughout the year also created problems. One working class mother from Kilmount in Dublin outlines these problems:

It's not just the cost of the books, which are dear enough, it's also the PE gear and runners, there's swimming, arts and crafts and photocopying costs as well. Every single day for three months I was handing over money for one or other of my four children for calculators, graph paper and so on. If I did not have it the kids would be sent home for it. Then there's the ingredients needed for home economics, half the time I wouldn't have my dinner and I'd have to buy cookery ingredients (O'Neill, 1992, p100).

There is a strong relationship between poverty, social class and choice of school. Lack of financial resources has a major impact on the level of active choice of working class parents and students. Limited economic resources determined the spending priorities of working class families. Many are concerned with meeting the basic needs of day-to-day survival. For some education is a luxury good which they struggle to afford. Voluntary subscriptions, transport, uniform and other expenses all act as silent selectors to 'exclusive' second level schools, encouraging student from wealthy higher class backgrounds to attend and pushing 'unsuitable students' away.

2.5 Parental Vision Of Education

The White Paper on Education states that secondary education “aims to prepare student for adult life and help them proceed to further education or directly to employment” (Dept. of Education, 1995, p43). In the Irish education system, this preparation takes at least five years of hard work and financial resources. Parental vision of a suitable education for their children is influenced by their own experiences and background. Their perception of education is also influenced by factors such as school structure, subject choice, programmes offered and extra- curricular activities.

Education is a high-risk investment of time, effort and finances and is not always possible in the uncertain life of a working class student. The working class child comes from a background where “long-term goals are less tenable than immediate gratification, because the general notion of the future is vague, dominated by chance rather than planning” (Drudy and Lynch, 1993, p152). As many working class students have little experience of family members benefiting from the educational system it “may open a gaping motivational hole: why bother when it is already so clear that in this race, one is an also ran” (Dunne, 1995, cited in CORI, 1998, p21).

Structures and policies within a school influence parents view of a good education. Within different schools the extent of ability grouping practiced leads to further social segregation and so influences choice. Students are labelled ‘weak’ or ‘good’ depending on their academic ability and hence placed into the appropriate group. According to Lynch and Lodge “ ‘ability’ is frequently a euphemism for class; it neutralises class debate within a culture and an education system that prides itself

on meritocratic values” (Lynch, and Lodge, 2002, p49). It has been shown that streaming has negative consequences for those placed in the bottom class, “at both Junior and Leaving Certificate level, being in the bottom class in a streamed school results in significant underperformance in exams... furthermore those in the bottom classes are more likely to drop out of school early” (Smyth, 1999, p219).

These ability groups are relatively homogenous in their social class structure with students from the lower socio-economic groups more likely to be located in the lower tracks in school (Lynch and Lodge, 2002). There is also evidence that the social class structure of a school influences the extent and type of ability grouping in that school. Studies conducted in Irish second level schools, show that working class students were more likely to attend schools that stratify classes by ability than professional students (Lynch and Lodge 2002).

This segregation according to social class leads to disparities in school achievements, and shows that the differences between second level schools and pupil outcomes (both academic and non-academic) is in fact due to the differences in the intake of pupils to the school (Smyth, 1999, p218). These connections between school structure, ability grouping and social class impact significantly on pupils performance and hence act as strong determining factors in parents choice of school.

The subject choice available within schools also influences choice. Traditionally many professional/ middle class parents sent their children to secondary schools which mainly offered academic subjects while working class parents sent their children to vocational schools which offered practical subjects.

the curricular pattern of secondary schools was firmly fixed within the humanist grammar school tradition where language and literary studies predominated. In contrast the vocational schools emphasised practical training in preparation for skilled and semi-skilled manual occupations for boys, and commercial courses and domestic economy for girls (Clancy et al., 1995, p477)

This tradition of suitable subject choices has carried through to today where professional parents value academic subjects and working class parents value practical subjects and hence send their children to the school which they perceive to be most suitable.

The resources of the school influence the number of subjects and classes on offer. In Lynch's (1999) study a working class student commented, "[In some schools] there is a better choice of subjects. If a class is full in this school you are put into another subject"(Lynch, 1999, p115). The variety of subjects on offer when students are expected to choose subjects at junior and senior cycle affects their performance in the final exams and hence impacts on parental choice. The White Paper on Education (1995) stated "that since it is recognised that students mature at different rates they should be allowed to maximise choice for as long as possible before making decisions regarding examination subject choice or subject level" (Dept. of Education, 1995, p46).

Students do not always reach this level of maturity before these choices are made. In many of the schools, students are streamed and made subject choices from an early stage in junior cycle. The effects of having to make early choices in subjects and levels are detrimental to the overall attainment of the student. It has been shown that "pupils tend to do somewhat better in their exams when subject choice occurs

later in the junior or senior cycles, allowing pupils to explore the range of subjects which suit their needs and abilities”(Smyth, 1999, p220).

In order for this delay in choices of subjects and levels to occur, resources and funding are required by the schools and “ many teachers have expressed concern about the difficulty of providing a broad range of subjects in the context of declining pupil numbers” (Smyth, 1999, p220). As mentioned above, the funding received by a school can vary greatly from one school to another. One teacher in Lynch and Lodge’s (2002) study perceived that the equality of resources and availability of teaching aids, varied dramatically throughout the strata of classes in Irish second level schools, from vocational to fee-paying. This lack of resources places restrictions on the subject levels and types of subjects available to students, and so influences student intake.

Participation in extra curricular activities also plays a role in students’ choice of school and hence, their performance. Smyth’s study indicates that pupils seem to do better academically and are less likely to drop out when they are more integrated into the school (Smyth, 1999). The tradition of certain extra-curricular activities being associated with certain social classes has lead to a continued ‘elite’ image of some schools.

Lynch and Lodge (2002) found that even though schools do not charge fees and cannot select overtly on academic grounds, they can promote themselves in ways which appeal to the professionals and upper middle classes. They highlighted the fact that certain schools in their prospectuses, portray themselves as academically

orientated schools that encourage certain types of extra-curricular and sporting activities that are more associated with the middle class. This identity of the school would discourage some working class parents from applying. In some ways these images are transmitting the message that working class need not apply for entry.

2.6 Relationships

A positive pupil-teacher relationship is the corner stone of a students' education and has a significant impact on the discipline climate of the school and on parental choice of school. The teacher-pupil relationship, learning environment and classroom experiences between working class students who are mainly found in the lower streams and middle class students who are mainly found in the higher streams is very different. This experience also varies between the types of school attended.

In Lynch's study, three of the five disadvantaged schools surveyed claim that regular disruption in class due to disciplinary problems was an important obstacle to learning, one student commented, "discipline is a major problem on this school. Classes are taken up with correcting students and dealing with general discipline problems" (1999, p115). The teacher-pupil relationships and discipline climate also has an effect on pupil drop out. Pupils were less likely to drop out of schools whose discipline structures were characterised as strict (Smyth, 1999).

Differences in the codes of discipline and the methods and styles of control used between various schools influence parents' and students' choice. These differences were also visible within schools, between the higher streams that were mainly middle class, and the lower streams that were mainly working class. Lynch and Lodge highlight these differences:

Not only were the high streams /tracks and mixed classes the classes with least disruption, they were also classes in which the forms of control exercised were most work focused... the use of individual questioning, extra work allocations and refocusing on the task at hand" (Lynch and Lodge, 2002, p53-54)

Lynch and Lodge (2002) found that in the lower streams control mechanisms used focused more heavily on student behaviour. Teachers corrected student behaviour as a

group and as individuals and frequently gave punishments such as detention. These methods of control often result in low self-esteem for the working class children and lead to further disruption, which is often used by the student as a cover up or defence mechanism.

A possible explanation for the disruptive classroom environment in the lower streams for working class students may be “the discontinuity between home and school experiences of some children”(CMRS, 1988, p4). In Cathleen O’Neill’s study more than half the interviewees had been called up to the school to account for aspects of their children’s behaviour. One mother recalled

“My lad said to her [the teacher] to “piss off” because she embarrassed him in front of his mates over the state of his trousers. Now I know he shouldn’t speak like that to her but to him it was everyday language”(1992, p96).

Boldt (2000) made similar findings, he describes the school as an alien environment for working class students who associated it with the authorities and rules. There is a discontinuity between the working class culture and language and that of some schools. Working class culture is rarely spoken of in schools through the curriculum. It is mainly middle class professionals who compile the curriculum for our schools and “the only lifestyle or culture depicted in the school books is the middle class one” (O’Neill, 1992, p99).

Not only is the working class culture not valued, but also, for working class people to emerge successfully through the education system they have to abandon certain features of their culture and background. Once educated, they cease to be working class (Lynch, 1999). The language of the working class does not form part of

the schools vocabulary. Often, working class children have difficulty communicating with the teacher. Bernstein's study found that "language is one of the most important means of initiating, synthesising and reinforcing ways of thinking, feeling and behaviour that are functionally related to the social group" (Drudy and Lynch, 1993, p151). In choosing a school, working class parents and students tend to choose schools where they feel the student will fit in best with the culture of the school.

The school structure and organisation through the practice of streaming, combined with a pattern where many schools select at entry and have certain, traditions, reinforces social inequalities. These inequalities see students from higher social class backgrounds at an advantage over students from lower social class backgrounds. The former attend the more 'elite' schools of their choice, being allocated to mixed ability or higher status classes and benefit more from academic and non-academic activities, thus leading to increased participation and performance.

Despite similar environmental constraints, such as a common curriculum and state examinations, schools differ in the way they are organised to serve different pupils and achieve different educational and social goals. It is mainly because different types of schools have different charters, vary systematically in their choice of pupil intake, have chosen or acquired different educational and social placement functions in society, that they differ so widely in their schooling processes (Hannon and Boyle, 1987)

The division in the educational market today arises as a result of open competition between schools in the same catchment area. Education markets trade off

the futures of the working class students to the advantage of those from professional/middle class backgrounds. Secondary schools provide an academic education to middle class students in an area while vocational schools provide a practical education to working class students in the same locale.

Today the “determining role of family property and inheritance has been replaced by that of wage bargaining...in recent years educational skills and credentials have differentiated between unskilled manual workers and professional, managerial and other routine service workers” (Clancy et. al., 1995, p483). The middle class continue to maintain their advantage in society as they have perfected the process of passing on their status from generation to generation. Choice of school has a considerable effect on the future social destination and life chances of any student.

The structural, social, cultural and economic barriers which the education system poses for working class young people have a major effect on their access, participation and achievement in the system. Middle class families can, and do, make more choices about schooling and they exercise more control over how schools operate than those from lower income backgrounds. Status differences between individual, publicly funded post-primary schools have been institutionalised, in the Irish education system and serve to reproduce existing class status hierarchies (Clancy, 1995, p490).

CHAPTER THREE
RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1 Focus Of The Study And Research Question

The study investigated the main factors that influence parental choice of second level school for their children. The logic for carrying out this inquiry arose from the contrasting experiences of teachers in a rural vocational school in the last decade. The researcher has been working in this school for the past five years and posed the question, are the factors that influence parental choice and experience of school, in a small rural town, different for parents from diverse social backgrounds?

The research attempted to provide parents from different social backgrounds with the opportunity to express their opinions and experiences about the education provided in the research school. Denscombe (1995) refers to this form of research as empowerment, as it allows a less powerful group the opportunity to discuss in the open experiences that would normally remain hidden. The research was mainly qualitative through the use of focus groups and interviews; it also had elements of quantitative research through collection and analysis of documentary evidence on educational attainment and social background of the student population.

3.2 Description Of The Site

The setting for this study is a rural co-educational post primary school in a small country town. For the purpose of the research the school was called St. David's. St. David's has approximately 380 students on roll. Originally in the town there was a secondary top school, which was run by the Presentation sisters, and a vocational school, which was established under the Vocational Education Act 1930. These two schools tended to attract students from diverse social backgrounds. The secondary top mainly received students from upper middle class backgrounds and the vocational

school, receiving students from working class backgrounds. In 1967, these two schools amalgamated to establish a stand-alone vocational school, which was under the control of a Vocational Education Committee. This was the origins of the study school where the research was carried out.

St. David's faces no direct competition from any other school within the same town, but it is important to look at the other schools, which compete against it in the same education market. St. David's is located about 15 miles from a main regional town, which presents competition from a number of denominational secondary schools, (one single-sex girls school, one single sex-boys, one co-educational secondary school) as well as a Gael Scoil and a Vocational School. St. David's is also within a 10-15 mile radius of four similar rural towns, which have schools that are also competing for students from the same catchment area.

The gender balance in St. David's slightly favours girls - there are 180 boys (47%) to 200 girls (53%). The social background of the students attending St. David's is quite diverse with a large number of students, from working class backgrounds and small farms. A smaller number of students come from professional/middle class backgrounds. It is difficult to quantify the extent of poverty and disadvantage evident in the rural communities surrounding the research school. Curtain, Haase and Tovey (1996) describe rural poverty as invisible as a result of its physical separation in rural communities reflected in the lowest population density in Western Europe.

Research by Curtain, Haase and Tovey (1996) estimate that two thirds of households living below the poverty line were located in small towns and villages

rather than large urban settings. They concluded that poverty in small towns and villages in rural Ireland is mainly located in public housing schemes established by County Councils where poverty has been ghettoised. Kellaghan et al., (1995) noted that on examination of the distribution of disadvantaged pupils throughout the country that 60.7% live in areas where the population is less than 10,000 people.

Along with the presence of social and economic disadvantage among the student population, there is also educational disadvantage. Educational disadvantage is associated with the discontinuity between home and school experiences of some students. Boldt and Devine (1998) define educational disadvantage as “concerned with the circumstances of those from ‘poor’ socio-economic backgrounds who experience difficulties within formal schooling or who have left the education system with few or no educational qualifications” (p10). Students who experience difficulties within St. David’s such as those with learning or behavioural difficulties receive learning support. Of the present Junior Certificate cohort approximately 25% score below the national average in the AH2² standardised attainment test for spatial, numerical and linguistic ability.

3.3 Planning The Inquiry

After considering the research question and the time available it was thought unfeasible to carry out research in a number of schools in the region. The research aimed to investigate the factors that caused some parents in one rural town to send their children to the only school in that town while other parents sent their children elsewhere. The research was mainly qualitative; focus groups with parents and one-to-

² AH2 test is a national standardised attainment test used to determine the number of students who require learning support.

one interviews with primary school principals, with a little quantitative research through documentary evidence on social backgrounds and educational attainments of pupils.

3.4 Focus Group Interviews

3.4.1 Rationale For Conducting Focus Groups

What is a focus group? It is a form of group interview that capitalises on communication between research participants in order to generate data (Kitzinger, 1999). There are a number of features which are common to focus groups, Wilson (1997) highlighted some of these common elements. They include a small group of people (4-12), who meet with a trained researcher/facilitator/moderator for 1-2 hours in a non-threatening environment. The purpose of the group is to explore participants' perceptions, attitudes, feelings, ideas and to encourage and utilise group interactions (Wilson, 1997).

According to Kitzinger, (1999) the main idea behind the focus group method is that group processes can help people to explore and clarify their views in ways that would be less easily accessible in a one-to-one interview. The basic argument in favour of focus groups is " that they reveal aspects of experiences and perspectives that would not be as accessible without group interaction" (Morgan, 1997, p20). Due to what may be seen as the sensitive nature of the discussion issues, it was felt that focus groups would be the most appropriate research method to use with parents and would offer them the opportunity to express their views in a supportive, non-threatening environment.

Focus groups are a good form of research when the information given is of a sensitive form. It should not be assumed that the groups are always more inhibiting than the supposed privacy of a one-to one interview or that the focus groups are inappropriate when researching sensitive topics. In fact, quite the opposite may be true.

Group work can actively facilitate the discussion of taboo topics because the less inhibited members of the group break the ice for shyer participants. Co-participants can also provide mutual supporting expressing feelings that are common to their group, but which they consider to deviate from mainstream culture (Kitzinger, 1999, p2).

Focus group research can be used in conjunction with other qualitative and quantitative research methods. Focus groups not only give us access to certain kinds of qualitative phenomena that are poorly studied with other methods but also represent an important tool for breaking down narrow methodological barriers (Wilson, 1997).

Generally speaking, the social situation of the research interview imposes certain constraints on the nature of the data collected and demonstrates the disparity in the power relationship between interviewer and interviewee. The interviewer usually has the right to ask questions, and the interviewee may seek clarification on certain points. Respondents feel obliged to provide answers. According to Wilson (1997), cornering the interviewee in this way can generate a type of impression-management whereby respondents provide answers which they think the interviewer will want to hear. Compared with individual interviews, focus groups help to break down this power relationship between researcher and respondent (Wilson, 1997).

Some researchers have also noted that group discussions can generate more critical comments than interviews. Kitzinger (1999) suggests that using a method that

facilitates the expression of criticism and at the same time, the exploration of different types of solutions, is invaluable if one is seeking to improve services. The researcher felt that focus groups as a research method were particularly appropriate when working with some less outspoken parents who are often reluctant to give negative feedback, or who may feel that any problems result from their own inadequacies.

3.4.2 Recruiting Members For Focus Groups

Since interaction between participants is a key feature of the focus group method, careful consideration of group composition is vital. Although there has to be a certain level of group diversity within a group, “groups that are too heterogeneous may result in conflict and the repression of views of certain individuals (Bloor et al, 2001, p20). The groups were selected mainly on social class lines. This was done in consultation with the principal of St. David’s.

Most researchers recommend aiming for homogeneity within each group in order to capitalise on people’s shared experiences (Kitzinger, 1999). On the evenings that the focus groups took place, it was evident that some members felt a sense of ease when they met and recognised the other participants in the group as being similar to themselves. The ‘safety in numbers’ factor may also encourage the participants who are wary of an interview or those who are anxious about talking to participate (Kitzinger, 1999). When initially seeking parent’s consent to participate, it was stressed that there were five other members in the group, which seemed to appear less daunting for them.

Five focus groups of parents were held: four focus groups of parents who sent their children to St. David’s and one focus group of parents who sent their children to

schools outside the local area. There were 6-8 participants in each group. Initially, all parents were contacted by phone to seek their approval to participate in the groups. This also allowed the researcher to answer any questions that parents had about the groups. These questions were usually about the background and aims of the research, and also the composition and format of the groups.

The second contact with the parents who agreed to participate was also by phone. The parents negotiated with the researcher a date, time and place for the focus groups to be held. During the second conversation, a brief outline of the topics planned for discussion were given to the parents, and any questions or concerns were answered. The final form of contact prior to the groups was made approximately one week before the groups were actually held. This was a written reminder about the date, time and place for the focus groups and it also stressed the guarantee of confidentiality (Appendix A).

Morgan (1988) stressed that participants need to feel comfortable with each other. Meeting with others whom they think of as possessing similar characteristics or levels of understanding about a topic is likely to be more appealing than meeting with those who are perceived to be different. At each stage of contact, from the initial conversation to the evening of the focus group, the importance of parental participation was accentuated and the researcher stressed that they were the experts and their opinions were valued.

3.4.3 Conducting Focus Groups

Morgan (1997) present four broad criteria for the effective focus group interview: it should cover a maximum range of relevant topics; provide data that are as specific as possible; foster interactions that explore participants' feelings in some depth and take into account the personal context that participants use in generating their responses to the topic. After consulting with parents, it was decided that the research school was the most appropriate venue for the focus groups to take place.

Although the researcher was aware that St. David's may have negative associations for some parents in the group, the majority choose it as the most central, convenient and confidential location available. There is no such thing as a neutral venue for a focus group (Bloor, 2001, p39). The researcher choose to conduct the groups in the evening in a small room situated at the back of St. David's, she was aware that the "venue should be free from interruptions or surveillance" (Bloor, 2001, p38).

Once the focus group was assembled, the role of the researcher was crucial in providing clear explanations of the purpose of the group, helping participants feel at ease and facilitating interaction between group members. At the beginning of the session, the researcher again outlined a suggested plan for the focus group (Appendix B). The researcher highlighted some of the issues for discussion and stressed the importance of each individual's opinion. The best introduction is often the honest admission that the researcher is there to learn from them (Morgan, 1997). The researcher explained that the aim of focus groups is to encourage people to talk to each other rather than address themselves to the researcher.

Initially, the researcher posed questions in relation to parental choice of school (see Appendix C). These were all considered relatively easy to answer owing to the parent's experience school. From this, issues arose and the researcher took a back seat at first, as parents were discussing the emerging issues. As the discussion progressed, the researcher found that she was intervening more, urging the debate to continue, discussing inconsistencies between participants and creating links to issues discussed earlier. The researcher found that there was a need to probe more deeply into some issues and widen discussion on them, skip over other issues that had already been discussed and also follow completely new topics that arose. A good guide creates a natural progression across topics with some overlap between topics – an artificial compartmentalisation of the discussion defeats the purpose of using group interaction (Morgan, 1997).

The researcher was conscious that she should facilitate the group rather than controlling it. According to Bloor et al. (2001) control is necessary for a successful group interview, but if the researcher tries to control the group they may be doing the research a disservice. If the aim is to facilitate group interaction in such a way as to understand group norms and meanings, then the group interaction of certain groups may be distorted by too much external control (Bloor et al, 2001). The researcher was aware of this, and intervened only where necessary to keep the discussion on track. The ideal relationship of the researcher to her group members is that of background figure rather than foreground figure - the theatre manager rather than director of the play (Bloor et al, 2001).

In some groups as the discussion progressed, some group members emerged as being more dominant than others. Just as the researcher was avoiding leading the group, so too she was seeking to avoid the over-domination of the group by particular members. At the outset (and reiterated where necessary) it is valuable to validate the expression of differences, to state that the researcher wants to hear about a range of experiences and if members disagree with a voiced viewpoint, then it is important for them to make their disagreement known (Bloor, 2001). In addition to controlling the over-dominant members of the groups, it was also necessary for the researcher to call on the quieter members of the groups for their opinions and experiences. The researcher must not just avoid domination of the group by individual members, but must also seek to encourage contributions from the more timorous (Bloor et al., 2001).

At the end of each focus group, the researcher provided a recap of the main issues which were discussed, reassured participants of the guarantee of confidentiality within the research and offered them the opportunity to raise any issues they felt were not dealt with adequately. At the end of three separate sessions, some parents remained behind to offer some further points which they felt were important in their choice of school. One parent spoke to me at a parent teacher meeting which followed the focus group discussions and one parent added a few more observations as I was dropping her home after a focus group discussion.

3.5 Interviews With Primary School Principals

It was decided to conduct one-to-one interviews with Primary School Principals. Four Principals from four main feeder schools of St. David's were

interviewed. The interviews were semi-structured and the principals were given a list of topics for discussion before the interview (Appendix D). One-to-one interviews were chosen in preference to a focus group, as the researcher thought that principals may have felt compromised by giving their perceptions of what factors influence their pupils' and parent's choice of school in the presence of other principals.

3.6 Documentary Evidence

Access was sought to academic records and school rolls from St. David's school principal to build a profile of the pupil population. Assistance was sought from the principal to access addresses of pupils and occupations of parents. This assisted in compiling a socio-economic profile of the pupils to provide insight into the extent of rural poverty and disadvantage. Specific support was sought from the career guidance councillor in identifying and compiling the percentages of pupils in need of learning support.

3.7 Access And Ethics

Permission was sought from the principal and management of St. David's to carry out the investigation. The principal was informed of the aims of the study and the research methodology to be adopted. Anonymity was guaranteed to all participants, no name of any individual who participated in the research process was used, nor was the name of the school identified. After receiving permission to conduct the study, volunteers were sought from local parents who did and did not send their children to St. David's and from principals of local feeder primary schools. Achieving goodwill and cooperation was especially important with the participants.

Time was devoted either to the groups or to individual participants to explain the objectives of the study, procedure to be adopted and to answer any queries individuals might have. When seeking cooperation from parents, it was important to specify the need to refrain from mentioning individual teachers, as the researcher feared the focus groups could become forums for personalised criticisms, which would result in the discussion losing direction. Allowing personal criticisms of teachers would also have jeopardised the researchers relationship with colleagues, and abused their trust and support.

3.8 Methods Of Analysing And Processing the Data

In analysing focus groups it is important to take full advantage and cognisance of the interaction between research participants (Kitzinger, 1999, p5). The examination of the interaction between participants required detailed transcripts of the focus group conversations. Although it is argued that there cannot be a perfect transcript of a tape-recording (Silverman, 1993), the transcripts were reproduced as near as possible to what happened in the group.

Attempts at analysis without the transcription will lead to loss of much of the richness of the data and will risk a selective and superficial analysis (Bloor et al., 2001). Although transcription was time consuming, it assisted the researcher when analysing focus groups. When carrying out the analysis, the researcher was aware that it must be “systematic and rigorous, reflecting the views of all cases not, for instance only those that fit the researcher’s own agenda, or the most interesting or the most commonly mentioned topic” (Bloor et al., 2001, p62).

After listening to the tapes and transcribing the conversations, the researcher indexed the material. The aim of indexing is to bring together all extracts of data that are pertinent to the particular theme, topic or hypothesis (Coffey and Atkinson, 1996, cited in Bloor et al. 2001). Indexing involved the researcher reading and re-reading the text and giving index codes to the relevant data. At the start, the index codes were quite broad, but these became more focused as the analysis continued.

To facilitate the analysis of the data, the researcher designated codes to St. David's and to each of the focus groups with parents, and interviews with primary school principals. As mentioned earlier the study school was called St. David's. Four of the focus groups (FG1 to FG4) involved parents who had children attending St. David's and ranged in social composition from working class to professional. The remaining focus group (FG5) consisted of parents who sent their children to a school outside the local area and came mainly from middle class and professional backgrounds.

The following codes were allocated to the focus groups

Focus Group 1 (FG1): Working class parents (Unskilled and semi-skilled workers);

Focus Group 2 (FG2): Working class parents (Semi-skilled workers);

Focus Group 3 (FG3): Middle class parents (Skilled workers/ Property owners);

Focus Group 4 (FG4): Middle class/Professional parents (Property/Business owners/Professionals);

Focus Group 5 (FG5): Middle class/Professional parents.

The four principals from the feeder primary schools interviewed were allocated the following codes:

- Primary school Principal 1:(PP1): large co-ed primary school located in the same rural town as St. Davids. Main feeder school;
- Primary school Principal 2: (PP2): Small rural co-ed primary school. Majority of students attended St. David's;
- Primary school Principal 3: (PP3): Small rural co-ed school. Majority of students attended St. David's;
- Primary school Principal 4 (PP4): Small rural co-ed school majority of students attend St. David's

The main approach to analysis was analytical induction. This involved a number of steps. The researcher started by outlining the main phenomenon to be explained. She then listened to the data and compared this to the hypothesis, on the occasion where data did not fit the original hypothesis, that hypothesis was redefined. The analytical induction method is progressive, each revision of the hypothesis building on the previous hypothesis and is basically comparative (Bloor et al., 2001).

CHAPTER FOUR

RESEARCH FINDINGS

4.1 Overview

Parents can exercise considerable influence on their children's education and there is a strong association between social class and parental involvement in education. In this chapter, the findings of the research from the focus groups with parents and the interviews with primary school principals will be presented. The impact of certain factors on parental choice of school and their children's experiences of school life were quite diverse across the focus groups. This variety may be related to the social class composition of the groups.

It was evident from the focus groups that parents from the various social classes differed in their cultural capital (educational attainment, language, knowledge of how the education system worked), in their social capital (links to positions of power and privilege), and economic capital (money and other financial resources). These features affected four main aspects relating to their children's education. The first of these was the extent to which parents could make choices when choosing a school. The second and third were concerned with parents' ability to finance education and parental vision of a valuable education for their children. Finally and the third was the relationships parents had with teachers and the school.

Parents varied in the level of active choice that they exercised. It was mainly the middle class and professional parents who actually made an informed choice about the school to which they intended to send their children. Many of these parents carried out extensive research on a number of schools before actually making their decision. After weighing up their options, some parents decided to send their children to the local school while others sent their children to schools some distance away.

Some parents also took into account the lifestyle their children would have while attending secondary school. These parents considered the fact that they would have to send their children away to boarding school or make them travel long distances as huge disadvantages. This caused them to choose the local school even though there were certain features of it with which they were not satisfied.

Some parents began the process of choosing school from very early on in their child's life and had made a decision not to send their children to their local primary school. From this, they made strategic decisions about the type of secondary school they would attend. These parents had extensive knowledge of the gender balance in the schools, subject choices, programmes offered and other facilities before making any decision. They also had the financial resources and access to suitable transport which facilitated the choice to send their children to a school outside the local area. They were conscious of the type of education they wanted for their children requiring an appropriate balance between what they considered to be a suitable academic and personal education.

The working class parents, on the other hand, did not choose schools for their children's primary or secondary education in the way that the professional/middle class parents did. Many of these parents sent their children to primary and second level schools which were in close physical proximity to their homes. These parents did not talk about placing a high value on an academic education and high examination results. They wanted their children to be happy during their childhood and teenage years, and, to receive an education that would allow personal development and the use of their talents.

Most working class parents automatically presumed that their children would attend the local school; sometimes the children made the decision themselves. Many of the working class parents had little prior knowledge of the subjects, programmes and facilities the schools outside the local area had to offer as the local school was seen as the only available choice. Lack of financial resources limited working class parents ability to choose. The cost of transport and other related expenses acted as barriers to these parents sending their children to schools outside the local area.

There were diverse views across the focus groups as to what constituted a good education. The professional/ middle class parents were primarily concerned with choosing a school which could deliver the desired package of academic achievement and personal development for their children. Because of their own educational background, they had a wide knowledge of the education system and were able to access social networks that allowed them to seek information regarding school structure and organisation. Many of the parents who sent their children outside the local area believed that the gender composition, social composition, subject choice, programmes offered, arrangements of classes and codes of discipline in those schools had a considerable impact on the academic achievements of the pupils. They considered these schools to provide a more suitable education for their children.

Some professional /middle class parents who sent their children to the school which was the focus of this study [St. David's], felt that, by making proactive choices about lifestyles and sending their children there, they compromised what they perceived to be the best education for their children. Many of these parents cited problems in the subject choices and structures of the programmes offered. They

believed that the subject choices encouraged a move away from a classical, academic education in favour of a practical education.

On the other hand the working class parents who sent their children to St. David's considered the large number of practical subjects offered in St. David's to be an advantage for their children. Some questioned the extent to which the programmes offered in the school met the needs of pupils. They considered the traditional Leaving Certificate to be too academic for a large number of pupils which resulted in their alienation from the system. Many working class parents' academic expectations of the school were not as high as those of the professional/middle class group. They valued an education that met the needs of all children and allowed them to use all their skills and talents, rather than prioritising an education that was primarily or solely academic. Their children's sense of achievement and happiness in the school was more important to them than their academic achievement.

The relationships that existed between the schools, parents and students emerged as being a very important influence on parents' and children's educational experience. The majority of professional/ middle class parents (both those who sent their children to St. David's and those who sent their children outside the local area), considered the cultures of the schools and the relationships within these to be open and transparent. They highlighted the fact that they never had a problem approaching the schools to discuss any aspect of their children's education, indeed many parents considered such communication to be the norm.

It was evident from the focus groups that all professional/middle class parents (both those who sent their children to St. David's and those who sent their children outside the local area) had the confidence and skill necessary to discuss any problems with the teachers and management of the schools that their children attended. The professional/middle class parents from St. David's and schools outside the local area considered their schools management to be quite helpful when approached.

One professional parent from St. David's highlighted the fact that she was seen immediately without appointment when she approached the school. All Professional parents from St. David's, and schools outside the local area, considered the discipline structures of the school to be very fair and felt that their children were always treated equitably. They felt that there was a high level of understanding shown to them and their children by most teachers and school management, and always felt at ease and welcome when approaching the school about any matter.

Working class parents in St. David's, on the other hand, considered that poor relationships between teachers, parents and pupils were the most negative aspect of their school experiences. Many did not feel comfortable approaching the school. Some highlighted the fact that the only time they were contacted by the school was when there was a discipline problem involving their children.

Some parents, who did approach the school, felt that teachers had not the time to stop and listen to their side of the story. They felt the culture of the school was one where parents and pupils were closed out creating an 'us versus them' mentality between parents and pupils on the one hand and teachers on the other. Parents

questioned the level of respect shown by some teachers towards their children and themselves. Some parents stated that they refrained from going to see certain teachers at parent-teacher meetings because of this. They saw a lack of respect and understanding as the cause of many discipline problems.

Working class parents in St. David's, felt that the school and its discipline structures were unable to cope with the new student population, many of whom no longer automatically respected figures of authority such as the teacher. They suggested that teachers and the school contributed to discipline problems by coming down 'hard and fast' on misconduct rather than trying to understand why it occurred. They also wanted problems to be dealt with in ways that involved both parents and teachers.

4.2 Ability To Choose Between Schools

Parents' ability to choose a school varied greatly across the socio-economic groups. The professional/ middle class social groups showed a strong inclination to choose a school besides the local study school. After carrying out research on a number of schools this group also showed a strong capacity to utilise choice. In contrast to this working class parents did not seem to exercise choice in the same way. Working class parents said that, they rarely researched the type of school their children would attend for primary or secondary education. Most automatically presumed they would attend the local school rather than considering alternatives.

All professional parents were well informed about many aspects of schools before deciding on what they perceived to be the most suitable for their children. Features such as gender composition, social class, facilities and finances all impacted significantly on their decision. Many professional parents who sent their children to schools outside the local area considered a single sex secondary school to be a good educational environment for their children, one that was more conducive to learning. They perceived that the opposite sex acted as a distraction for students from their studies.

I think it was because it was an all girls school the influenced me in sending June there. I felt the all girls school was better because I went to an all girls school myself, and I just felt that I wouldn't have liked to been in a school with all boys. That probably would have influenced my concentration. When you are trying to study it is better not to have them around, I felt that boys would have been a distraction [Rose, FG5].

It would have been the fact that it was an all boys school and both my husband and I went to single sex schools and that was the main factor that influenced our choice. Again I felt there would have been no distractions [Helen, FG5].

Some of these parents had thought about choice of school from very early on in their children's lives. They made pro-active choices about the type of primary school their children attended.

Well I made that decision from primary school. I didn't send my girls to the local primary school I brought them into the all girls school in town. When they were in sixth class the boys and girls amalgamated, and I was totally thrilled that I had made the decision to send them to an all girls school, because my oldest daughter did nothing in sixth class in school, she was totally distracted by the boys. Now she was with a gang and she fought the whole year to come here and I said you wouldn't do a thing. I must say I am delighted now that she is in Leaving Cert that she is in an all girls school [Aisling, FG5].

For parents who sent their children to school outside the local area, the existence of local friends influenced their choice of school. Many considered friends to be a distraction from their study and so they encouraged their children to attend school outside the local area.

Patrick didn't have anyone going in with him but he had friends already in the school. They were very nice friends and I think their friends are very important. Initially he didn't want to go but with that little bit of a push he agreed and I said if you don't like it after six month we will change it, and now he is in fifth year and still asking to go back [Helen, FG5].

For Carra most of her friends went here, her best friends from primary school. She was very lonely at first and I thought about taking her out several times. She did not settle for a long time and then she made friends, good friends. Even though she missed her friends I'd say now she sees it as a good thing, she says I'm studying better without them and she asks would I have studied as well if they had been calling around at the door every night [Pualine, FG5].

Although there was little discussion about the type of student with whom parents wished to have their children socialising, some of the primary school principals considered this to be an issue. They perceived that one reason parents sent children away to school was to mix with a more sociably compatible group, a higher social strata.

Well I would say that you get less of the working class people going out of the town. I suppose that people feel that sending their children out of town is also a little bit different its seen to be different rather than the norm so its something they aspire to. Also parents make the choice to separate children. Sometimes the children in sixth class have formed a sub group or a separate group of friends that parents may not be happy with. So then they make an effort to break it by sending their child to another school, now for some that is a big factor [PP1].

Yes I would say that the children who do not go to (St. David's) are not from the ordinary working class background. I think parents that send children away or to boarding school are offering them an opportunity to make friends with a more sociably acceptable group and that's what happens. Because if your parents are big business men or landowners and your ordinary playmates don't understand about what happens in your life or where you're coming from its difficult. They are sent away from here to other schools so that they get away from that and make friends with others. They think they will be mixing with a more socially advanced pupil, higher social strata [PP4].

The professional/middle class parents who decided to send their children to the local post-primary school also had a good knowledge about all the other possible schools to which they could send their children. But, although they may have preferred to send their children away to other schools, because of pro-active lifestyle choices they made for their families this was not possible. Many of these parents considered the fact that, if they were to send their children to a school, other than the local school, it would have involved long distance travelling for them, or extended periods away from home.

One of the main reasons that I sent my children here was that its local and its easy for the kids to get here, because kids have so much to study that it needed to be as easy as possible for them to get here physically. Also the burden of all that stuff when you send them away, and all the emotion that goes with it I couldn't take it [Celine, FG4].

Well location had nothing to do with why I sent my kids here, I sent my kids here because I couldn't afford to send them where I wanted to. I made a lifestyle choice along time ago and as a result I could only afford to send my children to the local school [Kate, FG3].

Some of these parents expressed surprise and disappointment about aspects of the school, especially the social conduct of some of the students within the school. They suggested that their children felt socially isolated from a number of students in the school and were made to feel different or unwanted.

There's an element of small mindedness in this school and I was shocked when I heard about it. My children were picked on and had horrible things shouted after them and I'm not proud of a local community that breeds children like that. It makes me very sad and very upset and they didn't even tell me for years [Tara, FG4].

There is a feeling of isolation among some students in this school, its pitiful to hear these people. They are isolated in the classrooms that assembly hall out there is a valley of tears, that's a sad place to be if your not in a click. I think it would be worthwhile to challenge and attack that [Grace, FG4].

Working class parents, on the other hand, suggested that they did not put a lot of thought into choice of school for their children. Many just automatically presumed their children would attend the local primary school and follow on to the local secondary school. Working class parents considered tradition and friendship to be important influences on the school which their children attended. In the past many working class parents and their families had attended St. David's local school and they perceived that their children would follow tradition and do the same. Some parents also perceived that their children would be happier with their own friends from similar backgrounds.

I was a student in the old secondary school here and had very good experiences. That's why I wanted our first daughter to come here, plus its only down the road [Josephine, FG2].

I suppose with our first child he was the one who mainly decided to come here himself, all his friends from primary were coming here and he didn't want to be in a group of strangers, and it was near so I suppose it made the most sense [Deirdre, FG1].

Primary school principals cited tradition and convenience as large factors influencing what school working class children attended.

Well I'd say its convenience and tradition. Parents themselves went to the school and their families went there. They feel that if it was good enough for the last generation its good enough for their children. They put very little thought into it really, its convenience for most of them [PP2].

Working class children go there because older family members have gone there, parents have gone there, its in the parish and it's the automatic thing to do [PP1].

Professional parents who sent their children outside the local area considered the extra curricular activities on offer in these schools to have influenced their choice. The single sex schools had well established traditions of what might be considered particularly feminine or masculine extra curricular activities.

Well in the boys school they are very involved in sports and they have a beautiful sports centre. Its mostly rugby, football and hurling and that would be it really. This was a big plus for them when we were first looking at the school [Helen, FG5].

As regards the music, they have a strong tradition in (school outside the local area) and they do a musical every year as part of the transition year. That I think is marvellous for the girls and she was in the musical this year and loved it [Aisling, FG5].

Working class parents who sent their children to St. David's did not consider extra curricular activities to have had an impact on their choice, but many professional parents who sent their children to St. David's regretted the fact that there was no music or drama in the school.

you know we have no music here and that's something which would have bothered me sending Jane here because music is very important to me. I felt there is no music and it doesn't look like there is going to be and there is no great interest in that end [Celine, FG5].

Primary school principals also perceived that extra curricular activities influenced parents and childrens choice of school. They felt that the absence of some activities such as music and drama from St. David's caused some parents not to send their children there.

Well again I suppose there is a perception that there is a lot of facilities in a bigger school and very often it is only a perception. Not every one can get on the camogie or basketball team and yet parents have a perception. I would say that kids do perceive that (St. David's) does not offer as many games and music. Now we have done two or three musicals here in the past and I suppose that a few people got the taste for it and saw how well the children got on and loved the occasions and it's a thing that stayed with them for years and I suppose they felt there was more opportunities in a school that offered these choices [PP3].

In (St. David's) sporting activities for boys are well catered for I don't know so much about the girls. The area that doesn't feature at all is anything in the music line. Music, drama, singing and dancing anything to do with that just doesn't feature at all. So the children that would have had abilities in that area really have no rights in (St. David's). That is something which I consider parents might like [PP4].

4.3 Economic Capital

The professional/ middle class parents' ability to choose was also greatly facilitated by their access to financial resources. All professional/middle class parents were well aware of the costs before sending their children to schools outside the local area. Although the costs were relatively high, professional parents placed a high priority on education and were well prepared to pay them. The cost of transport was the largest expense for those parents sending their children out of the local area. For some parents with two children in school the cost of a private bus was over fifteen hundred euro a year.

Transport is quite expensive. There is a private bus and they have to pay twenty-three euros a week, that's forty-six euro for my two children every week. It is an expensive decision because they could walk to this school so we were putting ourselves out by doing that but then you do what you think is right [Helen, FG5].

You make a decision and then you say is this the right one. There is no really perfect decision that you can make on behalf of a child. There are pros and cons to everything. You do what you think is best for them [Julie, FG1].

As most schools operate a book rental scheme few professional/middle class parents who sent their children to schools outside the local area commented on the high cost of books. All these professional/middle class parents, even those with no book rental schemes in their schools, considered the cost of books to be reasonable. These professional parents who sent their children to schools outside the local area also commented on the voluntary subscription as a preferred means of obtaining finance for the school as opposed to selling raffle cards. They felt that the voluntary subscription was good value for money as it covered services such as photocopying.

Well we don't have a book rental scheme. This year Patrick went into fifth year and I'd say I paid approximately three hundred euros for books. But like that next year we don't have to top up, so its two years books in one which is

fair enough. They also ask for a voluntary subscription of sixth euro [Helen, FG5].

We pay a Voluntary subscription in (school outside the area) also. I gave one hundred and twenty euros for the two girls. Its handier for me to pay the voluntary subscription than to try to get them to sell lines ,I'd rather be done with it. That cost covers photocopying and their personal accident insurance for the year and I thought it was very reasonable [Pualine, FG5].

Although finance was not a huge issue for most professional parents who sent their children to St. David's, it did emerge as a problem for some working class parents especially those with large families. Working class parents considered the cost of books and voluntary subscriptions to be a large burden on the family finances. Many questioned the costs and their uses. Some said they refused to pay the voluntary subscription, they considered it to be a waste of money.

The cost of sending children to school is huge especially if you have three or four going. There's books, uniforms, mock money, money for this and money for that. Its an endless stream of money. I haven't paid the voluntary subscription in three years. My lads are into sport and every time they are going somewhere its money, two euro for the bus each time. So whats the Voluntary subscription for? [Nora, FG1].

This levy, the voluntary subscription, was supposed to cover things like buses and photocopying but every time you turn around you are handing money hand over fist non stop [Sarah, FG2].

Some working class parents in St. David's did consider initiatives introduced by the school, like the book rental scheme and the uniform as helpful in reducing some of their costs.

I think the uniform is great. It works out a lot cheaper than if they were wearing their ordinary clothes because if they were it would be a fashion show and the boys are worse than the girls. Who could afford that? [Nora, FG2].

The book scheme is good and the rental scheme is good but they don't have a big enough supply [Sarah, FG2].

Many of the working class parents lived in close proximity to the school which meant their children could walk or take a bus to school. Some mentioned the difficulty that paying for private transport would pose for them.

Well mine walk to school so I don't have to worry about the cost of transport I imagine if you had to pay to get them to school it would be very expensive. I know that's the case for those going to (schools outside the area) [Pualine, FG1].

Although working class parents in St. David's expressed difficulty with costs, many primary school principals didn't consider costs to be a major issue. They thought all parents would give the maximum they could afford.

No I don't think costs influence parent choice of school. It is very rarely that you hear parents complain about costs. If they can afford it at all they don't mind paying for their childrens education [PP4].

I would say that all parents are aware of costs but I have never heard them make comparisons or talk about them. There is the obvious cost of travel and yet they are quite willing to pay this. Now I don't know what the cost is but it doesn't seem to deter them. I suppose if there is only one child they might be able to make the sacrifice if there is more than that they just might not be able to do it [PP2].

4.4 Parents' Vision Of Education

Professional/middle class parents and working class parents had quite distinct views of what they considered to be a suitable education for their children. While professional/ middle class parents appeared concerned with an academic education, working class parents seemed focused on a more practical education. Professional/ middle class parents carefully considered the subjects and programmes offered by schools before making their decision. Many perceived a secondary school to be more academic than a vocational school and so more suitable for their children. Working class parents, on the other hand, appeared to be more focused on a practical education which vocational schools offered. Working class parents perceived practical skills to be useful in the labour market.

4.4.1 Subject Choice

Professional/middle class parents who sent their children to schools outside the local area were very content with the subject choices offered to their children. Although there was a small focus on practical subjects in the curriculum of these schools, parents were very happy with the choices their children made and thought the academic subjects suited them better.

Well in an all girls school they can't do metalwork even if they wanted to, they don't do engineering which is probably a drawback for some students. But from Carra's point of view history and English and that type of subject that you get essays in suits her much better [Aisling, FG5].

Well with the boys in their first year they would have done a third of their year for woodwork then a third for metalwork and a third for tech drawing. Then after that they would decide for their second year on the one they would keep on. So they would have tasted of them and only pick one, in that way there wasn't a great emphasis on the practical subjects [Helen, FG5].

For the professional/middle class parents whose children attended St. David's, the choice of subjects seemed to cause some anxiety. Many of these parents expressed dissatisfaction with the subject choice combinations that their children had to make as early as at the end of first year. They felt that the children who were good at the classical academic subjects were at a disadvantage. Some parents stressed the importance of classical subjects in the international context and to our future as Europeans.

The subject choice is there initially and it is a really incredible choice but when you really want to choose you can't and I'm not happy about it. I'm not happy the way in first year you have an enormous wide choice and then in second year you've got to choose between the really classical subjects like history, geography and German. I feel these are the subjects that are all about who we are and how we got here and to be telling kids to choose between them already in second year is utterly ridiculous. There must be a way of cutting down more of the peripheral things. If we want to stay as Europeans and give our children the chances they need afterwards we must not vary away from the classical system [Tara, FG4].

For my daughter next year she has to choose between history, geography and German and it is pulling her in all the wrong directions. I think for kids who are bad at languages then the choice is easy but if you are a kid who wants to keep on a language its difficult because they still want their history and geography [Celine, FG4].

Some professional /middle class parents in St. David's, expressed concerns about the absence of some technology subjects from the curriculum. They considered these to be of vital importance in today's work place.

My two, now neither of them have ever touched a computer and if we believe what we are told well that's the way of the future. You would imagine that computer studies would be far more beneficial than needlework [Daniel, FG3].

They never go near computers in first year even though it's on the list of subjects. I would have thought that was a vital subject [Meave, FG3].

Although working class parents did not express concern about the choice of academic subjects they did discussed the importance of practical subjects to the students who

they perceive as being non-academic. In some cases, the availability of practical subjects swayed their choice.

Well Adrian wanted to go to (school outside the area), but one of the practical subjects woodwork or metalwork is not offered there and that was that he decided he was coming here [Sarah, FG2].

I think we have to accommodate all kids here because it is a Community School and there are kids who are not in the least bit academic and woodwork and metalwork are their life and bloodlines and what keep them here and interested [Julie, FG1].

All groups of parents in St. David's discussed issues relating to the choice of subjects available to their children. It was mostly parents from professional/middle class backgrounds who appeared to be concerned with a reduction in the classical academic subjects. Working class parents on the other hand appeared relatively happy with the choice of subjects in St. David's. They highlighted the attraction of practical subjects to the less academic students.

4.4.2 Programmes Offered

The programmes available to students at junior and senior cycle differed slightly between St. David's and other schools which parents had sent their children to. St. David's provided four main programmes that students can follow. At junior cycle all students follow the Junior Cert programme. At senior cycle, the school offered the Transition Year programme, the traditional Leaving Certificate and Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme. The school did not provide the Leaving Certificate Applied Programme which was mainly targeted at a student population who did not wish to gain points for entry to a third level institution.

Parents whose children attended some of the schools outside the local area had a traditional, academic view of education for their children and were quite satisfied with the education their children were receiving in those schools. Even though none of these professional/middle class parents had children who they would have considered to be non-academic, or to have special needs, they were aware of the facilities available to these children. They commented on the comprehensive education that all children in the schools received. The schools catered for the very academic students with the traditional Junior Certificate and Leaving Certificate and the less academic students with a special Junior Certificate in one school and the Leaving Certificate Applied in others.

Well I just know that (the school their children attended) has a very good system in place because I know some students who have gone there and have learning difficulties and they have done very well. They did better than they would definitely do in a lot of schools, it surprised me because instead of doing the ordinary level Leaving Cert they did the Applied Leaving cert and came out very well rounded. There obviously was very good support for the school and I think it was down to finance available [Pualine, FG5].

They have some weak children who are very well looked after in (the school the child attends). They have the Leaving Cert Applied and that caters for a lot of them and they also have a special junior Cert class. So I suppose if children's needs are met you are going to have less problems all round [Rose, FG5].

Working class parents in the St. David's, on the other hand, seemed less concerned with an academic education than the professional/middle class parents. Working class parents commented on the benefit that a programme such as the Leaving Certificate Applied would have brought to the less academic students in the St. David's. Working class parents perceived that a child's inability to cope with course material following the traditional programmes often lead to indiscipline. With

increased retention rates within the system they did not see the traditional Leaving Certificate as meeting the needs of the less academic students.

I would say our generation is the first generation where almost on mass we did the Leaving Cert. All before us huge amounts of them dropped out after the Group Cert at the time, but like that what I am saying is the school doesn't seem to have changed a whole lot in the mean time to accommodate the fact that the bulk of the chaps are now staying on to do the Leaving Cert and all of them might not be suitable for third level [Daniel, FG3].

Like a whole lot of people, if they are not good at something they are good at being an eejit, do you know what I mean? Like sometimes if a guy is not good at something he's good at fighting he has to be good at something and unfortunately that brings out the bad in him. English, Irish and maths to a degree are a waste of time for some students, if you brought the child in and learned them something practical that's useful [David, FG1].

Working class parents discussed the pros and cons of the Leaving Certificate Applied for the less academic student and highlighted the merits of such a programme if it were introduced into the school. Many considered the traditional Leaving Certificate to be unsuitable for the needs of their children

Like you know Shane; he's a troublesome chap and I admit that to a degree but he has a good side to him and the things that he is good at the school don't cater for. He's a slow learner, has been in national school but he got by and your man the headmaster, I can't think of his name never ever sent him notes like what comes out of here. James has a bit of brains now Shane hasn't, now I'm not just saying that, but he has hands. The school doesn't cater for that, now it's not your fault it's not anyone's fault, it's the whole system [David, FG1].

The leaving Cert Applied, that may be something which should be looked at for the future. Maybe plan for two years down the line where you could have your teachers trained, your facilities there and that could make a huge difference to the entire school because the pupils then who are non academic, are fed up in the classes and waiting to disrupt are not as likely to do so. It might benefit the whole school rather than just a few pupils [Marie, FG1].

Overall, in St. David's, professional/middle class parents were happy with the academic programmes like the Junior Certificate and the traditional Leaving

Certificate that their children were following. Few spoke about the Leaving Certificate Applied as they felt it did not affect their children. On the other hand working class parents in St. David's questioned the relevance of the traditional Leaving Certificate to students who were not academic and wanted to pursue a trade after school. They felt that the Leaving Certificate Applied would not only benefit these students, but the whole school.

4.4.3 Homework

While most parents considered homework and study to be an important part of their children's education, there were differences in the amount and standard of study expected from working class and professional parents. It was mainly the professional/middle class parents who set high targets for their children and were concerned about the amount of study their children were doing. Many of the parents who sent their children to schools outside the local area considered that the students should be largely responsible for their own study and examination preparation.

Homework and study is very much up to the child and their motivation. You are going to have such a mixed bag that if a child has brains then they are going to get on well, you know that they will still do it themselves. There are some kids no matter where they go if they don't care about school they won't do any good anywhere [Helen, FG5].

Some middle class parents whose children attended St. David's tended to see the teacher as a large influence on the amount of study their children were doing. They found it difficult to understand why teachers could not influence their children to study more.

Well in comparison to other schools I think they don't do half the amount of study. I have nieces and nephews who seem to study for hours on end, where as they do the two hours here and that's it and he puts up the bag. Maybe it's a good thing I mean he's so laid back and most of the kids here are so laid back. He doesn't seem to be under any pressure other kids you feel are more under

pressure. I know kids doing their junior Cert are their studying up to ten eleven o'clock at night [Meave, FG3].

I think they don't seem to get any homework in second and fourth year, my lad wouldn't even do it for the Junior Cert he sure as hell won't do it in fourth year but he seems to be able to get away with it [Daniel, FG3].

Some middle class parents saw it as the responsibility of the teachers to check and monitor the amount of homework and study each child was doing. Many considered that the teachers should be accountable for students who were not working to their full potential.

Surely the teachers know from the class sitting in front of them they know what those chaps are capable of doing without putting any undue pressure on them. Well I know John at home is being let away with absolute murder [Daniel, FG3].

Well I don't think the staff generally in this school have given the children who want to learn and want to do well enough oomph [Kathleen, FG4].

Some Professional/middle class parents in St. David's suggested it was a culture that developed in the school where the majority of students were from working class backgrounds and had low expectations and aspirations for themselves. They suggested that these students needed motivation and someone to believe in them. They felt that this had a huge effect on those students who wanted to do well academically.

I can't say I was happy with one years Leaving Cert class. I had a hard working child who was continuously held back by kids who couldn't give a dam. There was no motivation in the class and the class was never helped to feel motivated. It was a group of very low self-confidence people who just didn't see they had any reason for motivation because they were never going to be anybody anyway. One of the phrases used by my daughter was sure they are all going to be 'builders and beauticians' anyway. I felt so blooming sad that she didn't get a restart. The stress levels were so bad that she became ill. We thought she was sick from something else until I realised what was going on and we just had to help her saying this is one part of our lives we just get through somehow but I think that's an awful way to face your Leaving Cert.

The difference now because she is finished, she is still in a very challenging position but she is out on her own and she doesn't have to deal with classmates who don't want to do the subject [Tara, FG4].

One parent suggested that the problem was that children were not taught how to study. She complemented the study seminars which were organised in the school, and suggested that these should be provided right from first year for students.

I think the study seminar this year was very good, it shortens the time, I mean children should be taught how to study since first year [Sandra, FG3].

Parents thought that the school should give the parents a more regular update on the students' progress throughout the year. They suggested that the monthly tests and reports that are completed for Leaving Certificate students in the school should also be completed for the remaining students in the school.

Do you know the way in Leaving Cert they send home a monthly report, I think that is an excellent idea, even if they could do that for all years or for the two important exam years it would make a difference. Every month and you could say how come you have slipped back in that subject, where as if you leave it until the parent teacher meeting after the Christmas exam sure they have lost the whole first term [Meave, FG3].

It was parents in the working class group who spoke least about homework and study. One parent thought there was enough pressure on young people without adding the pressure of doing homework as well.

Certain parents set certain standards for their kids. Young kids going to school these days you're afraid to hassle them in case you find them overdosed. At the back of it all I don't say where is your homework being honest with ya I don't even hassle young lads over homework I should by right, I see young kids coming in here and studying here in the evening I can't see them being happy, now maybe they are. Young kids should be let grow, when they come to nineteen or twenty they will go and do their own courses in college [David, FG4].

Some kids are just not academic so whats the point in making them study for hours they would be better off doing something practical [Deirdre, FG1].

Parental views on a suitable education were diverse throughout the focus groups. Overall, professional/ middle class parents considered an academic education to be most suitable for their children. Many preferred academic subjects and programmes for their children and had high expectations for their futures. In contrast to this, working class parents valued a practical education for their children. They considered practical subjects and programmes to be more suitable for their children and generally placed high value on their children's happiness.

4.5 Relationships

Relationships within a school impact significantly on the culture of the school and influence the teaching and learning within. Every focus group acknowledged that teachers were an extremely important resource in the school and they stressed the positive effect a good teacher can have on a student's education. However parental perceptions of the relationships that existed within school between parents, pupils and teachers varied greatly between focus groups. Teachers, and the code of discipline within a school, were seen to have the largest effect on the relationships there.

4.5.1 Teachers

Most professional/middle class parents believed that the majority of teachers worked hard for their children's educational benefit and welfare. Many of these parents, both those in St. David's and those in schools outside the local area, were happy with the high standard of commitment and dedication that the teachers displayed. One professional parent in St. David's commented on the high level of hard work which most teachers displayed.

I feel quiet happy with the majority of teachers here and I actually feel without mentioning any names, I think there is about six teachers here and if private schools knew about them they would poach them because they are so hard working and committed. There is only one problem here and that is discipline. Teachers are not meant to be disciplinarians and there are a few possibly good teachers away from that five, their teaching skills are very good but they are not allowed to teach because they are not disciplinarians [Grace, FG4].

In addition to their professional commitment in the classroom parents also commented on the care which teachers displayed for their students.

Well I know when my first daughter started the teacher said to her, if you ever forget money for lunch just come to any teacher in the school and they will give it to you which I thought was fantastic [Kate, FG3].

Well I know we were concerned about Niall, I think it was in first year. The class teacher was great and went around and got a report from all the teachers

and asked how he was doing and they were all great at that time I couldn't fault any of them [Sandra, FG3].

While each professional/middle class group started by complementing the majority of teachers in the school on their work there were a few teachers who they and their children were unhappy with. They classified a good teacher as someone who was able to teach their subject matter in an interesting way so as to motivate their pupils. He or she could also maintain discipline in a class in a firm but fair way so that the subject matter could be taught. Most of all a good teacher was someone who cared about the students' futures.

They cited some of the main problems with teachers as their inability to maintain discipline in class and to relate to the students. Few parents spoke about a teacher's lack of knowledge in their particular subject areas. The main problems with teachers arose out of poor teacher-pupil relationships. Poor discipline and the teachers inability to focus on the class work were seen as important issues by the professional/middle class parents as they interfered with students' ability to learn and progress through the system.

Well to put it bluntly I know of a small number of teachers here and in my humble opinion, not being rude or disrespectful they should not be teachers that's my honest opinion in a nutshell. They have no control over the chaps like we are talking about teachers who's claim is that it's the group of people that are in the class that's causing the trouble. But that's a nonsense because the same group of people can be put sitting in front of another teacher and their perfectible manageable [Daniel, FG3].

Well I have only had problems with a few teachers since my child came here. Now the teachers involved aren't bullies just incapable of teaching. There are a few that want to learn and if these people can't control the class what is the point in teaching [Kathleen, FG4].

Some professional/middle class parents disagreed with the idea that a teacher is there to discipline a class they saw a teacher's job as transmitting their subject matter rather than crowd control.

Do you know what I think about incapable teaching? I actually think that it's the pupils not letting the teacher teach. So this is my theory, a teacher is not meant to be a Garda involved in crowd control and the pupils are meant to give a teacher a certain level of respect [Grace, FG4].

When asked if they would approach St David's about a problem which they had, all the professional/middle class parents said they had no problem doing this and highlighted that they had done so in the past

Well I get involved, maybe I'm just a challenging person. There was some course literature that wasn't there for one of my children and the child was doing a bit of going on about it at home so I said who is the teacher, and I came in and asked where was the course material and there was a very plausible excuse. There were a number of my children in here as you know, and I would have no problem coming into any teacher, because I'm a paid civil servant the same as anybody else here, and I am challenged every day so I have it expected of me so I expect it of others. I wouldn't be intimidated and I tell my children not to be intimidated and there not. I'm telling the truth here. I wouldn't be intimidated because it's a, b, c, d or e on the hard drive so who is going to persuade me it isn't. What do I want? I want the kids to be taught, I want them to be happy here, I want them to achieve results and that's about it. Get on with it! [Grace, FG4].

I think they have been very supportive any time I have reported a problem. Like that, maybe it was out of innocence because I'm new here, but I never sat on it because its my natural instinct and I was treated very, very well and listened to immediately. I was seen without an appointment I just came knocking on the door I was not told to go away and come back and make an appointment. I was treated very, very well with any problem I had [Celine, FG4].

Although lack of discipline was cited as a problem within classrooms by professional/middle class parents, some working class parents perceived the teachers as being too strict and issuing tough punishments on students. Working class parents highlighted the problem of reduced levels of tolerance among teachers in St. David's and their inability to adapt to the needs of students. They thought that some teachers

were coming down 'hard and fast' with punishments on all student misbehaviour in class rather than trying to understand the causes of their misbehaviour and dealing with the smaller problems themselves.

The amount of punishment received depends on the teacher you have, some teachers could have a chat with them, you know a teacher could have dealt with that themselves another teacher might give out to them but there is no need to send a letter home making a big deal out of something small. Teachers should be able to pull them up themselves. Some teachers have no control, and the way I feel is that, if a student misbehaves it goes back into the staff room and if that child is struggling in class a teacher says oh that's the name I heard [Sarah, FG2].

Well I'm sort of a bad example coming down here, I actually hate the school right! From a parents point of view I find that certain teachers within the school are outdated compared to the students. Now I can't go home and say that to my kids because it's hard enough get them down here as it is. Plus different kids have different standards of education, one lad might be backward one lad might be forward. Like I know there are special needs classes and different types of guys go to school and most of the teachers here, I'm not talking about every teacher here, but some teachers, they are back with the Indians. The kids coming up now a days are a different breed altogether even as a parent we have to adapt to it, where as some of the teachers just simply don't and then your coming down fighting and arguing over simple little things [David, FG1].

Working class parents believed that there was a cultural gap between teachers and pupils. As a result parents felt that teachers were unable to communicate with pupils on the pupils' level. These parents felt that this led to poor teaching, where teachers were unable to motivate students and gain their respect. These teachers were more likely to experience discipline problems in the classroom. Some teachers found it difficult to cope with any disturbance in the classroom and would frequently take disciplinary action for what might be considered minor incidents.

I even found it myself, I didn't come here I went to the old school but like that if the teacher didn't make it interesting we had no interest in it. There are people out there who are teachers with huge qualifications and they just can't come down to the kids level. If they can't get the subject across to the children then they are at nothing. Teachers know themselves who they can have a go at

the next thing they are on report and its home. When they are interviewing teachers they need to be really careful [Sarah, FG2].

Now I've sat them down myself at home and threatened murder and asked Why am I getting reports home from these teachers classes and they say "mam you can't even crack a joke if you open your mouth or sneeze or you go out to the year head" or who ever it is and your on report [Nora, FG2].

Some of the working class parents also found it difficult to approach the school and some teachers in particular to discuss problems with them. They felt that they were not listened to, and they were frequently bombarded with insults about their children from some teachers when they were explaining their cases. As a result, they refrained from approaching the school if a problem arose, and stopped attending parent-teacher meetings. Some Working class parents believed that some teachers had very little respect for pupils and parents and hence, the student showed little respect for teachers in those classes.

I come down here about problems and I tell you something, they don't even stop to listen to you. It was often the times a child was talking or was kept by their teacher and when they go to their class they were fired out on that corridor out there. Then while they are standing on the corridor they are not even insured to be out there and they could be left out there for three or four days on end. The kids aren't goin to come home and tell the parents because Daddy will give out to them and as long as they are left out there they are as happy as Larry [David, FG1].

There is a lot to be said teacher wise when you are dealing with teenagers. If they were more in tune to what's going on they get on better it's the actual teacher. I found with my Damian, he had no love for a particular subject and no love for his teacher, the two of them were like oil and water trying to mix and the teacher just got to me one day out there in the assembly hall at a parent teacher meeting so much that I had to just get up and walk away. I felt like saying if you just got with it and made the class more interesting the kids would co-operate [Sarah, FG2].

All parents who had children attending St. David's discussed the fact that they felt that teachers were not accountable for their actions. Parents resented the fact that

they had no say in the appointment of the teachers nor could they do anything to remove a teacher who they felt was not carrying out their duties in an appropriate manner.

Well it's the age old story of good teachers and bad teachers, if you talk about parents having a say in the running of the school, I have no say in the teachers who are teaching here, I have no say what so ever, contrary to popular opinion. If I am completely and absolutely appalled by a particular teacher there is nothing I can do to have that teacher chastised or removed in any way shape or form [Daniel, FG3].

There is really no come back with a teacher you have a problem with or a teacher who is not doing their job. If your not doing your job [looking at another parent], they'll fuck you out, if I'm not doing my job, I'll be down the road looking for another job, if your not doing your job [looking at the researcher] I'd want to put a bomb under you to shift ya. [Dermot, FG1].

Some professional parents acknowledged the increased demands and difficulties faced by teachers on a daily basis. They suggested that, for teachers to continuously remain creative was difficult, considering how little training they received. They saw the key to positive learning environment as being innovative and revitalised teachers.

Well I think its more about inspiration. I don't think there is a problem if teachers can inspire kids and I think in this school and any other school the teachers are the most valuable resource, the teachers and the kids are the most valuable resource no matter about equipment or anything else. I think what we expect them to do, to expect a teacher to come out and twenty years later teach the same thing without being revitalised is just crazy. I think teachers need repeated re-training and revitalising so they can pick up new angles and ideas to keep them active because if they keep churning out the same stuff they go dead and the kids pick up on it [Niamh, FG4].

4.5.2 School Rules And Regulations

In addition to the impact of individual pupil teacher relationships parents from all groups discussed the effect of school rules and regulations on the overall relationships within the school community. Professional/middle class parents who

sent their children outside the local area to school accepted the structures and codes of discipline within the schools to be fair, and in their children's interest. They thought that the structures treated the students more like adults and made them more responsible for their own actions. In some cases, there were partnerships where parents, pupils and teachers signed a contract for the benefit of all. They felt that all students knew what was expected of them, that the systems were fair to all students and that there were fitting punishments for the crimes.

Well I know the first time I went in when my eldest boy was starting off in the school, I was very impressed with the speech the principal made. He basically said he worked around a contract that had three parts to it. He would sign on behalf of the teachers saying they would do their best to be on time, correct the homework and teach them to the best of their ability. The parents would sign that they would provide the books, the uniform, get them there on time and give them the facilities to do their homework. Finally the students themselves would sign that they would take advantage of the opportunities given to them by parents and teachers. From day one they knew they were under an obligation to make the best of what they were getting [Helen, FG5].

I know from the first lecture in (school outside the local area) it sounded very like the ethos of the girls school where I went. They treat them more like adults and give them more responsibility. Discipline wasn't really something I thought too much about [Rose, FG5].

There were diverse views from parents whose children attended St. David's on the discipline structures and policies within the school. Many professional/middle class parents discussed the effect of discipline problems on the learning environment in the school.

I don't know what the school's policy is on disruptive pupils because they are actually taking from the teacher's valuable time. Now that is one of the worries that I have had with my dealings with this school where a small number of pupils are allowed to interfere with the education of others. This is a problem and it is a silent problem [Grace, FG4].

Susan seems to have a lot of messers in her class and I am just wondering if they are streamed because there is a definite clump of messers in her class. They seem to be interfering with the work of others and generally giving the class a bad name. At the last parent teacher meeting I was hearing she needs to

knuckle down and stop messing and I am saying hang on this is not my child. There seems to be no structures in place to deal with these pupils [Kathleen, FG4].

Professional/middle class parents discussed the idea that school rules were not carried out properly at all times in St. David's. These parents called for stricter enforcement of the rules by teachers. They felt that if the management and staff of the school decide upon a rule then they should ensure that each student complied with it and issue a suitable punishment for those who did not.

I think there should be a lot more discipline and if you decide that kids are not allowed down town well then they should be punished when they do [Carmel, FG4].

The discipline is not good enough. The system could be much tighter. I have experience and knowledge of kids leaving classes here and their not being missed and their parents don't know that they are mitching. I bring my daughters to school in uniform and I expect them to stay here. On that I feel very strongly and that is something the school can do something about, they should take a roll twice a day [Kate, FG3].

They suggested that mutual respect between teachers and students was the basis of good discipline structure rather than harsh punishment and suppression. Lack of respect was cited as a cause of many discipline problems by some professional/middle class parents in St. David's.

I think it is lacking from some of the teachers in the school to have respect for the children and in fact I have heard reports of some teachers who were giving out about fifty per cent of the school and calling them riff-raff just because of gender, I think that is disgraceful. I think you cannot give that message to kids in any form. I think that respect has to come from the top down in the school rather than just expecting the kids to come in with it. A lot of kids don't know what respect is and if they don't they have to be shown. I've heard of teachers saying things like "don't ever compare yourself to a teacher you must respect us". Now that's not showing them a lot of respect [Niamh, FG4]..

I think discipline should be carried out more but when you're talking about discipline in a class it is lack of respect or something you know and this is

what is causing the trouble. There needs to be both respect from pupils to teachers and from teachers to pupils [Carmel, FG4].

All focus group participants considered the discipline climate of St. David's to be somewhat suppressive where students are controlled and contained rather than instilling a sense of responsibility, self-respect and respect for others and their school. They suggested that students needed to feel a sense of pride and belonging in their school and a clamp down approach to discipline that tended to kill their spirit did not facilitate this.

I think the person who disrespects the teachers and everybody else is someone who has no respect for themselves. There is a policy here that when the kids start in first year its thumbs down on them as hard as possible, you are not going to get away with anything, they are treated pretty tough so the so called discipline is established. I don't think a heavy hand is necessarily the most effective. The thing that will motivate every child is catching their imagination, catching their attention. Just because you slam the door louder and force everybody isn't necessarily the most effective way. They have to learn self-respect. For some of those children, because we have such a huge cross section coming here, for some of the children I know its very hard because they might not have good support at home and they might come with huge disadvantages so its asking an awful lot of the school [Tara, FG4].

Teachers can be an enormous help in instilling respect in a child. As a teacher you have an approach and an access to a child that most other people wouldn't have so that when the respect is not there from the parents and lets be honest sometimes it isn't well that's not the child's fault and teachers can help [Niamh, FG4].

I think they kill their spirit, I mean kids they are energetic and they kill their spirit by just shut up and sit down where as just let them show their energy [Julie, FG1].

Working class parents in St. David's considered that sanctions such as suspension were not suitable for tackling the cause of discipline problems. Instead such an approach frequently accentuated the suppression that students felt. They

observed that the punishments were ineffective and they were not addressing the needs of the students who tended to repeatedly misbehave.

I think this thing of suspending a child, getting 2-3 days is totally wrong. Its not punishment for the child because mam and dad are working. They could be in front of the T.V instead of making them study in school during lunch break or an hour afterwards. I mean I get into trouble and there's a letter home and I get a week off, this is great. I can sit back they are gone all day there's no punishment in that. Parents are out working all day and they are walking the town, watching T.V come in the next week there is nothing stopping them from doing the same thing again. This isn't looking at the causes of these problems [Nora, FG2].

I think they didn't change with the times. I think some teachers have got tougher. Now I think they have got tougher because the children today are different to what we were so they think they need to be tougher rather than adapting. They are coming down 'hard and fast' on them [Julie, FG1].

Working class parents questioned the relevance of some school rules. They suggested that if the students and parents were more involved in compiling the code of discipline for the school, or consulted before decisions were made which effected them, there may be less trouble implementing the rules. One parent gave the introduction of uniform trousers for girls as an example.

The girls and their trousers, I tell you those trousers they are making the girls wear, its going back to what was said here earlier on about this school being twenty years behind the times. The equality law said they have to let girls wear trousers so if you want to be like men here's your mens trousers, butch or what, they're an absolute disgrace! The girls weren't asked they gave them boys trousers. I could not believe it, no consultation with the parents or students they just sent them to the manufactures and said just make a few small ones of those men's trousers. My two girls sometimes wear red tracksuits in to make a point, which is not at my instigation. More consultation is needed with parents and students there is not enough consultation [Marie, FG1]

Working class parents felt that there was a different code of discipline for different students. It was perceived that boys were harshly treated compared to girls

and that students from different background and of different abilities were treated in different ways.

Well I'm not from around here and I have two eleven year old sons and my daughters have asked me not to send my sons here because the guys get a hard time here basically [Marie, FG1].

Kids from different backgrounds get different rules. I see guys walking down the town here at one o'clock and saunter in and saunter out again they're not even hassled. Believe you me my kids have come home and I've been disgusted by what they have said and done in here but when they were right I have come down here to try and sort it out. Now kids can play on you just the same as anything else, I've actually gave up going to parent teacher meetings all I've heard is that he is a great fella but yet a report comes home the next day and for some reason the teacher feels obliged to tell you the good parts in the parent teacher meeting rather than the bad. Do you know what I mean? I'm just a bad example because I hate the bloody school [David, FG1].

When asked for suggested solutions to these discipline problems many working class parents felt it was an issue of mutual respect between teachers and students. The working class parents also cited respect between teaching staff and pupils as a large part of the problem. They believed that there needed to be change in the attitudes of school personnel.

Kids tend to react to the situations they are in. If as you say they are chucked out on the corridor and one or two teachers accost them in particular they may be quite abusive. If you get another teacher who takes them on board and asks them to explain themselves in a slightly different tone, they will actually explain. Treat them as a person not as a dog for the want of a better word [Dermot, FG1].

Some teachers just don't care. They nod, they agree with you, they are very nice, and they love ya. The school here has an act of building a file on a child. They would suspend them for no reason. Yes, eight out of ten times the kids are wrong we all agree with that but they build it up for so long that when you eventually do come down, you loose the rag and you come down to the teacher and they say but sure on the such a such date your child did x, y and z. Like that there is nothing about the teacher. There was one teacher here which my son had an incident with and I went into the school about it but there was very little done about it. Now at that stage there is a board of management and I felt like going to them to deal with it but I didn't. It was either that or take the bloody child out of the school you get so bloody tormented in those

circumstances at least the teacher should have been brought into the same room as me [David, FG1].

The findings of the research reveal that there are a large number of factors which combine to influence parental choice and experience of school. Parental ability to exercise choice of school differs greatly between the social classes. Professional/middle class parents had a good knowledge of a number of schools, before choosing the school which they perceived to be most suitable for their children.

The desired school for most professional/middle class parents was a single sex secondary school. This resulted in many professional parents sending their children to schools outside the local area. Some professional/middle class parents made proactive lifestyle choices which influenced their decision to send their children to St. David's, the local vocational school. Working class parents considered tradition, convenience and friendships to have a large impact on the school which their children attended. A large number of working class parents had attended St. David's vocational school themselves, and perceived that it would also be suitable for their children. Most working class parents were concerned about their children's happiness, and so sent their children to the local school, where most of their friends were attending.

Parents' vision of education also had a large influence on their choice of school. Many professional /middle class parents were concerned with an academic education, and felt that their children preferred the traditional academic subjects. Working class parents on the other hand were more focused on a practical education and for some working class parents the availability of practical subjects swayed their

choice of school. The discussion on the programmes offered in the schools, revealed a sense of contentment with the traditional Leaving Certificate programme among the professional/middle class parents in St. David's, and in the schools outside the local area. Working class parents in St. David's on the other hand did not seem as happy with the traditional Leaving Cert, and discussed that pros and cons of the Leaving Cert Applied. They suggested that the Leaving Cert Applied would benefit all students in the long term, and highlighted the advantages to the non-academic students in particular.

Relationships between parents and students on the one hand and teachers on the other varied significantly across the social classes and had a major impact on parental experiences and choices. Professional/middle class parents in schools outside the local area, considered the teachers in those schools to be helpful and approachable. Most considered the discipline structures of the school to be fair, and inclusive of both students and parents. While most parents in St. David's were happy with the majority of teachers, there were a small number whom they expressed concern about. Working class parents in particular, seemed to consider poor relationships with teachers to have a major influence on their children's experiences. They suggested that negative relationships, and lack of respect between students and teachers, were the cause of many discipline problems. Overall, a number of cultural, economic and social factors intertwined to influence parental choice and experience of schools.

CHAPTER FIVE

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1 Introduction

Increased participation rates and the pressure to acquire points for entry to third level has meant that the Irish education system is now dealing with a more diverse student population than ever before. As in many other European countries and indeed, elsewhere, this has resulted in the emergence of increasingly competitive education markets with distinct school systems providing different educational functions. The division of labour between these schools is a result of the free competition in the education market on the basis of sex, social class and educational specialisation.

The secondary schools mainly furnish places for children from dominantly middle class or upwardly mobile working class families. They provide a general or academic education biased toward third level entry, and perceived as a gateway toward professional or white collar employment. Vocational schools cater disproportionately for children from working class origins or from small farm origins. Traditionally they orientated their programmes for the higher achievers toward skilled manual apprenticeships for boys and clerical positions for girls (Hannon and Boyle, 1991, p27).

Parents have a major impact on their children's education and there is a strong relationship between social class and parental involvement in education. This study is concerned with illustrating the diverse ways working class parents and middle class/professional parents have impacted on their children's experience of education. The researcher focused on three main themes to demonstrate how parents influence their children's education. They were parental ability to choose a school, their vision of a suitable education and their relationship with school personnel.

5.2 Parental Ability To Choose Between Schools

Parental ability to choose a school is closely related to the amount of cultural and economic capital they possess. Many professional/middle class parents possessed the economic capital, which allowed them to choose between a large number of second level schools. For some professional parents, private transport to schools outside the local area emerged as the largest expense with many parents paying up to fifteen hundred euro a year per child. Parents sending their children to boarding schools which cost a lot more. Professional/middle class parents who sent their children to schools outside the local area placed high priority on education and were well aware of the costs before choosing schools and willing to pay them.

They suggested that they could have spent the money elsewhere but wanted to give their kids the best chance they could. Those professional parents who sent their children to St. David's did not consider costs to substantially influence their choice. Although they had the economic ability to make choices, other factors impacted more on their decision. Many had the option of sending their children to schools outside the local area, but had made proactive lifestyle decisions on behalf of their children where they valued their locality and having their children at home during their teenage years.

Working class parents did not have high transport costs as they lived in close physical proximity to the school so that their children could walk, access a car or take the school bus. Although most working class parents automatically presumed they were sending their children to St. David's, some commented on the high cost of transport for those attending schools outside the local areas and how it would have

curtailed their choice. According to Ball et al. “access to a car, the pattern of bus, tube and train routes, the local transport timetables, the pattern of busy roads and open spaces and the physical location of schools all affect the possibility and the perception of choice” (Ball et al. 1995, p61) of working class parents.

In addition to the cost of transport, other costs such as uniform, books and voluntary subscriptions were added to parents’ educational bill. Professional/middle class parents had the economic capital available to them to pay large amounts of money for school expenses if necessary. Most considered these costs to be reasonable with one mother who reported paying three hundred euro for her child’s books the previous year. They perceived the education their children received to be good value for money.

On the other hand, working class parents in St. David’s perceived the cost of education to be very high. Many working class parents only had one week’s wages coming in and found it hard to cope with large, unexpected costs. One working class mother called for more prior notice of costs so they could plan ahead for them. O’Neill’s study of a working class community also highlighted the difficulties that parents had paying for school expenses. One mother stated:

Every single day for three months I was handing over money to one or other of my four children for calculators, graph paper and so on. If I didn’t have it the kids would be sent home for it. Then there’s the ingredients needed for home economics, half the time I wouldn’t have my own dinner and I’d have to buy cookery ingredients (O’Neill, 1992, p100).

Working class parents questioned costs which the school imposed on them, with many admitting that they no longer paid bills such as the voluntary subscription as they considered them to be a waste of money. Finance did operate as a direct cost

barrier to parents on low income, discretely serving to discourage them from 'choosing' certain schools. In a society in which there are still major differences in wealth and incomes (Cantillon et al., 2001), this means, in effect, that those that have resources can exercise choices and those without resources generally cannot, or have relatively restricted choices depending on the area in which they live (Lynch and Lodge, 2002).

The level of cultural capital that parents possessed had the most significant impact on parents' ability to choose school. According to Bourdieu (1986) cultural capital can take three main forms.

It exists in the embodied state in the form of long-lasting dispositions of mind and body (such as accent, tone, ways of holding ones body); it also exists in the objectified state, in the form of books, films, works of art, and machines. Finally, cultural capital exists in the institutionalised form, in the character of educational credentials (Drudy and Lynch, 1993, p155).

Professional/middle class parents possessed large amounts of cultural capital, which allowed them to make informed decisions about the most suitable school for their children, and placed them in an advantageous position in the education market. These parents had extensive knowledge about a number of schools in the area and "before the final choice of school for their children was made, the parents carried out extensive research to find the 'right' school" (Lyons et al, 2003, p332).

Some professional/middle class parents, who sent their children to schools outside the local area, had established networks with other parents whose children attended those schools prior to making their final decision. This allowed them to gain access to important information about the school and allowed their children established friendships before entering the school. According to McGrath and

Kuriloff, “the social networks that upper middle class parents form through schools help them gain crucial knowledge about the workings of the schools and to make influential social contacts” (McGrath and Kuriloff, 1999, p606).

Most professional/middle class parents considered the right type of school for their children to be single sex secondary schools. Although these parents did not explicitly state that they preferred the social class structure of these schools, they suggested that their children’s friends in the local area would have distracted them from their study. They stressed that their children had now made ‘good friends’ in the schools which they were attending. Most of these parents attended single sex schools themselves and considered the general ethos and values of the schools to be more suitable for their children; this was especially true in the case of the girls.

According to Lynch and Lodge, single sex girls schools are characterised, by relatively high levels of surveillance and control of demeanour and behaviour, on the one hand, and on the other, by a strong academic orientation (Lynch and Lodge, 2002). These were features which professional/ middle class parents desired. As mentioned above, the ‘right school’ for some professional/middle class parents was the most local school, as they perceived that it provides their children with a better lifestyle option. These parents had other choices available to them, but valued their locality and being able to spend time with their children during their teenaged years.

Working class parents on the other hand did not possess the same levels of cultural capital, nor did they express the same choices as professional/middle class parents. Most working class parents did not consider sending their children to any

other type of school except St. David's. Many working class parents in the study considered tradition and convenience to play a large role in their choice of school. Most working class parents had attended St. David's themselves and so perceived it as suitable for their children. Many of these parents perceived the popular academically orientated schools as not for the 'likes of us'.

Reay (1996) argued that choosing a high achieving school carried high risks of failure for working class children and presented them with higher psychological and emotional stakes, and a greater risk of failure. Reay suggested that working class parents are "engaged in a totally different process to the middle class parents; one which holds dangers as well as promises, and presents the prospect of separation from their family of origin alongside the possibility of academic success" (Reay, 1996, p591). Working class parents did not expect their children to jump hurdles which they themselves had failed to cross.

Convenience was also cited as an important reason for working class children attending St. David's. According to Ball et al., for working class children "school has to be fitted into a set of constraints and expectations related to work roles, family roles and household organisation" (Ball et al, 1995, p57). Most working class children had responsibilities at home and some helped with the care of younger siblings.

On the other hand, professional/middle class parents placed a high priority on education and adapted household and family organisations to suit their children's education. They did not consider the most convenient school to be the most suitable. The pressures of work and family life made certain school choices impossible for

working class children. The research demonstrated that “if social groups continue to differ in their financial and cultural resources, then differences in educational participation are likely to persist” (Smyth and Hannon, 2000, p113).

5.3 Vision Of Education

Parental vision of a suitable education varied greatly across focus groups and was a large determining factor in the school which children attended.

Professional/middle class parents placed a high value on an academic education which would allow their children access third level colleges and white collar employment.

Many professional/middle class parents considered academic subjects and traditional academic programmes as more suited to their children’s needs for the future. These parents demonstrated much concern about their children’s progress in school and about the amount of homework and study which they completed.

Professional/middle class parents were very aware that their children’s success in the education system was necessary in order to maintain their class status. Craft (1970) suggests that the value orientations of the professional/middle class parents is linked to their occupations “the daily work of a business executive or a professional requires the capacity to take initiatives to plan ahead and above all assume that the future can be shaped” (Drudy and Lynch, 1993, p150).

Many professional parents were planning ahead from an early stage in their children’s lives and had high expectations of the primary and secondary schools to which they sent their children. According to Ball et al., “the middle class cosmopolitan families are more likely to ‘imagine’ their children as dentists,

accountants or artists, at university, in the sixth form; where as the working-class 'locals' will 'wait and see' they are less likely to speculate about the future of their offspring" (Ball et al., 1995, p60).

The working class parents in the study did not place as high a value on an academic education as professional/middle class parents did. They did not seem to "have the appropriate repertoire of imaginary futures in which to place their children as 'academic success' or any real sense of what that might mean socially or positionally" (Reay, 1997, p95). They seemed to place a high value on an education which allowed their children to gain skills for direct entry to the labour market.

In Boldt's (1994) study on early school leavers, he found that, although working class mothers wanted their children to stay at school, they felt that, if a job came up they should take it. Many working class parents considered the practical subjects on offer in St. David's did suited their children, but were concerned that there was no alternative programme to the traditional academic Leaving Certificate at senior cycle. Many parents suggested that a less academic programme such as the Leaving Certificate Applied to be more suitable for their children

Some working class parents practiced some degree of what Reay (1997) called 'child matching,' which involved them identifying aspects of schooling that were different from those on middle class parent's agendas. Working class parents were impressed when schools gave positive attention to less academically inclined pupils rather than focusing primarily on able students (Reay, 1997). Most working class parents in St. David's did not put pressure on their children to study or gain high grades; they

considered their children's happiness to be most important. Their aspirations were vague and related to the needs and wants of the children themselves.

Thomas and Dennison (1991) carried out a study on inner city students and found that "the 'happiness' of their children to be a major organising principle in parents approach to choice of school" (Ball et al.,1995, 60). Working class parents in St. David's believed in living in the short term 'here and now' as opposed to the concept of deferred gratification. Many suggested that student who were not high achievers or particularly ambitious for their futures would follow their own courses after second level in their own time.

As a stand alone school in the community, St. David's has a mixed student intake from various social backgrounds with diverse educational needs. In an era of increased accountability and qualification inflation, providing an academic and practical education for a diverse student population in an increasingly specialised education market has emerged as a very difficult task. Many schools still wish to attract a professional and middle class clientele with the traditional academic programmes, as they perceive these students will perform more favourably in the assessment process. As a result, in a "school system such as Ireland's, where there is competition and selective processes at work in accepting and organising students, those students with abilities which are non academic are catered for inadequately" (Boldt and Devine, 1998, p18)

5.4 Relationships

Relationships within the school emerge as one of the main influences on parents and student's experiences. Professional and working class parents held very different opinions on their school's code of discipline and teaching staff. Professional parents who sent their children outside the local area considered the discipline structures and teaching staff to be quite fair.

They felt they were involved from the outset in their children's education and were made well aware of what was expected of them. Most parents considered the discipline structures of the school to be inclusive involving parents, students and teachers. One parent described how the discipline structures in the school that her children attended worked around a contract. This involved the student, parent and school signing to accept responsibility for their individual roles in the student's education.

Students and parent's involvement in the schools outside the local area was seen as an important part of the school's discipline structures. According to Lynch and Lodge's study (1999) many students favour involvement in the school and their own education, and most respond positively to responsibility. One student in their study described a negative school experience where he perceived he had no responsibility "I am eighteen years old. I am able to vote, work independently, yet I am taught and punished like an eight year old. I have no responsibility. I'm unable to mature like a person" (Lynch and Lodge, 1999, p221).

Parents who sent their children to schools outside the local area suggested that the discipline affected the overall ethos of the school. They suggested that by giving students more responsibility and treating them as adults helped to reduce discipline problems, as students tended to live up to their school's expectations of them. These parents were ambitious for their children's academic achievements and desired a school environment that was conducive to learning. As a result, they also welcomed involvement in their children's education and had no problem approaching the school if there was a discipline issue which was interfering with their children's progress.

Parents who sent their children to St. David's felt that there were some aspects of the discipline structures which they were not happy with. Many of the professional/middle class parents considered the discipline structures of the school to be ineffective and felt that some school rules were not being enforced. Some professional/middle class parents suggested that discipline within the classroom environment was a 'silent problem', and that in some classes, certain students were making it impossible for the teacher to teach.

These parents offered different explanations for these classroom problems. A few parents suggested that the indiscipline was related to the cultural background and the academic aspirations of a large number of students while others saw it as a direct result of ineffective teaching. Parents viewed close partnership between teachers, students and parents to be the key to a positive school culture and the solution to discipline problems.

All parents described the discipline climate of the school as being suppressive and failing to instil a sense of responsibility and respect in the students. They felt that the discipline structures killed the spirit and initiative of the students. Parents suggested a more democratic school environment, which requires more meaningful student involvement would cultivate a sense of pride and belonging in the school for students. As Lynch and Lodge (1999) stressed, students want to have their opinions taken seriously and influence decisions which effect them.

Working class parents questioned the relevance of some of the school rules and suggested that if the students and parents were involved in compiling the rules, they may be easier to enforce. As in O'Neills study, working class parents in St. David's considered some school rules, such as those relating to uniform trousers and shoes, to be ridiculous. One working class mother in O'Neill's study illustrated the problems with some school rules

Its hard enough to get them to wear sensible shoes without worrying about the colour as well, especially the way kids change their minds. The same thing applies to trousers. I mean, I have been sent for over things like this and have felt like crying at being told off. It's hard enough to dress them without all this messing (O'Neill, 1992, p97).

Working class parents said their perspectives on issues relating to the school were never sought and some stated the only time they were contacted by the school was when their children were in trouble. Many working class parents stated that they rarely approached the school and some felt unease and anxiety when talking to individual teachers. These parents felt frustrated about some decisions made by the school which affected them personally and financially. They perceived that their

opinions were not proportionately represented and considered the parents councils to be a token body.

Many parents in St. David's were not aware of the role or function of the parents council and agreed with Hanafin and Lynch (2002), who stated that working class parents considered the decision-making process in their school to be undemocratic and unbalanced, with parents, especially those from working class backgrounds, as having very little input. Many held a view reported also by Vincent (1997) that "the voice of parents through Annual Parent's meetings or school-based Parents Associations is muted...their voice does not impinge upon the operation of the school as an educational institution" (Hanafin and Lynch, 2002, p44).

Findings from all parents in the study concur with Boldt (1994), who found that parents considered teachers to be the cornerstone of their children's education. Teachers are more important than anyone else in schools and are the ones who have the power to help children (Boldt, 1994). Parents who sent their children to schools outside the local area were very happy with the teaching staff and management of their schools. They considered teachers to be strict but fair and felt that they worked in their children's best interests. These parents did not feel intimidated if they needed to approach teachers and felt that the teaching staff treated them with utmost respect. Overall, they considered parents to be the most vital resource in their schools.

Although parents who sent their children to St. David's stressed that they were very happy with a large majority of teachers in the school, there were some teachers about whom they expressed concern. It was not the level of knowledge which teachers

possessed in their particular subject areas which worried them but their ability to discipline their classes. Boldt's study on early school leavers found that

the way teachers related to and treated pupils was more important than the subject being taught. In almost every case, the interviews favourite subjects are those they considered themselves to be "best at" were taught by teachers they liked and respected most (Boldt, 1994, p39).

All parents suggested that it was a lack of respect between teachers and students which created discipline problems. This lack of respect may result from the cultural differences that existed between teachers and working class students. The cultural background of teachers is very different to many of the working class students who they teach, and this leads to different life chances, experiences and expectations. According to O'Neill (1992) many teachers come from better off backgrounds and experience a culture shock when employed in schools with a large working class population. Lynch and O'Riordan (1999), found that the majority of teachers in their study were aware of cultural differences which existed between them and their working class students. One teacher felt that working class

children have no concept of study, of organisation. Their priorities are so different. They've no money for books yet [they have] money to socialise. They do not understand how hard they need to work; they think that three to four hours a night might kill them; they do an hour (Lynch, 1999, p114).

The diverse cultural backgrounds in St. David's made it difficult to reconcile teacher expectations and ambitions with those of working class students. Many working class parents in St. David's felt that children from different backgrounds were treated differently. They suggested that children from working class backgrounds were treated with less respect and given harsher punishments than others. Parents considered suspension to be a form of punishment that was ineffective.

Working class parents felt that continuous suspension compounded the problems for students and teachers. Many working class parents viewed the punishments students received as stupid or unnecessary and believed that these led to the student's disillusionment with the school. According to Boldt's study, "working class parents felt that children cannot survive in a school if they feel they are constantly being picked on"(Boldt, 1994, p30). Some working class parents felt that their children had to put up with a lot at school and just got fed up with it.

Working class parents in St. David's thought that teachers were dealing more harshly with minor incidents. They felt that some teachers were unable to adapt to a changing pupil population, (who came from diverse social classes, had reduced respect for figures of authority, experienced increased social problems) and were therefore enforcing stricter punishments to control the situation.

Working class parents suggested that they themselves were sometimes treated with disrespect also when they approached the school. Many felt that teachers looked down on them and some didn't even stop to listen. Some working class parents described how they refused to attend parent-teacher meetings anymore as they felt that some teachers treated them and their children with disrespect. This concurs with O'Neill (1992) who suggested that working class parents felt they were treated with disrespect due to discontinuities between home and school environments. Parents in St. David's stressed that discontinuities are differences and should not be treated as deficiencies by school personnel.

5.5 Recommendations

Differences in economic and cultural capital which parent's possess have a significant impact on their ability to choose a school and have resulted in professional/middle class parents being able to maintain their advantage in the education market.

As outlined by Lyons et al. (2003), working class parents are disadvantaged in managing their relations with the institutions of the schools due to the low levels of cultural capital that they possess. Schools on the other hand, do little to overcome this disadvantage. Bourdieu (1977) found that many "schools only grant recognition and legitimacy to particular forms of cultural capital, thereby advantaging some parents and marginalizing others" (Lyons et al., 2003, p330). The cost of education also emerged as a major barrier to parental ability to choose. Most working class parents lack the financial resources to consider sending their children to the same 'elite' schools that some of the professional/middle classes selected.

In order to achieve equity in parental ability to choose, basic reforms in the Irish education market are called for. All schools must value the cultural contributions which the different social classes can make to their institutions. Methods of assessing school effectiveness other than academic achievement of pupils must be considered. The structure of the market has to change. But these reforms are pointless without accompanied reforms in financial income and redistribution of wealth. Economic concessions to students and parents from working class backgrounds should be considered to allow them achieve equal status in the education market.

As parental vision of education varies significantly between social classes, so too do the functions of schools in the second level system. The traditional value placed on a secondary academic education, by the professional/middle class parents has resulted in a disproportionate number of working class pupils attending vocational schools. St. David's provided a broad range of practical subjects but many of the working class parent felt the programmes offered were unsuitable for their children. They felt that the system expected students to 'fit into a box' which caused them to rebel.

Although many new programmes have been introduced in the Irish education system, substantial numbers of disadvantaged pupils are not covered by these schemes. In order for vocational schools similar to St. David's to compete at an equal level in the education market positive discrimination is required in financial assistance and teaching resources so that the needs of non-academic students are met. Money must be disproportionately diverted to the less privileged sections of society and to the schools which continue to provide for these students, "in a situation of inequality, equality of treatment reinforces the inequality" (Mulholland and Keogh cited in Boldt and Devine, 1998, p20).

Discontinuity between home and school experiences of working class children have been cited as a major influence on their education. According to the CMRS (1992) ... "as well as the child's inability to cope with school we must also focus on the schools inability to cope with the needs of the disadvantaged child" (CMRS, 1992, p11). The cultural deficit that exists between home and school for working class children frequently results in students rebelling against discipline structures. Many

parents and pupils questioned the relevance of school rules and punishments and considered some school rules to be ridiculous.

If the discipline structures of a school are to be successful then there needs to be more tolerance of working class backgrounds and a less rigid approach by schools in terms of school rules. Parents, pupils and students should be formally involved in taking responsibility for implementing the school rules and policies. The cultural diversities between working class children's backgrounds and those of their teachers frequently put a strain on the teacher-pupil relationships. Teachers' expectations and ambitions were quite different to those of working class students and parents.

What teachers perceived as a choice for many students and parents, such as long hours of study and not having to work part time are not actually choices for some working class students. As a result, conflict arises which working class children and parents perceive as a lack of respect on the part of their teachers. In Boldts (1994) study, working class parents felt that teachers should "stop treating pupils like kids and give them more respect" (Boldt, 1994, p33). This illustrates that it is necessary for teachers to develop an understanding of their student's backgrounds. Schools and teachers need to be sensitive to the positive and negative contributions which working class students make to the school environment.

This will involve appropriate training of teachers about working class situations and problems. Teachers today are required to adopt many roles, and to deal with difficult situations. This is an impossible task without appropriate training throughout the careers of teachers. In addition to the issue of training, high pupil-

teacher ratios also present problems. In an era when academic achievement is necessary for a school's success in the education market, it is increasingly difficult for teachers to meet the diverse needs of the large numbers of pupils in their class. In order for teachers to provide the education which many disadvantaged students require, it will also be necessary to consider a reduction in the pupil-teacher ratios.

If education was to take seriously the goal of equalisation of basic attainments, major changes would be required, not only in the curriculum, but also in the organisation and ethos of schools (Boldt and Devine, 1998). The culture and ethos of a school is influenced by the involvement of the partners in the school community, that is pupils, parents and teachers. Strong links are required between these partners to ensure students' success through the system.

It has been shown that many students want to be involved in their own education and respond positively to responsibility (Lynch and Lodge, 1999). The parents from St. David's felt that pupils would take more pride in their school if they had increased responsibility. The democratic representation of students in the school through bodies such as student councils and prefect structures would contribute to a positive school culture. Although parents were represented on parents' councils and the board of management, many felt that their involvement was limited. Most working class parents stated that their views were never sought and they rarely considered approaching the school about matters which concerned them. Many considered the focus groups to be a rare opportunity to express their feelings about the school.

If a school is to be successful, it must meet the needs of its pupils and parents. This will require meaningful involvement of all parties in matters relating to every aspect of the school. Schools which function in isolation are more likely to fail to meet their students needs. Hanafin and Lynch stated

the exclusion of working class views on education, and the expressed unease regarding assumed parental compliance with policy and other decisions (Coldron and Boulton, 1995) are in themselves reason to further elicit, record and consider their opinions, wishes and concerns prior to the formulation of policy in schools (Hanafin and Lynch, 2002, p47).

This study has illustrated how the present structure of the Irish education markets, seem to be shifting the competition in favour of the middle classes. Although many issues relating to factors which influence parental choice of school and their subsequent experiences, have been highlighted in the study there are many more intricacies which need to be explored. If equality of access, participation and achievement is to be attained in the future, then major research is required into the operation of the Irish education markets.

APPENDICES

APPENDIX A

Notice To Parents About Focus Groups

17/01/03

Dear _____,

Just a short note to remind you about the meeting which we arranged for
_____ February _____. The meeting will take place in **Room 1** in the
school at _____ pm.

Can I take this opportunity to stress that anything that you say as a parent, on the night
is strictly confidential. This information will only be used for the purpose of my
research. Thank you for your co-operation, and I look forward to meeting you.

Yours sincerely,

Caroline McEvoy.

APPENDIX B

Layout Of Focus Groups

Layout Of Focus Groups

1. Introduction

Name: Caroline McEvoy

Important notices

Confidentiality is very important.

It is important that one person speaks at a time for clarity on the tape.

I am a **facilitator**, anything which **you don't understand please ask me.**

You as parents are the experts in this area. All opinions given are greatly appreciated.

2. Initial Discussion

Please break into groups of two and consider the following questions:

Name one positive thing you/your children have experienced about this school?

Name one negative thing you/your children have experienced about this school?

What was the main reason you sent your child to this school?

Is there anything that may have caused you not to send your child to this school?

Is there anything that may have caused you to change your mind about continuing to send your child to this school?

3. Discussion issues

As **arise** from focus groups.

Curriculum, Discipline structures, Parental involvement in school,

Social structures, Financing school, Transport, Social Backgrounds.

4. Summary/Conclusion

Summing up of main points from focus groups.

What are the main factors that influenced your choice of school?

What are the solutions to any problems encountered?

Dose the study school need to adapt to change?

How dose the study school need to change?

What should the study school continue to do?

THANK YOU FOR YOUR HELP AND CO-OPERATION.

SAFE HOME.

APPENDIX C

Focus Groups Initial Discussion

Focus Groups Initial Discussion

Questions

- 1. Name one positive thing you/your child have experienced about this school?**
- 2. Name one negative thing you/your child have experienced about this school?**
- 3. What was the main reason you sent your child to school?**
- 4. Is there anything that may caused you not to send our child to this school?**
- 5. Is there anything, which may cause you to change your mind about continuing to send your child to this school?**

APPENDIX D

Primary School Principal's Discussion Topics

Primary School Principals Discussion Topics

- 1. Curriculum:** Subject Choice,
Academic/Practical Subjects,
Levels Taken,
Honours/Pass,
Assessment Procedures,
Special Needs Education,
Homework, Results

- 2. Discipline:** Relevance of School Rules,
Informing Parents of Incidents,
Rules Too Hard/ Soft,
Punishment Matches Offence,
Enforcement of Rules,
Consistent/Inconsistent/Caring/Uncaring,
Pastoral Care System

- 3. Parental Involvement:** Role in Decision Making,
Consulted about School Rules,
Involved in Formation/ideas Perspectives Sought,
Management/Teachers Supportive or Unsupportive
when approached,

Sense of Ease if approaching school about any matter,
Parent/ Teacher Meeting are Informative/Intimidating.

4. School Structures: Streaming of Classes.

Numbers in classes.

Ratio of Boys/ Girls.

Facilities for Students With Learning Difficulties.

School Building/ Equipment.

Extra-Curricular Activities – Sport, Music ect.

Study Facilities/Extra Classes.

5. Financing School: Voluntary Subscriptions.

Costs of Books/ Equipment.

Uniform-Expensive, school sensitive to this.

P. E Uniform.

Trips Away.

Create unnecessary pressure for Grinds.

6. Transport: Difficulty /Ease in Organising.

Local/ Long Distance.

Private/Public/Dept of Education.

7. Social Background: Describe a Typical Student-What's

Positive/Negative? How has it Change in the last ten years?

Similar cultures/Ideas/Goals/Ambitions.

Students 'Rough' / 'Civil'.

Change in Children's Behaviours for the better/ worse.

Ability to 'Fit into the school' Do you feel

similar/different to other students?

Students Language/Culture.

APPENDIX E

Primary School Teachers Interview Schedule

Primary School Teachers Interview Schedule

- Q1. How long have you been a teacher in this school?**
- Q2. On average how many children approx. would you have in sixth class each year?**
- Q3. What are the most common second level schools selected by pupils and parents of sixth class students?**
- Q4. Can you give a brief description of how you perceive these school example boys/girls/mixed, vocational/secondary ect.**
- Q5. Approx what percentage of your sixth class students would attend the local vocational school each year?**
- Q6. How well informed are you as a primary school principal and the parents and students of sixth class about the structures and running of the local the vocational school?**
- Q7. How dose this compare to the other second level schools in the area?**
- Q8. What do you think were the main factors influencing pupils/parents choice of school in the local vocational school?**

Q9. Curriculum: What are your opinions/experiences on

- **Subject choice**
- **Academic V's practical subjects**
- **Homework/assessment/results**
- **Special needs education**

Q10. Discipline: What are your opinions/experiences on

- **School rules, relevance, enforcement, hard/soft, associated punishment.**
- **Pastoral care system.**

Q11. Parental Involvement: What are your opinions/experiences on

- **Parental ease in approaching the school.**
- **Parental involvement in their children's education**
- **Relationships with teachers**

Q12. School Structures: What are your opinions/experiences on

- **Class organisation, numbers, streaming/banding**
- **Facilities, provision of extra curricular activities**

Q13. Financing School: What are your opinions/experiences on

- **School voluntary subscription, uniform, P .E uniform.**
- **Costs of books, exam papers, equipment**

Q14. Transport: What are your opinions/experiences on

- **Difficulty/ease of travelling to the local vocational school, mode of transport.**

Q15. Social Background: What are your opinions /experiences on

- **Type of student attending the local vocational school
middle/working/professional class.**
- **Student culture/language/rough/civil.**
- **Student behaviour/good/bad.**
- **Atmosphere/Ethos of the school, changed the same.**

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