'Do you mind me askin, but how did you get in here?'

A collaborative inquiry exploring class and education in Ireland, from the perspectives and experiences of working class women who have attended higher education.

Sorca Mc Donnell

Thesis submitted to Maynooth University for the degree of Doctor of Education

Department of Adult and Community Education

October 2023

Head of Department: Dr. Camilla Fitzsimons

Supervisor: Dr. Fergal Finnegan

Table of Contents

Acknowledgements

I have to begin by thanking the amazing group of women, who not only gave their time, stories and passion, but who offered me support through the process. I enjoyed our group so much because of the banter, care, humour and chats. Without you this thesis would not exist and I would not have learned so much, not just about the topic but about myself. I still miss our meetings and how we found ways to find joy in the sadness and humour in the dark. I hope I have done justice to our group in the thesis that follows and I truly look forward to seeing what our futures hold.

Brian, without your love, support and knowing you always had my back I never would have made it to the end of this process. There were so many dinners, walks, chats, discussions and the occasional kick up the back side that got me through. I'll try not to mention inequality or neoliberalism as much for a while, but I can't make any promises! You truly are my one and only, I love you and I hope you have a nice day!

My love of learning and my passion for challenging injustice comes from my family, my siblings Caitríona, Seán, Eoin, Niamh, Piaras and Ruaidrí and my parents. The joy of arguing, debating and the determination to keep up was an education in itself and without that grounding I could not have even attempted this. My Ma and Da (Mary and Seán) are both so important to my journey and their unwavering support makes me feel unbelievable lucky. It doesn't feel like enough to just acknowledge you both, because without you I wouldn't be who I am and I wouldn't be where I am. I love you both.

To Mary, my wonderful Mam-in-law, thank you for your love and support and for helping me to keep my feet on the ground.

I want to thank all my friends who understood when I missed a meet up or chatted too much about my research. I also need to mention Debbie, Katie and Pauline in particular because our chats about inequality made me think that research like this was possible.

I cannot articulate the importance of Fergal Finnegan, my supervisor (and co-coordinator of the programme), for his unbelievable support throughout this process. Your

Abstract

This research is a Collaborative/Co-operative Inquiry (CI) with a group of working class women who have attended Higher Education (HE), in which we explore class and education in Ireland. The challenges of inequality, within our stories, particularly in educational structures, are at the heart of this research. It is also practitioner research where I am exploring and critiquing systems in HE that continue to 'other' students and my role as a lecturer within these systems.

The importance of voice and story in articulating classed experiences from an insider perspective is important in challenging taken for granted, and individualistic, perspectives of class and choice (Skeggs, 1997; Reay, 2017; Crew, 2020). Pierre Bourdieu's key concepts of class, are used to explore our experiences and our positions in the social structures, including how they impact our trajectories.

Our research group worked collaboratively to explore our stories and to co-construct knowledge based in our classed experiences. The process, underpinned by care and empathy, highlights the expertise in our group on class, access and education. The impact of inequality in wider society, particularly education, on our experiences and trajectories was at the centre of our inquiry.

The research highlights the middle class framing of the educational system and how having the right habitus, and cultural capital provides a distinct advantage, with working class students feeling 'other' in the system. This impacts our lack of belonging in education at all levels and how moving to HE can change class awareness. Feeling, and being different from the middle class students was linked to deficit perspectives of class which places blame on individuals for their lack of success in HE. Feeling caught between worlds, started in HE and has continued into employment. The role of family, and habitus also impacted our trajectories, when we went to HE and changed relationships and positioning related to succeeding in HE.

This research contributes to the small body of research on the lived experiences of class and education in Ireland. It highlights the complexity of classed experiences and

challenges narrow classifications and deficit models of class and affirms the inclusion of voice and story in challenging taken for granted perspectives.

Chapter 1 Introduction

Introduction

This is a thesis about class and education, but it is more than that it is about the voices, the people and the stories that illuminate the experiences of going to Higher Education (HE) as a working class woman in Ireland. It is a collaborative inquiry(CI) in which seven women worked together to co-construct knowledge based in our experiences of class and education, where we explore what the barriers and supports were for women like us. This thesis is not looking to provide a template or profile of a typical working class woman who goes to HE- because there isn't one. Instead, I will explore how the stories we shared as a group, where we reflected on and analysed our experiences together, helped us to see the importance of these stories in the bigger picture, and how it relates to and influences our stories. So it is about how by coming together our stories and our voices became more than they were, and how we articulated our experiences and used them to think about class in a broader sense. This research is about how when we have a space to think and share together, to find solidarity, to be reflexive, we can make sense of our experiences and find a way of framing them, to contribute to wider discussions related to the field of class, access and education. Our perspectives are those of insiders and our lived experiences and stories are at the heart of this research.

In this research we discussed the classed experiences of inequality and how class is lived, but the core of this research and the starting point for the group, was education, and the stories of our trajectories to and through HE, and the impact of class. Attending HE as working class women, along with our achievements, educational credentials and experiences before, during and after HE were what brought us to this group. In this research I will explore and discuss the supports and barriers to our participation in HE and what our stories can contribute to wider discussions of class and education, particularly access and participation.

This research is qualitative, collaborative and participatory (Heron, 1996). It is small but our stories provide a different, and often unheard, perspective (Lynch and O'Neill, 1994). Our stories are rich and meaningful and through both our experiences and our collective reflections on them, this research can contribute to much wider discussions about class and education. Our stories are powerful and listening to what we have to say can be

challenging, emotive and empowering (Charlesworth, 2000). Our collective struggles, challenges, achievements and solidarity were inspiring to us in the group, and hopefully will be for you reading them.

This research is personal to me. I grew up in a working class family, in a working class community and went to the local working class school. Education was always important to me and I was lucky that it was encouraged in my family. When I did undergraduate research my topic was education and disadvantage. As a student I recognised how I was different from other students and how my way of seeing and being in the world did not fit neatly in the world of HE. I saw inequality from a young age and the experience of being seen as less than or 'other' continues to fuel me, both in my personal and professional life.

I made a very conscious decision that I did not want to do research that was just about my story, I wanted to research with other women. I wanted to hear other stories and discuss our experiences. My story is intertwined with other working class women in this research who went to HE. We all have our own unique stories and way of seeing the world, influenced by and related to going to HE as working class women.

As a practitioner this research is relevant to all aspects of my professional identity, particularly being an educator and a researcher, which I reflect on throughout this thesis. It is important that the knowledge and skills I bring to, and develop throughout this research are part of a process of professional development; so not only am I gaining knowledge and understanding but I am working to find ways to critique and improve my practice. As an insider researcher, researching my own experiences, with others (Crean, 2018), this research is relevant to my work in a number of ways. I am teaching in an institution, and on a campus, that has a high number of students from low socio-economic status (SES) backgrounds, working class backgrounds (HEA, 2022). I also teach on programmes which focus on 'care' and have mostly female students, so this research will support me to understand the experiences, the barriers and challenges in particular, of the working class students that I teach. The lack of naming of class in Ireland is also relevant to my professional identity, as my classed experiences, class position, and positioning is concealed. Does the lack of naming of class impact trajectories and positioning in professional roles? Answering the questions posed by this research provides me with

empirical knowledge that is important for my work, and in understanding the systems that impact both my own and the students experiences within it.

Background and choice of research

This research began with reading a chapter from *Formations of class and gender* by Beverley Skeggs (1997). Her research was about a group of young working class women who were studying care in a local college. Skeggs (1997) discusses how we can form our identity in relation to caring and how the "practices of caring become inseparable from the personal dispositions" (p. 56). I could see myself in their stories and how they engaged with education. I began to reflect on my own educational journey and how being a working class woman had impacted it and I started to question my own sense of agency and 'choice' in what I had studied. Had I been 'constrained' by my habitus? (Reay, 2004). My best results in the Leaving Certificate were Maths (pass as we didn't have honours in our school) and Accountancy but I never considered studying them further. Instead I studied Social Care. I recognised myself in Skeggs' (1997) participants - as a working class girl, who had studied care, I had questioned the importance of the theoretical and was drawn to the practical and pragmatic parts of the course. Reading the chapter made me feel disconnected from myself and my experiences and made me question my own journey. I worked with children and families for many years before returning to HE. Going back to education, part time as a mature student opened up possibilities which were not available to my younger self. But this wasn't just about the practicalities of what that meant, the idea of doing something different was outside the frame of what was possible for someone like me when I was younger. I reflected on the limitations I had experienced, and also placed on myself. I wanted to know more about what the supports and barriers were for working class students and the impact of wider social structures on 'choices'. The experience of seeing an academic text about someone like me made me wonder about concepts of class and education, so the beginnings of my research started in being able to hear voices like mine.

In looking for a focus for this research I started to explore the literature and was particularly drawn to biographical and autoethnographic accounts of everyday classed

experiences (Law, 1995; hooks, 1994; Lynch and O'Riordan, 1998; Finnegan, 2012; Ingram and Abrahams, 2016; Friedman, 2016; Reay, 2017; Case, 2017; Crew, 2020; Stone, 2020; Walkerdine, 2023; etc.). Thinking about researching in a way which would centre and value voice and story became important (Couldry, 2010). The accounts which provided insight and nuance in working class lives were both challenging and engaging. I realised that most of the accounts were British or American and there was very limited research based in lived experiences in Ireland, and even fewer from an insider perspective. So voice and story, an Irish perspective and the barriers and challenges of trajectories all became crucial to what I would research.

This question about what I (and others like me) chose to study and what influences it is also important for me as an educator. This is also important in the context of my current position within HE. As a practitioner this research is an opportunity to gain a deeper understanding of the systems, the individual journeys and stories, which can allow me to critique the barriers in the system while also finding ways to support students in my every day work. I don't have data on the social class of the students sitting in my classes but I know from statistics in Ireland that working class women are over represented in the kinds of programmes I teach on (HEA, 2022). This diversity, including class diversity (even though it is not named as this either in my institution or in Irish social policy more broadly), is part of my motivation for doing this job. Recognising the challenges which are part of the trajectories of 'underrepresented' students is part of this research journey, in the hope that this understanding will make me a better and more supportive educator.

Skeggs (1997) discusses how caring courses present a right and wrong way to care that is based on a hierarchy of knowledge inherent in the curriculum, which can devalue the students own knowledge and experience. The hierarchy of knowledge is classed, placing academic knowledge over practical ways of knowing (Heron, 1996). So knowledge, who produces it and from what perspective is also an important element of this research (Lynch and O'Neill, 1994). My practitioner identity was being challenged by the process of preparing one of our courses for accreditation by Coru. "Coru is Ireland's multi-profession health regulator responsible for regulating health and social care professionals" with a register for named professions and fitness to practice components (Coru, 2019). This is linked to the teaching and assessment of 80 "proficiencies" of what a social care worker should know and be proficient at (Coru, 2019). I was struck by the

individualistic nature of the proficiencies and the lack of focus on social justice. Skeggs (1997) discusses the role of "conduct and etiquette manuals…detailing of caring practices enables clear definitions to be constructed between good and bad, right and wrong, normal and deviant (p. 63)" which can generate doubt and insecurities for the women and take away the sense of positive identity linked to their role as caring. So not only was I reflecting on my own journey but I was thinking about how the changing landscape of caring courses in HE was impacting my values as an educator. I was wondering what this meant for current and future students, particularly students who were like me, and what I could learn from this research that could support me to understand and challenge perspectives which did not value particular ways of being and knowing.

So this research is the result of a journey, some of it alone and some of it with others, to answer questions about how our stories were impacted by our class, how it was part of our educational journeys and trajectories. It is also about how our classed experiences are also gendered, and what this can add to debates about how we conceptualise class and inequality.

This research is an examination of the structures that supported or inhibited our journeys and how the macro and the micro intertwined, using our stories to critique the inequality in the systems (Connolly, 2018). It is also an exploration of theory and how the right theory can help us to see the world more clearly, to recognise the barriers as structural and not individual and to find ways to articulate our experiences. The process highlights how, as a collective, we can offer support to tell and hear each other's stories in a real and embodied way.

Importance of voice and story

Throughout this research I prioritised the importance of voice and story. I will discuss this in more detail in later chapters but it is important to state that in this research voice and story are central to helping us to understand the world around us and our place in it. Finding and using our voice and story also allows us to connect with others to think about the world together. Couldry (2010) describes not just the importance of our voice and

story but knowing that they matter. The importance of voice is linked to political perspectives which prioritise particular voices and viewpoints, which highlights "long-entrenched inequalities of representation" within our society (Couldry, 2020, p. 1). Prioritising voice and story allows us to tell our own stories from our own distinct perspective and in the process of telling and listening to build a recognition of the importance of our voices. It also allows us to contribute to discussions about us and our experiences (Lynch and O'Neill, 1994). In this research we learned about ourselves, each other and the impact of wider social structures within the telling and re-telling of our stories. I will explore if using our individual and collective voices helped us to feel less alone in our current class positions.

Theory and me

It is vital that I provide some background to how I relate to and understand theory, as it was an important factor in the what, the how and the why of this thesis. As I have discussed it was reading a chapter from Beverley Skeggs (1997) which planted the seed of this research, and how important it was seeing myself in research. But it was also how interesting and accessible the theory was and how it was integrated into the experiences which the book detailed. This was not always my experience with theory and some negative experiences had disconnected me from the potential and the importance of good theory.

I am interested in theory which is useful and accessible, which helps to explain the world around me (Thompson, 2000). Unfortunately I have not always found theory 'useful' but I have continued to try to engage with it in an open way, in order to understand both the importance of theory and of finding ways to appraise it. I will discuss this in more detail in chapter 3.

Purpose and rationale of this research

This research has three key purposes which I will outline here; to centre the voices and stories of working class women who have succeeded in HE and what our expertise reveals about the experience of class and education in Ireland; To explore my own role as a practitioner working in HE; and to contribute to wider debates about class and education in Ireland, providing a lived experience perspective. It is important to state here that this research is placed within class analysis and as such I will explore the usefulness of class analysis in framing inequality in a way which recognises the structural barriers that are part of everyday experiences for working class people.

Much of the research on class and education in Ireland is quantitative and although it can have a clear focus on inequality, it is missing the everyday experiences of working class students (Finnegan, 2017). Voice and story are at the centre of this research. Using a collaborative research process provided an opportunity to bring a group of women together to co-construct knowledge, based in our classed experiences and centring our voices, as women who are not often heard in academic spaces, in an equal and powerful way. This research is about broadening the conversations about class, to include stories and understanding which is embodied and complex (Reay, 2004; Walkerdine, 2023).

A crucial aspect of this research is that it is practitioner research. I work as an academic in the Irish HE system, but I came to this from working with children and families and in working class communities. As a lecturer, it is important for me to reflect on my position within the system of HE and to understand more explicitly the inequalities in the system and how inequality is challenged or maintained, and my own role in this. This knowledge allows me to critique and challenge taken for granted perspectives about what works and what the barriers are. As practitioner research it is also important for me to build knowledge beyond my own experiences of class and education, which I hope will help me to understand the experiences of the students I encounter, and how to both support them and to challenge the barriers within the systems, both in the classroom, my own institution and the sector. An additional factor for me as a practitioner is to have a language of class which I can use to name the barriers and challenges which exist for working class students in the current system, and to have empirical evidence on this issue.

This research will present a perspective of class which is lived and embodied. The importance of family and early experiences in educational trajectories is positioned within classed experiences (Walkerdine, 2023). It is intended that this research will also contribute to wider discussions of class, and in particular class and education, in an Irish context. Some of the key debates which this research engages with are related to; The positioning of working classness in the educational system; The importance of and role of access and participation policies and practices; Knowledge production and whose voices are heard; Classifications of class.

Loxley, Finnegan and Fleming (2017) discuss the status of access and participation in Ireland, including programmes and political context. This research will contribute to these broader debates about class and access in Irish HE, from the perspective of our group who have gone through it. Our contribution is storied, using our own experiences to interrogate the barriers and supports that are part of the Irish HE system. It is also positioned within, and contributing to, wider debates about class and education.

In this research I utilise key concepts from Pierre Bourdieu's theory, particularly habitus, field, capitals, misrecognition, symbolic violence and habitus clivé. This research is also informed by those who have used and expanded the work of Bourdieu, particularly British feminist Bourdusian scholars including Reay and Skeggs, and other scholars who have made significant contributions to understanding class, adding to the conceptualisation of class and classed everyday experiences. It is intended that this research will provide a perspective that is distinct, voices that are different and, as I have outlined, can contribute to debates about class, inequality, access and education.

It is also important to articulate the centrality of class and class analysis in this research. Although it is often described as not existing in Ireland (Pierse, 2011), and not as useful for thinking about modern individualistic societies, I will examine its usefulness in highlighting structural inequality and how it is lived and experienced, particularly in relation to education and trajectories for working class women (Pierse, 2011; Finnegan, 2012; Reay, 2017; Walkerdine, 2023).

Research questions

The research questions which we explored collaboratively in a group process are:

- What are our experiences and understanding of class?
- What impact did higher education (HE) have on us?
- How has our class position changed and how does this impact our class identity?
- How can we understand the barriers and supports to higher education and access from our perspective and how can I draw from this as an educator/lecturer?

Research process

In our group we used Cooperative/Collaborative Inquiry (CI) which is a process based participatory research method in which a group come together to co-construct knowledge about an agreed topic that they have knowledge and understanding of (Heron, 1996). Our group was six (initially seven) women from working class backgrounds who had gone to and through HE, reflecting on and co-operatively building knowledge about our experiences and how they fit with wider social structures, particularly the education system, in order to contribute to wider scholarship about the experiences of women like us, from our perspective.

I chose CI as I wanted this research to be a collective process, to work in partnership with others to think deeply about our experiences, our opportunities, or lack of, our trajectories, and our journeys to and through HE. I wanted to ensure that I wasn't placing myself as the only 'expert' in the group and that those who took part in the research could gain something from the experience (Heron, 1996). I also wanted to find a way to highlight the voices that we don't hear much in an academic context (Lynch and O'Neill, 1994). This thesis is filled with our stories and I have endeavoured to place our voices at the centre. I hope you will hear us as you read through the thesis, particularly the findings. I am also aware that my voice is the dominant one and this thesis is part of my own story, but that the group have had an impact on my journey and influenced my position and my sense of my place in the world, particularly the world of education.

It is worth noting that this research took place during the Covid global pandemic and was impacted by lockdowns. The research group met between September 2020 and May 2021. The group moved from meeting, socially distanced, in person to online via Teams. I will discuss this in more detail in further chapters.

Contribution and importance of this research

Class has become quite a contested category in modern discussions of inequality, with some perspectives focusing more on individual issues or identities (Finnegan, 2012). This is even more stark in an Irish context where class has often been side-lined or invisible in conversations about inequality, particularly in the context of national and individual identity (Pierse, 2011).

This research is important for a number of reasons, the first being its commitment to class analysis and the use of class theory (Bourdieu) to explore inequality, particularly educational inequality. There is a small body of research on the lived experience of class in Ireland, and even less that comes from an insider perspective. This research adds to both these and wider discussions about class, inequality, access and education, from the perspective of a group of working class women. The importance of looking at class which includes embodied, affective and lived ways of being and knowing have enhanced this research (Walkerdine, 2023; Reay, 2004). I have positioned our voices, stories and perspectives at the centre of this research and they illuminate classed and gendered experiences which provides meaningful information on how policy and practices impact on us, particularly the barriers and challenges.

Current discourse on class reproduction which presents social mobility and education as a way 'out' or 'up' is missing voices like ours (Folkes, 2021). Social mobility can be presented as a positive and easy experience (Friedman, 2016). However research has demonstrated the challenge of going to and through HE for working class students (Law, 1995; hooks, 1994; Lynch and O'Riordan, 1998; Finnegan, 2012; Ingram and Abrahams, 2016; Friedman, 2016; Reay, 2017; Case, 2017; Crew, 2020; Stone, 2020; Walkerdine, 2023; etc.). Being working class in a system built on and prioritising middle classness is

not easy. Our trajectories highlight barriers which made our journeys more difficult, and continue to place us as 'other' in middle class work spaces. The importance of working class values and ways of being was highlighted in our group, positioning us 'outside', with continuing difficulties related to accent, care, or absence of care, and challenging the status quo (Reay, 2017; Crew, 2020).

The methods used were also important in demonstrating the depth of knowledge that is within us and our stories and how by working together we can use our experiences to explore the macro social implications of them (Ledwith, 2005; Connolly, 2018). The importance of voice and story in placing 'worth' on our experiences and expertise was an important aspect of the research process (Couldry, 2010). The methods also demonstrate that research of this kind can be reciprocal, with the participants gaining from the process, along with the researcher. It challenges the idea of the powerful researcher and advocates for a democratic process of co-researchers (Heron, 1996).

There are powerful stories which highlight some key themes in this research. There are insights into how we were positioned within the educational structures, at all levels and how this impacted our journeys through education (Reay, 2017). In our group we had different ways in and through higher education, and different timings, with some of the group going as mature students. Our stories feature adult education, further education and access programmes, highlighting the importance of these routes (Fleming, Loxley and Finnegan, 2017).

There are also rich stories about the experience of class, of accent, place, culture and leisure as markers of class, influenced by media representation, as well as representation within educational structures. These aspects of class placed us as 'other' in the educational system, where we experienced symbolic violence which impacted our sense of belonging (Crew, 2023; Case, 2017). Class and classed positioning was complicated by the lack of language to articulate class, as it often isn't discussed in Ireland (Pierse, 2011). The relational, embodied and affective experiences of class are difficult to understand, or name in this context. They also impact our current class positioning, who is classifying and how classifications of class are made. The role of our families and wider communities in understanding, traversing and inhabiting our past and current positions is felt deeply. Sharing these experiences contributed to the feelings of solidarity

and understanding, care and empathy, that was at the core of our Collaborative Inquiry process (Heron, 1996). I will detail how we built a place of understanding, empowerment and collaboration within and between our stories.

The findings from this research are embedded in both the process of CI and in the experiences we discussed. The education system is built on middle class ways of being and knowing, which can make it challenging to find a sense of belonging for working class students (Lynch and O'Neill, 1994). The enduring nature of early habitus impacts our trajectories, which can lead to habitus clivé, feeling caught between worlds (Bourdieu, 1984). Belonging, or unbelonging, is a major theme of this research, both within the process itself and in our experiences. Our stories revel experiences of misrecognition and symbolic violence in education, particularly in HE. A deficit perspective of the working class led to questions like the one in the title; *Do you mind me askin, but how did you get in here?* Our stories highlight barriers, challenges and inequalities which we experienced as working class women going to HE. They also emphasise the role of HE in our trajectories and how this differentiates us from others who have not had this opportunity, which can also impact class identity.

Chapter outlines

In the next chapter I will position this research in an Irish context, thinking about how we discuss (or not) class and the relationship between class and education, particularly HE in Ireland. This includes examining the access routes and the political context of education in Ireland, past and present. I will outline some of the key ways that class is discussed in theory and articulate the importance of class analysis in theorising and recognising inequality, including how stigma and positioning are impacted by the perspective of those who classify. I will discuss how gendered experiences of class are often not captured in narrow classifications of class and how including lived experience and affective and embodied experiences of class can help us to frame class in a broader more nuanced way.

In chapter 3 I will discuss how I view theory and the concepts and theories which have helped me to see my own world, and that of our group in a clearer way. I will discuss some of the key concepts of Pierre Bourdieu and how they related to class and inform my perspective of class, including habitus, field, capitals- economic, social, cultural and symbolic, misrecognition and symbolic violence and habitus clivé. I also draw on the work of Skeggs, Reay, Crew, etc. to find ways to articulate the experience of being working class and of going to higher education for our group, working class women, including the affective, embodied and lived experience of class.

In chapter 4 I will examine how this research was a collective endeavour and collaborative/ cooperative inquiry (CI) is used to explore experiences together in an open and democratic way. I will present my own positionality and the political intent of this research. This includes researching as an insider and the importance of reflexivity. I will discuss the key beliefs of CI and how they relate to this research. This includes the different ways of viewing knowledge and how they are interrelated and work together to provide a full understanding of a topic. I will discuss the importance of building relationships in a CI process and how working in cycles and coming back together contributes to this.

In chapter 5 I will provide depth on the process of CI in this research. I will outline the group and how it came to be and provide detail on the different aspects of the process. The group process was at the core of the research. I have divided the process into three sections, the first session, the middle sessions and the group analysis, of both the topic and the process itself. CI is an interesting method and I will talk about how it worked from my perspective, not just as a researcher, but as an insider. I will also discuss the importance of collaborative, participatory research in creating new knowledge.

I will then move on to present the findings in Chapters 6 and 7. I have endeavoured to ensure our voices are at the centre of these chapters so have included significant quotes and interactions from our group. I have broken the findings into two separate but interconnected chapters as the process itself had significant meaning for us in the group and I felt it was important to capture this. There are outcomes that are as closely related to the process and its impact on each of us. This is an important aspect of participatory research and for me has significant value as knowledge itself. This includes creating a

space for voice and belonging, which allowed for the expression of emotions and emotional aspects of our stories. I conclude this chapter with our deep reflections on the process.

In the second findings chapter I focus on our stories to, through and after higher education and how our stories capture parts of a classed experience that may resonate with others who have had a similar journey. The key themes which I will discuss are; what are our experiences and understanding of class?; Belonging; Family influence; Education, class and choice and how HE changes us, including thinking about habitus clivé and being caught between worlds. Our perspectives are in the context of classed and gendered experiences.

In the final chapter I will discuss what this all means, and how it can contribute to wider discussions on class and education, from an Irish perspective. I will discuss the importance of voice and story, particularly in the creation of new knowledge that is from the perspective of seldom heard voices. Conceptions of class, which focus on the affective and gendered experience of class are examined. I will return to the way class is classified and how this is limited, but how broader ways of thinking about class can include the challenges of habitus clivé and social mobility. I will return to the importance of using class analysis in this research and its importance in recognising and providing a language to articulate classed inequality and experiences.

I will conclude the thesis by articulating the contribution of this research, both to a broader discussion of class and education, particularly HE, but also more specifically to the small body of research on Irish HE which focus on working class stories and experiences. I will make some recommendations about education and inequality in Ireland, potential further research and conclude by reflecting on the importance of this research for myself as an academic.

Chapter 2 Class, Ireland and education

Introduction

In this chapter I will provide background to the Irish context of this research. Much of the literature I will discuss on class and education, particularly Higher Education (HE) is from outside Ireland (hooks, 1994; Skeggs, 1997; Reay, 2017; Crew, 2020; etc.) and although it has great significance for any discussion of class, and in particular class and education, it is important to ground this research in an Irish context. This is particularly important as there is a significant lack of qualitative research on class and education in Ireland, particularly with experience at the centre, and even less from an insider perspective (Lynch and O'Neill, 1994; O'Neill, 1997; Finnegan, 2012; Crean, 2017; Bissett, 2023).

I will provide a brief overview of some significant socio-historical events in Ireland. I will build on this to discuss the lack of discussion of class which was influenced by the positioning of cultural identity and loyalty to our emerging state over discussions of inequality and class, which was also impacted by the conservative nature of those in power and their connections to the Catholic Church.

The role of educational developments and policy will also be explored, linking them to how class is experienced within the educational structures. I will present this in the context of the current political climate and key policy developments in education in Ireland. I will position this research within wider debates in relation to access in education and education as a tool of social reproduction.

I will then introduce the importance of class analysis, both in broader perspectives on inequality but also for this research. I will link in discussions about how to ensure the classed experiences of women are included in wider class analysis and discuss how gendered and storied experiences of class can be useful in recognising the importance of everyday experiences of class.

Class and Ireland

There has been a denial of the centrality of class inequality in Ireland which is historic as well as current (Finnegan, 2012; Pierse, 2011). In this section I will present some key discussions about class in Ireland, starting with colonialism and the founding of the state, links with and differences from the UK. I will outline how the conservative nature of those at the centre of the newly formed state, the role of the catholic church and the move from being a colonised country to developing a national identity ensured class was side-lined by those with power. I will discuss some important accounts of class in Ireland and what they tell us about how class was, or is, lived in everyday experiences.

In Ireland we often describe class as a British phenomenon, and see ourselves as different and distinct from this idea of a classed society, despite our shared history (Pierse, 2011). Pierse (2021) discusses the difficulties of navigating class in an Irish context, including the different language used to describe class in different contexts and places. The "complex history of industrialisation, colonisation, emigration and partition" (Pierse, 2021, p. 273) provides different foundations for class than our nearest neighbours, meaning we need to explore class in an Irish context, while also acknowledging the shared history. As a former colonised country we want to distance ourselves from particular aspects of Britishness, including class. This was also influenced by the conservative nature of those in power.

Therefore conceptualising class in Ireland needs to acknowledge the links, the intricacies and differences in Irish history and culture, particularly as a former British colony. Our cultural identity as a country is linked to our need to be different from our former colonisers and seeing ourselves as classless is one aspect of this. However, there are continuities across contexts, but also direct influence as we were under the governance of the UK government and part of the discourse on British historical concepts of class as a result. Skeggs (2004) discusses the British systems, but the common origins of our systems makes her assertions relevant in an Irish historical context. Skeggs (2004) explores a number of key historical concepts and presentations of class in England, which has some significance for thinking about class in Ireland as a country colonised by Britain during this time. The presentation of the working classes, including Irish working class,

as less moral, less intelligent and more hedonistic have allowed them to be presented only from the perspective of those 'above' (Skeggs, 2004). Despite important social, economic and political differences in Ireland there was still a moral positioning of class, with deserving and undeserving poor, those with good or questionable 'morals'. Skeggs (2004) asserts that "exclusions had to be made so the good self could be demarcated and known" (p. 22). This separated those with moral authority (the middle-class) from those inscribed with ideas of "interesting immorality, having no convertible exchange-value, unless through respectability" (p.22) (the working-class). Skeggs (2004) argues that the "possessive individual developed from the perspective of a small elite group" (of men) who were able to use their privilege to consolidate their views and authority through law and other institutions (including religion), into what and who could be viewed as moral, proper and good. This extended to become associated with the middle class, and was only possible by differentiating themselves from the working-classes (Skeggs, 2004).

In her historical overview Skeggs (2004) makes the case that knowledge and education were tools that were used to legitimate the position of the "possessive individual' at the centre of a moral society. Skeggs (2004) argues that systems of knowledge are legitimated and the categories created are "not neutral terms, but are rather the result of historical struggle" (p. 27) and that "certain historical legacies are fitted into the present, carrying with them ideas about moral and economic value" (p. 28). These narratives are linked to the 'market' and capitalism. Much of these narratives still remain in relation to class relations in modern societies, and the presentation of working class, and more pointedly the precariat/ underclass as less than or 'other'.

Comparative research by Finnegan and Merrill (2017) which explored the experiences of working class students in higher education (HE) in England and Ireland describe our "tangled common past, many cultural connections and have a broadly similar educational systems" (p. 307) despite differences in our countries and societies. Class inequality was evident in both countries and they assert that there are similar patterns in HE participation, both in numbers and in the type of institution attended and programme studied. They acknowledge the difference in class identity which they link to "the very different nature of class formation in both states" which includes "class pride appears more commonly in England" (Finnegan and Merrill, 2017, p. 317).

The historical context of Ireland at the time of independence is useful to included here. There was an uprising in Ireland in 1916, which was linked to workers movements and one of the biggest labour conflicts in 1913. One of the socialist leaders James Connolly was executed, along with fifteen other leaders. Ireland became an independent state in 1922 after the Irish War of Independence. A Civil War, 1922-23, followed which divided political allegiances in the newly formed Free State. We adopted a new constitution in 1937 and were officially declared a Republic in 1949. In 1922 when Ireland became a free state it was one of the poorest regions in Europe, with poor housing and living conditions, particularly in tenements in the cities. There were "appalling social conditions" which included "118,000 working class Dubliners were crammed into just over 5,000 tenement houses"(Pierse, 2011, p. 13). Pierse (2011) outlines the changing nature of Ireland after independence, the increasing population and rapid urbanisation which contributed to the changing view of class in Ireland. More people were moving to cities, particularly Dublin, to work and emigration was a feature of Irish experience, particularly in rural Ireland, which contributed to an urban- rural divide (Pierse, 2011).

As an emerging state in the 1920s and 30s there was an emphasis on building a national identity and sense of loyalty to the new independent state (Pierse, 2011), which was prioritised over inequalities and class issues. Finnegan (2012) argues that "following independence in 1922 the organised working class, after a period of growth and militancy, became once again invisible" and the perspectives of "wealthy farmers, the middle classes and the church, through appeals to religion and nation" were prioritised (p. 142). The importance of bringing the country together after a civil war was used by politicians, with the political narrative which saw "the major political parties consequently eager to downplay social inequalities and to cement loyalty to the fledgling state" (Pierse, 2011, p. 14). Pierse (2011) discusses the decline in union membership after independence, as issues of class were marginalised and "The politics of decolonisation led to a calcification of class conflict" (Pierse, 2011, p. 15). Finnegan (2012) asserts that "class formation is best understood as a layered historical process based on large scale socio-economic change which is defined, shaped and understood through classification struggles in politics, everyday life and the academy" (p. 85).

Harford, Fleming and Hyland (2023) describe the leaders of the newly free Ireland as "fundamentally middle class and conservative in outlook" (p. 2). They facilitated an

education system that was controlled by the church and funded by the state. Harford *et al*. (2023) describe an education system where the "Church State nexus, rooted in a male, middle-class, conservative world view, fostered an education system in its own likeness, privileging a minority and reinforcing hegemonic norms and ideals" (p. 4).

The Catholic church also played a role in wanting to keep socialism at bay and due to the power of the church in Ireland there was significant social pressure to conform. The church and state worked together to supress any move towards socialism (Pierse, 2011). The significant role the Catholic church played in the education system ensured that this message was embedded at a young age. Finnegan (2012) asserts that "the state-church nexus is fundamental to understanding Irish society and the Irish working class experience in the years following independence" (p. 143). Pierse (2011) argues that the

> power of the Catholicism, aligned with capitalism, inveigling itself strategically into every institution and power block of the new state, was the principal reason why working-class consciousness was sublimated into more moderate forms (p. 15).

The enduring role of the Catholic church in education at all levels is evident in statistics from the Department of Education and Skills (2019) which reported that almost 90% of primary schools had a Catholic ethos, demonstrating the long term effect of the Catholic church's involvement in socialisation within education, which began in the formation of the new state (DES 2019).

The current, and past, reluctance to admit that class exists in Irish society is embedded not just in our history but in the lack of working class voices. Pierse (2011) traces some of the writing on class in Ireland and concludes that there is very limited literature on this topic, apart from some Labour history and a small number of local history texts. There has been some working class accounts in literature, Brendan Behan, Sean O' Casey through to Roddy Doyle, or Paula Meehan but they are in the minority. This lack of working class stories can be linked to the idea that social class did not exist, or was not named, in Ireland. Pierse (2011) also explores the perception that is presented, of Ireland as a mostly middle class society, with a 'underclass' of long term unemployed and those in marginalised groups, including those in addiction and criminality. Finnegan (2012) discusses the inadequate ways we frame and discuss class in Ireland. He asserts that being working class is associated with deficit and how classifications "gloss over the causes of

class inequality and offer no space either to describe what is positive about working class Ireland or to articulate the 'injuries of class'" (p. 351).

Although there has been significant research on class in Ireland most of it is quantitative (HEA; ESRI; CSO; etc). There is limited research on the lived experience of class in Ireland. I am particularly interested in this small body of work that illuminates the everyday experiences of class. The work of Silverman 2001; Finnegan, 2012; Bissett, 2023; Lynch and O'Riordan, 1998; O'Neill, 1992; Crean, 2018 suggests that class is often hidden or denied. They articulate aspects of class and class positioning which are symbolic as well as material and how experiences of class inequality related to agency, worth and status. In this section I will present a number of accounts of class which are important in understanding class as lived and storied.

In her ethnography of Thomastown in Kilkenny, Silverman (2001) discusses how people in her research were categorised, and self-categorised, by job role and respectability, or lack of, linked to that role. This influenced the language used to describe class in the community and was influenced by social relations and power structures, both formal and informal. She describes "the structural density of local social relations, the overlapping of multiple local meanings, and thus the potential ambiguities and conflicts that inhere in local life" (Silverman, 2001, p. 493). She describes the power structures, at times presenting as unified but with real differences influenced by "both past and current experience" (Silverman, 2001, p. 493). Status was an important factor in class relations and was tied up with who was deserving of respect and charity. The local dimensions of power, although unspoken, highlighted class and classification linked to status and employment. People learned to understand their place in the social structures, underpinned by a deference to those with power and status. This made it difficult to organise. The Irish historical context, is present in current social relations and structures, both in her study and in wider Irish society, and is an important factor in how we name and view class in Ireland.

O'Neill (1992) provides an account of the working class community of Kilmount, women's experiences and the sense of solidarity, in the context of much hardship and challenge. She provides not only an insight into the lives of the women, but a critique of the social structures which work to make their lives more difficult, including education,

health and social welfare services. Bissett (2023) describes "the relationship between the physical-practical-social-economic-historical-affective world one inhabits and how one lives is crucial."(p. ix). In his ethnography of 'Bridgetown', a social housing estate in Dublin he explores the everyday lives of some of the working class people who live there and how the structures of modern Ireland impact them. He articulates stories of foodbanks, insecure work and care, and of the "relationship between class and place"(Bissett, 2023, p. ix). The women in his research "are impassioned beings with deep commitments and investments of love and care and strong views on virtue and justice"(p. 113) who prioritise care and relationships in their lives. Bissett (2023) discusses how classifications of class move from being relational to being "solely a gradational category" (p. 6) which fails to recognise the importance of everyday experiences which impact classed lives. They assert "it's not where you live, it's how you live" as a way of reclaiming agency over their lives. The similarities in many of the everyday experiences across two different estates and thirty years highlights the importance of both naming and critiquing class inequality, and also working to challenge the structures which see the kinds of experiences as inevitable, and individualised. This thesis is focused on education and its role within these wider social structures.

My own experience of class in Ireland is growing up in Crumlin, a working class Dublin suburb in the 1970s-90s. Life was impacted by large scale unemployment in the 1980s which affected disadvantaged and neglected communities, including my own. At the same time the heroin crisis was disproportionately affecting working class communities (Loughran and McCann, 2006). I have strong memories of this time, growing up in Crumlin. There was significant poverty and social issues. There was also a sense of solidarity and community in challenging the drugs issue, in organising community weeks and street festivals. There was a definite sense of being working class for me. I watched my parents become involved in community initiatives. I saw meetings happen in our house and I listened to the discussions about inequality and class. I went to the youth club that my parents were involved in setting up, to provide positive experiences for young people in Crumlin. Their activism was about providing alternatives to drug use. This informed my view of being working class as positive and connected, to solidarity and challenging inequality.

However, Pierse (2011) discusses the links between class prejudice and class shame in the context of "unquestioningly accept this kind of snobbery" (Pierse, 2011, p. 3), in relation to derogatory comments and views about working classness, particularly voices and accents. I will discuss class and stigma in more detail later in this chapter. In Ireland accent is a significant marker of class, and in our group the Dublin working class accent was discussed throughout the process. The wrong type of accent is frowned upon, and opens you up to experiences of symbolic violence. In my primary school we did speech and drama, which looking back was probably more about changing our accents that any kind of dramatic pursuit. Some people I went to school with worked very hard to get rid of their working class Dublin accent, to acquire a more 'acceptable' accent.

In 2022 the Irish State turned 100, but our history as a colonised country has a significant influence on how we both view and name class in Ireland. It is a complex topic, tied up with ideas of Irishness and differentiating ourselves from British concepts of class. This, alongside the significant role of the Catholic church has impacted our ability to discuss class, which can also leave us inarticulate to tell our stories and name our experiences in the context of class. I will return to the importance of having language to articulate our experiences, particularly when we don't acknowledge class as a society, in the findings chapters.

Class and Education in Ireland

As I have discussed the Irish education system was funded by the state but provided by religious orders, predominately the Catholic church. Changes in the provision of education included the introduction of free secondary education in 1967, which provided some opportunity for working class children to continue in their education. The secondary school I went to was opened under this scheme. Secondary education was fee paying before this (Harford *et al*., 2023), leading to class inequality as only those who could pay continued in education. In the 1960s and 70s legislation was introduced which provided grants for attendance at higher education programmes, initially covering degree level programmes but expanded to cover higher certificate and diploma courses too (Oireachteas.ie). This included an expansion of places with the establishment of Regional

Technical Colleges (RTC), which later became Institutes of Technology and more recently most have merged to become Technological Universities.

Pierse (2011) argues that the education system in Ireland is based on middle class values and preparing students for 'white collar' jobs. He contends that a key aspect of the Irish education system is that it "fails to reflect the realities of students' lives is at the heart of broader class inequalities" (p. 24). There is a lack of representation both in those working in the education system and in the choice of 'culture' which is presented as legitimate. O'Neill (1992) describes the disconnect between schools and working class experiences, and the lack of representation of working class culture and lifestyle in the curriculum, which led to "teachers did not understand working class people" (p. 95). Most teachers in Ireland are middle class and Keane and Heinz (2015) also noted that the numbers of working class students in teacher education was lower here than other parts of the world, highlighting the lack of class diversity in our education system. This is something that I will return to in the findings as it was significant in our group, particularly when we heard teachers 'like us', which made us feel '*real*'.

Finnegan (2012) conducted extensive biographical research with students to think about class and education in Ireland. His research highlights not only the economic and cultural aspects of class but also the affective elements of class which contribute to an individual's sense of 'worth'. He asserts that "the complex relationship between access to cultural and economic resources and people's inner conversation about their worth and capability is right at the heart of what class means to many people in modern Ireland" (Finnegan, 2012, p. 221). The students accounts of their decision to go to HE related to factors which included altering their trajectories, particularly in relation to work, but also to gain respect, dignity and autonomy. They saw higher education as a route to choice and agency over their lives.

I want to briefly mention here the role of formal academic language and research on how class, and particularly the working class are presented and viewed. Much of the literature on class is formal, stuffy and an interpretation, mostly from the outside, of lives and culture which are not known or understood in a lived way by most of the researchers. Lynch and O'Neill (1994) highlight the lack of working class voices in research and how "interpretations are still made by 'experts' on relatively powerless research subjects" (p.

308). Working classness is interpreted by outsiders who "interpret your world and to speak on your behalf" (Lynch and O'Neill, 1994, p. 309). This can help to maintain the status quo in what is viewed as legitimate culture and legitimate knowledge. The link between who the knowledge creators are and the classed perspective of much formal academic knowledge is an important one which I will discuss further in later chapters as it had a significant influence on this research, both the topic and the methods. This is closely linked to what kind of knowledge, and whose knowledge is given value. It also frames some of the discussions and themes of this research exploring voice and story- Whose voices are heard and represented, who are the researchers and who produces the knowledge about working class experiences?

Higher Education and Access

In this section I will outline some key programmes for access in Irish higher education (HE) and discuss their limitations for challenging inequality. The political context of inequality in education and in society more broadly is an important aspect of access which I will explore. I will also discuss the relevance of this research to wider discussions on access in Ireland. I will conclude by positioning myself as someone who went through an access route and is now a lecturer in HE and what this means for me as an educator.

Access in Ireland

The Higher Education Authority (HEA) describe access as a way;

> to ensure that the student body entering, participating in and completing higher education at all levels reflects the diversity and social mix of Ireland's population (HEA, 2022, p. 51).

In Ireland there are a number of programmes which aim to 'tackle educational disadvantage' which are positioned within the educational structures. The main programmes which I will outline are Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS) and the National Access Plan (NAP) which both target specific groups with additional support, with the aim of higher participation rates for these students in higher education.

Loxley, Finnegan and Fleming (2017) detail a number of other access routes into HE, including foundation programmes in individual HEIs; Further Education access programmes; Higher education access route (HEAR) and Disability access route to education (DARE) programmes; Mature student entry; and Further education (p. 90). I will explore the importance of alternative routes for our group in later chapters.

The Department of Education DEIS (Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools) programme seeks to address the imbalance between progression rates to higher education. It is the "Department of Education and Skills policy instrument to address educational disadvantage" in Ireland (DES, 2019) and is implemented at both primary and secondary level. The criteria for being designated a DEIS school is based on the socioeconomic status of parents. Additional resources and funding are provided, which can include Home-School-Community liaison teacher, school books scheme and lower teacher-pupil ratios. Schools who meet the criteria are designated DEIS and the list of schools is published by the Department of Education.

Attending a DEIS school can provide opportunities to go to access programmes or access a place in HE on the Higher Education Access Route (HEAR) scheme. The additional supports are intended to support students in achieving in education. However, Ryan (2019) asserts that being a DEIS school can be stigmatising and create an even more unequal system, where only the most disadvantaged attend these schools. Harford *et al.*(2023) critique aspects of Irish education policy including the DEIS programme by asserting that it is not ambitious enough and that "the enduring mind-set that educational disadvantage is an issue for schools alone with a lack of recognition and response at a policy level of its fundamental, deep-seated relationship with wider economic inequalities across Irish society" (p. 13). I will return to the positioning of education and access within a wider social and political context later in this section.

The current National Access Plan (NAP) 2022-28 is the fourth one and states that "people should have equity of access to education independent of their socioeconomic background, ethnicity, gender, geographical location, disability or other circumstances" (HEA, 2022, p. 20). It acknowledges barriers and challenges for particular students in accessing HE and sets targets for diversifying the student population. The plan includes key indicators and the importance of "measuring performance" including "qualitative

indicators" (HEA, 2022, p. 24). One of the priority groups identified is Socio-Economic Status(SES). The NAP articulates a focus on equity of access and a recognition that some groups are over-represented in HE, while others are significantly underrepresented. It also asserts that success is not just about getting into HE but having the opportunity to have "full participation and eventual success" (HEA, 2022, p. 21). The recognition of class (named as SES) highlights the inequality in the system and the importance of education in life chances. There has been significant and ongoing research by the ESRI, which began in the 1970's and indicates enduring class inequalities (ESRI, 2019). The access plan describes "equity in education means ensuring that every student has an equal opportunity to achieve their potential and that any social or economic constraints that might prevent a student from having equal opportunities are mitigated" (HEA, 2022, p. 17), which recognises the need to provide additional support to try to reduce the multiple disadvantages experienced by some students.

Access and widening participation plans are one of the few places where class inequality is made visible in Irish education policy (Finnegan, 2017). It acknowledges the barriers to HE for working class students, which is a core part of this research. Naming both "social and economic constraints" (HEA, 2022, p. 17) is a recognition that inequality in the education system involves factors wider than finances. This research will explore the importance of access routes but also whether it ameliorated the significant barriers for us as working class women attending HE. It is important to discuss access and to position it within this research as it is part of our stories, and wider educational policy, which I will discuss in later chapters.

Access is located within a broader social and political context. Fleming, Loxley and Finnegan (2017) discuss how access is *presented* as a positive aspect of HE which "strengthens social cohesion, lessens inequality" (p. 1) as well as meeting the needs of the economy by providing educated workers, and is seen as a way of "creating a fair and truly modern society" (p. 2). They discuss the role of education, the expansion of HE and access in the context of the economy and globalisation, including the influence of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and the European Union (EU). In order to attract investment into the country we needed 'human capital', an educated workforce for a knowledge-based economy (Fleming *et al*., 2017). This highlights the prominence of the ideology of neoliberalism in education and how it

impacts the motivation and limits of access policy. Neoliberalism is an ideology that places the needs of the market in a priority position. Monbiot (2016) describes neoliberalism as

> Neoliberalism sees competition as the defining characteristic of human relations. It redefines citizens as consumers, whose democratic choices are best exercised by buying and selling, a process that rewards merit and punishes inefficiency. It maintains that "the market" delivers benefits that could never be achieved by planning.

The needs of society become secondary to the needs of the economy (Lynch, Grummell and Devine, 2012). Harford *et al.* (2023) explore the role of neoliberalism in education policy in Ireland and assert that the "over-riding motivation was economic, rather than social" (p. 13). This is the context of education and access in Ireland. The aim is to provide enough suitably qualified workers, rather than to challenge the unequal systems. Finnegan (2017) acknowledges that with the expansion of HE there is an increase in the numbers of working class students going to HE in Ireland. However, although those who make it to and through HE from working class backgrounds may have some individual success, it is argued that there is little change in the structures and systems, either in education or wider society (Archer *et al.*, 2002).

Access can fulfil different needs, it can provide a way in to the current system or it can aim to provide structural change to provide access for all (Loxley *et al.*, 2017). They describe the current system as a deficit model which seeks to re-socialise students so they can function within the system "not only academically but also existentially and culturally" (p. 50). Education policy has a role in maintaining a "stratified and segregated education sector" (Ryan, 2019, p. 87) which supports a view of working class students as deficient and inferior, and allows the system to be presented as meritocratic. The deficit is with the individual and not the system, and it "detracts from analysis of inequalities" (Archer *et al.*, 2002, p. 195). Loxley *et al.* (2017) argue that one perspective on access is that is a way to acknowledge deeper inequalities in our society without dealing with them. Providing access keeps the problem within the education system and fails to address inequalities in the wider structures. The need for access is "symbolic, as well as symptomatic, of more entrenched structural problems regarding the unequal distribution of educational life chances more generally" (Loxley *et al.*, 2017, p. 91).

The positioning of access and widening participation programmes in the context of wider social policy is illuminating, as it highlights the deficit perspective of class, which is evident in education. Lynch and O'Riordan (1998) describe the role of the state in "constantly negotiating and recreating the conditions for the operation of unequal relations in education" including wider "policies on wealth, income, welfare, taxation, education, health, etc., which have a direct bearing on the opportunities and constraints operating for students in the educational site" (p. 451). Economic, cultural and the education system are all barriers for working class students, which lead to disadvantage in education (Lynch and O'Riordan, 1998). However, education is also presented as the answer to social inequalities, a way for individuals to become socially mobile (Folkes, 2021).

It is also important to place this discussion in the context of how class is lived and experienced, particularly, as I have discussed, with the significant influence of neo-liberalism on education policy (Loxley *et al*., 2017). Education and access can play a role in making changes but unless this is part of a wider understanding and drive to challenge and dismantle wider inequalities and barriers for working class people then it is limited in its reach, focused on the individual rather than the structures (Thompson, 2000).

Broader discussions of access and widening participation, which are relevant to this research are seeped in the idea that working classness is of less value than middle classness and that changing class is positive for working class students (Archer *et al*., Reay, 2004; 2002; Fleming *et al*., 2017). Fleming *et al*. (2017) describe access as a number of programmes and policies which target "the so-called non-traditional student"(p. 11) highlighting the complexity of labels which begin with a deficit perspective and a positioning of access as a way to 'fix' the students by providing an opportunity to attend HE. Hutchings, Leathwood and Ross (2002) describe access as a way to "change or 'raise' working class aspirations and attainment" (p. 195) and the impact of "institutional cultures" on working class students experiences of HE (p. 197). These perspectives begin to highlight the complexity of class positioning and access to HE which is a core part of this thesis. Did access play a role in our HE journeys? As 'non-traditional' students how did the label of working class or 'disadvantaged' impact our experiences? What was the impact of 'institutional cultures' on our experiences?

The role education can play in changing trajectories in relation to class is something I will explore later in this thesis, but as I believe class is wider than simple economic measures I will also explore it's impact, or not, on wider aspects of class experience and inequality. DEIS and other access routes primarily prioritise financial circumstances which impact opportunities within the education system. The broader aspects of the lived experience of class, particularly within the middle class education systems are often absent from discussions. This limited view of class, education and access to HE ignores the more complex analysis of class, (hooks 1994; Skeggs 1997; Reay 1997, 2017; Finnegan 2017), which includes multiple concepts of embodied and situated social experiences grounded in a classed experience of Irish society. Loveday (2015) asserts that "while class undoubtedly operates at the level of economic, to limit the analysis of class to purely objective measures neglects the complexity and lived experience of social class" (p. 571). Lynch and O'Riordan (1998) describe economic, social and cultural barriers, and educational constraints and how working class ways of being are not valued in either education or Irish society more broadly. The importance of capitals, habitus and field are important to consider if we want to look at classed experiences of education from a broader perspective, which recognises the complexity of lived experience. I will discuss these Bourdieusian concepts in more detail in the next chapter.

This argument is part of a broader discussion of social reproduction and how social mobility is linked to viewing those outside the norm as deficient and needing to become middle class. Lynch and O'Riordan (1998) discuss the perspectives of teachers who saw a "cultural climate which was not conductive to educational success" as emanating from the students and not the teachers (p. 460) and recognising cultural differences between themselves and the working class students. It is part of Lovedays (2015) assertion that there is an expectation that working class students be 'grateful' for the opportunity in a way that is not expected of middle class students. Going to HE and gaining an educational qualification is an individual pursuit which has individual benefits. It can provide opportunities to work in professional/ middle class jobs, which reinforces the individual benefit of access, rather than it having a role in social justice and tackling inequality more broadly. This is important to recognise as education is presented as the solution to inequality, even though research has "repeatedly highlighted the existence of enduring class inequalities in HE" (Finnegan, 2017, p. 139).

The literature I have cited above makes the case that access routes fail to acknowledge broader experiences of inequality. Finnegan (2017) asserts that focusing on access and education "directs our attention to the secondary effects of class inequality rather than towards the sources of inequality" (p. 148). In this research I examine how deep inequalities are lived every day in working class communities, and access programmes and routes are limited in their understanding or ability to respond to the complexities of working class identity in the middle class world of HE.

The differences in culture between working class students and middle class institutions is highlighted by O'Sullivan, Byrne, Robson and Winters (2019) when they describe the importance of "bridging capital" for students on access programmes (p. 42). The gap between our experiences and the middle class world of HE, as I have already mentioned is broader than just financial, and the barriers related to cultural and social capitals can be particularly challenging. Loxley *et al*. (2017) also discuss the positioning of working class students as deficient, and needing to learn the ways of the middle class educational structures in order to succeed in HE.

Despite investment in DEIS and access programmes there is still a significant gap in the percentages of students from working class backgrounds going to HE, compared to those from middle class backgrounds (Finnegan, 2017), with targets from the last access plan not being reached (HEA, 2022). The HEA publishes yearly reports outlining the class background of students (using SES) and where and what they study (HEA, 2022). They report that 19% of the student population are from affluent backgrounds, while 10% are disadvantaged. In their report published in February 2022 the most disadvantaged students are more likely to attend LYIT (Letterkenny IT, now part of Atlantic TU) or TU Dublin Tallaght campus, while the most affluent students are most likely to attend Trinity college, Royal College of Surgeons or Institute of Art Design and Technology (HEA, 2022). 36% of Trinity college students are from affluent backgrounds, while only 6% are from disadvantaged, while Letterkenny IT has 3% from affluent backgrounds and 25% from disadvantaged. Figures from 2020 showed that "just 4% of medical enrolments are from disadvantaged areas" and 19% of students studying 'childcare and youth' come from disadvantaged areas (HEA, 2020), so not only is there disparity in the institutions attended but also the type of programmes. In relation to access there are some interesting findings. 59% of disadvantaged students enter through the Leaving Cert (LC), which means that

41% enter through other routes, compared to 76% LC and 24% other routes for affluent students (HEA, 2022). This emphasises importance of these alternative routes for working class students. Almost 40% of undergraduate students receive "some level of funding" through the students grant scheme (Broderick and Smith, 2022, p. 38) highlighting the importance of financial support.

These figures paint a stark picture of an unequal system, with unequal opportunities. There has been an increase in working class students attending HE (Finnegan, 2017). However, the ambitious targets of the NAP are not being realised within the current structures and with current access routes. The statistics provide important information about how the systems are working, or not, for working class students. In this research I will explore the stories of the barriers and challenges of going to HE, even with access routes and what our experiences and expertise can contribute to ongoing discussions on access in Ireland.

There is limited research which explores the lived experiences of working class students in HE, in an Irish context (Ryan, 2019; Finnegan and Merill, 2017; Finnegan 2012, 2017; Lynch and O'Riordan, 1998). Looking beyond quantitative measures they found that there were additional responsibilities for working class students, including part time jobs and caring responsibilities, which impacted their opportunity to engage in both academic and non-academic aspects of HE. Having to overcome barriers and inequalities "was a common theme…and largely absent in the interviews with the middle-class students in Ireland" (Finnegan and Merrill, 2017, p. 314). "Difficulties and domination" (Finnegan and Merrill, 2017, p. 315) were highlighted by working class students, while experiences related to strengths of working classness were discussed less often. Their responses were shaped by inequalities experienced and the energy needed to succeed in an institution that was not designed for them, and often devalued their knowledge and cultural experiences, by the prioritising of middle class values and experiences. These kinds of experiences are not captured by quantitative measures of access.

The focus on quantifiable classifications can "have a direct role in diffusing a meritocratic and individualistic notion of education and equality" (Finnegan, 2012, p. 351) and gaining academic qualifications and middle classness are seen as interconnected, with many of the research participants suggesting "you cannot be educated and working class" (p. 350).

I will return to explore the connection between HE and being middle class both in the findings and in the discussion to explore it further.

This is important in relation to the methods used to measure the NAP. Although it is useful and necessary to have quantitative measures I would argue that it is difficult to capture the stories and the depth of experiences without using in-depth qualitative research methods. Questionnaires will only capture a glimpse. If we really want to understand why some groups are underrepresented there needs to be opportunities to hear and listen to stories, both of those who did go to HE and those who didn't. Finnegan (2017) asserts that "we know very little about how working-class students view and value education" (p. 149) because of the lack of research on everyday experiences. This kind of research could provide invaluable insight into what is happening both in our society and in our education system which leads to the lack of diversity in HE.

The significant research which provides a quantitative analysis of educational inequality in Ireland and "Clancy's research has helped to ensure that class inequality is very high on the agenda in HE policy" but an emphasis on one type of research is "problematic" (Finnegan, 2017, p. 147). Decisions about how to 'measure' the experience of HE for marginalised groups can lead to "socially constructed silence" (Welton, 1995, p. 153 as cited in Fleming, Loxley and Finnegan, 2017, p. 41). On the basis of my research I am convinced that looking beyond socioeconomic status and drawing on Bourdieusian concepts including capitals, culture, field and habitus, can provide a broader perspective based in the experiences of working class students (Reay, 2017). Investment in meaningful, qualitative and participatory research in Ireland can provide answers to why some groups see HE as natural, while for others it is a significant choice, in an Irish context. As I have discussed a deficit perspective of working class students is presented from a particular viewpoint. It can present a picture of classed experiences as black and white, with clear boundaries, but my perspective is that, for the most part, life is lived in the grey, in the intangible, embodied, messy and complex world of relationships to each other and to structures and power. When we try to simplify it to one dimensional rather than complex interactions we only see a partial picture, and it is important that research reflects the complexity.

Pierse (2011) asserts that class "has a culture, a history, a sense of its own existence, which renders theoretical debates about whether class exists or not as irrelevant" (p. 9). This is important in an Irish context when the denial of class is commonplace. One of the motivations for conducting this research is the firm conviction that for access policies to make real change they need to be based on an understanding of the complex experiences of class, particularly within the structures of the education system. Finnegan (2017) asserts that "this lived, embodied experience of restriction and subordination in society, in its economic, cultural, symbolic and even moral dimensions has to be acknowledged within access and participation initiatives and policies" (p. 155). The stories in this research demonstrate significant challenges for working class women getting to and through HE, and beyond. Merrill *et al.* (2020) assert that "there is an assumption, in policy but also more widely, that once working-class students enter university inequalities disappear" (p. 173). In later chapters I will discuss whether going to HE put us on a level field, and how aspects of our stories are hard to hear as they paint a perspective of education which is alien to those who have not needed to navigate the challenges we did. However I believe that it is important that we tell our stories, to each other and to others, and to challenge policy makers, and those with the power to make changes in the unequal systems, to recognise their role in maintaining them.

Access, depending on your perspective, serves a number of different functions; servicing the neo-liberal economy by providing human capital stock; proving a way in and through without changing the system; challenging the structural inequalities that make HE an easier journey for some and working to change it to create a more equitable system as part of a more just society. I think that there are different agendas that have informed the current access plan but that the desire for structural change is not evident (Loxley *et al.*, 2017). The current political and policy context is still focused on the economic value of education, for the individual but more especially for the economy. However as more working class students go to and through HE and we find ways to share our stories there is potential for the power in our multiple stories to become difficult to ignore, but only if there are channels for our voices to be heard, by each other and in wider social structures.

Access to higher education (HE) is an important part of this research because as a group of working class women we are underrepresented in HE and our expertise provides a framing of access from a different perspective. This research used a collaborative/co-

operative inquiry were as a group of working class women we examined our experiences of education, and access to, and engagement in HE was central to our discussions. We discussed our trajectories, the access routes that were important for us including adult education, further education and university access programmes. As three of the group work in education, and two in community development, we also discussed the ongoing barriers and challenges for students now. The importance of class and classed identities for us working, and students attending, remains within a system which values middle class ways of being and knowing, and continues to position working classness as deficient. As a practitioner working in this system this is particularly relevant to me. Recognising the barriers but being inside the system is an ongoing challenge and one which I could explore openly in the group process. The importance of finding others who also see the world as unequal is important in finding a voice to challenge these inequalities. In the findings and discussion I will explore the role of access routes in our trajectories, and the impact of HE on our class positioning. Our stories are part of the Irish experience of access and the knowledge we co-created can inform the broader debates on this topic, from a storied, qualitative and insider perspective.

I undertook this research as a lecturer to explore the topic itself but also to reflect on my role in HE. Access and widening participation, and engaging with working class students is important for me as an educator. It is particularly relevant as the institution where I work, and our campus in particular, has a high proportion of students from 'disadvantaged' backgrounds (HEA, 2022). I also teach on caring programmes which have higher numbers of working class students (HEA, 2022). So, not only is access part of my own story, it is part of the stories and experiences of many of the students at my institution, and my knowledge and understanding of both the policy and practice of access can support me to understand the barriers and challenges in order to try to find ways to recognise, and challenge them for, and with, the students I work with. This has become particularly important as we are now a TU and there are changing structures and priorities, which may impact our role in access for working class students, as well as the class backgrounds of future staff. This research is a reminder of the challenges that are part of everyday experiences as a working class student in HE and is important knowledge for me as a practitioner.

Ongoing debates about access and widening participation are also important in the context of this research. Our group all succeeded in HE despite the barriers. All but one of us used an alternative route to HE, which was crucial to finding a way into HE. In the findings I will discuss the challenges in everyday experiences while attending HE and discuss how these additional barriers are part of our stories, and those of many working class students. I will discuss this in relation to voice and story and the importance of having research which prioritises story as a way of understanding the impact of access and participation, within the current system, on working class students. In the findings I will return to the importance of not being a lone voice in challenging inequality in the system and the dilemma of being inside an unequal system.

Perspectives on class

I will begin this section by exploring broad perspectives of class and how class has moved from being central to discussions on inequality to being less visible from the end of the 20th century. Jones (2011) describes how the working class went from being 'salt of the earth' to 'scum', while in the UK some politicians and media were proclaiming that everyone is 'middle class now' and it is a 'classless society' (BBC, 2017). Atkinson (2015) discusses changes in employment patterns, including mass unemployment in the 1980's which, as class had been linked with employment, saw those without jobs or education as outside of class structures, as 'underclass'. This allowed some commentators to begin to discuss the demise of class as a useful concept. It also fit with an individualistic, neoliberal perspective which blamed individuals on their difficulties, while ignoring or minimising the impact of structural barriers (Thompson, 2000).

Class is a complex concept with a long varied history and different perspectives offer distinct ways of viewing, categorising and thinking about class (Atkins, 2015). It is important to acknowledge and recognise that there is a wide range of perspectives and theories of class which provide different ways to see and interpret class and classed experiences, including perspectives which see class as less relevant in modern societies (Atkins, 2015). There are also those who argue that class analysis is necessary to name

the conflict and inequality in society (Skeggs, 1997; Thompson, 2000; Finnegan, 2012; Savage, 2015; Tyler, 2015; Reay, 2017; Crew, 2020; Walkerdine, 2023).

In this section I explore two significant theories of class, stratification and Marxism. I will discuss how classifications derive from those with power and the impact this has on what is valued. I will discuss the importance of class analysis in both recognising and challenging inequalities. I will conclude by moving towards Bourdieu in looking for theory which was useful and adequate for the questions which I explored in this research.

Class theory

As I have mentioned the beginnings of this research began with reading a chapter from Skeggs (1997). I began to think about the crucial role class plays in inequality and trajectories, and in particular the role of education. As a practitioner I wanted to find theory to support me to understand the role of class in the trajectories and experiences of working class students. In attempting to conceptualise my research I needed to delve into the broad range of class theory to find theory that was conceptually adequate for this research project. In my search for theory which was 'useful' (Thompson, 2000) I explored different perspectives of class which are used widely in conceptions of class. There is a large body of work exploring class, which was not possible for me to review. I found the in-depth analysis of class by Finnegan 2012; Olin Wright, 2015; Atkins, 2015; Savage, 2000, 2015, particularly useful in gaining a broad sense of class theory and in finding an adequate perspective.

In this section I will give a brief outline of some of the key aspects of both stratification theory and Marxism, and discuss some of the significant critiques of both. I have chosen these theories as they were the most central in my exploration of class theory. This section is not intended to provide a comprehensive analysis of different perspectives of class. Finnegan (2012) provides an in-depth analysis for those who are interested in further reading on this topic, particularly in an Irish context.

I will start with a brief outline of stratification perspective of class and how and where it is used. Much of the research on class in Ireland is quantitative and provides significant data on the macro aspect of class, using socioeconomic status (SES) as a measure (Finnegan, 2012). Max Weber was at the centre of stratification theory and his theory focuses on how the individual performs within a bureaucratic system. Atkins (2015) discusses the centrality of the individual in Weber's theory of class, that although there is classes "like any other collective entity, always reducible to the actions and properties of the individual human beings who make them up" (Atkins, 2015, p. 42). He explores class as linked to "life chances", which "refers to an individual's typical chance of obtaining that which is deemed desirable in a society" (Atkins, 2015, p. 43). Life chances are linked to your employment prospects, the type of job you can get. Bureaucracy and systems are central to Weber's theory and these influence the power dimensions and the relationships within the society, and how "this is culturally mediated" (Finnegan, 2012, p. 71), as they are formal and impersonal and are dominant in public services.

It is important to note that stratification theory is used as a tool of bureaucracies to classify and categorise groups (Atkins, 2015). It is one of the most used concepts of class, particularly in policy development. It focuses on economics and status given to particular professions or jobs. Some jobs are considered to require significant 'skill' while others are 'unskilled'. This in turn relates to level of education, as professional jobs require particular academic qualifications, and other jobs require no particular qualifications. Your level of education is linked to life chances, employment prospects and risk of poverty (Atkins, 2015; Curristan *et al*., 2022).

In Ireland there is a significant amount of research on social inequality using stratification approaches. Researchers from educational institutions as well as research bodies use stratification approaches to provide significant information on inequality, from a macro perspective. The ESRI (economic and social research institute), HEA (higher education authority), CSO (central statistics office), and many other researchers provide information which is used to inform policy decisions and to highlight particular issues in society (Finnegan, 2017). This research, and perspective, provides information about the socioeconomic status of higher education students and what they study, as well as much broader information about Irish society.

However there are some critiques of the stratification approach. Tyler (2015) asserts that classification and categories are made and remade by those with power and influence. They can be presented as unbiased as they measure specific things, e.g. household income, type of employment. There is an important question about who makes decisions about the categories and who doesn't, and how they change, or not, over time. Occupations are given particular value, or lack of value, related to "cultural judgements about the ranking and social importance of jobs" (Savage *et al*, 2015, p. 35). Some jobs are seen as more prestigious, and are ranked accordingly. Savage *et al.* (2015) argues that this was a way of those with power and status to recognise the respectable middle class and is important differentiating them from the working class.

Critiques of stratification theory ask questions like; Who determines the status, renumeration or power ascribed to particular jobs? Education and qualifications can create barriers which allows for "opportunity hoarding" (Wright, 2015, p. 7), which allows the blame to be placed on the individual and not the system; those who have power and status have earned it by choosing the right qualification and the right career. Therefore it is in the interests of those who are benefitting from the system to maintain it, regardless of any bias in the categories.

Tyler (2015) describes how "stratification approaches to class analysis collect data (using a variety of methods) to produce knowledge about the relative economic (wealth) and social positions (status) of a population within a given time and space" (p. 499). She acknowledges the process as a way of "fitting people into preordained classifications" which are decided by those with the political power to make those assertions (Tyler, 2015, p. 499). She argues that "what stratification research often 'forgets' is that it is actively engaged in the formation and establishment of the social class hierarchies that it describes" (Tyler, 2015, p. 499). It is important to ask who is producing the knowledge, and what perspective or position is it produced from. Categorising people not only helps to provide a picture of society, it also impacts those who are classified. Power is an important factor in deciding on and maintaining particular classifications.

The push back on being labelled as being working class, or in particular underclass in linked to the categorisation from the outside by those with power (Tyler, 2015). She suggests that "the struggles of the exploited against classification and, more specifically,

against the social destinies described and prescribed by class names" (Tyler, 2015, p. 502). This is an important argument in discussions about class, and how class is assigned, embraced or rejected, particularly by those without power and status.

Stratification theory is useful for looking at the bigger picture and the macro perspective of class. It frames the context of issues of inequality in a broad way, within predefined classifications. Stratification can fail to recognise the daily experiences and the embodied nature of class and classed relations, or the fact that those with power and influence are involved in making and remaking the categories (Tyler, 2015). In my search for theory which supports me to articulate the lived experience of class I was interested in the everyday experiences of class, the stories, and how to centre them. I realised that stratification theory would not be a conceptually adequate way to explore the micro process and relational aspects of class, or the complexity of everyday experiences, so continued my journey to find the theory which would be useful for this research project.

The other theory of class I explored is Marxism, which is concerned with economic relations. Marxism views class relations as central to human history and in the current system defined by relations of power (Finnegan, 2012). A key aspect of Marxism is the conflict between those who own the means of production, (the capitalist) and those who work for the owners (the worker), and the exploitation that occurs in this unequal relationship. Finnegan (2012) describes class struggle as being at the centre of Marxism. Those who need to sell their labour can be exploited by those with power, as they do not benefit from the "surplus value" of their labour, which Atkinson describes as "the difference between the value of what the worker is paid in wages…and the value the worker produces for the capitalist in terms of goods" (Atkinson, 2015, p. 21-22). Wright (2015) asserts that Marxism "is distinctive in its normative commitments to class emancipation" (p. 2). It is your place in the overall capitalist system that has greatest influence on your life chances. Marxism prioritises the structural dimension of class and the emancipatory potential of collective working class movements and is concerned with class relations, class reproduction and how the structures support this (Finnegan, 2012). The importance of recognising class relations is important in being able to understand your position, and to challenge the unequal systems.

Marxism is critiqued as being too simplistic to describe the modern world (Savage, 2015; Crew, 2020). The focus of Marxism is on political struggle and he describes the inevitable revolution. However, revolution has not happened. Marxism is focused on the owners and the workers, and a key critique of Marxism is that it does not explain the growth of the middle class (Finnegan, 2012; Crew, 2020). Bourdieu (1985) critiques the focus on economics and its failure to recognise "positions in different fields and sub-fields, particularly in the relations of cultural production" (p. 736) as one-dimensional and limited.

Again Marxism is focused on the macro processes of class. It is also focused on paid labour, which, as I will discuss later in this chapter, often excludes the everyday experiences of class, particularly women's experiences. As this research is focused on the complexity of everyday experiences of class I realised that Marxism would not be the appropriate theory for this particular research. I concur with Finnegan's (2012) arguments on class theory and the limitations of Stratification and Marxism for including stories and everyday experiences of class, which are central to this research.

At this point I returned to Skeggs (1997), and to the voices of working class women who had made me question my journey. Being back in the stories and experiences was important for finding a sense of coherence for the kind of research that I wanted to engage in. In turn this led me to Bourdieu and his theory of class, and another step toward finding theory which could be useful for exploring the everyday experiences of class which was at the centre of this research. Is Bourdieu's theory of class useful for exploring the more complex relational and everyday experiences of class? I will discuss this in detail in the next chapter and throughout this thesis.

The importance of class analysis

"Class remains a hotly contested and much disputed topic" (Finnegan, 2012, p. 58). Savage (2015) argues that in modern western societies there is "a more muted, individualised and complex set of class identities is to be found" (p. 365). The rise of identity politics means that there is a move away from class identities towards other

factors such as gender, race and sexuality, which can also lead to a lack of commonality within the broader distinction of class (Atkins, 2015).

As I have stated class analysis is not recognised as being relevant in modern society by politicians and academics with a particular perspective (Finnegan, 2012; Savage, 2015; Tyler, 2015). I have foregrounded this section with some information about two specific theories, stratification theory and Marxism, as I explored their usefulness for this research project. Finnegan (2012) asserts that thinkers like Giddens, Beck and Bauman argue against the use of class in understanding modern society, and focus on "new forms of individualisation and the fragmentation of older notions of community" and that the death of class "was based in an over-identification of class analysis with Marxism and the manual working class and considerable exaggeration of the velocity and novelty of recent social change" (p. 81). Tyler (2015) argues that "class as struggle" (p. 508) and stigma related to class is linked to a political attempt to individualise inequality which impacts collective notions of class. Arguments against class analysis emphasise that 'we are all middle class' or that most of us are and there is just a small upper-class/ super rich and an 'underclass' or 'precariat' with everyone else in between, in the middle (Savage, 2015). Along with a more individualised neoliberal political landscape and the rise of 'identity politics' there are arguments which move away from the collective notions of class (Thompson, 2000).

Skeggs (2004) argues that many of those asserting the position of the individual, with the knowledge and ability to make decisions, as doing so from positions of privilege, both classed and gendered. She asserts "considering we are in a period when class is denied as an issue on a regular basis it is significant that assumptions proliferate about how individuals have equal access to the cultural resources for self-making, as if the self can be entirely divorced from the conditions which make it possible" (Skeggs, 2004, p. 75). She argues that the prioritising of the 'self' is "constitutive of different aspects of middle-class experience, perspective and strategy, they do not leave us with the tools for understanding a great deal of working-class experience and value" (Skeggs, 2004, p. 90).

I would argue that in order to understand working class experiences we need class analysis, which can use every day experiences to highlight structural inequalities which impact some and benefit others. Imogen Tyler (2015) asserts that "the most effective

forms of class analysis are concerned not with undertaking classification per se, but rather with exposing and critiquing the consequences of classificatory systems and the forms of value, judgements and norms they establish in human societies" (p. 507). This is important in relation to a key question of this thesis- How have our class positions changed? Do you become middle class because you have gone through higher education, or what class do we belong to now? These questions are also framed within the broader idea of who creates the knowledge, who formulates the categories and can they recognise class as more than a particular job or socioeconomic status, to include broader cultural and social capitals and the importance of lived experience in class positioning.

Thompson (2000) describes the side-lining of working class as a designation related to how "working class has become reminiscent of a heroic past" (p. 53). As I have discussed the changing landscape of work and unemployment sine the 1980's has also led to changing perspectives on who is working class and the othering of those outside the 'middle class'. This has intensified stigma which changed the way people were described in class terms and many

> academics were declaring the death of grand narratives- such as social class- in favour of lifestyle and consumer groups and identity politics, the notion of the underclass was taken up with surprising enthusiasm… to stigmatise the poor and to define them as somehow responsible for their own demise (Thompson, 2000, p. 54).

Thompson (2000) discusses how by changing the collective, perspective of class to more individualised aspects of identity there has been a move away from a collectivism, and a pride which can be part of that. Despite the difficulties with the 'heroic' portrayal of the working class, it was not a designation that people distanced themselves from in the way it is happening now. The stigma that is presented as part of working class lives has an impact on class identity. The individualisation of social problems, increases the stigma assigned to those who are not 'respectable' enough.

I want to briefly mention intersectionality, as an alternative way to analyse and critique structures and systems. Hill Collins and Bilge (2020) describe intersectionality as the overlapping identities which impact our positioning in society, related to "categories of race, class, gender, sexuality, class nation, ability, ethnicity, and age- among others- as interrelated and mutually shaping one another" (p. 1). As this research is about the

experiences of working class women I will be discussing gendered experiences of class. However I will not be using intersectional theory. I am not rejecting the importance of an intersectional perspective but the primary focus of this research is class and as I have discussed in this section, class analysis provides an effective approach for exploring this topic. Also, as I have discussed, we often deny the existence of class in Ireland and I would assert that it is important to centre class, and to discuss its impact on inequality in Irish society, and more particularly in education.

The changing position of class as a tool of social science is impacted by two important factors, stigma and contestation of labels or class positioning. There is a significant interrelationship between these two factors, which I will discuss in the next section.

Class, stigma and positioning

It is important to position these discussions of class and class analysis in the context of the stigmatising of those who are most impacted by inequalities in our society. The language of 'underclass' has become more common and widespread, and is linked to the stigma associated with some groups, particularly unemployed, those in addiction, poverty, homelessness or generally not seen as contributing to a particular view of society (Thompson, 2000; Jones, 2011; Tyler, 2015).

The focus on the 'underclass' and middle class, and the absence of the working class in discussions is also powerful in terms of where people would want to be placed in the social structures. In order to avoid being stigmatised and labelled underclass you need to buy into the idea that you as an individual have the opportunity to work harder, to escape. This narrative and stigma associated with being working class also means that "even working class people do not want to be associated with the term" (Thompson, 2000, p. 58). I would contend that this leads to 'misrecognition' (which I will discuss in more detail in the next chapter), of not seeing your own place in the structures and of believing the version of working class that is presented in media and policy. Leo Varadkar (Irish Taoiseach) spoke about working for those 'who get up early' and targeting 'welfare cheats', to separate the middle class as different and hardworking (Bardon, 2017). It is

also a further stigmatising and stereotyping the working class by someone with power and status.

It is important to explore the stigma that has historically been associated with being working class but has been heightened in relation to the 'underclass'. Thompson (2000) asserts that

> the term underclass was not used to describe the structural consequences of explicit social economic and political preferences made in favour of more affluent and powerful sections of society. Members of the underclass were portrayed as inherently, even genetically, almost certainly culturally responsible for their own deficiencies (p. 180).

This way of presenting the 'underclass' allowed for individualising social problems and stigmatising the poorest in our society. It shifted the blame from structural inequalities and political decisions, to individual deficits. Thompson (2000) argues that "it is not surprising, in these circumstances, that a sense of working class pride and working class identity was difficult to sustain" (p. 180). This is even more important in the Irish context where working class identity was less clearly named, even if it was experienced (Pierse, 2011).

In Britain, Jones (2011) describes the presentation of the working class as 'chavs', "the feckless, the non-aspirational, the scrounger, the dysfunctional and the disorderly" (p. 24). Thompson (2000) argues that the "vilification of the underclass" has been relatively successful in "the demise of collective community action and community values in the face of individualism and pragmatism as a political credo"(p. 59), but that individuals sometimes challenge this. This is important in this thesis as class was not recognised in many of our stories until we went to HE, where we stood out as different and 'other'. The misrecognition, and symbolic violence associated with our classed position forms a significant part of our journeys through education which I will return to later in this thesis. I will also discuss the importance of voice and story, and finding others who have an understanding of this in recognising class and classed differences. Can collaborative research work to create knowledge which brings misrecognition and experiences of symbolic violence into the open, and challenge to it?

People will seek to reject a label if is stigmatising. We can be positioned by those with power, in relation to economic, cultural and social capitals and also in relation to the status ascribed to where we live, accent, work etc. and labels can position us as 'other'. Skeggs (1997) describes the different experience of talking about class and "living it" which she links to "not want to be reminded of their social positioning in relation to it" (p. 77). Finnegan (2012) discusses the disidentification among the working class students in his study in Ireland, with students telling stories about finding "their 'place' in society" and "notions of social worth" (p. 185). Every day experiences can lead to a contesting of class labels. Tyler (2015) asserts that the rejection of derogatory or judgemental labels is linked to an attempt to deny the positioning as less than or other, by those who would be categorised. However, this can mean the collective possibility of class is impacted. I would argue that, in Ireland, as we have a dearth of language, and naming of class has been almost invisible at times so the connection is less straightforward to begin with, adding complexity to this. Being labelled and othered is a stigmatising experience and rejecting these labels can be a way of asserting a social worth.

The decline of class analysis in discussions about inequality, the rise of identity politics and the move away from collective notions of solidarity, along class lines has happened in tandem with the rise of new managerialism, the importance of academic credentials and the mainstreaming of neo-liberal politics and policies (Thompson, 2000). The blame for social problems is with the individual and not with the structures. Class analysis is important to challenge this perspective, and to highlight the vast differences in experiences and capitals between the working class and the middle class, and how this impacts choice, opportunity and trajectories (Reay, 2017). I believe that class is political and can help us to name the conflict and inequality in society and remains useful as a way to see power relations and who does and does not benefit from current social structures. This is also related to how class is framed and understood. In the next chapter I will discuss in detail some key concepts from Pierre Bourdieu and how they support me to understand and articulate my understanding of class.

Significance of class

As I have already discussed the naming of class in Ireland has been limited and often denied and in wider discussions of class there has also been a move away from using and naming class, with a focus on individual rather than group issues/ concerns/ difficulties. In my view this has had two very significant influences on society and how we view class. Firstly it has allowed for a move towards a more individualistic, neo-liberal way of viewing problems as within the individual rather than issues of power and structures. This is particularly significant for this thesis in relation to education and its presentation as an answer to wider societal problems. It allows individuals to 'escape' without changing the structures which are creating the difficulties. It also allows those with privileges to think about their achievements within a meritocratic lens, and not within a stratified and advantaged one.

Secondly it provides a way of differentiating the general hardworking middle classes from the 'underclass', which can involve stigmatising groups and individuals who are represented as unwilling or unable to meaningfully and 'respectably' participate in a particular view of society. It provides a binary choice for the working class- to be viewed as less than and 'underclass' or respectable and middle class. This is also significant in the neo-liberal narrative, as if we are all middle class then we all have the same opportunities and our failings are our own, and not the result of unequal structures in society. So I would assert that to deny class and class inequalities is to create a disequilibrium for the working class in finding a way to position themselves in wider social structures and to identify others like us.

Thompson (2000) argues, and I would agree, that class is still a significant factor and despite it not being "fashionable" in current discourse the

> structural determinants beyond market forces, coincidence or free choice, are still, it seems to me, critical to the persistence of the extreme inequalities which ensure that the self same groups always end up in poverty and with poor education, bad health and unemployment (p. 58).

The inequalities are replicated and privileges are taken for granted and presented as working harder, making better choices, and being more intelligent, ignoring the structural barriers and the differences in economic, cultural and social capitals. The individualising

of social problems, and the pretence that class is no longer a significant factor contributes to the myth of meritocracy, which allows the valorising of some and the stigmatising of others.

Class and Gender

In this section I will include gender in this wider discussion of class, as it is important to recognise that the gendered experiences of working class women as different from men. In this section I will discuss how women were positioned in discussions of class, particularly in relation to employment. I will examine the importance of everyday experiences in how class can be conceptualised to include the experiences of working class women. I will then discuss how approaching class from this perspective is useful for thinking about class more broadly and how this relates to how I theorise class.

Understanding class requires examining both micro and macro processes of class. Class is experienced both in everyday interactions and within the broader structures of society (Finnegan, 2012). My perspective of class is that it is relational, to each other and to the power and social structures around us. My experience of class goes beyond the measurable tools used to define and name class and needs to include the "complex sociological and psychological process that encompass far more than materiality and social location" (Reay, 1997, p. 227). Reay (1997) asserts that some concepts of class can be one dimensional and understood solely in relation to paid employment. Occupational measurements of class were based on the job of the main household earner which "was unsatisfactory as it ignored the position of women" (Crew, 2020, p. 2). The focus on the labour market fails to include wider classed experiences of women. "Position in the labour market tells us very little about how social-class processes are played out in social relationships" (Reay, 1997, p. 225). She asserts that class needs to be viewed through a broader feminist lens which also explores inequality, links between public and private spheres and access to economic, social and cultural capital.

Historical concepts of class are often idealised, focusing on "masculine manual labor as more authentically working class", but this perspective ignored the kind of work that

women performed, "feminine work which received little dignity or respect" in these conceptualisations of class (Bettie, 2014, p. 198). This view of class also ignored the reproductive and caring roles undertaken by working class women. Only paid work, and more specifically men's paid work was linked to class positioning. Crean (2018) discusses "the importance of spaces outside of purely waged relations for forming consciousness of class inequality" particularly for women (p. 1178).

Bettie (2014) argues that women's roles in working class life was as much about (invisible) paid labour as family and community, but this was not recognised in concepts of class that focused on working class men, and particular types of work. She argues that class "is an element of contemporary feminist and cultural theory that is often discursively present but analytically absent or that at best makes cameo appearances" (p. 205) which has led to challenges in "defining women in class terms" (Bettie, 2014, p. 206). She asserts that class needs to be explored in the context of gender and race, recognising the intersections of these different aspects of lived experience.

Walkerdine (2021) also critiques descriptions of class which focus only on occupation of the chief income earner in a household, which can exclude women, and asserts that "it was difficult to glean anything about working-class women and girls at all in the sense that the working class was often assumed to refer to male manual workers" and she asserts that "everyday life and femininity seemed never to get a look in" (p. 66).

The omission of gender from concepts and discussions of class is also critiqued by Bettie (2014). She describes the importance of everyday experiences which situates class as a "relational identity"(p. 194) that is often missing from wider discussions of class and framed in a way "that class itself is rendered invisible" (p. 195). She discusses how femininity is associated with "passivity, conformity, middle-classness, and consumption" (p. 198) which omits working class concepts of femininity. Walkerdine (2021) argues that the lives of working class women were not even a factor in feminist discussions, where it was seen as separate and issues of "gender was seen as separate from, and pitted against class" (p. 66).

Respectability is mediated through forms of cultural and social capital and is both classed and gendered. Skeggs (1997) argues that respectability is especially important for

understanding the lives and choices of working class women, and how working class women are inscribed as outside the middle class norm and are derided for their difference. The experiences of working class women in middle class spaces can be understood from this perspective. An example of this is Case (2017) discussing not fitting into the respectable feminist spaces, as she was too direct or disagreeable. She describes "the gender and class intersections define me as violating middle-class gender roles that expect women to behave like a proper little lady" (Case, 2017, p. 23).

The intersection of class and gender felt particularly acute in the middle class space of academia, where she was "judged negatively for being without the proper behaviours and values that middle-class culture endorses" (Case, 2017, p. 25).

> Women have experienced themselves and have been experienced as without class, while in reality they are and always have been class subjects whose access to the cultural and economic resources of class (cultural capital and paid labor) has been shaped and mediated by gender and racial projects. But the androcentrism of the class concept as it exists in social theory and popular discourse precludes their visibility (Bettie, 2014, p. 200).

These discussions highlight some key questions for this research. Are gendered experiences of class important to our stories? Did it impact our trajectories? How does care and affect influence our class positioning and our ability to fit, or not, into middle class work spaces? I will explore these questions further in the findings and discussion chapters.

Bettie (2014) argues that "exploring class by beginning with women's lives makes the contemporary salience of class as a cultural identity, and potentially a political one, more visible" (p. 206). The impact of internalised and embodied experiences on women should inform any discussion on class and can help us to articulate a view of class that moves beyond employment (Reay, 1997). This explanation of class is complex and placing relationships at the centre, is a crucial aspect of being a working class woman. The affective aspects of lived experiences are positioned within relationships; those where I feel I belong and am part of something, and those where I am positioned as 'other' by those with power and status. What are our experiences of the affective and feelings aspects of class as working class women? Crean (2018) recognises the importance of

class and lived experience. The positioning of her research within an equality studies framework allows it to explore class and gender and the impact of social inequalities in Irish society. A key focus of Crean's research is critiquing the structures which impact the women in her research and finding ways to ensure a more equitable future, which is at the core of equality studies (Crean, 2018; Baker, Lynch, Cantillion and Walsh, 2009). In her research Crean (2018) "places affective relations as central to how class inequality is lived and how the class inequalities of the class system are experienced" (p. 1178). Exploring relationships, both at a micro and macro level, recognises both the everyday experiences and the influence of structures and power on those experiences. Relationships within families and communities are working alongside, and in conflict with, relationships with structures and institutions. Brah and Phoenix (2004) assert that "social class is lived in everyday practices and the emotional investments and issues it produces" (p. 79).

Women's experiences are different as we are positioned differently. Thompson (2000) asserts that we need to "recognise that women see the world through different eyes and experience the world differently, as a consequence of being positioned differently within it" (p. 63). Thompson (2000) also argues that women respond to poverty and class difficulties in different ways and are more likely to become involved in voluntary and self-help groups, and just get on with doing the best they can. Even with shifting social circumstances working class women find ways to adapt and continue to hold both private and public aspects of their and their families lives (O'Neill, 1992; Bissett, 2023). Thompson (2000) argues that the responsibility placed on working class women to hold themselves, their families and their communities together, in the face of significant change, including in the construction of masculinity and femininity in these changing circumstance, places pressure on them to remain in the gendered position of carer, mother and within a particular view of "femininity within patriarchy" (p. 80), to "attempt to keep everybody going and keep everybody happy" (p.81) even if this had an impact on them. The responsibility for fixing the many social problems was placed on the shoulders of working class women. The everyday experiences of this, in an Irish context, are detailed in both O'Neill (1992) and Bissett (2023). Lynch, Lyons and Cantillon (2007) highlight the 'rational' nature of most education, to the detriment of the affective, caring and gendered experiences. Solidarity and relationship are central to care which is embodied in working class women's habitus and affective experiences, but are not valued in the

'rational' educational systems. This highlights a difference in habitus and experience between working class lives and experiences and the middle class education system. It also raises an important question for this research; Are solidarity and care important for our lived experiences both past and present, and how are they affected by being in middle class spaces and does it impact our sense of belonging in these spaces? The importance of naming and recognising classed and gendered experience is evident in the experiences and stories from both O'Neill, Bissett and I will return to explore this further later in this thesis.

The stories that have been told about working class women has positioned us as the carer, the one that held families and family relationships together. However, this view does not articulate the level of community engagement by women in their working class communities (O'Neill, 1992; Thompson, 2000; Bissett, 2023). Thompson (2000) highlights women's political activity and activism as "defiance, however parochial, against traditional constraints of femininity, respectability and subordination" (p. 73). O'Neill (1992) and Bissett (2023) highlight the role of women in holding things together, in finding ways to feed their families and support neighbours with loans or goods. The everyday experiences of being a working class woman frames identity and expectations of that role, which "are improvised, constructed and re-constructed through discourse and everyday activity and behaviour" (Thompson, 2000, p. 65). The importance of care and solidarity are evident in these experiences.

O'Neill (1992) articulates the indignities which are part of daily life for the women, in the interactions with state agencies, particularly social welfare, health and education. The lack of understanding of those in professional roles was described by one of the women who took part in her research;

> Cathy says "My experience of experts in terms of doctors, teachers and the local health centre is their inability to understand how the poor live. They have a great lack of awareness around our culture and needs" (O'Neill, 1992, p. 31)

The everyday interactions with state structures evidence the unequal power relationships between the women and the structures . The responsibility for making ends meet fell to the women and they suffered "loss of personal dignity" (p. 63) and "are simply unable to do ordinary things" (p. 58) as a result of the responsibility and pressure of this role, which

was not recognised or understood by those with power. The lack of recognition of these experiences and their relationship with state structures highlights the absence of their perspectives, their voices and stories from decisions and structures which have a significant impact on their everyday lives.

The studies by O'Neill (1992) and Bissett (2023) provide an Irish perspective of classed and gendered experiences, from two Dublin communities. Despite the fact that there is 30 years between their research there are overlaps in the everyday experiences of the working class women, particularly in relation to making ends meet and finding ways to provide food, to make it stretch and with customs and culture which recognises the importance of community by helping each other out and sharing of scarce resources. Both studies emphasise the importance of good neighbours and having people who understand what it means to live in a working class community, and with limited means. They describe a solidarity, which is evident in the day to day care and support that is offered. The descriptions of the women in their studies highlights the affective, lived experience of working class women, of scarcity and want, but also of solidarity, care and creativity (O'Neill, 1992; Bissett, 2023).

This also highlighted, for me, the idea of class fractions and intraclass differences (Reay, 1997), as the women in both studies have had significantly different experiences than the women in our group. Reading the experiences of the women in these books reminded me of my experiences growing up, and of my Ma's experience. I could relate to the descriptions of education from O'Neill (1992), except my experience was as a student. The different perspectives and stories, across different times highlight the different trajectories and experiences, and the lack of universal experience for working class women.

This gendered experience is in the context of less value placed on feminine attributes and not only are women "different from men, but inferior" (Thompson, 2000, p. 64), and when women move outside the roles expected of them, including pursuing educational qualifications it can upset the status quo. So as working class women going to HE is there an additional barrier from within our own class? How does stepping outside the roles that are 'meant' for us change our own sense of selves and our relationships to others? These are important questions that I will return to in the findings chapters.

The importance of recognising agency as operating "within as well as against the very real constraints of structure" is part of the experiences of working class women (Thompson, 2000, p. 99). The struggle to find a path that is meaningful, but outside what is expected for working class women, involves a tension between keeping what is meaningful and authentic about your identity, and searching for something different. Again this is important to consider in relation to working class women who step outside this role for a number of reasons. It can highlight the support, or lack of from within their class, and the impact it has on them and their relationships. Lynch *et al.* (2007) highlight the prioritising of the competitive, individualistic, rational student and the lack of value placed on care and solidarity, which is also important in relation to affective dimensions of class and holding on to working class values in middle class spaces. This is something that I will explore in relation to going to HE and subsequent jobs for our group in later chapters.

It also highlights education as a site of struggle, in multiple ways. As a way to get cultural capital necessary to gain entry to particular professions; as a way of proving that the system is flawed and early experiences (particularly for mature students) do not indicate ability or potential as it is the system itself, and not the individuals, which is flawed and deficient; but as a site of struggle within our own class where we are challenging the taken for granted perspective of who and where we should be. These are struggles which are particularly classed but are also impacted by being women and the expectations, both historical and current, of what a working class woman can and should be. These also create internal struggles in how we attempt to reconcile the challenges from both structures and class solidarity with an attempt to become more conscious of both our own and others positioning in the social structures, and our changing, or changed, place in it. This is all impacted by the affective aspect of being working class women, and the values and ways of understanding the world that are integral to this (Walkerdine, 2023).

The intersection of class and gender is relevant both to current discussions of class and to how class has been categorised based on labour, mostly men's. The omission of women from historical descriptions of class impacts our ability to see what it means to be a working class woman. Changing the focus, and the way we see and categorise class means including women's experiences and stories, and recognising their perspectives, values and ways of being in the world. It allows us to recognise the importance of broader

social and cultural aspects of class which "attaches importance to those everyday experiences of class which are more complicated than objective measures would suggest" (Evans, 2010, p. 55). It allows me to include aspects of relationships and everyday lived experiences in thinking about how class is lived and understood, which is at the centre of this thesis.

It is also useful in moving discussions of class away from occupation which can be narrow and limited, which is also helpful in highlighting the importance of class and class analysis in current discussions about inequality and social justice, to a more relational perspective; relationships to each other and to the structures in society which is core to the experiences detailed in Bissett (2023) and is core to research from an equality studies perspective. Crean (2018) asserts that "class analysis needs to take these affective references in the women's lived experiences of class more seriously" (p. 1179). This helps us to challenge the dismissal of class analysis because it challenges some of the ways that class was viewed and theorised. Linking class and gender includes recognising both the private and public aspects of life, not just work but home and the gendered "domestic and emotional negotiations that take place within patriarchal relations", which are altered with "patterns of identification and ways of relating to each other in shifting and altered circumstances" (Thompson, 2000, p. 75). This negotiation and reimagining is also part of the conversation about higher education and working class women.

How we position ourselves, and are positioned by others is both classed and gendered. In the next chapter I will discuss how Bourdieu's theory frames the relational aspect of class, relationship to others like us, to others not like us and to the power and structures which are instrumental in the classification process.

Conclusion

In this chapter I have discussed the context of class in Ireland. I have outlined some key aspects of Irish history, particularly as a colonised country and moving to independence and the impact this had on conceptions of class in Ireland. I have explored the Irish education system, particularly access and how despite some improvements there is still less students from working class backgrounds going to HE, compared to their middle

class peers. There is also a disparity in the types of courses which are being undertaken, and the kinds of institutions where they are going (HEA, 2022).

I also presented a perspective which highlights the importance of class analysis, particularly focusing on how categorisations are made by those with power and this has an impact on who is stigmatised and who is valorised, linked to the neoliberal individualistic perspective (Tyler, 2015). I discussed how stigma can create a difficulty for those who are working class in owning that collective label as this can mean being stigmatised.

I argued that gender is an important aspect of class for working class women, but is also important for how we can theorise and usefully think about class as relational and more than occupation, to incorporate lived experience. The role of women in community building and challenging structures or of trying to hold their families and communities together, in the face of stigmatisation and powerful structures is important in highlighting the importance of class in seeing and challenging inequality (O'Neill, 1992). This also highlights the potential constraint, or challenge for those stepping outside the role that is expected, and in the case of this research going to higher education. The importance of class in helping us to see the inequalities in our society, and to recognise the structural barriers was discussed.

Finding theory that could support me to explore and explain how I conceptualise class and classed experiences involved moving between key ones, before settling on Bourdieu and his complex way of theorising class, which includes a way of recognising everyday experiences and how they interact with the structures. Although stratification and Marxism are useful for thinking about macro process of class and are applied to class analysis in useful ways they did not allow me to focus on the everyday experiences, the relationships and the affective aspects of classed experiences which are integral to this research and to my way of viewing class. Bourdieu (1984) includes complexity of relationships and experience with his core concepts of habitus, field, capitals and habitus clivé, which, for this research, provide a fuller and more nuanced way to capture classed experiences.

In the next chapter I will discuss key concepts of class from Pierre Bourdieu, (1984) framed as a relational concept impacted by struggles against inequality, which moves beyond individual or collective thinking about class to discuss the interconnectedness and relationship between the individual and society, linked to habitus, capitals, fields, being caught between worlds and the role of education in this.

Chapter 3- Bourdieu and beyond- Interrogating class

Introduction

I will begin this chapter by exploring my own relationship with theory, which has evolved both throughout my working life and also engaging in this research and writing this thesis. It was important for me to find theory that resonated and was complex enough to describe lived experiences, of inequality, symbolic violence and stepping outside your expected trajectory. My perspective is also influenced by my own experience of class and how theory supports me to articulate some of the realities of the complexity of lived experiences. Most of this chapter is taken with my exploration and discussion of the key concepts of Pierre Bourdieu's theory of class. I will use key concepts from Bourdieu (1977, 1984, 1985, 1986) to provide my theoretical perspective of class which is relational, complex and recognises the interconnectedness of agency and structure, which I will discuss in more detail throughout this chapter.

I recognise class as an important factor, and a way towards explaining the inequality in the structures and processes in Irish society. How I see the world is influenced by my own experiences of inequality both personally and professionally, and the absence of social justice. Growing up and working in communities affected by poverty and other social problems means I have seen the differences in experiences based on where you are born and the social and economic conditions of your family and community. Education can be presented as a solution to class inequality, despite the barriers that are inherent in the system for working class students. Coming from a working class background and having 'succeeded' in HE has influenced my everyday experiences in both positive and challenging ways. This is an important aspect of the thesis and I will return to it in both methodology and findings chapters. As a result I am also interested in how we think about class positioning and trajectories before and after HE, the impact this has on habitus and family relationships and how our experiences are reflected, or not in policy.

My relationship with theory

I want to start this chapter by continuing to present how I understand 'useful' theory. I have a complicated relationship with theory, which has evolved throughout my working

life, both working in practice with children and families, in community settings and also in my academic work.

In order to write a doctoral thesis it is necessary to engage with theory in an open way. Skeggs (2004) discusses how "theory also has to have a particular resonance to be effective, that it has to speak to people and make sense" (p. 46). It was important for me to recognise the role that theory can have in supporting me both to understand and frame experiences of class but also in finding a way to challenge structures and prioritising of one way of knowing over others. Different ways of knowing are important for this thesis and I was drawn to Heron (1996) naming clearly the importance of experiential, presentational, propositional and practical ways of knowing, which to me challenges the prioritising of academic or propositional ways of knowing over others. I will return to this and explore it in more detail in the methodology chapter. Skeggs (2004) also challenges the idea that theory is created in a neutral or objective way and she suggests that "the world becomes what is wanted by the theorist: regular, ordered, controllable" (Skeggs, 2004, p. 82). This way of critiquing theory helps me to think through some of my own reservations about it. It also highlights different kinds of theory, that which is elite, academically focused and inaccessible is not the same as theory which is "useful" (Thompson, 2000). Theory can be used to include or to exclude and in the case of the later there is an elitism or snobbery about theory which is only aimed at other academics, or is intentionally opaque to those outside. The use of jargon or flowery and inaccessible language serves to exclude and alienate others from some theory.

Theory can be used to try to explain difficult and challenging human experiences in neat packages, that often don't quite fit. Bourdieu (1992) challenges the siloing of knowledge into different disciplines, which can leave theory incomplete. My experience is that theory rarely provides a full explanation and particular aspects can be prioritised to explain complex experiences in neat or simple ways. This was one of my challenges with academic theory- that it could be sociological and focus on the group or society, or it could be psychological and focus on the individual. There are fewer theories that try to bridge the gap, which recognises that we are more than part of a collective or an individual in a vacuum. I believe that the interaction and interdependence of each is central to understanding the human experience. One difficulty with siloed theories is that the use of theory in practice, in my experience, rarely recognises this complexity.

I believe that to get a deeper understanding of the world and our place in it, it is necessary to combine theories and perspectives to provide a more authentic or complete way to describe the world, but this is a challenging and complex process- and a time consuming one- that isn't an option for most people.

So it is important for me to differentiate between theory which is 'useful' (Thompson, 2000) and theory which is overly academic and sometimes even impenetrable. As a practitioner, who has spent most of my working life in community based projects I value theory which I can apply or enhances my understanding of why things are the way they are, and how we can change them. I am interested in theory which can help me to understand the world, but is also accessible enough that I find my way in. Good theory helps me to understand and explain the complexities of everyday life, and to argue the importance of seeing and tackling inequality. This is a big ask of theory, and I have learned that the more challenging the question, the more complex the answer, or theory that helps to explain the experiences. Therefore this is when it becomes even more important for me that theory is not so impenetrable that it becomes another barrier. I will discuss the key aspects of Bourdieu's theory of class which is complex and useful. However engaging with his writing was demanding and time consuming. Other writers mediated this complexity at times and helped me to find a way in. Reading, the research of Skeggs, Reay, Finnegan and Crew, in particular, supported me in this process. For me theory needs to have a way in, and I value those who write in a real and accessible way to ensure theory does not remain the possession of the privileged few, as good theory should belong to everyone.

The rest of this chapter is the result of my engagement with, and embracing theory which helps me to frame the world, particularly classed experiences of education, in a way that recognises the messiness and complexity of lived experience, the interaction of agency and structure and the stories that are integral to understanding this. It represents my deep engagement with key literature and how I moved from being alienated from theory to seeing it as a crucial part of my learning journey. My engagement with theory includes finding 'resonance' as well as enough complexity to help me to explore lived experience in a meaningful and real way. In this chapter I will present, explore and discuss the theory that makes sense for me in understanding class and education.

Bourdieu

Pierre Bourdieu (1930-2002) was a French academic who is known for his significant contribution to social science, and particularly theorising class. He came from a working class background, and received scholarships to a top prep school in Paris, and went on to become an academic of significant standing in both France and beyond. He was sent to Algeria in the 1950s, for military service, where he became interested in anthropological research (moving from philosophy), conducting an ethnography of groups in the region. Wacquant (2002) assets that he "sought to connect evolving social structures and cultural forms" (p. 551). Wacquant (2002) described Bourdieu as having "an abiding commitment to science, intellectual institution-building, and social justice" (p. 549) and researched "the relations between culture, power, and social inequality" (p. 552) which was underpinned by rigorous research.

Grenfell (2014) asserts that Bourdieu was interested in a particular type of sociology which included a link between theory and practice. He was interested in a reflexive sociology, and the importance of intellectual work (Wacquant, 2002). Bourdieu sought "to explain the social, political and cultural practices that surround him" (Grenfell, 2014, p. 15). The importance of using knowledge and research tools to be reflexive about your own position was an important aspect of his sociology, which can highlight the power structures in research between those who have the experiences and those who write about them, "between actual social life and the accounts that the sociologist produces of it" (Wacquant, 2002, p. 551). Bourdieu developed a "set of conceptual terms" which were useful in explaining social situations and "the social processes" of experience (Grenfell, 2014, p. 2). Grenfell (2014) asserts that "any study to be undertaken within a Bourdieusian framework must begin with real, empirical data" (p. 2). Bourdieu was particularly interested in education, and how it contributed to maintaining systems of inequality in society. He also focused on how capitals, particularly economic, social and cultural capital impacted class and class positioning.

Pierre Bourdieu (1977, 1984, 1985, 1986. 1992) has developed significant theory that is useful for exploring class and class relations (Skeggs 1997; Reay 1997; Finnegan 2012: Crew 2020). Bourdieu's theory of class, which I will discuss, includes habitus; field;

capital- economic, social, cultural and symbolic; misrecognition and symbolic violence; habitus clivé. The relational nature of these concepts is key to Bourdieu's theory. They interact and influence each other, which makes them complex and provides a frame to discuss the complexity of classed experiences. His theory interrogates the interaction between structures and the individual, and the way class processes are experienced and reproduced.

Bourdieu's theory offers a complex way to explore class. He offers a holistic perspective on class, which is core to this research. Although it recognises the primary role of economic conditions, his theory looks beyond to include habitus, cultural and social capitals alongside fields. His theory of class explores the "relation between the economic and the symbolic" (Weininger, 2002, p. 121), and recognise status and lifestyle as part of social class differences. The kind of job you can get is part of a system which is relational, and influenced by the accrual, or lack, of capitals, particularly economic, cultural and social capitals. Crew (2020) describes Bourdieu's view of class as "social differences are based on one's different access to specific resources and power otherwise known as capitals" (p. 3). Finnegan (2012) argues that Bourdieu "provides a compelling way of exploring social class that does not rely on either static, socio-economic categories based on occupational hierarchies or 'heroic' models of class that seek to explain class experience solely in relation to political mobilisation"(p. 90). It builds on stratification and Marxist perspectives of class to include everyday experiences, and how people are positioned within the social structures. Bourdieu's theory allows for exploration of both the macro structures and the lived experiences of class.

I sought theory which was complex enough to explain the everyday experiences and how they interact with the wider social structures in understanding class, to include both agency and structure, but importantly how they interact and influence each other. The importance of including everyday experiences and how individuals engage in and react to the social structures is key to this thesis. Bourdieu's concepts, and their use and development by British feminist Bourdieusians (Skeggs, 1997; Reay, 2017; Crew, 2020) and others interested in understanding the role of education, particularly higher education, have been central to deepening my own knowledge and the knowledge which we co-created in the group. The complexity of the ideas which I will discuss in this chapter

gave me the tools to work across multiple aspects of classed experiences and how they influence each other.

Bourdieu (1984) had a keen interest in class and education and in particular how it is used in class reproduction, and his ideas have been used extensively and extended by those studying class, particularly class and education (Skeggs; Reay; Crew; Finnegan; Ingram; etc.). His ideas have been mediated by other scholars who have influenced my engagement with his theory and its application to class and working class experiences. The use of his theory in research which recognised complex and layered class experiences supported me to enhance my knowledge and understanding of his ideas. Their research was important in my theorising and framing of this research.

In this section I will discuss his concepts of; habitus, field, capitals (economic, social, cultural and symbolic), misrecognition and symbolic violence, and habitus clivé and how they are useful for examining class and classed relations, particularly in relation to education. These concepts are important for me in recognising and articulating classed experiences. They are enmeshed in our stories and how we experienced education as working class women. They help me to explain the messy and complex way that class is lived in everyday experiences.

Habitus

Habitus is a core concept in Bourdieu's research as a whole and how he understands class. In this section I will explore habitus and how it is relevant for seeing and experiencing class. Bourdieu's theory is based on extensive empirical research in various settings (Wacquant, 2002). A key piece of his early sociological research was an ethnography with the Kabyle in Algeria and he asserts that;

> It is their present and past positions in the social structure that biological individuals carry with them, at all times and in all places, in the form of dispositions which are so many marks of social position and hence of the social distance between objective positions (Bourdieu, 1977, p. 82).

Bourdieu (1984) explores the idea that we are socialised and internalise the structures around us, giving us a sense of who we are and where we do and do not belong. Habitus is internalised and "converted into a disposition that generates meaningful practices and meaning-giving perceptions" (Bourdieu, 1984, p.166). He argues that "different conditions of existence produce different habitus" (p. 166). Habitus impacts how we engage with the world. Where we come from, both physically and in terms of social positioning, and our family influences our habitus.

According to Bourdieu (1984) the habitus is influenced by our past and present conditions of existence, and shapes our place in the social structures, without explicitly named rules. It influences our engagement with different aspects of the social world and our level of comfort in social spaces, related to how close they are to our habitus. It emanates from the past as well as the present and only becomes visible by stepping outside it and being reflexive about your experiences. Without this reflexivity habitus "tends to perpetuate itself into the future"(p. 82) because it becomes "taken for granted" or "reasonable" (Bourdieu, 1977, p. 80). I will explore the importance of reflexivity and understanding your own position in the social structures, as a researcher in particular, in later chapters where I will discuss the importance of voice, who tells the story and how much it is mediated by a different perspective, all linked to my own conceptions of good theory.

The internalisation and acceptance of the way things are forms a significant part of the concept of habitus. Bourdieu (1984) says that you "'develop a sense of one's place' which leads one to exclude oneself from the goals, persons, places and so forth from which one is excluded" (p. 473). He goes on to discuss the way we think about ourselves and our lives from within this perspective. It influences where we feel we belong and we feel comfortable in places that feel familiar to us.

> "Social reality exists, so to speak, twice, in things and in minds, in fields and in habitus, outside and inside social agents. And when habitus encounters a social world of which it is the product, it is like a `fish in water': it does not feel the weight of the water and it takes the world about itself for granted. (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 127)

Bourdieu (1977) discusses the way habitus is transferred between generations by children interacting with and being immersed in family and community life. They observe and soak up all the social information which forms part of their culture and social positioning.

The tacit knowledge that is developed through experience is linked to what you are and are not exposed to. This highlights the link between habitus and capitals, as what we experience becomes part of our habitus, and of what we expect to experience. A child who has parents that are university lecturers experiences education and higher education as natural and expected, while for first generation students it is alien and involves moving outside their original habitus.

Burke, Thatcher, Ingram and Abrahams (2016) describe habitus as "norms, values and dispositions inculcated via the family, education and to a lesser extent the environment" (p. 2). We absorb it through our interactions in our environment. Reay (2004) describes habitus as embodied, including in how we speak, eat, gesture and stand. We can recognise aspects of habitus in accents, clothes and hairstyles. The embodied nature of habitus can mark us as working class.

Reay (2004) asserts that habitus can be both "constraining" and "transformative", but for most people there is a tendency towards constraint and particular ways of behaving and interacting in a particular field, finding ways to "make a virtue out of necessity" as others avenues are closed (p. 433). Going into a 'posh' hotel, when you know you are not dressed in the 'appropriate' clothes or have the right accent, opens you up to feeling out of place so it can be easier to go to places where you feel accepted, rather than have to challenge the structures or differences within the unfamiliar field. Reay (2004) asserts that "Bourdieu views the dispositions which make up the habitus, as the products of opportunities and constraints framing the individuals earlier life experiences" (p. 433). The habitus is influenced by individual experiences but also by their environment and in particular family and communities experiences. Reay (2004) argues that Bourdieu frames habitus as both an individual and a structural experience, meaning it can be experienced differently by people within the same class or group.

Habitus can be ingrained in a way that makes changing or challenging it difficult. In Ireland we often use the word 'notions' as a way to let people know we think their way of thinking about or doing something is 'above their station', or 'not for the likes of us'. Linking this to Bourdieu's idea of habitus allows us to see how we participate in the maintenance of boundaries that are used to segregate and divide us between classes. This is important in relation to education, educational institutions and the numbers of students

from some areas, demographics or even schools who see it as a natural progression to go to HE, while others feel like a 'fish out of water'(Bathmaker *et al.* 2016).

Habitus and educational structures are important to explore in the context of this thesis. Bourdieu (1977) asserts that education is impacted as, "the habitus acquired in the family underlies the structuring of school experiences" (Bourdieu, 1977, p. 87). Our habitus impacts our engagement with the education system, and how we are viewed in that system, and our habitus is also "transformed by schooling" (Bourdieu, 1977, p. 87). Our habitus interacts with the educational structures and for the working class there is a disconnect, feeling like a 'fish out of water'. The valuing of middle class knowledge and middle class ways of being is a significant aspect of this for working class students. Our habitus and way of being in and understanding the world is different from what is valued in the education system. The lack of teachers from working class backgrounds means that the transition into this system is more challenging than for middle class children, who see both themselves and their culture and way of understanding the world represented. Education is presented as a way to change your trajectory, but the lack of fit in the system makes this challenging for working class students.

The idea of a "social trajectory" which can see habitus either remain static, staying where you are, or finding alternative avenues that support you to "raise or lower" expectations is discussed by Reay (2004, p. 435). She describes it as "generative" (Reay, 1997, p. 231). There is possibility for movement and transformation of life experiences. Therefore habitus doesn't lead to acceptance of the status quo by all, "but at the same time the choices inscribed in the habitus are limited" (Reay, 2004, p. 435). Skeggs (2004) discusses how the women in her research tried to find a way to place value on aspects of their working class culture which didn't have high value in their educational course, and how at times this meant hiding their own true values to get a higher grade, but not accepting that way of viewing the world. Loveday (2014) discusses how the students in her study rejected the expectation that they adjust to fit in and found ways to keep their working class identities. However these experiences in HE are in the minority, with a significant amount of research indicating that students from working class backgrounds try to find ways to 'fit in' (Bentley, 2020; Merrill, Finnegan, O'Neill and Revers, 2020; Bathmaker *et al.* 2016; Finnegan 2012). I agree with Reay (2004) and Skeggs (2004) that although habitus can be a powerful force, the extent to which it is fixed can be different

within a class, or even within families. Can education be an avenue for changing expectations, and in turn altering habitus? By going to HE we are challenging the idea that it is not for the likes of us and in this research I will explore the impact of the "social structures which produced" our original habitus (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992, p. 19), how our past and present selves are affected, as this is not a simple journey. What is the role of agency and how does the volume of capitals we possess influence our 'choices' and trajectories?

I believe that habitus is a very important concept in helping us to understand class and class relations. It provides a frame in which to understand the power dynamics at play and why we often, but not always, accept the role assigned to us. It, in conjunction with field, helps to explain the sense of belonging, or unbelonging in particular spaces which is important in understanding our experiences in the education system, particularly HE. Reay (2004) discusses the use of habitus as "a way of understanding the world" (p. 439), when it is seen as a concept that moves between theory and method. I think it helps us to understand how things are and how we engage with society as it is. Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992) describe habitus as "creative, inventive, but within the limits of its structures, which are the embodied sedimentation of the social structures which produced it" (p. 19). We are products of our environment and we in turn help to shape it. However, as discussed above it is not always limiting and it is possible to move within and outside it, to 'transform' rather than be 'constrained' (Reay, 2004). In the findings and discussion chapters I will discuss the impact of our habitus, transmitted through our families, on our trajectories and our experiences in the education system.

Field

Bourdieu (1984) discusses the concept of 'field' as arenas with particular expectations. Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992) describe "a field consists of a set of objective, historical relations between positions anchored in certain forms of power (or capital)" (p. 15). Fields are socially constructed, and can change, over time and in a historical context (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992). They assert that "each field prescribes its particular values and possesses its own regulative principles" (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992, p.

16). This means that to succeed in a particular field you need to understand the 'rules of the game', including what is recognised as worthy and valuable in that field, so a field can be a 'battlefield' where those in the field compete to gain most benefit from it. I will explore this further in relation to cultural capital, related to knowing the rules of the game.

Bentley (2020) describes field as "the social universe as divided into multiple distinct but overlapping and interrelated social fields of practice" (p. 70). She describes how 'fields' are influenced by both "larger social structures and the habituses of those who operate within it" (Bentley, 2020, p. 71). Burke *et al*. (2016) describe "the concept of field can be read as an active and dynamic site in which habitus and capital interact" (p. 2). They describe field as a "site of competition and aggression in which an individual or group is required to negotiate" (Burke *et al*., 2016, p. 2). Our habitus can influence our comfort and sense of belonging within a particular field. How we respond in a given field is influenced by our previous experiences and the different kinds of capitals we bring with us.

Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992) argue that fields are structured in a way that incorporates a historical context, as well as a current one and the tensions within and between fields is linked to "the field of power"(p. 90) and how those with power use "the monopoly of the state"(p. 93) to dominate others. Fields are constructed over time and how they are perceived differs depending on who is looking. However "a field is not the product of a deliberate act of creation, and it follows rules, or better regularities, that are not explicit and codified" (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992, p. 98).   So those on the inside are more likely to know and understand the rules and to be able to succeed in that particular field.

"The field is the arena in which an individual and their social biography (habitus) interacts" (Crew, 2020, p. 12). Different dispositions, rules and behaviour are expected and valued in different fields. This can include things like clothing, tone of voice, politeness and language. So cursing loudly in an art gallery would be seen as violating the rules and expectations of a cultural space, but acceptable in the local pub. It is also important in relation to education as there is particular ways of being that are seen as acceptable.

Your habitus influences your ability to know and understand the expectations in a given field, which has an impact on your ability to accrue capital. Reay (2004) asserts that "habitus becomes active in relation to a field, and the same habitus can lead to very different practices and stances depending on the state of the field" (p. 432). Your tacit knowledge influences your ability to know how to behave, which can influence your ability to make gains from a particular field.

As I have discussed in relation to habitus, Reay (2004) also discusses the role of different fields as sites of reproduction or where "habitus can be transformed through a process that either raises or lowers an individual's expectations. Implicit in the concept is the possibility of a social trajectory that enables conditions of living that are very different from initial ones (p. 435)". Encounters with unfamiliar fields can also lead to feeling destabilised as it can lead to an awareness of "power relations and political agency" (Reay, 2004, p. 436). In a situation where you feel 'other' it can be safer, or more comfortable, to withdraw to more familiar fields. However this also means remaining within the limits of your initial habitus. This 'constraint' can also relate to the affective aspect of class which I will return to later in this chapter.

> The relation between habitus and field operates in two ways. On one side, it is a relation of conditioning: the field structures the habitus, which is the product of the embodiment of the immanent necessity of the field (or of a hierarchy of intersecting fields). On the other side, it is a relation of knowledge or cognitive construction: habitus contributes to constituting the field as a meaningful world, a world endowed with sense or with value, in which it is worth investing one's energy. (Bourdieu in Wacquant, 1989, p. 44).

This quote illustrates how Bourdieu views the relationship between field and habitus, and also demonstrates that there is a process involved with both, and in how they interact with each other, and how we use them to help us to make sense of our worlds. We are shaped by the habitus of our field, but we also need to see value in engaging with the structures and rules of the world in order to feel valued or assign value. Habitus and field are dynamic, interconnected and operate in relation to each other.

As discussed earlier feeling comfortable and accepted in a given field is related to our habitus, and sense of belonging, which is both linked to current, but also historical connections and relationships between spaces and people. The closer we are to a field

which places value on our habitus, and way of being in the world, the more at home we feel and the more out of place we feel the further we are from it. The ability to feel like a 'fish in water' is related to our original habitus and its connection to the field. It can also act as a way of seeing and setting limits and boundaries, and where we should be or what we should do. Bourdieu (1985) describes "the sense of one's place, as a sense of what one can or cannot "permit oneself" implies a tacit acceptance of one's place, a sense of limits" (p. 728).

Capitals

Another key aspect of Bourdieu's theory is capitals, in particular economic, cultural and social and how they are mediated using symbolic capital. Bourdieu (1984) discusses capitals as a differentiator of class positions. He asserts "the primary difference, those which distinguish the major classes of conditions of existence, derive from the overall volume of capital, understood as the set of actually usable resources and powers-economic capital, cultural capital and social capital" (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 108). The quantity and type of capital possessed can structure class position. He argues that capital "takes time to accumulate" which means those with inherited capital have advantages over those who do not in relation to life chances and trajectories (Bourdieu, 1986, p. 46).

Bourdieu (1984) argues that capitals are held unequally across classes, and therefore are at the centre of class inequalities and are linked to class reproduction. All three forms of capital are passed through the generations, so the privileges inherent in them are also passed on. The reproduction of capitals is also a site of struggle and Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992) argue that the state has a role in this, which makes holding this kind of power important to those who are interested in this reproduction. They name specifically the "school system in particular" (p. 115) as a powerful institution in this regard.

Economic capital also impacts other forms of capital, including cultural capital and social capital. Bourdieu (1986) highlights the prioritising of economics in capitalist societies and how keeping the focus on economics and "mercantile exchange" can influence how we view other kinds of capital, which can be viewed as "noneconomical" (p. 46). This takes the focus off the inherent advantages of those other capitals. Economic capital can

provide significant advantages, both in itself and through symbolic and cultural capital in a more hidden way.

Capitals and field are connected as the possession of capitals can impact the power and influence you have in a particular field. Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992) assert that

> a capital does not exist and function except in relation to a field. It confers a power over the field, over the materialized or embodied instruments of production or reproduction whose distribution constitutes the very structure of the field, and over the regularities and the rules which define the ordinary functioning of the field, and thereby over the profits engendered in it (p. 101).

Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992) also discuss the importance of capital in determining trajectories through social space. The quantity, and also the type of capitals influences both engagement with and resistance to particular fields, which can also limit opportunities. This is particularly important to consider in relation to education, and in particular who goes to HE and how this is impacted by the different kinds of capital. Again this is a really crucial question for this thesis and one I will return to both later in this chapter and in the findings and discussion.

Economic capital

Bourdieu (1986) describes "economic capital, which is convertible into money and may be institutionalised in the form of property rights" (p. 47). The role of economic capital is central in a capitalist society and Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992) assert that "in advanced capitalist societies, it would be difficult to maintain that the economic field does not exercise especially powerful determinations" (p. 109). Economic capital provides the resources to purchase or acquire both possessions and experiences. Your starting point, in relation to economic capital influences the opportunities, choices and trajectories of the other forms of capital I will discuss, so those who start with large amounts have more opportunities and choices which means they are further up the mountain (Savage, 2015) than those without it.

I have started with economic capital as it is a key aspect of how Bourdieu views capitals. It is also the one that is most often discussed, or used in discussions of class in Ireland (Finnegan, 2017). Economic capital is linked to income and employment, which are

important aspects of class positioning. We use measures of 'socioeconomic status' in most conversations about our education system and who benefits from it. Government funding is provided to all schools, with some additional funding going to DEIS schools. However this funding is 'topped up' by fees, 'voluntary contributions' or fundraising, benefitting some schools more than others. In addition those with enough economic capital can 'buy' private education, grinds, etc to improve their chances (or their children's chances) of succeeding in the educational system, of achieving higher points in the Leaving Certificate(LC) which opens opportunities for more prestigious HE places, in high demand programmes like medicine, law, etc. Economic capital is also linked to power and status, and influences social structures. It is a tangible marker of privilege and inequality.

Interestingly Bourdieu (1984) includes "spare time" as an indicator of economic capital (p. 110). He asserts that "the link between economic and cultural capital is established through the mediation of time needed for acquisition" (Bourdieu, 1986, p. 49). He includes the idea of how much time your family can afford to give you, "free from economic necessity" (Bourdieu, 1986, p. 50). This is important to consider in relation to those who go to HE, as there is a significant time commitment in gaining an academic qualification. This often means delaying secure employment, which can be an economic necessity for some. Time is also a factor in the ability of working class students to engage in extracurricular activities and in their dedication to study as it requires extra time to repeat (Bathmaker *et al*., 2016; Finnegan, 2012).

The accounts of class that are presented by both O'Neill (9992) and Bissett (2023) highlight the role of economic capital, or more specifically the lack of it, on the everyday lives of working class people, women in particular, and the role of social structures (social welfare, education and health) in maintaining the situations. The time taken up by attending appointments, shopping in the cheapest way and supporting neighbours is immense and the structures work to keep the research participants 'in their place'. The role of economic capital (or lack of) is central to their existence and also to their (lack of) opportunities, choices and trajectories.

Economic capital is also relevant to the other concepts which I will discuss in this chapter, as money can buy access to those with power, it can buy cultural experiences and access

to prestigious educational institutions, and it also plays a role in who is 'other' and therefore linked to symbolic violence and inequality.

Social capital

> Social capital is the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalised relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition (Bourdieu, 1986, p. 51).

Social capital is the people or networks someone has access to, their connections with the social world (Bourdieu, 1984). It is "membership in a group" which provides relationships which can support the individual (Bourdieu, 1986, p. 51). Not all social networks are of equal value in relation to the possession and accumulation of capitals. Bourdieu (1986) argues that "social capital is never completely independent of" economic and cultural capital (p. 51). Some networks provide access to those with power and often there is an economic cost to these networks (e.g. private schools, golf clubs). This can impact the networks or social capital available to the different classes and which groups have access to the networks that can provide an advantage.

The advantages that come from being part of particular social groups means that building social networks can be seen as an investment or just as a natural part of a particular role. Bourdieu (1986) describes "the network of relationships in the product of investment strategies, individual or collective, consciously or unconsciously aimed at establishing or reproducing social relationships that are directly usable in the short or long term" (p. 52). This can be as simple as being able to access varied work experience, seeing 'people like me' in different roles and occupations in society and having connections that can advantage you. Social capital can be inherited from your family, or it can be developed outside this. It can also be linked to your habitus and where you feel you belong, and who you feel you belong with, which can be influenced by 'constraint' of your habitus. Crew (2020) and Binns (2019) both highlight the lack of comfort with networking in academia for many working class academics, and how the competitive nature of many networking opportunities impacts finding a sense of belonging, related to habitus. This can impact the kind of social capital you access.

Some networks are built consciously. Savage (2015) describes social capital "as a means of allowing the privileged and powerful to use their connections to help each other and to protect their interests- and thereby shut out those who lack the social capital" (p. 131). Building this kind of social capital requires "expenditure of time and energy and so, directly or indirectly, of economic capital" and also requires you to know who to invest your time with, which requires "knowledge of genealogical relationships and of real connections and skill at using them" (Bourdieu, 1986, p. 52). Private schools in Ireland remain elite and resistant to diversification, and allow for privileged positions to be replicated (Courtois, 2015). Courtois (2015) describes a 'screening process' which focuses on "social selection, rather than academic selection" to choose students for these elite schools (p. 58). Social connections are made and social networks are built in these closed spaces, which prioritise siblings and children of past pupils, providing "further privilege an already privileged minority" (Courtois, 2015, p. 55). Social capital is a complex process that requires particular kinds of knowledge (cultural capital) as well as economic capital to benefit.

Social capital can also provide an additional advantage in the education system as those from middle class backgrounds are more likely to go to HE, and study more prestigious courses often know others who have gone through the system, which allows for an easier transition into and through HE. It can also have a more practical benefit in having access to networks for work experience or graduate employment.

Savage (2015) agrees that our families and family background either increase or limit our social connections. It also impacts our ability to make use of the capitals we acquire. Bathmaker *et al*. (2016) discuss the complex experiences of working class students in HE detailing how "their experiences are shaped by social class inequalities, which are often intangible yet have a powerful influence on university life" (p. ix). The working class students were more constrained in their experiences in HE due to having fewer resources. One of the ways this impacted was in relation to finding work experience and internships as they lacked the connections, or social capital, afforded to their middle class peers. Even students with good family support found that "the disadvantages they faced were that their social capital did not match up to their aspirations as students who sought careers outside of the field occupied by their families" (Bathmaker *et al*, 2016, p. 81). The working class students ability to engage in extracurricular activities was also

impacted, both by economic constraints, including needing to work during term time and the expense associated with many of the activities (Bathmaker *et al*., 2016; Finnegan, 2012). These inequalities are marked by absence of, or limited kinds of capital, which their middle class peers had.

The solidarity of working class community, building networks of those who share your values, including seeing the inequality of classed experiences is also a form of social capital. Folkes (2021) discusses the importance of community for the working class participants in her research. She argues that they prioritise this collectivism over the individualism which they see in wider society. This sense of community can support students to know and understand themselves and their class identity, and contribute to a feeling of belonging. O'Neill (1992) and Bissett (2023) articulate the friendship and support offered to neighbours and friends in every day interactions. However this kind of social capital doesn't provide any power, status or recognition in dominant spaces or fields. It is not a dominant form of capital. In fact it can mean you are labelled, excluded or 'othered' within HE. However, both Crew (2020) and Loveday (2014) assert that there was a solidarity and bond created by those who were seen as 'other' within HE, due to being working class and "for some, this connection with working class peers led to acts of institutional solidarity" (Crew, 2020, p. 113).

This highlights the difference in how dominant and non-dominant social capital is both viewed and experienced in different classes. Building networks, which are useful for getting ahead is valued in middle classes. Access to those with power and influence is prized as it can be valuable, while the importance of community and collectivism are not valued in wider social structures. This again can be linked to knowing what, and who you have access to, and making the best of your situation (Bourdieu, 1977; Reay, 2004).

Cultural capital

The concept of cultural capital relates to the importance of social and cultural resources and how they influence current and future opportunities (Bourdieu, 1984). He highlights the importance of "the domestic transmission of cultural capital" to show that children

from more privileged backgrounds benefit directly from familial cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986, p. 48). Cultural capital can be seen "in the form of long lasting dispositions of the mind and body" as well as ownership of "cultural goods" and "educational qualifications" (Bourdieu, 1986, p. 47). It is particularly useful in assessing the role of education in the reproduction of inequalities. Bourdieu (1986) recognised cultural capital as a theoretical concept which can help to "explain the unequal scholastic achievement of children originating from the different social classes by relating academic success" (p. 47).

Cultural capital is a broad concept that refers to "skills, tastes, posture, clothing, mannerisms, material belongings, credentials, etc. that one acquires through being part of a particular social class" (Longhofer and Winchester, 2016). Bourdieu describes two ways in which to accumulate cultural capital; education, particularly educational qualifications and "social origin" (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 5). Cultural capital can be inherited through socialisation within family and school and is accumulated through the accrual of academic qualifications.

Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992) describe cultural capital as "informational capital" which can be "embodied, objectified, or institutionalized" (p. 119). Institutionalised cultural capital is recognised at a macro level and includes educational qualifications. Objectified cultural capital is linked to possessions of literature, art and music, among other things. Embodied cultural capital is "in the form of habitus and long-lasting dispositions of the mind and body" (Bathmaker *et al*., 2016, p. 23). This can be heard in accent, or seen in gait or body language.

Bourdieu (1984) asserts that cultural capital includes experiences, qualifications, taste as well as knowledge and skills that can provide access to particular social spaces and social networks. Bourdieu (1986) recognises education as a system of reproduction, which provides "qualifications which gives rights to occupy rare positions" (p. 55). The expansion of places in HE has meant those who previously used education to maintain or advance their status and position have to "step up their investments so as to maintain the relative scarcity of their qualification and consequently their position in the class structure" (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 127). Bourdieu (1984) believes that this will lead to an "inflation of academic qualifications" (p. 127). He also asserts that "the least qualified

are the ones who feel the effects most directly" (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 128). Education is a social structure which grants status, by virtue of qualifications, and access to 'rare' positions by limiting the numbers in high status programmes and careers.

Discussions about culture are often seeped in what is seen as good and bad 'taste' (Bourdieu, 1984). This means that taste can be used as an indicator of class or status. Cultural capital is assessed with some types being viewed as more valuable and more legitimate than others (good taste). This can be contingent on where they are presented, the social field and who is making the assessment. Music is a good example with specific types of music being assessed from different perspectives, e.g. the value placed on classical music versus hip hop depends on who is assessing.   Weininger (2002) asserts that choices in relation to lifestyle and culture "serves as a vehicle through which they symbolise their social similarity with and their social difference from one another" (p. 138). Who you are and where you belong can be seen in your posture, your choice of clothing and your appreciation, or lack of, of specific elements of culture. He also notes that what is considered valuable culture can differ both between societies but also over time. People use their knowledge of culture to assess who is like them and who is different, which can impact your ability to feel like you belong.

Assessments of cultural capital are used to categorise or class people or groups. The kinds of culture that are deemed to have value can influence how boundaries are created, and how we classify each other based on how we are in the world, leading to either inclusion or exclusion based on your 'taste'. Using lifestyle and culture in defining class is only possible when value is placed on some aspects of culture while other aspects are not ascribed any value. This 'symbolic process' where differences are noted is a key factor in the demarcation between classes (Weininger, 2002).

Some groups have more power and are able to categorise others which is linked to their knowledge, understanding and acquisition of legitimatised culture, influenced by the habitus of the individual or group attempting to name or categorise. Weininger (2002) assets that "the various practices, and through them the different lifestyles, all stand in a hierarchical relation to the legitimate culture- that is, (schematically) to the canonized culture" (p. 142).   In HE students from middle class backgrounds are in a place that is

compatible with their own cultural capital, helping them to feel like a 'fish in water', and able to recognise and 'other' working class students in a judgemental way.

Only cultural capital which is seen as valuable by those with power can be converted, so it can be used, in particular situations, as symbolic capital. Symbolic capital is described as "prestige, reputation, renown, etc., which is the form in which the different forms of capital are perceived and recognised as legitimate" (Bourdieu, 1985, p. 724). Savage (2015) argues that "the power of cultural capital depends on it not being recognized directly" (p. 49). The benefits of cultural capital can be hidden. One example of this is the type of cultural capital which is found in the educational curriculum and who can benefit. Savage (2015) discusses the role culture plays in developing a habitus that is 'respectable' or 'acceptable' and how this impacts the ability to make significant gains by being "better placed to understand their school curriculum" (p. 97). The power dynamics and prioritising of particular kinds of culture allow some to make gains, while creating barriers for others, as it is more removed from their lived experiences.

The benefit gained from the compatibility between the cultural capital you hold, and that which is valued in education, can lead to a sense of entitlement. Entitlement is a characteristic that Skeggs (2004) ascribes to the middle-class, where culture is acquired as a way "to produce a specific form of personhood" (p. 135). This sense of entitlement is based on what is valued by those with power. It is also closely linked to the concept of meritocracy, where the middle-class feel they have earned their privilege, through the accrual of appropriate knowledge and culture. The concept of entitlement doesn't acknowledge that the game is rigged, or that not everyone knows the rules (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992). It also ignores the fact that there are multiple perspectives, not just the one that is presented as the norm. This links to the deficit view, where "the middle-class utilize their chances most effectively, assuming the working-classes have choices which they utilize less adequately" (Skeggs, 2004, p. 139).

Skeggs (2004) discusses the assessment of cultural capital from a particular 'perspective'. She asserts that "perspective is a technique by which the interests of some people are put into effect" (Skeggs, 2004, p. 6). This is also linked to the valuing of different kinds of knowledge and different ways of knowing over others. In HE, and formal education more generally, academic knowledge is often prioritised over experiential or practical knowing.

I teach on applied programmes where students study academic, creative, and practical subjects as well as undertaking a significant amount of practice placement. However academic knowledge is given precedence, even in practice placement, where students are engage in practical experiences but are assessed on academic portfolios and essays to prove their practical knowledge.

Cultural capital is an important concept to my experiences and perspective on class, as it includes, among other things family, location/ place, accent, clothing, vocabulary, taste (music, art, cinema, etc), recreation, hobbies, travel etc. Crew (2020) describes some of the key aspects of class including family, and familial influences; accent; presentation (clothing, tattoos etc); humour; care; solidarity and resistance. These are not easy to measure, or to describe in a way that has a clear boundary. They are part of the messiness and fuzziness of trying to explain class and classed experiences; our stories are complex and messy. The experience of cultural capital is classed, and the kind of cultural capital we have either supports or hinders our engagement with the world, and with education in particular.

There are some elements of culture that are particularly important to explore in relation to how culture is perceived and lived between the classes. It is also important to explore the value placed, or not, on different forms of culture, and how these assessments are made. How cultural practices are lived and experienced has an influence on access to and inclusion in societal structures, including education. What was the impact of cultural capital, or lack of, on our educational experiences?

Symbolic Capital

Bourdieu (1984) describes symbolic capital as the ability to convert other forms of capital for individual gain, which is linked to knowing the 'rules of the game', e.g. using cultural capital to 'invest' in art which will grow in economic value or studying the right course to get the best job. Having the tacit, insider knowledge which is part of having cultural and social capitals associated with the dominant and powerful groups in society, provides a route map or guide to getting ahead. Savage (2015) describes those with advantages as

starting the mountain climb from a higher base camp, so those with the least amounts of capitals, economic, cultural and social, have a much longer and more arduous journey to reach the top. Bourdieu (1986) describes the starting point for those whose families are "endowed with strong cultural capital" (p. 49) as being able to increase their cultural capital "at the outset, without delay, without wasted time" which allows for "hidden form of hereditary transmission of capital" (p. 49). Symbolic capital is how Bourdieu describes how these advantages are hidden and unacknowledged.

Symbolic capital is an integral part of how Bourdieu sees capitals and how the ability to make gain from cultural and social capitals are framed within the idea of the meritocratic society. This is linked to whether there is status or recognition of that kind of capital within a given field. Savage (2015) discusses the "inequities" that are inherent in how different kinds of capital are accumulated and the importance of understanding "the interplay between these sorts of capital so that we can identify how certain forms of advantage and disadvantage build up across them" (p. 165). The inequality can be hidden and transmitted across generations, including tacit knowledge about systems and social networks.

Bourdieu (1985) describes how cultural capital can be hidden behind concepts of respectability and taste, hiding its value to those who hold it but also to those who do not. This 'misrecognition' happens in all classes, even though it is mostly only of benefit to the middle and upper classes. This is 'symbolic capital' according to Bourdieu (1985). Weininger (2002) asserts that symbolic capital is present "when differences of economic and cultural capital are misperceived as differences of honor" (p. 142) which gives power and status to those with these capitals, which is not named. The use of this misrecognition to gain power and influence is described as 'symbolic violence' which I will explore in more detail later in this chapter.

This means that what is viewed as important, real or valuable culture is a classed experience. This is an important factor in looking at class and how class is formed and maintained. It also links with the idea of voice and experience, particularly in relation to whose voices are heard, where are they represented and who edits or approves those voices. The dominant middle class culture is evident in Irish cultural work. Pierse (2011) discusses the way working class writers and stories are viewed and presented in Ireland.

There is a lack of working class characters, particularly urban working class, on Irish made television. In order to see these characters we had to watch British television channels. This is something I will discuss in the findings as part of the question What does it mean to be working class? Pierse makes links between this and the low number of people from working class backgrounds in publishing, linked to not having the right connections (social capital) to access the industry (Pierse, 2021).

Access to both education and particular professions is presented as a meritocratic process (Courtois, 2015). However Bourdieu's concept of symbolic capital highlights the 'hidden' capitals and advantages that skew the system in favour of those with 'good taste' and the 'acceptable' kind of capitals, the right connections and knowledge of the rules of the game.

Misrecognition and Symbolic violence

In this section I will move from the concepts of habitus, field and capitals to think about how they relate to misrecognition and symbolic violence. The experiences of the working class are framed by those with power, and capitals. Moving outside your original habitus and being reflexive about the social structures can highlight the inequalities, and the power dynamics at play in which the inequalities are enacted. Misrecognition is where the symbolic power, often wielded through hidden capitals is not recognised as such, it is misrecognised and seen as a natural part of society. Symbolic violence is how this power is used to 'other' or legitimise and reinforce inequalities, which can have a profound and difficult effect on those who are impacted.

Misrecognition

Misrecognition is an important concept which allows us to critique the power structures and how they are experienced in everyday experiences, and particularly experiences of inequality. Bourdieu (1984) asserts that misrecognition is an important part of class experience. He describes misrecognition as the internalisation of the social structure. Burawoy (2018) discusses the concept and describes it as "domination is not recognised

as such, it is misrecognised" (p. 12). Bourdieu (1984) argues that "objective truth is misrecognised" (p. 168), that systems of power and capitals are presented as legitimate leading to an acceptance of the way things are. Bourdieu (1985) asserts that "power relations are also present in people's minds, in the form of categories of perception of these relations" (p. 729). The idea that societies function based on particular rules and games, which give the impression that everyone has a chance to succeed, is a key part of misrecognition.

Bourdieu (1984) names the education system as a site of reproduction, which also has a significant role in socialisation and in maintaining the status quo. In the education system "the curriculum is designed to match the symbolic mastery learned in the middle and upper classes, so that such children do well at school while those endowed only with practical mastery fail" (Burawoy, 2018, p. 8). This supports the idea of a meritocratic system where the best and brightest succeed and "children from the dominated accept their lesser destiny as a product of their lesser talent" (Burawoy, 2018, p. 8). Systems of education present notions of success and achievement as ways to ensure economic advantage, while at the same time obscuring their role in class reproduction.

The expansion of places in higher education in Ireland has led to more people going to HE, but there is still a significant divide between those from more privileged, middle class backgrounds (who are over represented), and those from working class backgrounds, particularly those from DEIS schools (who are underrepresented). 81% of affluent students go to HE, while 42% of disadvantaged students do (DIS, 2019). This might be explained in part by the "increasing gap between hopes and possibilities" (Burawoy, 2018, p. 9). As I discussed in the last chapter, there is also still a link between class and type of course attended, which links to possible future career and earnings. The most prestigious areas are still dominated by those from more affluent backgrounds (HEA, 2022; Irish Times, 2018).

As noted earlier in this chapter, Bourdieu (1984) describes "'a sense of one's place' which leads one to exclude oneself from the goods, persons, places and so forth from which one is excluded" (p. 473). One aspect of this that I will explore in the findings and discussion chapters is the consequences for those who step outside what is expected, women like us

who went to higher education, and the challenge when family and friends view this in a different way, seeing it as having 'notions' or not for 'people like us'.

The narratives of the deficient working class can also impact how people perceive and recognise their classed position, and their acceptance of particular labels. This can in part be linked to misrecognition. Tyler (2015) describes the inequality present in classed societies. She suggests that "inequality remains a matter of class, even when it is not explicitly understood as such by those who perceive or indeed experience inequality" (p. 498). She is describing the misrecognition of class and inequality. Those who are being exploited or who are being disadvantaged may not recognise the conditions that ensure those with privilege can benefit from the systems which create and maintain inequality.

Case (2017) describes how she changed to fit in to academia, but didn't recognise this as accepting middle class ways of being as the norm and working class ways of being as 'less than', 'other' or 'outsider' in academia. She asserts that in her desire to fit in she "perpetuated deficit-model critiques of the working class without attention to systemic analyses or awareness that middle-class cultural norms defined me as without" (p. 21). The process of misrecognition meant she bought into the dominant narratives of working class as deficient, and allowing the systems and those with the power to maintain the status quo.

I would argue that misrecognition isn't a universal or encompassing experience for all. Families and communities where there is social and/or political activism, often see the differences in society, defined by class (Finnegan, 2017). Pierse (2011) argues that "being working class is not the same as being a passive victim of powerful social forces; it is part of a collective and active, organic and historical process of identity formation" (Pierse, 2011, p. 9). It is linked to a historical and social context. Charlesworth (2004) emphasises the importance of leaving, or stepping outside your community of origin and reflecting on your conditions of existence from the outside in order to 'recognise' the power dynamics at play.

Misrecognition and academia

Many working class academics are writing about their experiences of being working class in the academy (hooks, 1993; Case, 2017; Binns, 2019; Crew, 2020; Stone, 2020; etc) and are reflecting on their acceptance of the dominant (deficit) view of class, or of resisting it. For some the resistance only emerged after feeling secure in their positions and deep reflection on their experiences, and the symbolic violence which label them as 'other'. They found ways to survive, which meant accepting the system, as it takes energy, time and knowledge to even start thinking about change (hooks, 1993; Case, 2017; Stone, 2020).

Case (2017) describes "the additional burden of cultural taxation, draining emotional labor, and loss of time involved in the working-class academic journey to respectability" (p. 21) and reflects on how she tried to hide her new knowledge to "avoid being perceived as uppity or too smart" (p. 19). The balancing act necessary to 'fit' in both worlds can take a toll. The feeling of being different and at times estranged from your family or community can lead to feeling caught between worlds, which I will discuss in more detail later in this chapter.

Teresa Crew (2020) describes a form of "resistance capital" (p. 134), of challenging inequality and the acceptance of working class as less than. It is a 'recognition' of inequality inherent in the system and a rejection of the dominant narrative. Resistance capital is part of Tara Yosso's (2005) cultural wealth model, which highlights the benefits and strengths of being from a diverse background, focussing on the positive aspects of culture. Her model is useful in challenging the idea of the 'outsider', or 'other' as less than and prioritises the benefits of their culture. Yosso (2005) asserts that "the array of cultural knowledge, skills, abilities and contacts possessed by socially marginalized groups that often go unrecognized and unacknowledged" (p. 69). The model was developed in relation to race, and critical race theory but Crew (2020) has highlighted its usefulness in relation to class, as a marginalised group, particularly in higher education. Yosso (2005) presents the perspective that students need to be filled with the right kinds of knowledge and need to change to fit a particular perspective. She challenges this by highlighting positive aspects of marginalised cultural experiences including "aspirational capital", "resistance capital" "navigational capital" and "familial capital" (p. 78-79). The

knowledge and understanding of the world that comes from our background and our ability to navigate a world that is build on other (middle class) ways of knowing and being in the world is an asset, a cultural wealth that can have a positive impact beyond ourselves. We need to recognise this and use it in how we challenge taken for granted perspectives that can try to position us as deficient (Yosso, 2005). Crew (2020) suggests the importance of embracing the identity of being a working class academic, and "recognising working-classness as an asset" (p.135). The importance of being open about being working class, or having a working class heritage links to the idea of having to 'see it to be it', for working class students. In this research I will ask if our "cultural wealth' was recognised in the education system and what impact misrecognition had on our experiences? I will return to this in the discussion chapter.

Symbolic violence

Symbolic violence refers to the use of power and status to diminish or undermine the experiences of one group by another group, and to legitimate another (Bourdieu, 1985). This can have a significant impact on the experience of working class people and communities. Bourdieu (1985) discusses the use of status and titles to exert power, which are often recognised by state structures.

Symbolic violence is possible because classification and objectification of some groups by others is part of the social structure. "It is in the course of an analysis of the different modalities of symbolic power that the politics of classification fully emerge" (Weininger, 2002, p. 144). The use of symbolic power to create explicit boundaries between classes or groups, based on what is perceived as respectable and legitimate, allows for classification of some groups. Bourdieu (1984) argues by naming the working class as a group, brings it into existence. Categorisations are made by those with power, and are done from their perspective, as a way of separating and legitimating themselves from those 'lower' down the social structures. We are positioned in relation to the amount, and type of capitals we possess, relative to others. This "makes it possible for its boundaries to become an object of thematic concern… a finite set of individuals whose limits can be traced, and a principle of inclusion which can be applied to particular cases"

(Weininger, 2002, p. 144). Labelling the classes differentiates between those groups. It provides guidance of who is respectable, has worth and who is 'other'. Finding commonalities and "feelings of affinity or incompatibility engendered by similarities or differences of lifestyle" (Weininger, 2002, p. 144) allows individuals to identify with a particular group, which can form part of their identity. It also creates a way of naming others as from a different group or class.

Bourdieu (1985) discusses the role of the state in defining hierarchies and the allocation of power to those who can then create limits and boundaries on groups or individuals. Naming jobs as skilled and unskilled, requiring specific qualifications and in some cases a requirement to register, is an example of how particular perspectives are legitimised and validated by the state. It is also an additional way to ascribe status to particular roles. The differentiation can also lead to the labelling, stereotyping and stigmatising of groups by those with power, acquired through the acquisition of capitals.

Children begin education with the habitus they have from their family and wider socialisation (Bourdieu, 1977). Their experiences form a significant part of their habitus, and ways of being in the world. Reay (2017) also discusses the role of the education system in prioritising and recognising middle class culture, while, in relation to the working classes, the system "considers them and their cultural knowledge as inferior" (p. 76). In her research she found that this led to feelings of injustice, powerlessness and 'educational worthlessness' in the young people. The structures are constructed in a way that these young people are positioned as less than, as their experiences are not recognised or validated within the education system. "Habitus transformed by schooling… underlies the structuring of all subsequent experiences" (Bourdieu, 1977, p. 87). The disconnect between working class culture and educational culture is of huge importance in this narrative (O'Neill, 1992; Lynch and O'Riordan, 1998; Skeggs, 2004; Evans, 2010; Loveday, 2015; Finnegan, 2019). This disconnect is enmeshed in the arguments "which focus the blame for the low uptake of university places by working-class people upon dispositions and attitudes related to the 'culture of poverty'" (Evans, 2010, p. 61). James (2015) argues that "educational processes naturalise social differences" (p. 109). The prioritising of middle class 'culture' and ways of knowing fits with the competitive, individualistic aspects which dominate the educational systems and can lead to feelings of inadequacy in working class students.

Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992) also explore the power dynamics in the use of language as a source of symbolic violence. They discuss the "monopolies on the market of linguistic goods" where "legitimate" ways of speaking are recognised and used by those with power (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992, p. 147). Those who speak differently, both accent and vernacular, are opened up to acts of symbolic violence. Language and accent were important aspects of class in our group and in the findings I will discuss how this was a source of symbolic violence in HE.

Bourdieu (1985) also argues that the social world is dependent on struggle which is closely linked to the habitus and field of those involved, but there is symbolic power which not everyone has access to which impacts your ability to engage in the struggle in any kind of equal way. In order to engage in the struggle you need to understand not only your place in the system but how the system works to keep you in that position. You need to know both 'the game' and 'the rules of the game' (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992). As I have discussed Tyler (2015) discusses the push back on particular labels which are linked to stigma, but also how this can lead to a lack in terms of collective identity related to class positioning.

The subordinate role of working-class culture and the dominant middle class belief that all working-class students in higher education are looking to improve themselves by becoming more middle class is also discussed by Skeggs (2004). This narrative is further challenged by Loveday (2014) in her assertion that education policies (in the UK) are founded on the belief that education is about "striving to become middle class" (p. 571) by the acquisition of middle class capitals. She asserts that there is also an inbuilt belief that working class students should be indebted to society for this opportunity, in a way middle class students do not need to be. She asserts that this perspective allows policy makers and broader society to "refuse to legitimise education as a form of class superiority" (p. 571).

This can also be a way of presenting working class students as being deficient, as they don't have the 'required' capitals to seamlessly fit in (Skeggs, 2004). This is evident in how stories are presented as students dropping out, rather than examining the policies that supported or alienated working class students to succeed. Loveday (2014) asserts that

"there is a danger of imagining working-class culture, experience and lives as being incompatible with the university environment" (p. 572). The challenging experiences of students, because of their class origins can lead to them experiencing symbolic violence. This means that finding a sense of belonging can be even more difficult as who you are is being targeted, and you are inscribed as 'other'.

The classed positions we occupy are related to the 'legitimate' or 'respectable' forms of culture (Skeggs, 2004), including language as detailed above, which is framed by those with power. This can be used to stigmatise some groups, particularly working class and 'underclass'. It also impacts whose voices are heard and presented (I will discuss this in more detail later in this chapter and throughout the thesis as it a crucial aspect of this research). So class and power are interconnected and influence your ability to categorise, or be categorised. Bourdieu (1985) describes the importance of "realistic knowledge of what it is and what they can do with it from the position they occupy within it" to describe the constraints that have been inscribed that either support or hinder your ability to "conserve or transform that structure" (p. 734). "The symbolic, in Bourdieu's view, is a formidable but highly elusive type of power" (Weininger, 2002, p. 161) that can become part of a person or groups habitus, and become somewhat invisible, unless time is taken to be reflexive about your position and social circumstances. Time, as I have already discussed, is a form of capital and has a cost.

The working classes rarely hold the power and positions so are categorised from the outside by those who do. Connolly and Healy (2006, p. 15) argue that "in essence it represents the way in which people play a role in reproducing their own subordination through the gradual internalisation and acceptance of those ideas and structures that tend to subordinate them". The symbolic power, and the impact of symbolic violence can contribute to the belief that things are as they should be, including your position in the social structure. In the findings I will explore the role education has on this and what effect going to HE can have on these perceptions and classifications which place working class students as 'other' and in the discussion I will critique the classifications ascribed to educated working class people.

I want to mention the term micro-aggressions in this section, as it is a term that is used more widely in general discussions of discrimination, and is used to describe acts of symbolic violence as it is a word that is known more generally. It was used in our group process to describe some of the ways in which these forces played out in our everyday lives and stories. Microaggressions are

> Typically described as a subtle form of structural oppression that manifest as verbal, behavioural, or environmental indignities, (whether intentional or unintentional), that communicate derogatory, or negative slights towards minorities and other historically stigmatised groups (Crew, 2020, p. 81).

Crew makes the connection between this term and Bourdieu's term, symbolic violence. "Bourdieu would describe this as symbolic violence, a "soft" violence that includes actions that have discriminatory or injurious meaning such as racism, sexism or classism" (Crew, 2020, p. 81).

Habitus Clivé

> Education, it seemed, gave us so much but it also took so much away, and produced a horrible sense of alienation from the environment of our growing up. Neither any longer unproblematically belonging where we came from, we also did not feel a secure sense of belonging in the new place, where thoughtless assumptions about us were often the norm and pointed questions about our origins often asked. (Walkerdine, 2021, p. 62)

Habitus clivé (or cleft habitus) is a feeling of being caught between worlds (Bourdieu, 1984). It is an important concept to explore, particularly in relation to the experiences of our group- working class women who succeeded in HE and will be discussed in the findings. As the quote from Valerie Walkerdine above shows although going to HE is a transformative experience, it is not all positive. The possibility of being caught between worlds, of lacking a place of belonging both in your old life and your new one, is real.

Ingram and Abrahams (2016) describe a cleft habitus as the feeling that you are somewhere you are not supposed to be, that your original habitus has not prepared you for this place or experience. It can create a tension whereby you feel the need to 'correct' yourself to ensure you are behaving in a way that is appropriate to this setting. It can also

lead to feelings of being judged- for using the wrong language, wearing the wrong clothes or having the wrong interests. There is a "misalignment between habitus and field" (Ingram and Abrahams, 2016, p. 145). They argue that by being reflexive we have the ability to modify our habitus, but that there is still a degree of "conflicting dispositions" which can lead to a feeling of being "pulled in different directions" (p. 146). This can lead to feeling like you don't fully belong in either field, which can cause difficulties in relationships both with those from your original habitus, family and community and also your fellow students/ colleagues as your way of seeing, experiencing and being in the world is different.

Moving across and through social spaces, particularly HE, has an impact on the working class student. Bourdieu's concepts of habitus, field and habitus clivé are useful to explore how particular trajectories impact those who have moved across social spaces. Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992) describe how "each field prescribes its particular values and possesses its own regulative principles" (p. 16) and how your place in the social structures, or hierarchy, influences how you engage with it and your interest in maintaining or changing the values and regulations. Are we more inclined to want to change the values when they differ from our original habitus, or do we try to integrate and become part of the system as it is?

Walkerdine (2021) discusses the experiences of working class women who went to HE, which left "a strong sense of not knowing what or who one was after having experienced the limits of one's previous taken-for-granted world" (p. 62). They felt caught between the two worlds they now inhabited. She details how she herself felt she had to be "almost a different person in each classed place- dress differently, speak differently, behave differently" (p. 62). The difficulty in finding a sense of belonging happened in both the old and new worlds they inhabited. Case (2017) goes further to describe how "by hiding and altering myself in hopes of passing as middle-class, I lost a piece of my working-class habitus" (p. 26). The desire to feel like you belong can lead to a *split* in who you are in different fields, and can impact relationships in both.

The impact of a cleft habitus on family relationships is a recurring theme in writing on this topic (Case, 2017; Law, 1995; hooks, 1993; etc.). hooks (1993) reflects on her parents perspective;

No wonder our working-class parents from poor backgrounds feared our entry into such a world (the elite university community), intuiting perhaps that we might learn to be ashamed of where we had come from, and that we might never return home, or would come only to lord it over them (hooks, 1993, p. 101).

While Law (1995) remembers her mother's comment that "education destroys something" (p. 1). Similarly Case laments her "complicity in allowing education to destroy the respect, patience, pride, and loyalty my family and broader community deserved. " (p. 19). These assertions about the impact of going to HE on family and community relationships, and the disconnect that can happen as a result, is a possible reason why some working class people are concerned about the impact of education on themselves, their families and their wider community. It also challenges some of the current discourse on social reproduction and social mobility, which I will discuss in more detail later in this chapter.

These ideas are also explored by hooks (1994), when reflecting on her experience of higher education. She talks about changing her accent, her syntax and how she interacted to 'fit in' and the toll it took on her sense of self as well as her relationship to her family and sense of identity. She frames these changes as expectations of the institutions and systems, that you accept their values and ways of seeing the world and different kinds of knowledge. She also talks about finding her voice and asserting and embracing her identity, including, race, class and gender, but only after she was established in her position. It was only possible to find and reengage her working class voice when she had gained status within the institutions.

Reay (2017) explores the impact of this on the individual. She discusses the "balance between realising potential and maintaining a sense of authenticity" (p. 108). The negative impact of 'succeeding' in education can create a distance from family and community. But it doesn't necessarily open the doors that are opened to middle class peers, creating this void between both worlds. Case (2017) describes not acquiring the "middle-class decoder ring" as part of your education (p. 27). Loveday (2015) describes educational policy, in relation to working-class students going to HE as based on the assumption that these students are "striving to be middle-class through the accrual of these valuable forms of capital" (p. 571). Friedman and Laurison (2020) discuss the

advantages of class origin that continue into work and careers, even after attending higher education, and for those from working class backgrounds success in prestigious careers "takes longer, happens less frequently and often represents a markedly more labour-intensive, even exhausting experience" (Friedman and Laurison, 2020, p. 226).

Friedman (2016) explored the change in thinking that went with moving through HE and how having new perspectives and new language had an impact on how you were viewed, both by your working-class family and friends, and your graduate work world, which was often dominated by middle-classness. Friedman (2016) acknowledged the experience of being stuck between two worlds and the impact this had on relationships, was gendered. As women we are socialised to build and maintain relationships and this may have influenced the women in his study. The emotional labour of sustaining relationships in both worlds had an impact. The different kinds of capital that were acquired by going to HE and in the jobs open as a result of the qualifications achieved was also a factor in this. He asserts that increased economic capital allowed for a smoother transition to a new class (Friedman, 2016). Those who go into 'caring' careers, who are disproportionately women, have lower rates of pay, so are potentially still excluded from some aspects of cultural and social capital, as well as economic capital. The value systems linked to being a working class woman prioritises care and caring so although going to HE led to a change in thinking, with some new perspectives and new language, this was a factor in the choice of courses and wanting to "give back" (Bathmaker *et al*., 2016, p. 122).

Class and class relations, and the importance of the affective way of viewing and experiencing the world can be linked to where we feel we belong. Skeggs (2015) describes class as a relational construct, where those with power decide who and what are of value. This value is based on moral judgements, including deserving and undeserving poor (or appreciative student). There can be a lack of value placed on some ways of approaching and engaging with the world, especially when this isn't transactional in nature. The lack of value placed on care in modern capitalist societies, unless it is linked to an economic value, is an important part of any discussion about affect and working class women (Lynch, Lyons and Cantillion, 2007). Skeggs (1997) described the importance of rejecting some of the narratives of care that were integral to the course, in order to maintain a clear sense of selfhood, and being a working class woman. The rejection of this way of viewing and engaging with the world may be part of the reason

for being caught between worlds, holding on to a way of seeing the world but through a prism of care and community. It may be a rejection of the individualistic and transactional values of the middle-class while holding on to the importance of affect. Social mobility can be framed as a way of trying to escape your class, however Folkes (2021) highlights the idea of "rising with your class" (p. 14) and how investing in communities acknowledges the importance of the relational over the individualistic competitive ideas of mobility. This centres care as a core value, linked to class and classed relations.

The impact of education is not that of the idealised socially mobile individual that transitions seamlessly from being working class to being middle class. Instead it causes a tension and a feeling of being caught between two worlds. Gaining cultural capital, through the accrual of academic qualifications doesn't allow for or acknowledge the potential loss that can be felt by the individual. This is crucial to how I experience class and how our working class habitus is not easily lost. In fact as more working class academics are writing about their experiences they are highlighting how being reflexive has allowed them to reconnect with their working class habitus (Stone, 2020; Case, 2017; Law, 1995; hooks, 1993; etc).

Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992) discuss the role and importance of reflexivity in finding ways to understand the world we live in. In order to recognise the dynamics at play we need to step outside the places and spaces where our habitus is compatible. Habitus clivé can be the result of this and can help us to see the world from different perspectives. Ingram and Abrahams (2016) argue that by having access to both worlds, "passing through working-class and middle-class worlds we have become class and cultural hybrids, belonging in neither and both places at once. We have been displaced to the third space" (p. 152). They argue that by not fully belonging to the different fields allows for a creativity and an opportunity to "contest the boundaries" by the development of a new way of being. "It is the development of something new altogether in relation to the confrontation of the incommensurate aspects of the two fields" (Ingram and Abrahams, 2016, p. 152). Being in a "third space" allows for a reflexivity and the creation of a new space which neither conforms to or rejects both fields, it is a new space built on the knowledge gained from both fields.

hooks (1989) also discusses the importance of "understanding marginality as position and place of resistance is crucial for oppressed, exploited, colonised people" (p. 21) and how we can bring our experiences from the margins to discussions at the centre. She includes gender and race alongside class in thinking about the margins we inhabit. Inhabiting both worlds, and our ability to speak both languages can be part of a resistance, and a way to find voice and share experience. However this is not a space that is easily inhabited and can identify you as 'other' but can provide an opportunity to have your voice heard, instead of being spoken about. The reflexivity that Ingram and Abrahams (2016) discuss allows us to have an insight into both worlds, that allows us to choose a "site of resistance" which prioritises those voices who are not usually heard in academic spaces, and where struggle is felt and understood.

> We are transformed, individually, collectively, as we make radical creative space which affirms and sustains our subjectivity, which gives us a new location from which to articulate our sense of the world (hooks, 1989, p. 23).

So although habitus clivé can be a difficult space to occupy, it can also be empowering as we see the world from a more nuanced perspective, which gives us power to articulate the struggles and challenges of being working class. It provides an opportunity to highlight the inequalities inherent in educational systems and advocate for change.

Habitus Clivé and academia

There is a growing body of literature which explores the experiences of those from working class backgrounds working in academia (Crew, 2022, 2021, 2020; Stone, 2020; Binns, 2019; Case, 2017; hooks, 1989). Crew (2020) and Binns (2019) both undertook research on the experiences of working class academics (in the UK) and found that for many of their participants there was a disjuncture between their working class habitus and that of academia. Some of their participants did embrace the middle class world of academia, and could 'pass' in that world, while others felt caught between worlds.

They do however have different perspectives on being a 'working-class academic'. Binns (2019) frames the idea of a "working class heritage" (p. 33), which influences our perspectives but is separate from our current class position. Binns (2019) describes an

academic job as a middle class job, requiring qualifications and with a salary above average wage. She therefore argues that there is no such thing as a working class academic, but those from "working class heritage" (p. 40).

Crew (2020) is emphatic in her assertion that "a working class and academic identity exists in a dichotomous relationship, where one is depicted as in almost complete opposition to the other. This is a problematic discourse and should be rejected" (p. 26). She argues that 'outing' ourselves as working class can be important for our students and others to recognise possibilities for people like us. She highlights the positives we bring from our working class backgrounds, including 'resistance capital' (Crew, 2020), which she has developed from the work of Yosso (2005). Reay (1997) also discusses the importance of being able to recognise inequality, because we have lived it and asserts that "if you have grown up working class you know the solution to class inequalities does not lie in making the working classes middle class but in working at dismantling and sharing out the economic, social and cultural capital which go with middle class status" (p. 25). It is clear that there is not a consensus on categorising class for those of us who are (or were, depending on your perspective) working-class and have achieved qualifications that allow us to work in traditionally middle-class jobs. What we do know is that as more working class people go to HE, there needs to be more discussion about class, culture and education, challenging the "ignorant stereotypes about the 'uneducated working class" (Crew, 2020, p. 25). I will discuss this further in the findings and in the discussion chapters.

Bourdieu and education

The complexity of Bourdieu's theory makes it useful for exploring class inequality in education. Education is a field where inequality is reproduced through the structures and the prioritising of particular (middle class) ways of knowing. Our habitus can fit naturally with this or it can be an alienating experience and our classed position has a significant impact on this. Those whose habitus are most closely aligned with the education system feel like a 'fish in water'.

The fact that many eminent scholars have embraced the work of Bourdieu to explore education (Skeggs 1997, 2004; Reay 2004, 2017; Crew 2020; Finnegan 2012, 2017; Bathmaker *et al.* 2016; Thatcher *et al.* 2016; etc) highlights its effectiveness for exploring this topic in depth. Education is a structure that is presented as meritocratic which allows the brightest to make gains from it. Using Bourdieu's concepts allows me to interrogate inequality in the education system by recognising education as a field, with conflict and competition, and highlighting the role of habitus and capitals in being able to make gain from the system. The differences in classed habitus can be seen as a natural part of society, and it can frame where we feel we should be, what we should be interested in and who we should and shouldn't associate with. But using it to explore inequality in education allows me to look at the structural aspects of the system that create barriers for some, while clearing a path for others.

The link between habitus and field is crucial to understanding the role of educational structures in the experiences of working class students and in maintaining the status quo. Reay (1997) explores the relationship between field and class and discusses the role of "class as powerfully internalised and continually played out in interaction with others across social fields" (p. 226) and the impact of "educational trajectories" on this. Reay (2004) also discussed the impact and implication of encountering a new or unfamiliar field and the impact it can have, which can "generate change and transformation" (p. 436), including seeing power dynamics at play and how they impact classed experiences. It is also impacted by our willingness, or not, to engage in a particular field, as "a space of play which exists as such only to the extent that players enter into it who believe in and actively pursue the prizes it offers" (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992, p. 19). This is really important to consider in relation to HE, and those who feel at home in these structures as well as those who benefit from maintaining the structures as they are. Recognising fields as sites of competition, with those with the requisite capitals in the best position to make gains in particular fields, can help us to recognise the experiences of those from 'outside' a particular field. It can highlight the inequalities in the systems. This raises the question of how going to higher education impacted us as working class women, entering an unfamiliar field and what impact it had on our "expectations" and awareness of our class positions and class identity? In the findings I will return to the idea of entering the field of HE, and the challenges we experienced, and the impact of being in a different field (HE), outside that which is expected for women like us.

The influence of habitus on 'choice' is discussed by Reay (2004). She asserts that there are limitations placed on choice, due to the habitus of the individual or group. I have explore this earlier linked to the idea of constraint and habitus, and how 'choice' can be a way of protecting ourselves from 'choosing' something which isn't achievable. Skeggs (2004) describes choice as a resource. Discussions on success or 'failure' in the education system are often blamed on making 'good' or 'bad' choices. This way of viewing the world removes any responsibility from systems and places it on individuals. It also allows those on the inside to maintain their own position and not challenge the systems which allowed them to succeed.

Bourdieu's concepts help me to critique educational failure as individual responsibility- and moves to a more complex relational way of exploring the interaction between the individual and institutions. The role of habitus and capital is particularly useful is helping to reframe the discussion from individual deficit to structural inequalities. As I have already discussed the education system provides a way to replicate the inequalities that exist in wider society (Bourdieu, 1984). The cultural capital of the middle class is well represented in the curriculum, making it easier for those from that background to succeed. Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992) also discuss the 'game' and 'knowing the rules of the game' which allows those with the right cultural capital to succeed in a system they understand. This success is framed as meritocratic and allows the system to be maintained. In relation to HE Crew(2020) asserts that "middle-class families pass on their cultural, economic and social advantages to enable their children to succeed in the educational system, whereas working-class families, who face economic constraints, may not have this, more elite knowledge" (p. 100). As I have discussed these advantages are generally presented as individual merit, highlighting the importance of discussions, and recognition, of the role of class, particularly habitus and cultural capital, inherent in the educational system. It was important for me to explore how this impacted our 'choices' and trajectories in this research and I will return to it in the findings and discussion.

Crew (2020) asserts that "those whose habitus and capital are desired will be privileged. In academia, it is middle-class dispositions and forms of capital that monopolise the field" (p. 12). The field of education, and especially higher education, has particular expectations and rules which are bound up in middle class values and norms. Having the

'right' dispositions and capitals in a particular field ensures an advantage for that individual or group. Burke *et al.* (2016) describe field as "a site of competition and aggression in which an individual or group is required to negotiate" which is influenced by their habitus and capital. They describe field as the place where "habitus and capital interact" (p. 2). Bentley (2020) argues that fields are sites of power struggles and "those with the capital and habitus most congruent to the field are in a better position to establish this power" (p. 71). Different kinds of capital have different value in different fields, and knowing the rules of the particular game make it easier to succeed. This, combined with a deficit perspective of working classness, frames an unequal structure, a rigged game, in which the middle class can succeed much easier. It also highlights the structures which facilitate the additional barriers which working class students must traverse to succeed. And at the core of this is the 'choice' to feel 'other' or assimilate to fit in for working class students, impacting any sense of belonging, and impacts any possibility of moving from misrecognition, and individual perspectives to becoming reflexive and 'recognition' of the game, the hidden capitals and how the structures work to maintain inequality.

Reay (2017) also discusses the importance of history and generational deprivation and inequality and how it can impact on the ability of those from working class backgrounds to engage in education in a confident way. They are impacted by their own, their families and their communities experiences of "relative deprivation and school failings which generate fragile, unconfident learner identities" (Reay, 2017, p. 16). The influence of our habitus can impact our engagement with and success in education. Lack of confidence can be read as an individual deficit but when seen in this context the wider influences of shared understanding of where we belong can have a significant impact. It can also influence teachers expectations of the ability and prospects of the children they teach, as they are also influenced by their own habitus (Lynch and O'Riordan, 1998).

A key aspect of the replication of the inequalities in education relates to who are our teachers. In Ireland most teachers come from a middle class background (Keane and Heinz, 2015), and these teachers bring their experiences of middle class life and values, and perspective on education, which can have an impact on their perceptions of the communities and children they are teaching in the classroom every day (Lynch and O'Riordan, 1998). This can reinforce the internalised negative 'habitus' of the children

in the room. Merrill *et al.* (2020) describe how "the school's limited, and limiting, expectations of the students on this course were made abundantly clear to them"(p. 171). Keane and Heinz (2015) describe the higher expectations of teachers from working class and ethnic minority teachers who use their own experiences to gain a deeper insight into the students cultural experiences. The disconnect between the cultural capital of the students, and the cultural capital valued by the school, including the teachers, places limitations which is not just experienced but *felt* by the students. In this research we explore our working class cultural capital and what it meant for us in the education system.

This is important to consider in relation to access in HE. Reay (2017) describes how generational learner identity can become part of our habitus. Teacher education in Ireland is dominated by middle class students, and middle class culture (Keane and Heinz, 2015). Access to HE programmes often start much later, closer to completion of or after Leaving Certificate. However messages about belonging, ability to be successful or confident in education develop much earlier and are difficult to undo. The complexity of classed experiences of education is experienced through the inequality in the current systems. As I discussed in the last chapter current access policy aims to support students to integrate into current systems, rather than challenge the status quo (Loxley *et al.*, 2017). This ensures those who currently benefit from the system will continue to do so, while working class students (and educators) will continue to be underrepresented.

Class and gender in education

Bourdieu's theory has been built on by others to include a more specific female perspective. His theory has been critiqued for being too focused on the experiences of men (Atkins, 2015) but has been expanded by feminist Bourdeusians to ensure women's experiences are incorporated. Skeggs (2004) asserts that "Bourdieu has been particularly useful for enabling feminists to put the issue of class back onto the feminist agenda" (p. 76). I have used Bev Skeggs, Diane Reay and Cathleen O'Neill, in particular to ensure that the gendered nature of class is included in this thesis. The experiences and perspectives of women are classed but also gendered, as I have already argued. I have

previously discussed the prioritising of middle class knowledge within the education system.

Walkerdine (2023) was also important in building on Bourdieu to highlight the affective dimensions of class and gender. She highlights how classed and gendered habitus are transmitted across the generations, including the importance of care and caring for working class women. We learn what it is to be a working class woman from those around us, and as women our experiences and expectations are different than working class men.

The women in O'Neill's (1992) study articulate the lack of working class culture in the curriculum, with books presenting a middle class life as the norm, including house, family structure and money. Skeggs (1997) asserts that the educational system excludes knowledge that is typically part of the working class women's experiences, and prioritises academic knowledge, which is defined in a classed and gendered way. The girls in her study find ways to reject this, to maintain a way of succeeding without abandoning themselves and their values in the process. Evans (2010) describes the "relationship of working class people to middle class institutions" (p. 55) and how success is framed as linked to individual merit, ignoring the structural barriers. She describes "this tendency of young working-class women to frame issues of equality as personal deficit demonstrates the audacity of political discourses which seek to individualise them" (p. 64) and how this "gendered habitus" prioritises relationships and family (p. 66). She links this to the importance of care in their choices, and how their choices were limited by this gendered habitus. The habitus of working class women can differ from their middle class peers due to class differences, as well as access to economic, cultural and social capitals. These differences were discussed in the group and I will discuss this in more detail in the findings and discussion chapters.

I also see this in my experience working in education on caring programmes, where there is a reverence given to academic knowledge that is not given to practical knowledge and experience, related to care and practice. I think of the women in Skeggs (1997) research when I am talking to students about their experiences of education and their engagement with the practical aspects of the programme. They often place a lesser value on the modules that are less academic and more practical. This research process has led me to

reflect on how I can challenge this and support students to see the value in their practical knowledge, and to place value on the practical subjects. I am naming it more clearly now but, in the context of the current neoliberal competitive education structures, think it is only when students can look back and reflect themselves that they might be better placed to recognise the value in the practical.

Higher Education and social reproduction

Bourdieu (1984) discusses the use of educational credentials to maintain class inequalities. As I have discussed working class habitus and capitals, impacts choice and 'constraint' (Bourdieu, 1985; Reay, 2004). I will discuss the framing of social mobility in education policy within the context of education as a tool of class reproduction. Social mobility is a concept that is used in discussions about class, education and inequality, particularly in policy and in wider debates about access in higher education. Whelan and Layte (2004) describe social mobility as "measured in terms of movement between social classes and in particular, the extent to which children equal or surpass the social class of their parents" (p. 1) and link it to education and employment. I, and the other women in our group, would probably be described as socially mobile by others, as we have had success in higher education(HE) and are working in 'professional' jobs. In this section I will use Bourdieu's theory to discuss how education is a tool of social reproduction and critique the idea of social mobility.

Thinking about education as a 'game' with winners and losers (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992) is a useful frame for critiquing access and widening participation agendas, which are how social mobility in education is enacted. The impact of habitus, cultural capital and the dominance of middle class ways of being and knowing in the education system, are not generally part of discussions of access and widening participation but are key to social reproduction of the classes. Policies related to these topics don't aim to change the inequalities within the system, just to provide places within the current one (Loxley, *et al.*, 2017). Policies are written by those who know the rules, and possibly assume that the rules are universally known. Those who know the system are able to make gains from it while those who don't have this 'knowledge' are considered "responsible for their own

educational success without providing them with the resources to make that success possible" (Reay, 2017, p. 102).

An aspect of 'the game' is the "scarcity" of particular qualifications and the "opportunity hoarding" where jobs which can offer significant benefit, in both status and salary, often require expensive educational credentials (Wright, 2015, p. 6). I have discussed the low percentage of working class students in highly sought after courses like medicine, while they are overrepresented in less prestigious courses like ECCE or Social Care (HEA, 2021). So educational credentials "require investing in HE" (Folkes, 2021, p. 5) including time and financial commitments.

Social reproduction is possible because of the value judgements which frames the working class as deficient or less than. As I have discussed in relation to cultural capital, those with the power make the classifications of what is good or bad, and in this case they present education as a tool to move class and frame social mobility as good and what the middle class believe the working classes should aspire to (Folkes, 2021). Bentley (2021) recommends changing the use of the term social mobility and instead having a focus on social justice. This changes the narrative from an individual endeavour to a collective approach, which recognises the inequalities in the system and not a deficit in the individual.

Current discourse on inequality and social mobility, linked to value judgements, often fails to acknowledge that achieving in education isn't necessarily about trying to escape being working-class or wanting to become middle-class (Folkes, 2021; Case, 2017). There is a desire to have opportunities not available without a qualification, but not necessarily to abandon family or community. In their study which explores the experiences of working class students of HE, Merrill, Finnegan, O'Neill and Revers (2020) describe that "what comes out of the students and graduates accounts very clearly is the desire for what might be termed the expansion of reflexive agency whilst retaining a sense of biographical coherence" (p. 168). Folkes (2021) highlights the importance of place, community and kin. She asserts that "for many in working-class communities a form of relational sociality holds value", where "relational selfhood focuses on relationships with others, ontological security, social fixity, and belonging" (Folkes, 2021, p. 5) and are valued and prioritised over a neo-liberal self-serving individual. This

also highlights differences in habitus between the classes, and the different trajectories that are connected to class positioning. Valuing family and community, and seeing mobility as a community endeavour, rather than an individual one highlights the importance of values and world views of working class habitus. This ensures the valuing of a continued connection, with social justice and collective growth, over the idea of escaping. Participants in her research valued being true to themselves and their community over formal educational achievement- which they didn't see as something for them (Folkes 2021). They placed value on living near family and the connections facilitated by this 'anchoring'. They placed a value on 'fixity' and the connection to community across generations. Folkes (2021) argues that "it is such relationality to home, community, and kin that is overlooked in the normative social mobility discourse" (p. 10). She acknowledges the desire to escape 'difficult circumstances', but the importance of families and values were seen as valuable and worth holding on to. Folkes (2021) research highlights the enduring nature of habitus.

She also challenges the quantitative measures that are typically used to measure mobility;

> Typically focusing on intergenerational movements across both occupational and income structures, quantitative measures of social mobility are conceptually narrow by limiting mobility to work- place relations and ignoring the affective aspects of being socially mobile (Folkes, 2021, p. 4).

Reay (2017) highlights HE as a site of social reproduction and also critiques the idea of social mobility, describing it as an "optimistic fantasy that ensures and works on both the individual psyche and collective consciousness" (p. 102) and that it also assumes that the working classes aspire to be middle class. The individuals who fail to make themselves middle class continue being named as deficient (Reay, 2017). The game is rigged, but those who lose are blamed for not knowing the rules. The differences in economic, cultural and social capitals are hidden, and individual factors are blamed, without acknowledging the structural and societal factors. Discussions of social mobility obscure the structures which limit opportunities and enable social reproduction of the classes.

The experience of going to higher education(HE) isn't always positive and HE structures often lead to a "process and class defensiveness and disidentification" leading to students attempts to blend in or "pass as middle class to avoid devaluation", but is challenged by

some students (Loveday, 2014, p. 581). The participants in her research did not view education as a way out of their class and in many cases it gave them the language and confidence to "reject the legitimacy of the classes, cultural hegemony" of HE (p. 582). This happened with the support of other working class students and staff, where there was a sense of belonging related to class. Loveday (2014) asserts that the deficit perspective of working class culture "implicitly endorses the value of middle class forms of culture and knowledge" (p. 577). Bathmaker, Ingram, Abrahams, Hoare, Waller and Bradley (2016) discuss the influence of experiences of social class inequality, which can be intangible and difficult to describe, but which also has a significant impact on life in HE, including through acts of symbolic violence.

I am particularly interested in how conceptions of social mobility and habitus clivé interact, especially in the context of social reproduction. Habitus clivé or feeling caught between worlds can mean not really belonging fully in either. Going to HE changes you (Walkerdine, 2020; Merrill *et al*, 2020; Reay, 2017; Case, 2017; etc) and provides opportunities outside your original habitus, but it does so at a cost. Being in a field outside your norm opens you up to potential acts of symbolic violence, being seen as 'other' or assimilating and giving up part of yourself to belong. Case (2017) describes how "my working-class body and habitus betray me as an accidental insider" (p. 17). So although HE offers different opportunities, it can come at a cost for working class students, and graduates.

Crew (2020) discusses the presentation of social mobility and its "expected positive effects" but how "little is presented to contradict the advantages of upward social mobility" (p. 70). It also doesn't acknowledge that the qualification achieved doesn't necessarily bridge the gap in economic, cultural and social capitals, or alter embodied habitus, that can be necessary to succeed in middle class jobs. One participant in Merrill *et al* (2020) study "recognises she will never have the same social, economic and cultural capitals of her middle-class counterparts but at the same time recognises that she has changed and 'grown' as a result of studying at an elite university" (p. 173) and they conclude

> "In this way old inequalities – which shape early biographical choices and trajectories- related to wealth as well as social and cultural capital, continue to affect labour market outcomes in later life."(p. 173)

So the promise of social mobility is difficult to actualise as you continue to play catch up with your middle class peers. Friedman and Laurison (2020) assert that there are "profoundly unequal rewards based on the accident of social origin"(p. 227), and the effects of social reproduction continue to be experienced.

I believe that this highlights the importance of working class voices in challenging the taken for granted narratives about our experiences. It also highlights the prioritising of academic ways of knowing, as those from working class communities have lots to say about their experiences, but their voices are often not heard or are mediated by others (Lynch and O'Neill, 1994). Looking at the culture of HE and whose voices are represented can give us information about additional barriers and challenges for working class students, as well as recognising the role of HE in social reproduction.

Policies related to social mobility are based in the current educational structures that are dominated by middle class academics and policy makers. They frame education as a way out, or a way up, within the system as it is, and don't acknowledge any possibility of a different kind of system (Finnegan, Fleming and Loxley, 2017). Education as a way to become socially mobile does not recognise the role of education beyond its benefit to the individual and the economy. It does not frame social mobility within the context of a system which provides advantages to the middle class and therefore promotes social reproduction.

Social reproduction is an important concept for this thesis. Bourdieu (1984) emphasises the significant limits of social mobility as the social structures make it difficult to change social position or class. Our working class habitus and capitals do not have the same value within education, and HE in particular and can highlight the power, symbolic violence and misrecognition that maintain the system. Despite this the concept of social mobility is inherent in education policy that frames access and widening participation. It is presented from a positive, middle class, perspective, but increasing literature, particularly qualitative and autoethnographic work of working class academics, is starting to highlight the challenges both within HE and in middle class jobs after HE. The gap in economic, social and cultural capitals is narrowed but remains, and alongside a potentially

fractured and enduring habitus, impacts opportunities beyond HE. I will continue exploring social reproduction in the findings.

Voice, story and class

> But thinking through class is still vital because it makes us confront the issue of who has wealth and power. It also focuses our attention on which stories and versions of a social world are listened to, and encourages us to ask why (Reay, 2017, p, 7).

Voice and story are crucial in understanding class in a nuanced and lived way. When I think about class I am brought into my own experiences, as well as those of my family, friends and community. I also think about my city and country and how we discuss, or omit from discussions, concepts of class. A very important aspect of this research is grounded in voice and experience. Diane Reay points out, in the quote above, that the voices that are presented, represented and heard is an important factor in discussions of class and what it means to be working class. In an unequal society those with power and status have the ability to frame conversations and narratives of class. However there are also those of us from working class backgrounds, and those who want a more equal society and world, who are trying to find ways to ensure our voices and the voices of others like us are heard. This way of understanding class and classed experiences is very significant for every part of this thesis.

My use of voice and story is related to the importance of our using our voices and telling our stories, both to each other and to the broader conversations about class inequality. It is also about how stories like ours are not afforded value and we can challenge that perspective. Couldry (2010) emphasises the importance of voice as value, in which our stories have value, both to ourselves but also in a broader sense. "Treating voice as a value means discriminating against frameworks of social economic and political organisation that deny or undermine voice, such as neoliberalism" (Couldry, 2010, p. 2) so having voice and story as central to this research is a way to challenge any taken for granted perspectives which exclude or undermine our perspectives. Couldry (2010) argues that "treating voice as a value means discriminating in favour" (p. 1) of seeing the

person, their experiences and their voice as worthwhile. In this research we worked together to place a value on our voices, within the process and this continued for me in writing the thesis. I have "discriminated in *favour*" (Couldry, 2010, p. 2) throughout this research process and have used our voices and stories in a way which places significant value on them.

Starting with voice and story also means starting with the expertise which is inherent in us and in our experiences. Having the space to tell our stories is part of a "process of giving an account of one's life and its conditions" (Couldry, 2010, p. 7) which allows us to reflect on our experiences and to "think about what one strand of our lives means for the other strands" (p. 9). This was an important aspect of our research process where we could reclaim our stories without them being redrafted or undermined by the social structures which position us as other.

The role of "social opacity" in what stories "individuals and groups can tell about their role and place in the social world" is linked to the individualising of social problems (Couldry, 2010, p. 125). Highlighting voices and stories which show the inequalities in our society can challenge the status quo. Voices and stories, from a sociological perspective, means thinking about where our stories fit in wider social structures and what this tells us about the world and our place in it. It also provides a way to challenge narratives about the way things are.

I will present a number of different accounts here to demonstrate the importance of voices of working class scholars and how their perspectives can challenge some of the taken for granted accounts of class and classed positioning. The journey to and through HE is challenging and can impact classed habitus and finding a sense of belonging. It can lead to us losing our voice. It was important for me to read these accounts and find a sense of shared understanding in the stories that supported me to understand the impact of being working class in this world. It is also important to note that the structures and processes in higher education(HE) create barriers to us getting to a level where our voices are heard, but there are more of these kinds of experiences being shared as we claim, and own, our place in HE.

Reay (2017) discusses the importance of voice and story in class. She emphasises the importance of looking at who is telling the story and how this is often related to who has the power and wealth. She discusses the importance of naming and thinking about class as a way to understand the version of the world that is presented to us. She links this to narratives of the deficient working classes and how they don't succeed in education because of individual failings, rather than acknowledge the structural inequalities and generational deprivation. This class blaming allows the middle classes to believe the myth of meritocracy. This is influenced by the voices that are heard and those who aren't. Stone (2020) asserts that "rarely are the people from the working-class allowed to speak for ourselves" (p. 12). This gap in who is represented and heard influences how we view class and at times how the working classes see their roles in society.

> The very owning and controlling of the stories of oppression adds further to the oppression as it means that there are now people who can claim to know and understand you better than you understand yourself; there are experts there to interpret your world and to speak on your behalf. They take away your voice by speaking about you and for you (Lynch and O'Neill, 1994, p. 309)

Often, those who study the working class do so as outsiders. The middle class perspective of most academics and researchers informs their starting point in research. As Lynch and O'Neill (1994) have stated this can lead to others claiming to be experts in your life, and how this can "take away your voice by speaking about you and for you" (p. 309). Research can become a process whereby "working-class people are always asked to explain themselves to academics and their stories mapped if not pathologized as objects of inquiry, known rather than knowers" (Walkerdine, 2021, p. 68). She also discusses the importance of working class academics and working class students undertaking research on class, as insiders, bringing their knowledge and voices to the discussions of class. Thompson (2000) asserts that "as members of a group or as individuals, the working class are rarely asked to write about themselves" (p. 86). Changing whose voices are heard shifts the presentation of working class stories as 'other' and often 'pathologised' by middle class academics (Tugwell, 2022; Walkerdine, 2021; Reay, 1997; Lynch and O'Neill, 1994;). It changes the narratives of working classes from them to us.

The importance of voice and story is also discussed by Sharon Tugwell (2022). In her autoethnographic piece she discusses how reclaiming her own story is part of the journey to being whole, and part of this is rejecting the label of middle class. She describes "the embodied dimensions of class are something only the working-class have access to. It is only us who can know how it feels" (Tugwell, 2022, p. 44). Those who study class from the outside have a vested interest in rejecting working classness and academic as co-existing as "to do so would mean the object of study has become the subject, thus the status quo would be threatened, and the surety of their position of entitlement might come under threat" (Tugwell, 2022, p. 44). The complex, embodied experience of class creates barriers and challenges for those who do not fit the typical middle class mould in academia, which can leave us feeling fractured and 'other' in that world.

After reflecting on her journey to finding her working class voice in academia, from the position where she felt she needed to alter her accent and syntax to succeed in the academic world, feeling shame at having a 'southern' accent to "(re) claiming working class identity while acknowledging my partial middle-class privilege", Case, (2017, p. 26) emphasises the importance of using this reclaimed voice to advocate for students and other working class colleagues, but her reflections indicate that the journey to reclaim her voice was not easy or linear. It required time to reflect and work through previous internalised misrecognition.

Freire (1996) describes the importance of voice in a journey to liberation. The systems of education which are based in banking pre-prescribe what is to be discussed and in what frame. In Ireland this is a middle class frame. Freire describes the need to reconnect with your experiences and what they mean through a process of praxis, which allows you to take back the narrative of your experiences. "Those who have been denied their primordial right to speak their word must first reclaim this right and prevent the continuation of this dehumanising aggression" (Freire, 1996, p. 69). The experience of formal education gives us messages about whose voices are heard which impacts our sense of what we can think, do and aspire to.

The power in research relationships plays an important role in whose voices are heard and how they are presented. Lynch and O'Neill (1994) discuss the role of the researcher as an "expert" and interpreter of meaning (p. 308). They also discuss the structures within academia which prioritises presenting research in a way that will be "recognised and

appreciated" by other academics. Most academic research is also behind paywalls so access to it is restricted. This gatekeeping can exclude those outside the academic world.

Lynch and O'Neill (1994) also discuss how this gatekeeping means that those from working class backgrounds must enter the academic credentialed world of formal education to be able to meaningfully participate in "the academic definition of their own class culture" (p. 318). They assert that this time in HE will lead to them being "contaminated if not converted to middle class culture" (Lynch and O'Neill, 1994, p. 318). They state that "this does not mean they abandon their class identity" (p. 318). This is something I will explore further in the discussion chapter.

I have also reflected on this throughout the process of this research. I recognise that my perspective and way of seeing class is very much based in my experiences, both personal and professional. At times I have also struggled with finding ways to write this thesis which makes it mine, where I can hear my voice, but will also meet the academic requirements. This hasn't been an easy process. There were times where in an attempt to be academic enough I lost my voice and needed to find it again. In my reflective journal I wrote "*why have I become compliant, what do I need to do to keep my voice- and the voices of my participants, at the core of my writing*". An important part of this process was the solidarity in the group, and after the sessions listening back to our conversations and recognising the importance of not just my own voice but of our collective voices. Darder (2018) discusses the importance of collective, communal voices coming together to create knowledge that challenges the status quo. She describes the process as involving "a deep physical, emotional, and spiritual activity of communal solidarity" (p. 101) which brings voices together and empowers those who are part of such a process. I also found this solidarity with other academics from working class backgrounds who offered support and hope about the world of academia. Being with others in this process helped me to find and keep my own voice, as well as to recognise the power in our collective voices.

What these scholars are articulating is that maintaining your authentic, classed self is challenging in structures that are built on and maintain middle class ways of being and knowing. This can lead to a disconnect from yourself which was only resolved when you recognise the classed differences and are able to re-assert yourself. The importance of

hearing from others moves this from a solitary process to one in which you can assign value to your working class self (Crew, 2020).   Finding and using our voices and stories can reconnect us to not just ourselves but to others like us.

The experience of feeling caught between worlds is something that I have discussed already, but it is important to revisit it here in relation to voice and story. If you are feeling disconnected from yourself, articulating your story can be challenging. Walkerdine (2021) discusses the experiences of working class women who went to HE, which left "a strong sense of not knowing what or who one was after having experienced the limits of one's previous taken-for-granted world" (p. 62). They felt caught between the two worlds they now inhabited. She details how she herself felt she had to be "almost a different person in each classed place" (p. 62). The difficulty in finding a sense of belonging happened in both the old and new worlds they inhabited.

This was also the experience of Paula Stone (2020), who discusses her own experiences of this and asserts that "the contradictions, ambivalences and paradoxes between my working class beliefs and values and this middle-class milieu has led to integration fatigue and has continued to endorse feelings of inauthenticity and illegitimacy" (p. 9). The dominant view and narrative that comes from the middle class policy makers doesn't acknowledge or recognise the story behind the 'success' and doesn't acknowledge the difficulties and challenges that can be created by moving between social worlds. Skeggs (2004) adds that "even when some of the working-class learn to play the game of the middle-classes this often generates a habitus that can rarely be comfortably inhabited" (p. 88). The importance of telling and hearing stories of working class women who went to HE is important in helping to frame a more nuanced perspective, one that is qualitative and storied.

Similar ideas and experiences are clearly articulated by bell hooks (1989), who describes "the multiple voices within me" as part of the journey to find an authentic voice, that represents all aspects of who she is and needing to use the "language of the oppressor" to articulate the struggle (p. 16). She discusses the different ways of communicating, with family and with academics that are usually separate and contained within different fields. She discusses the importance of remembering the past in stories and culture, including movies and literature. She says that "there is an effort to remember that is expressive of

the need to create spaces where one is able to redeem and reclaim the past, legacies of pain, suffering, and triumph in ways that transform present reality" (hooks, 1989, p. 17). The importance of "habits of being and the way one lives" (p. 20) is important in creating a sense of community, with those on the inside who understand both worlds, and can support the need to "resist".

Sharing powerful and evocative stories and struggles to find their voices in educational spaces that weren't meant for women like us, help us to see we are not alone, and it is the systems and not us as individuals that are creating significant barriers. This links back to the importance of working class women being able to tell our stories without them being sanitised or mediated by those who haven't experienced the world the way we have and whose experiences and perspectives are different (Lynch and O'Neill, 1994) . These stories highlight the importance of voice.

The absence of voices and stories that are familiar to us can heighten feelings of being an outsider, especially when our stories are mediated and repackaged by people who have had different experiences. The affective experience of class is something that can only be understood fully by being lived. The embodied

> relation between experience and a certain kind of being-in-the-world: a relation of world-shaping; and this exists through the implicit understanding that growing up into certain forms of comportment and patterns of relationships produces in one. It is knowing the aspect disclosed in that understanding of being, knowing the affective resonances of the world known through this way of being (Charlesworth, 2000, p. 110).

How we engage with the world and interact with others is part of our embodied habitus. We tell our stories from our perspective, from our embodied and lived experiences, which are guttural and felt. They can be challenging for others to hear. Charlesworth (2000) describes how those with privileged positions can hear "the voices of those demanding redress always sound shrill, demanding, ugly" (p. 69). Writing up research can, for some, mean finding ways to make those voices more palatable and easier to be heard by their intended audience. Charlesworth (2000) describes "the stylistic conventions of academic writing are the product of a specific trajectory, one that all too often empties the world of its biting, incessant, primordial wailing, giving reality a comfortable hue that moderate tones reflect"(p. 68). Different perspectives are also important in finding ways to theorise

aspects of society, of lived experiences, as they can broaden and change the taken for granted ways of seeing the world, linked to a middle class gaze. Our stories and the importance of centring our voices is at the core of this research. It is central to the importance of finding complex theory, the methods used and the process we engaged in together in this research, a process were we could be heard, even those parts of our stories that are hard to hear were heard from an embodied place of understanding. I will discuss this in more detail in the methodology chapter and findings.

My perspective of class

So how does the theory I have discussed relate to how I view class? For me choosing Bourdieu wasn't about rejecting other theorists but finding a theoretical ally, that for me offered the fullest perspective that most closely linked with my way of experiencing class. My initial reflections on theory are an important aspect of this. I needed complex theory that recognised the complexity of life. Bourdieu's theory allowed me to explore class in a nuanced and complex way, as it is relational and multidimensional, and explores how the different aspects interact and influence each other. His theory of class explores economic capital, alongside cultural and social capital as a way of including wider everyday experiences alongside social structures. His ideas of habitus, fields and culture allow for a broader view of class based in experience, in everyday moments and in relationships to others and to structures. From my perspective class is *more* than job or income, although they are also important. It is embodied, felt and experienced, as an individual and collectively, in relation to power, fields and those who are like me and those who aren't. Class is dynamic and can change over time and can encompasses both the wider social structures and how we as individuals interact with them. Bourdieu helps me to look at concepts of class which move beyond the measurable and works towards finding ways to capture a deeper understanding of the lived experience of class and the micro and macro aspects which impact this.

The most important aspect of Bourdieu's theory for me is that it is relational, dynamic and recognises the complexity of interactions, both micro and macro and how they impact choice and trajectories. Finnegan (2012) asserts that "his theory of class is orientated to

both broad structural description and everyday experience"(p. 87). This is particularly important for exploring the experiences of working class people in our educational system.

For some moving through the different levels of education is seen as natural but for others, particularly working class students the additional barriers, particularly related to the lack of fit with their habitus and cultural capital, emphasises the role of education in replicating the class system.

The complexity of classed relations is not an individual issue but one related to power both external (laws, rules, regulations) but also how this becomes internalised and impacts how and where we engage with the world (habitus). Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992) also emphasise the importance of looking at the historical context, again including broader society and family and community histories.

Charlesworth (2000) emphasises the embodied nature of class and how what is not said can be inherent in the "practical sense, the knowledge necessary to live life in poor and deprived urban space" (p. 109). The experience of growing up in a deprived community has both a historical and a current influence on us. The values and expectations of the past can weigh heavy on the experiences of those in his research, particularly the impact of deindustrialisation and neglect. The messages we get both locally and from broader society become inscribed on us. Our habitus is part of us and we know and understand the world through our lived experiences and also our affective reaction to it. Although we recognise our difference we may not see it clearly, or recognise why we are different. Charlesworth (2000) articulates the process by which we start to recognise the innate aspects of our lives, when we step outside of our communities. He asserts that "only a break with this primary milieu brings any recognition of it as a bounded, particular life" (Charlesworth, 2000, p. 110). Going away, in the case of this research attending HE, opens up a different world, which changes how we see our own. At times this is through the difficult experiences of symbolic violence, where we are marked as different which can lead to us assimilating to be more like 'them', or struggling to find a sense of belonging in an institution which doesn't see us the way we see ourselves- doesn't recognise the inherent value in our embodied and classed selves. But the affective, embodied habitus remains part of us, whether we try to reject it or not.

Bourdieu's (1984) way of conceptualising class is useful for exploring education at all levels, but particularly HE. The importance of not just financial resources, but cultural capital and the impact of habitus provide a framework for critiquing the systems, rather than the individual as deficient. When we recognise the disconnect between working class habitus and cultural capital, and the middle class educational system, it highlights an inherent inequality in the system, which prioritises some over others. This is also within the context of how education as a field allows some to feel like a 'fish in water' providing an inherent advantage.

Moving this discussion further allows us to critique the concept of social mobility. As I have already discussed it positions working class students as deficient, needing to be brought 'up' into the middle class, educated world. It also acts as a way of highlighting the 'success' stories as a way of saying anyone can succeed and reinforcing the education system as meritocratic. I, and many working class students, recognise 'luck' and chance as part of our successes. I also recognise that there was cultural capital in my family that placed a high value on education which in turn became part of who I am, despite the systems and not because of them. Most of my leaving Certificate(LC) class didn't go to HE, and only a few went to FE. There wasn't either a culture or an expectation in our school that we would succeed in education. I think many of our teachers saw it as a success that we even completed the LC. I also think it is important to recognise that HE shouldn't be seen as the only route with value, or going straight from school as the preferred trajectory, but I also acknowledge that educational level is a predictor of poverty and life chances.

Class is a complex category and to include lived everyday experiences as well as structural and power dynamics highlights the complexity. In this chapter I have demonstrated how using Bourdieu's concepts supports me to both understand and explain, to some degree, the complexity of class, particularly the experience of being working class. Moving between habitus and field, seeking a sense of belonging, are influenced by misrecognition and reflexivity, and also our experiences of symbolic violence. The experience of habitus clivé and being caught between worlds can be a result of the disconnect between your original habitus and the field you now occupy, whether HE or work.

The key ideas from Bourdieu's theory, which I have discussed above, provide space and opportunity to centre and validate stories and lived experiences from different perspectives. His theory recognises the significant structural influences on classed experiences, alongside individual experiences. The combination of structure and agency allow for a complex, and even messy, perspective of class. It also, in my view, provides opportunity to include insider perspectives. It is not focused solely on the 'neutral observer'. This allows for different perspectives, seldom heard voices, be prioritised in research. It also fit with my methods which emphasised researching *with*. His theory is based on substantial empirical research which is based on lived experiences. This gives his theory credibility which is important in trying to expand and explore complex conceptions of class.

From a personal perspective his concepts helped me to reflect on my own experiences, and those of our group, to recognise where the personal was political and impacted by structures, both visible and invisible. It helped to bridge the agency-structure divide for me, as I could use both to theorise our experiences. His concepts *fit* with a broader perspective of class which supported me to work through complex ideas in a less restrictive and boundaried way, that fit better with real life.

Conclusion

In this chapter I have discussed my own engagement and challenges with theory. Theory can be complex and finding theory that is congruent with our experiences of the world can be challenging. Throughout this chapter I have presented the key aspects of Bourdieu's theory of class and I have discussed why it is important in how I conceptualise class. The relational, complex, messy, affective experiences of class are central to our stories and how they are told. They are also important in how I conceptualise class.

In the next chapter I will discuss my methods and using Cooperative/ Collaborative Inquiry (CI) in this research and how it is related to voice, story and the complexity of classed experiences.

Chapter 4 Methodology

Introduction

In this chapter I will discuss the use of Co-operative/ Collaborative Inquiry (CI) in this research. I will outline the key aspects of this method and discuss how it relates to this research. I will include some brief descriptions of the process but will provide a much more detailed account in the next chapter. In the first section I will discuss the origins of this research and finding the methods which I used. In the next section I will outline the method. In the next chapter I will give a detailed account of the use of CI in this research process.

Positionality

> To ignore questions of methodology is to assume that knowledge comes from nowhere allowing knowledge makers to abdicate responsibility for their productions and representations. To side-step methodology means that the mechanisms we utilize in producing knowledge are hidden, relations of privilege are masked and knowers are not seen to be located: therefore the likely abundance of cultural, social, educational and economic capitals is not recognized as central to the production of any knowledge. (Skeggs, 1997, p. 23).

This quote from Beverley Skeggs is an appropriate way to begin this section as she highlights the power relations in both research and knowledge production and how naming our positions within the research can highlight our capitals, and our power. It is also an important place for me to begin as the researcher. I began this research naming myself as a working class woman but I have many privileges that are not available to most working class women. I have acquired significant cultural capital through educational qualifications. I am working as a lecturer. My qualifications have opened doors to opportunities, particularly professional employment opportunities, which are not accessible without educational credentials. There is status ascribed to professional jobs. These employment opportunities have also helped to provide some financial stability. I don't have to think about or worry about money in the same way as my parents did.

Acknowledging my advantages does not tell the full story though. I still have a working class accent, and live in a working class area. I have the imprint of growing up in poverty

and the challenges that I had to overcome to get to where I am today. I also know that I am 'lucky', that most people who grow up in communities like mine don't have many of the opportunities that I have. The voices and the stories that we hear in the academic world can be limited, and voices of women like me are often absent. There are many different trajectories, experiences and stories, but this was where I was when I started this research.

My prior experiences, of poverty and inequality help fuel my sense of social justice. It is not possible for me to separate these parts of myself, or to distance myself from values and ways of being in, and seeing, the world in order to conduct research. I bring my whole self into this process. I think it is important to state this here, to ground my perspectives as these in turn influence what I chose to research and crucially *how* I chose to research.

I spent nearly 20 years working in community based projects working with families before becoming a lecturer. Working with children and families kept my perspectives on social justice front and centre. Despite the advantages going to HE had given me I was seeing inequality every day. I was reminded that opportunities were still very limited for many working class people. I could see the gap in our society getting bigger and the impact of poverty on another generation of working class children. Many families needed support to meet basic needs.

The work I did was collaborative in nature, exploring challenges and working together to find practical solutions. I always approached this work from the perspective that we are all experts in our own lives. However, I would not have articulated it that way. A significant challenge was a shift in the way knowledge was viewed and valued in social care. There was a distinct move towards valuing academic knowledge over experience and tacit knowledge of the work. One example of this was training that was provided for all staff working with children and families, in one organisation I worked, that was delivered by an academic who had never worked with children and families. The trainer was very surprised that we had different perspectives that were backed up by significant experience. However, this didn't change the direction of the training, just positioned our knowledge as lesser. The use of terms like 'evidence informed' or 'evidence based' involved a cultural distancing from relationship building and intuitive and experiential

knowing. The voices of academics were being prioritised over both those working, and those engaged, in the services. There was a lack of listening to the voices of children and families. Those with the least power were the least heard.

These changes were a factor in my decision to return to education to pursue a Masters. Looking back I think it was an attempt to find a way to communicate what I knew, in a language that would be valued. It was a way to find a voice, my voice, that was being lost in the process of change. I saw education as a way to reframe my interpretation of the process of change. I framed my inability to speak the language of academia as my deficit. I internalised the lack of value placed on practice as a personal deficiency. I think I was probably not alone in this.

I sometimes think it is ironic that I have moved from there to being a lecturer, where particular kinds of elite academic knowledge is centred. However I have spent considerable time reflecting on how to include other kinds of knowledge in my practice. I place value on the students engagement with practice and how they can bring their own experiences into our classes. I can now speak the language of theory alongside the language of practice and place significant value on both in the learning process, while continually working to ensure I don't prioritise one over the other.

Ledwith (2007) asserts that "voice is an expression of self; it is rooted in the belief that what we have to say is relevant and of value (p. 258)". The importance of voice is also linked to power and who has the power to have their voice and story heard. In spaces where only privileged voices are heard and represented it can create a sense of unbelonging and isolation for working class students. I will return to this in the findings and discussion chapters. This research aimed to provide a space for voices to be heard and, using a reflexive process, new knowledge to be created as a consequence.

Understanding my own position is an important factor in conducting qualitative research which isn't seeking a universal truth (Braun and Clarke, 2022). Bourdieu sought a way to explain the complex relationship between structure and agency, the complex interplay between how we experience the world and the structures which influence this. In order to explore this topic in a meaningful way I need to know where I stand and be willing and able to be reflexive about my own positioning. "Within this context, we recognize

ourselves as culturally situated and have reflected deeply on the attitudes and biases related to our own cultural positioning as well as others" (Atkins & Duckworth, 2019, p. 205). Reflexivity was a crucial part of the research and a skill that I needed to develop. In order for this research to have real meaning I not only needed to recognise my own position, I needed to allow space for this position to change through the process. Reflexivity is important for all research, but is particularly important for me researching a topic that is part of my story. I will return to this later in this chapter.

This research was an opportunity for me to explore and "attach importance to those everyday experiences of class which are more complicated than objective measures would suggest" (Evans, 2010, p. 55). The level of importance attached to different kinds of knowledge and different ways of knowing is influenced by who holds the power. hooks (1994) discusses the role of "values, attitudes, social relations and the biases that informed the way knowledge would be given and received" (p. 178). This has a significant influence on the who and how of this research. The inequality in society and the narratives around who does and does not go to college are political statements which continue the myth of meritocracy. Those who 'succeeded' are often held as examples of the truth of meritocracy and this research will look beyond this to explore co-operatively what our experiences were, what barriers we had to overcome, what supports we had and the influence of our working class habitus on our experiences and subsequent sense of class identity. My own sense of justice and belief in the importance of social justice comes from my knowledge, experience and values, all of which are classed and embodied. They are part of my core and are important for every part of my story, past, present and future.

Another important aspect of this research is the influence of feminist methods and feminist ways of knowing (Connolly, 2018; Reay, 1997; hooks, 1994; Oakley, 1981). Although this research is about the experience, the stories of the women in the group, I didn't begin the process by naming it as feminist research. However as I became more engaged in the literature I realised this research would not be possible without the feminist researchers that have gone before me, providing among other things a way to articulate research which foregrounds story and relationship- key aspects of this research (Connolly, 2018; Reay, 1997; hooks, 1994; Oakley, 1981). The use of stories and acknowledging that the personal is political is also important for this research.

Haraway (1998) discusses the importance of "situated knowledge" (p. 583) in research, to name your own position and work reflexivity, rather than trying to claim objectivity. She describes the 'God' position as standing outside the research and trying to maintain objectivity, which is in contrast to the feminist position of realising that your location and position are part of the research and naming them provides a space to become a reflexive researcher. The feminist perspective allowed me to position myself inside the research.

The concept of situated knowledges is important in helping to recognise my own position as a researcher. How does my previous knowledge and experience impact what I chose to research and how I chose to research? I needed to recognise myself as an insider, with similar lived experiences to the other group members. "Feminist objectivity is about limited location and situated knowledge, not about transcendence and splitting of subject and object" (Haraway, 1988, p. 583). Research which aims to explore experiences and how they are impacted by wider social structures is situated within those structures, and as individuals we are influenced by them. This is also a starting point for becoming a reflexive researcher, recognising the importance of naming our positions and working reflexively from there, realising that we cannot adopt a 'god' position that is completely removed for the area of research. In fact for insider research this would be to deny ourselves- to ignore the knowledge we bring in order to try to remain 'objective'.

So for me knowledge is embodied and comes from engagement with others, with literature and with reflexivity. It is relational and we discover or absorb it through our relationships with others, with the world around us and with literature. We can gain a clearer understanding when we have time to be reflexive about what we know, thinking about what the knowledge and experiences mean both for us and for the world we live in. I have knowledge that is formal and academic but I also have knowledge that is intuitive and felt. Although I am naming these as separate here, in reality they are combined and mixed together in my understanding of the world, but they are viewed differently by different structures and in different situations. As I have discussed my engagement with formal and academic knowledge is linked to my felt and intuitive understanding of who produced it, from what perspective and how is it useful. It has also changed over time, as has my knowledge about it. The ability to be reflexive about our situated knowledge can deepen what we know as we can combine our different kinds of knowledge to form

a more complete way of seeing the world, which differs from a singular (e.g. academic or practical) way.

Reflexivity as an insider researcher

> It means turning of the researcher lens back onto oneself to recognise and take responsibility for one's own situatedness within the research and the effect it may have on the setting and people being studied, questions being asked, data being collected and it's interpretation. As such, the idea of reflexivity challenges the view of knowledge production as independent of the researcher producing it and of knowledge as objective (Berger, 2015, p. 220 as cited in Braun and Clarke, 2022, p. 13).

Reflection was an ongoing part of the research process, before starting the research group, during the research- particularly after each session and before the next one, during the transcribing, in the initial analysis, and before the final session. It was crucial that I made time to think through what my own experiences were, how they were similar or different to the other women in the group but also how they influenced how I heard what was said. Braun and Clarke (2022) assert that "who you are and what you bring to the research shapes and informs your research" as it influences what you do and do not see and "what you take for granted" (p. 15). This was particularly true for me as an insider researcher.

Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992) emphasise the importance of reflexivity in research and the importance of seeing the bigger picture, beyond your own world view and that of a particular discipline. The role of reflexivity is to ensure the individual, is recognised within a "social trajectory" and the universal experiences which are embedded in our experiences (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992, p. 44), which is evident in "genuine sociological reflexivity is that it makes us discover things that are generic, things that are shared, banal, common-place" (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992, p. 72). Bourdieu (1977) emphasised the importance of reflexivity in order to see our own habitus, where we sit in the wider social structures and how as researchers we need to ensure we step outside. He also advocates for it to be "anti-narcisstic" (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992, p. 72) but instead should focus on the sociological importance in how it can support us to see the world as it really is and not hidden behind the doxa, or taken for granted perspectives,

that are presented by those with power and influence. Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992) emphasises the importance of "uncovering the social at the heart of the individual, the impersonal beneath the intimate, the universal buried deep within the most particular" (p. 44) and to use this knowledge to expose the unequal and replicating power structures and their impact on us. Reflexivity can be important in finding ways to move from the personal to the political, and to recognition. "Bourdieu defines reflexivity as an interrogation of the three types of limitations—of social position, of field, and of the scholastic point of view—that are constitutive of knowledge itself" (Schirato and Webb, 2002, p. 261). This is also important as an insider researcher, particularly when using collaborative research methods, as it is a way to present a different perspective, as through this reflective research process we cease to be objects of study and become part of knowledge creation. Reflexivity is an essential tool in order to challenge "doxa as an uncontested acceptance of the daily lifeworld" (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992, p. 74).

"Reflexivity becomes a goal we are working towards rather than something that can be accomplished through research" (Reay, 1996a, p. 444). Reay explores the importance of reflexivity in her research with working class women, and how she is positioned in relation to them. It is important to recognise and be aware of similarities and differences, particularly with insider research.

Braun and Clarke (2022) describe "reflexivity involves the practice of critical reflection on your role as a researcher, and your research practice and process" (p. 5). Reay (1996) asserts the importance of not just naming reflexivity but in enacting it in practice as a researcher. For me an important part of this reflexivity was when I was listening back to the sessions, both when I was transcribing and for analysis. I sometimes heard things differently and at times I felt differently. In the sessions, at times I was focused on ensuring we didn't go over time or that everyone had an opportunity to check out which meant that I missed things. Sometimes small parts of someone's story or their tone of voice. But in listening back I could be completely attentive and really hear everything that was being said. I found this experience quite emotional at times. One aspect of this was allowing myself to hear the similarities and differences in our experiences as well as the importance of the process for all of us in the group. I had to really reflect on the way we engaged in the group in a reciprocal way, which was an aim of the research process.

Reflexivity is framed within both psychology and sociology, but with slightly different emphasis. Braun and Clarke (2022) emphasise the importance of individual reflection, while Bourdieu focuses on the importance of stepping outside of yourself to ensure you recognise where you are positioned within the social world and how this is linked to broader social structures. So reflexivity is important on two levels, that of me as the individual with my own story but also how that story interacts and is influenced by the world, and the structures around me.

Political Intent

This research is focused on class and the experiences of working class women who went to and succeeded in HE. Research which has a political intent aims to highlight "the social, political, and economic conditions in which those experiences play out are stacked against those being oppressed" (Hatch, 2002, p. 235). This research is about highlighting the working class stories and experiences, including the barriers that we needed to overcome to succeed in HE in Ireland. Through this research we explored our own and each other's stories, but we also discussed and reflected on how our stories were impacted by broader social and political structures in our society. We theorised about what impact they had on us both personally and collectively, and used the process to co-construct knowledge.

I have discussed the importance of voice and whose voices are heard. This research places voice at the centre. Our voices are important and we have a lot to say. It is important to find channels for the voices of working class women to contribute to discussions and knowledge about us (Lynch and O'Neill, 1994). This research is the result of the engagement of a group of seven women. There are many more stories and many more women who have much to say. Sharing the voices of those often unheard is a clear political aim of this research. Story and experience are important sources of knowledge (Reay, 2018; Mc Niff, 2016; Heron, 1996; Freire, 1996; hooks, 1994,). As argued earlier the voices that are heard in academia are typically those from more privileged groups and hearing the stories and experiences from beyond this is important in developing a broader understanding of the world around us. Hall and Tandon (2017)

assert "that what is generally understood as knowledge in the universities of our world represents a very small proportion of the global treasury of knowledge" (p. 7). We need to examine who is producing knowledge, and recognise their limited perspective. When we recognise that there is a lack of diversity of voices it will allow us to see the gaps in knowledge and whose voices, and knowledges are needed to fill those gaps.

The political intent of insider research is having a role in identifying and finding a way to present the unheard voices in a way that challenges the epistemological assumptions of those who dominate academic research. Many academics from working class backgrounds have discussed how difficult it is to find your authentic voice in the middle class world of academia (Crew, 2020; Stone, 2020; Case, 2017; Law, 1997; hooks, 1994). This highlights the importance of challenging 'what is knowledge' and including ways of knowing that move beyond formal, elite, and often inaccessible, academic knowledge, and valuing knowledge from the perspectives of voices that are seldom heard in this sphere. We need to challenge what kinds of knowledge are valued and who has the power in relation to assigning value.

Recognising the value of different ways of knowing is very important to me. As I have discussed I see knowledge as embodied and relational. Knowledge is experiential, presentational, academic (propositional) and practical (Heron, 1996). I believe that knowledge is much broader than qualification and formal education. Our life experiences provide us with a wealth of knowledge which can be richer and have more depth than formal academic knowledge. Mc Niff (2016) states that "practice based forms of research believe that knowledge is always being created, and exists in people and the stories they tell" (p. 217).

Skeggs (1997) discusses the "relations of knowing" (p. 24) and how knowledge is positioned and produced by those with power. The status of knowledges and the focus on formal qualifications has an impact on how we view ourselves, and also how the world views us. This is something I have grappled with, holding this perspective while also studying at Doctoral level at times feels contradictory, and the particular focus of this research is those who have succeeded in HE from working class backgrounds. The kinds of knowledge, and the recognition of it in wider society changes how the world sees us,

to an extent, but it can also change how we see ourselves. I will return to this in the findings particularly in relation to habitus clivé and where we belong after HE.

The recognition and exploration of different kinds of knowledge is also part of the political intent of this research. Recognising knowledge in a broad way to include experiential, presentational, propositional and practical ways of knowing (Heron, 1996) is important in moving beyond the prioritising of particular voices and knowledge. The recognition within our group, of different places and spaces that appreciate different kinds of knowledge was linked to a classed experience and differential values being placed on more academic ways of knowing is important. Different ways of knowing and experiencing the world are concepts that inform my epistemology and have played a significant role in choosing a methodological approach. The knowledge we create will begin with our voices being heard within the group and the process to make sense of our experiences. I will explore this further in the findings chapters.

Skeggs (2004) explores the idea of knowledge as "commodities to be acquired in self-making" (p. 77). The valuing of particular kinds of knowledge over others is a daily reality. More and more roles in society are requiring higher levels of formal academic qualifications. She also challenges the notion of the neutral researcher. She asserts that "theories always bear the marks of their makers" (Skeggs, 1997, p. 25), and that knowledge is framed by their experiences and perspectives. The importance of positionality and naming your own stance allows for you to interrogate both the knowledge and the theory in an honest way. She states that "research that listens to others rather than making assumptions about their existence is, I would argue, more plausible" (Skeggs, 1997, p. 38). This is just as important for an insider researcher, and reinforces the importance of being reflexive throughout the research process, including in the writing up. An important part of this process for me was researching with a group. As we were working together cooperatively I was hearing different perspectives each time we met, some which were close to my own perspectives and others which I needed to spend time reflecting on. We all brought ideas, thoughts, reflections, feelings back to the group to process together. I also had the experience of engaging with lots of literature which at times challenged or supported my own perspective and I needed to think through what this meant for both myself and this thesis. I worked through this by having in-depth conversations with others. Often there was a different perspective which challenged my

assumptions and gave me cause to pause and think through my way of seeing the world and why it was different, or similar to others. I also reflected by writing, keeping a reflective journal and also writing into the literature. I engaged in a process of writing key points from a text and then reflecting on what this meant to me, how it supported or challenged my perspective and how it linked, or not to what was being discussed in our group. Skeggs(1997) also describes how in trying to write an academic thesis she added some rationality to some aspects of the women's stories that made it more contained and academic. This highlights, for me, the importance of integrating the relevant theories, but not letting them dictate, and the importance of praxis and valuing the different kinds of knowledge and different ways of knowing at all stages of the research process.

I want to highlight the link between power and knowledge production, which for me, recognising who and how knowledge is produced, is political. As I have discussed earlier those with power and status are involved in creating the categories which maintain their status, and differentiate them from those 'below'. Related to this Skeggs (1997) describes the concept of "legitimate knowers" which led to knowledge positions that were subjective but not named as such, and how the knowledge created was based in the 'norm' of those legitimated to produce knowledge. Those who were granted the status to produce knowledge, which is most often done through educational credentials, delineates who are 'legitimate' and whose voices are worth listening to. The status of 'expert' is ascribed with particular academic qualifications. Higher education is dominated by middle class perspectives and culture and this influences what knowledge, and whose voices are valued as a result.

It is important to note that this research is CI and not PAR. The research did not involve an intent towards organised, political action at the outset. CI looks at the world from a humanistic perspective (Reason, 2006). It can frequently have a personal focus, without moving to a societal or political framing. Hatch (2002) asserts that "collaborative research here refers to work that is distinguished from action research because its principal aims are the generation of knowledge and understanding" (p. 32). CI offered a process to co-construct knowledge. The topic at the centre of this research is inherently political, but the research design didn't include a plan to do something about what we found. Within the group this created a tension at times, discussing what happens beyond the research itself, other than me writing a thesis, and there were some members of the

group that were invested in the potential for this to become something else collectively. It was often in moments of heightened emotion, particularly anger or hopelessness when someone would ask what else we can do, how we can bring the energy from the group forward. However, although we there has been individual ripples, a collective action hasn't happened, yet.

Although I frame this research as political, I accept that the lack of intent towards a collective action may be viewed as a limitation of this research design. However the democratic process to create new knowledge had an impact on each of us as individuals. I hope the process we went through together and the new knowledge will continue to have an impact on us, and potentially others who hear stories like their own. In the findings I will also discuss how it has influenced some small individual acts, which have the potential to lead to more explicit collective actions in the future- small ripples that can spread out. Heron and Reason (2008) describe "living repercussions and ripples" (p. 370) as potential long lasting outcomes of a CI. I will return to this in the discussion.

The creation of new knowledge about the experiences of working class women in higher education is important and meaningful. It allows us to highlight the structural challenges which were present and to bring this knowledge beyond those who have experienced it. We explored power and powerlessness, as this was part of our own stories and is an important aspect of how class is created and framed. As I have already discussed there is a significant absence of working class voices, theorising working class experiences, particularly in Ireland (O'Neill, 1992; Lynch and O'Neill, 1994; Lynch and O'Riordan, 1998; Finnegan, 2012; Crean, 2018; Bissett, 2023). Most perspectives on the working class are produced by outsiders, and the stories are mediated from that perspective. This research is a step toward showing that there is significant knowledge inherent in our stories, that is not evident in much of the existing scholarship.

The purpose of this research was to find a way to bring our stories and experiences into a process where we can make sense of them, and inquire as to what our experiences meant both personally and politically. We all recognised the importance of hearing each other's stories and how powerful our voices can be, which I will discuss in more detail in the findings and discussion. The intention was for this to provide a platform for us to co-create new knowledge, to add to the discourse on this topic. It is not an attempt to valorise

our stories over others or to attempt to present a universal experience. It is however a statement about how important it is to hear voices like ours, and the knowledge we created together.

Insider research

> The inspiration for conducting a collaborative inquiry often comes from some disquiet rooted in one's own experience… The disquiet can be around an intellectual question or rooted in the problems of life (Bray *et al*., 2000, p. 52).

Being an insider was an important factor in the 'how' of this research. I was going to be sharing my own experiences, alongside the other women in the group. I spent time thinking about how this might impact the group and what my role as researcher would be. Before the research I wondered if I would feel divided by the two roles. I thought about how much of me and my story I wanted to share and also how if I held back too much how this could affect how others engaged. I needed to be open and willing to share myself if I wanted it from others. In the first session when we were talking about our qualifications I felt a sense of pride in the group as a whole. There was an openness in the way we shared our stories which made me feel comfortable sharing my own. Looking back at this I think I overthought this aspect of the process before we started. However I think the openness in the group was achieved by us together, sharing and trusting each other with our stories. The tone was set by us as a group together. I do think the reflection before the group started helped me to settle into the uncertainty of the process, which I think was important both for me and for the group.

Reading other researchers and theory which was helping me to explore the complexity of classed experiences was also important at this time in the process for me. I realised that other people have researched this way and had similar feelings about the process of being an insider researcher. Mags Crean (2018) was particularly useful as her research also related to class and inequality in Ireland, and her challenges in being both an insider, in terms of class and an outsider in being an academic researcher. The ability to place yourself inside the research using CI "places researchers in a position to "do justice" to

their experience, rather than simply making reference to it in the course of offering abstract explanations" (Bray *et al.*, 2000, p. 94).

Crean (2018) also discusses how as an insider with a vested interest in the research topic, linked to lived experiences, the research moves beyond the individual stories. It is important to think about the academic knowledge it produces and how this can be a precursor to or part of a move towards action. She highlights the importance of the desire to "move the debate from individual and self-focus to a focus on the structural relations of inequality, knowledge production and social change" (Crean, 2018, p. 3). We used the space in the group to find support and community which helped us to find our voices and think about our lives together, within the broader context of the Irish education system. We used our stories to create knowledge which gives an often unheard perspective.

What is Collaborative/Co-operative Inquiry?

Co-operative (or Collaborative) Inquiry (CI) is a research method, based in the broad category of participatory research (Heron, 1996, Heron and Reason, 2011). CI involves a process of working together and engaging in research about something you have knowledge about, using a broad interpretation of what knowledge is. Heron (1996) describes CI as "two or more people researching a topic through their own experience of it, using a series of cycles in which they move between this experience and reflecting together on it" (p. 1). CI is also based on viewing knowledge and ways of knowing as connected and important for helping us to frame the world. They are Experiential knowing; Presentational knowing; Propositional knowing and Practical knowing (Heron, 1996). There are also some key elements of CI; Researching with and not on; Having a democratic process where decisions about the process are made together; Recognising different kinds of knowledge; Working in cycles, which move between action and reflection; Values; Co-constructing new knowledge (Heron, 1996). CI requires us to be "fully present and imaginally open" to engage authentically and meaningfully in the process (Heron, 1996, p. 82).

> The focus of a collaborative inquiry group is on understanding and constructing meaning around experience- a focus that may involve learning for purpose of

133

personal development, enhancement of some aspect of one's practice, creating a new context in one's practice, or problem solving (Bray *et al.*, 2000, p. 38).

CI is a way of researching together which aims to produce new knowledge, based in the experiences of the group members. It can be practice based or issue based, but recognises different ways of knowing as important in knowledge construction.

Researching with, not on through a democratic process

A cornerstone of CI is that the research is 'with' and not 'on'. The participants are full co-researchers (Heron, 1996, Heron and Reason, 2011). Reason (1999) describes the purpose of CI as "to articulate and offer democratic and emancipatory approaches to inquiry, relinquishing the monopoly of knowledge held traditionally by universities and other institutions of 'higher learning'" (p. 2). He also describes knowledge as political, particularly the idea of "who owns the knowledge and thus who can define the reality" (Reason, 1994, p.5). CI, and participatory methods more generally, aim to research with, to provide a space where seldom heard voices become co-researchers in the production of knowledge based in their experiences. Bray *et al.* (2000) describe "a group of co-researchers/ co-subjects who share a burning desire for new knowledge and a willingness to work with others to pursue new avenues of meaning" (p. 51). Authentic commitment by co-researchers can ensure that there is meaningful collaboration and co-construction of new knowledge.

Heron (1996) asserts that using CI provides the opportunity to democratise research. Instead of researcher and participants he describes co-subjects and co-researchers, working together in a democratic process to make knowledge claims. As a group key decisions are made together about the direction of the research process. Tasks in the group can also be shared. Acknowledging and challenging power through a process of dialogue, respect and reciprocity CI promotes the use of democratic processes to co-construct new knowledge (Reason, 2011). I will outline some ways this operated in our group in the next chapter.

Ways of knowing in CI

Heron and Reason (2008) detail four ways of knowing that are central to CI. I will outline the four areas and provide some detail on how they relate to this research. They are: Experiential knowing; Presentational knowing; Propositional knowing and Practical knowing. All four are important in helping us to see and understand the world around us. These ways of knowing are not separate but "naturally employs these four ways of knowing and tacitly interweaves them in all sorts of ways in everyday life" (Heron and Reason, 2008, p. 367). CI, as a method, can provide a space to look at how these different ways of knowing interact and help us to see how we know what we know and how this can lead to a deeper understanding and the creation of new knowledge.

> Valid knowledge, on the multi-dimensional view, means that each of the four kinds of knowledge is validated by its own internal criteria, and also by its interdependence and congruence with all the others within a systemic whole (Heron, 1996, p. 33).

Heron (1996) argues that each kind of knowing is interdependent. He presents them in a pyramid and suggests that those below are necessary to support those above, experiential at the bottom, followed by presentational, propositional and practical at the top. He also recognises that some forms of knowledge are given higher status, particularly in relation to research and academia. This "rests on the unquestioned assumption that intellectual knowledge is the only valid and respectable outcome of systematic inquiry" (Heron, 1996, p. 33). His assertions also relate to the importance of being an embodied researcher, that you bring your whole self into the research process, and not just the intellectual part. The interaction of the different ways of knowing allow the co-researchers to bring their full range of knowledge into the research process (Heron, 1996).

Experiential

"Experiential knowing is by being present with, by direct face-to-face encounter with, person place or thing" (Heron and Reason, 2008, p. 367). It is what we know by engaging with the world and with other people. It grounds our knowledge in our experiences. The different ways we engage with other people and the relationships we build can impact the

knowledge that we can gain. Heron and Reason (2008) describe this as "tacit". It can be difficult to articulate as it is ingrained in us. They describe the "quality of field" (p. 368) in our interactions but how this is felt, and impacts how we understand the interaction. Our perceptions and intuition of the world comes from our engagement in and with the world, our participation. "Experiential knowing is feeling engaged with what there is, participating, through the perceptual process, in the shared presence of mutual encounter" (Heron and Reason, 2008, p. 369). Our relationship with the world makes us "humans in the web of life as embodied participants" (p. 369). We are relational and our interactions with others and with our environment provide us with knowledge about ourselves, others and the world more broadly, including the interdependence. Bray *et al*. (2000) describe experiential knowledge as "knowing through empathy and attunement with present experience" (p. 38).

This way of knowing is significant in the process of CI. The importance of building relationships, community, and participating in an embodied way allows us to engage meaningfully in the process. We recognise the feeling in the group and use this to listen, support each other and build meaningful relationships- to care. It is also an important source of knowledge for us in the group.

Presentational

Presentational knowing involves ways of presenting what we know experientially, through stories, art, music etc. (Heron and Reason, 2008). Language plays a significant role in how we see and understand this way of knowing. Having the language to convey the messages in the art or stories can be mediated or constrained by culture and cultural understandings. Representation is also an important part of presentational knowing. If who you are is not represented it can limit the language you have to understand your own experiences.

Presentational knowledge is important for this research because it links to the stories we tell about our experiences, the language, or lack of, to meaningfully articulate these experiences and the representation of people like us in wider culture which can frame how we see ourselves. The patterns that we see in our experiences link experiential and presentational knowledge.

Propositional

"Propositional knowing is knowing 'about' something in intellectual terms of ideas and theories" (Heron and Reason, 2008, p. 373). They argue that this kind of knowledge is dependent on language and is the kind of knowledge that dominates in our society. It can be used not only to define our world but also to frame the "kind of world we tell ourselves we live in" (Heron and Reason, 2008, p. 374). Propositional knowledge can give us the language to articulate and understand the world, however Heron (1996) describes a bias towards this way of knowing, influenced by the ability to frame it as logical and intellectual. It is often presented "in ways that do not infringe the rules of logic and evidence" (Heron, 1996, p. 32).

Practical

"Practical knowing is knowing how to do something" (Heron and Reason, 2008, p. 367). In a CI process it refers to both the skill of engaging in the process and the skills that are developed in the world related to the process. Within the CI process "practical knowing is embodied in the individual" and there is a "shared culture of competence in which particular practices are not only supported and valued but are embodied in the interactions of a whole community" (Heron and Reason, 2008, p. 375).

Heron (1996) argues that practical knowing is dependent on the other three kinds of knowledge. "I cannot take intentional action in direct relation to something without having some conceptual information about it, without having presentational data, and without meeting it" (Heron, 1996, p. 165). The skill to do something or engage in a process is influenced by our experiences in the world, how we can represent these experiences and what we can learn about them from theory. Heron and Reason (2008) also argue that practical knowing is at the pinnacle as it is the way we enact our knowledge, how we bring it into the world. Bray *et al.* (2000) describes practical knowing as "the ability to change things through action" (p. 38). Bourdieu also highlights the relevance of practice. He emphasises the importance of "the fusion of theoretical

construction and practical research options" (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992, p. 34) and the importance of researching to find ways to solve practical problems.

Reflection

> People can learn to be self-reflexive about their world and their actions within it (Reason, 1994, p. 25).

I have already discussed reflexivity but I want to name it here as a core aspect of the CI process. The importance of reflection is articulated by Heron and Reason (2011) as central to this approach. It isn't possible to conduct this research without a clear intention for reflection. Heron (1996) describes a process where "they use reflection and action to refine and deepen each other" (p. 19).

Bray *et al*. (2000) describe reflection as "an integral part of the meaning-making process. It is the basis for effective dialogue and validity testing" (p. 97). They describe three different types of reflection, descriptive, evaluative and practical. All three are necessary in a CI process. They allow us to reflect on the process, evaluate how it is impacting us and how to move forward. These different elements of the reflective process happened in our group. We brought thoughts or events since our last meeting. Together we dug deeper into them and analysed what they meant either for us individually or as part of the wider research. We also thought about how these new reflections could affect our lives. Bray *et al*. (2000) assert that "it is the interplay between individual reflection and group reflection conducted through dialogue that produces meaning" (p. 98). There were some very clear examples of this in our group. In the findings I will give an example where reflections on the impact of HE on family dynamics was evaluated together and meaning making happened. The dialogue in the group was key to finding meaning together.

In sharing our own stories and hearing others we could position our own stories within a broader understanding, and how they can contribute towards the construction of new knowledge. "In each story, the contexts, conditions, values, uses and politics of knowledge called for an opening outwards of our comfortable assumptions about whose knowledge counts and what the relationship between knowledge and life might be" (Hall

and Tandon, 2017, p. 11). We discussed how rare it was to be in a group like this, with other women like us. Thinking and reflecting together provided a space to move outside our own stories and to examine patterns in our stories and what structures created barriers, the impact of the macro on the micro.

Values

Heron (1996) discusses the importance of our values in a co-operative inquiry process. "A cooperative inquiry is a community of values and its value premises are its foundation" (Heron, 1996, p. 63). In order to fully engage in a CI process we need to be able to name our own perspectives and the values that underpin our way of being in the world. Building a space where values can be lived allows us to bring our whole selves. In our group respect and listening were underpinned by values of care, empathy and solidarity. Our values influence how we engage with the world and being in a space where our values are respected allows us to engage fully. CI can provide a framework to build a space and place where we can be embodied and build meaningful relationships (Heron, 1996).

A key element of CI and other participatory research is the importance of building relationships in the process. Relationships don't occur by just being together, they happen when we create a space that allows for open honest engagement and there is respect. The importance of a democratic process and working in an egalitarian way can help the process of relationship building. "This implies building empowered and empowering relationships based on trust, negotiating roles and boundaries, learning from others and striving to contribute to the field of study" (Atkins and Duckworth, 2019, p. 206). Sharing our stories and being heard was the starting point to building trust in our group. The values we enacted in the group provided a space where we could be open and trust that we would be respected, even if we didn't agree on everything.

Building relationships helped us to form a community, a place where we could be open, honest and vulnerable, where we could share our values with each other. Atkins and Duckworth (2019) highlight the importance of "critical reflection" and "critical dialogue"

within this process to allow for different experiences and different perspectives to be shared and explored (p. 207). This can only happen authentically when relationships and trust have been built, when power is shared and where we feel heard and respected. This allows ideas to grow and develop and emerge from the group. It is difficult to describe the feeling or atmosphere in a group process but it is usually underpinned by the values that are enacted. As I have mentioned the values that were at the core of our group process were care, empathy, solidarity. The importance of values is something that I will return to in chapter 6 when I present the findings based *in* the process, including our perceptions of it at the end.

The research questions, the thesis, creativity and CI

> There are no hard and fast guidelines for conducting a collaborative inquiry, at least not in the traditional sense of a research orthodoxy. Such an orthodoxy would be contrary to the spirit and openness and learning that is the basis of CI (Bray *et al*., 2000, p. 50).

Bray highlights "the values of collaboration and participation" as core aspects of CI (p. 50).

Heron (1996) describes in detail the process of conducting a CI. However he is clear that this is not a template and that each inquiry group will find its own way of working that may differ, but is still CI. The core aspects can still be present, even if it moves in a slightly different way than he has suggested. Bray *et al.* (2000) assert that "one of tenets of collaborative inquiry is that there is no dogma or an orthodox way of conducting one" (p. 13). Despite this it is important to note one key aspect of this research which varies from CI. This research had a starting point that came from my research questions and in this way it deviates from pure CI, where the research questions are decided together. Heron (1996) describes the broad role of "co-inquirers" and how they are "fully involved in research content, that is, about the focus of the inquiry, what it is seeking to find out and achieve" (p. 10). In a CI the group come together to decide what they would like to research, but our group came together at my invitation to discuss the topic I had decided on. In order to mediate for this, when I was deciding on my research questions it was

important for them to be broad, so as a group we could decide where to focus. The information sheet which participants were given before deciding to take part in the research described the purpose of the research as "an opportunity for us to work together to think about what it was like going to college, coming from a working class background and what it has meant for our lives. It is a space to reflect on our experiences and build knowledge together". The information sheet and invitation to take part in the research named the broad purpose, so we could work together to explore related topics that were important to us as a group. In the beginning this did create some anxiety for me. In my reflective journal I wrote;

> *I think something I will continually need to reflect on is the needs and process of the group versus my need to get enough good data to write a thesis- even thinking this makes me uneasy as I really want to honour a process and the experiences of whoever takes part but I will always have a product somewhere in my thoughts- this makes me feel guilty- I'm hoping that having open and honest dialogue will allay this a bit.* (Reflective Journal, December 2019)

This reflection was made many months before the group began. It was an important aspect of my reflexive process as I needed to move towards seeing the thesis as part of the overall process rather than a separate entity. It highlighted for me an aspect of my professional identity where I saw myself primarily as a practitioner and teacher, and how through the process of doing this research began to see myself more as an academic and, as I have already discussed, more connected to theory.

The discussions in the group were rich and meaningful. They were real and based in our stories and experiences. As we moved through the process my anxiety dissipated. Our relationships, our stories and our in-depth discussions were important and weighty. Writing a scholarly thesis based on the knowledge we were creating was important and useful.

The starting point for our CI was my invitation to take part in the research, which meant that the topic was decided outside the group process. We didn't agree specific questions together which, in my opinion, was not as big an issue as I thought it could be. The two main reasons for this were that the women who engaged in the process did so with a clear idea about what they wanted from the process, they knew what they were taking part in and what it might mean for them. Secondly the space we created was ours and not mine.

By engaging meaningfully in the process we created a democratic and empathetic space where we could articulate different stories, experiences and views on class and classed experiences. Although the research questions guided the research, we were not constrained by them and although we didn't formulate our own questions as a group, we each brought our own understanding and experiences of the questions. The findings will show that we discussed widely and found our own way as a group to explore the topic.

It is also worth noting that the writing up of this research was not collaborative. The collaborative nature of the research group is not possible in writing a doctoral thesis, for which I will get credit. It would not be appropriate, or ethical for this to be a collaborative endeavour. However this didn't seem to be an issue for anyone in the group and there was no desire in the group to do this. The work we did together was of benefit to us all (as I will discuss in the findings) and the thesis was seen as my responsibility and my work- as it is. It is however a limitation of using CI for doctoral research as it limits this potential for further collaboration, until I finish the programme. In the section on process I will come back to how this worked in the group.

Another aspect of this CI that was different than I anticipated was the level of creativity. When I was planning the research I thought about many creative ways we could engage together, both inside and outside the group. However this didn't happen. The impact of Covid on both our everyday lives and on how we met is central to this. As we had to move the group online after the first session we were only meeting virtually. I have a lot of experience of being in and facilitating groups creatively, but none of it was online. Moving work online was an adjustment for us all and both that and the wider context of Covid impacted energy levels for some sessions. Therefore as well as my hesitancy, due to lack of experience working that way online, there wasn't an appetite in the group. There also wasn't a necessity. The conversations were rich and meaningful and didn't need to be scaffolded by creative interactions. In fact the one example of creativity, linked to the use of post-its for analysis wasn't something that created any level of buzz or creativity in the group. Based on previous experience of working in groups I think this would have been different if we had been able to meet in person. Moving around the room and moving post-its can engage a group creatively. In the process of working online during Covid I have learned new tools and skills that I may be able to use if I was to do this kind of research online in the future.

Working in cycles

CI involves working in cycles (Heron, 1996, Heron and Reason, 2008). The cycles can be quite structured or can be more open and emergent, depending on how the group decides to work. However regardless of the structure, the cycles include action and reflection (Heron, 1996, Reason, 1999, Heron and Reason, 2008). The process of CI moves between these aspects of the process in a way that works for the group. Our group process was more emergent, allowing the group to work through stories, thoughts and reflections as they arose, rather than in a planned way. Reason (1999) describes the "best inquiry groups find a balance between chaos and order" (p. 14). In the next chapter I will give a more detailed account of the process in our research group and the challenge as the researcher in living with some chaos. However, at this point it is important to say that using an emergent process in the group allowed us to foreground our own stories and voices and to use them to work together to build knowledge.

The cycles in this CI involved meeting to think about the broad topic, sharing and discussing stories in the session. We all went back to our lives for a month and reflected on what had meaning for us in the group and decided what to bring back to the next session. The reflections that came back structured what we focused on that session. In some sessions this was related to strong emotions that were evoked, in others it related to observations or experiences in the world related to our discussions or for some of us it was about deep reflections we wanted to share or actions we had taken.

Action in CI can be broad. Bray *et al*. (2000) describes a number of different kinds of actions including "engaging in dialogue and meaning making within the group is a form of action" and that "action can also occur in the group as it works together" (p. 75). In our group the initial check in was an action. We brought thoughts, ideas, stories and reflections to the group that would inform our session that day. These check-ins were a core part of our process. As part of this process we were reflecting on the group as a whole and the impact it was having on us individually and collectively. Bray et al (2000) describe the difficulty in making a clear distinction between action and reflection and describe them "as fluid or 'porous'" (p. 77), they leak into each other. "We experienced

learning as a circular, spirling, and meandering process, through recursive procedures of action and reflection" (Bray *et al*., 2000, p. 78).

CI is a process that moves between reflection and action (Heron, 1996, Reason, 1999, Heron and Reason, 2008), and in this group action meant something different for each of us. The kinds of actions that we brought back to the group related to speaking up, or not, in other spaces about class, testing ways to challenge the status quo, applying for new jobs, hearing other people in a different way, responding to a consultation on access, among others. These descriptions may appear flat and I have purposely not given too much detail here, as they will feature in the findings, with our voices at the core, rather than mine here. The importance of our collective voices being in this thesis has been important throughout this process and presenting more detail in the findings is a way of valuing our collective voice. The group provided a supportive space to find or reignite our voices and this enabled us to act on what we were gaining from the process.

Building relationships in a Collaborative Inquiry group

A key aspect of CI is that it is a process, it evolves and changes with the group, and this is linked to the importance of building meaningful relationships in the group. In this research group our commonality was linked to our lived experiences of class and education, it was personal. This meant that we were bringing ourselves and our stories into the space we had created together. It was in the sharing of our stories, and responding to others, that we got to know each other and build these relationships. "The more the participants appreciate each other as people beyond their role as group members, the better the inquiry" (Bray *et al*., 2000, p. 111). Relationship building is key to a good CI.

CI also emphasises the importance of reciprocity and this was an important aspect of the method for me as a researcher. The aim was that by using CI everyone in the group would get something from the process and not just me as the researcher. In order to do this we needed to build relationships with each other. "Here we can see that relationship is key to the generation of reality and, importantly, that a methodology which separates the researcher from the researched denies that relationship" (Atkins and Duckworth, 2019, p.

207). The relationships we built in the group process allowed us to dig into the realities of our stories and our experiences. It also provided a safe space for us to interrogate these experiences as part of a bigger, structural, perspective. The relationships we built were key to being able to engage meaningfully in the process, and as a result to generate new knowledge.

These relationships were built within the cycles of CI (Heron, 1996). It wasn't only about our time and conversations together, but it was also about our reflections between sessions. We spoke about the importance of reflecting on each session and bringing those reflections back to the next session. It was also mentioned during check outs that ideas and reflections would be brought back, which helped with ending some of the sessions. Our time away from the group where we thought about what our stories and our discussions meant for us out in the world. The reflections that we shared back in the group gave us an opportunity to think about our actions, both now with the new knowledge we were creating, but also our past actions related to this. Heron (1996) describes "a co-operative inquiry is a community of values, and its value premises are its foundation" (p. 63). Our reflections and discussions allowed us to create a safe space that was grounded in values of care and empathy- values that we named as key aspects of our working class experiences.

Everyone engaged in the process in a meaningful way. Everyone spoke, offered words of advice and comfort and discussed both our classed experiences and class in Irish society more broadly. The check in and check outs were how we anchored the group and meant that the sessions opened with how we were, our reflections and thoughts, rather than a pre-set agenda. Again this was part of using a democratic process which provided space for all our voices, allowing us to get to know each other and build relationships. This also created an emotional climate which allowed for the expression of good and bad feelings (Heron, 1996). I will return to this in the findings and provide some examples.

Ethics

Braun and Clarke (2022) assert that

> Your ethical thinking should be primarily around your responsibilities to participants and the power dynamics inherent in representing the voices and stories of participants, particularly those from socially marginalised groups (Braun and Clarke, 2022, p. 28).

In this section I will discuss the importance of ethics in this research. Key aspects of research ethics include ensuring voluntary consent, confidentiality, right to withdraw, openness and transparency (Mc Niff, 2016). These are also closely related to ethical practice in social care and the importance of working in a respectful and relational way, which is related to my practitioner values, both working with children and families and as an educator. I had worked this way for over 20 years. Using a participatory method adds some additional layers to the ethical process of the research, particularly in relation to consent for a process that hasn't happened and confidentiality within a group.

All of the group members received an information sheet about the research before agreeing to take part. It was important to ensure they knew the type of research and the commitment required before making a decision about being part of the group. I also spoke with each member of the group to ensure they had an informal opportunity to ask any questions about the process, or anything else related to the research. This helped to ensure that we were clear about what the process entailed and how we might work together, including making some key decisions together about the process. Mc Niff (2016) states the importance of explaining that this research is 'with' the participants. She describes a process where "you are studying yourself, in relation with them" (Mc Niff, 2016, p. 87). The role of individual group members is a negotiated process across the duration of the research (Heron, 1996; Grant, Nelson and Mitchell, 2011). Everyone knew going into the first session that we would create a group contract together, where we would decide key issues like confidentiality and how we would work together.

Part of these discussions included the naming of ongoing consent. As we were starting a process together there needed to be opportunity for the process to evolve. Clear, open and honest communication about this was crucial from the beginning (Heron, 1996). I

provided access to transcripts and reminded the group that if there was anything that they didn't want included that was ok and wouldn't impact their involvement in the group in any way. This was particularly in relation to sensitive information which was shared in the welcoming and safe space that we created.

In relation to confidentiality Heron (1996) describes the initial meeting as a space to decide on a group contract for how we will work together. Confidentiality, and what it means for this group, was agreed at the beginning. This also includes confidentiality of identity (Mc Niff, 2016), which was also revisited across the process. We had some discussions about whether the group members would want to be identified. We agreed at the beginning that if the group, or some members want to remain anonymous then this is how the information will be presented.

I also needed to consider the impact sharing experiences may have on individuals. As it is a group process it was possible people could feel emotional, exposed or uneasy. Heron (1996) discusses the importance of group processes and individuals taking on roles within the group. He believes that this needs to be clearly articulated at the first meeting. The importance of emotional intelligence and good facilitation skills are also stated as necessary skills for this. Heron (1996) believes that this role can be taken on by any group member with the necessary skill. However, as the researcher I have a duty of care to the participants so I needed to ensure I had details of possible supports that people can access, as well as ensuring a check in, and out, was built into each meeting. The check in and check outs were an importance part of the process, where we could think about what the process meant for us. The group collectively took on positions of care and empathy. We supported each other in the telling of our stories by listening, hearing and understanding. We responded with empathy to stories that were difficult to tell, or difficult to hear. On two occasions group members became upset in the group. The response from the group was to mind and check in, but also to offer reassurance. On both occasions I made contact after the group and checked in, even though there had been some resolution in the group.

An ethical concern I had to negotiate related to using CI, a participatory method, while also being a doctoral student with the task of writing a doctoral thesis. A key task of CI is the co-construction of new knowledge, but in this research there was also the

consideration of who owns the knowledge we created together (Heron, 1996). The added element of me using the knowledge to obtain a qualification was also present. I negotiated these dilemmas by being open and honest from the beginning, and throughout the process about what I was getting from this. As we were using a participatory process we also thought about what we would get from this. An aspect of this I hadn't anticipated was the meaningful and real support from the group for me in this. When I raised concerns about who would own the knowledge the response was that their engagement was, in part, motivated by the fact that it would help me to get the qualification and this new knowledge could be communicated by me. There was also an acknowledgement that the work in the group was not shared equally. I had initiated the group, I was doing the transcribing and I would be taking all the information to write a thesis. So although we collectively owed the process, I would own the thesis.

Power

I also had to examine this in the context of power. In any research power within the group needs careful consideration. CI emphasises the importance of sharing of power. This can only happen when power is acknowledged and power inequities are recognised. CI only works when researching 'with' and not 'on' (Heron, 1996; Reason, 2004; Ledwith, 2007). Using an agreed, democratic process which involves sharing power from the outset and making decisions together, including deciding on clear rules and boundaries at the initial meeting, contributed to an equitable process.

As the initiating researcher I have a responsibility to reflect on the role of power in the process. Bray et al (2000) describe the role of the initiator as complex as they need to "quickly concede authority as soon as possible during the inquiry" (p. 39). Power is one of the beginning points for this research. The choice of research topic and research participants is underpinned by the inequality in society which makes us a disadvantaged/ underrepresented/ marginalised group in higher education. This is driven by the power relations within society and social institutions, particularly education in this regard. There is an inherent importance in using methods that will support an analysis of power, both by the group and in the process of analysis by me as researcher. The importance of reflecting on the "the politics of our research process, and the knowledge we produce" is

as important as being critical of our own positioning (Braun and Clarke, 2022, p. 14). Power is also inherent in whose voices are usually heard and the dynamics at play in this. The use of a democratic and participatory approach provides a space for the group to move beyond our own stories to place them within a political and societal context. These discussions were an integral part of the process.

Within all this I needed to consider the ethics of being an insider researcher. Balancing the two roles of group member and researcher can influence all the issues mentioned above and include "consent, managing pre-existing and ongoing relationships, and the use of insider knowledge" (Toy-Cronin, 2018, p. 456). Crean (2018) discusses the role of insider researcher to support the "generation of new knowledge and frames of thinking for social class analysis" (p. 5). She also discusses the clear benefit of the research process for the researcher which can be less clear for the participants. This is an ethical consideration linked to moving the research beyond personal and professional to political.

Being a reflexive researcher was really important to ensure I didn't ignore the power relations at play in the research. Negotiating the insider-outsider divide was part of this-recognising what I had to gain from the process and how this could impact the process. I needed to ensure that I wasn't pushing my own agenda but was allowing the ideas to evolve in the group. The power dilemma and my role was something that I really experienced in the first session. The choice of whether to try to direct the session or to let it flow was there. The importance of understanding the CI approach helped with this as I reminded myself this is a democratic process. I also opted to go last, or towards the end of check-in and check-outs. That way I wasn't influencing our starting or end points in the group. I felt this was particularly important as the check-ins were often an important source of discussion topics in the group. We brought back to the group things that stayed with us or new experiences related to previous discussions.

One aspect of power I hadn't considered was the power offered to me by the group- asking if I needed us to think about something in particular (which occurred in one of the analysis sessions), asking if it was ok to chat about something or apologising for talking about a particular topic. Despite using a democratic process, everyone in the group was very aware that I am doing this research to get a doctoral qualification and part of their motivation for engaging in the research was to help me to achieve this. So despite me

trying to share power, at times it was given back to me, almost as a gift, to help me on my research journey.

I applied for and received ethical approval from Maynooth University. This involved a detail process of explaining CI and participatory research and thinking through what the process may look like.

In some ways the research ethics process and using a CI process can create some tensions. At the research design part of the process I wanted to leave as much open to decide with the group as I could. Klocker (2012) also discusses this as a concern in participatory research, but frames the ethics process as ongoing with potential to go back if changes are needed. When I started to engage in the ethics process I realised that I needed to have a clearer outline of the process than I had originally intended. At the time I found this frustrating and was concerned that it may constrain the research. I needed to provide a lot of detailed information about the CI process and how I would keep participants safe. On reflection the main frustration was that I felt that my values, which were so important to the *how* of this research were not obvious. I needed to move past what I felt and believed to demonstrate the practical steps that would do this. This, for me, links back to the different ways of knowing and how in a doctoral programme the propositional knowing, is at the forefront, and the other ways of knowing need to be articulated in a way that demonstrates responsibility and ethics for the research.

> To generate knowledge about persons without their full participation in deciding how to generate it, is to misrepresent their personhood and to abuse by neglect their capacity for autonomous intentionality. It is fundamentally unethical (Heron, 1996, p. 22).

I think it is also important to think about this beyond the individual in relation to groups whose voices we seldom hear, unless they are mediated by those with a different world view and experiences (Lynch and O'Neill, 1994). The importance of using a research method which not only centres the individual experience, but allows for the creating of a collective experience is another important aspect of CI. This was a really important aspect of our group and how we worked together. It also links back to some of my frustrations in the ethics process, because this is how I work, it is how I try to live but it wasn't easy to describe. Again this links to the different ways of knowing and how tacit

and experiential knowledge can be challenging to articulate in a propositional way, even if it is enacted in a practical way.

Despite the frustrations I felt at the time this was a very useful process and made me dig deeper into both the literature and to exploring my values and practice. It helped me to move from seeing the different ways of knowing as separate and realise the importance of how they are linked. It also helped me to develop a language to articulate the process of the research, which was very important before I spoke with possible group members. It functioned as a way of me recognising the importance of the different ways of knowing, and of the process of merging them into a more scholarly format, something that was important as part of the research process. It provided a space for me to begin the process of bringing together theory and practice, of praxis, which as I have discussed was not an easy process for me. Bray *et al.* (2000) describe "an intense interaction between action and reflection that produces generative learning that changes the life-world of those who engage in it" (p. 28).

The ethics application process also helped to ground me during the research. I was able to go back and read the clear information I had provided to remind me of where I had started and what I had planned. The working through of queries from the ethics committee had provided a solid base for my research. It provided a structure in a process that was, by design, emergent and unstructured.

Conclusion

In this chapter I began with myself and my own position, including how I came to choose this research. I have outlined the importance of recognising my starting position and how my way of viewing the world and knowledge are key motivators for me both as a practitioner and as a researcher. I explored how discussions and knowledge about class are political and the political intent of this research. The duality of being an insider researcher was also an important consideration and I discussed how this also influenced my choice of methods. This also highlights the importance of reflexivity in qualitative research, particularly for an insider.

I moved on to discuss the theory and application of Co-operative Inquiry (CI) and the importance of researching with and not on. The importance of working in a democratic way that allows values to be part of the process was also discussed. A key aspect of CI is the recognition and use of different ways of knowing. I provided detail on each of the four kinds of knowledge; Experiential; presentational; propositional and practical and how this framework allows us to co-create knowledge starting with our stories and experiences. I highlight the co-creating of knowledge related to our experiences in education and the role of power and societal structures in this as political. I also outline the process of using CI, including the importance of cycles and building relationships.

I gave some information on the importance of ethics and the ethics process for this research. This included exploring the role of power and also how CI, as a group process, has some additional aspects in relation to ethics.

In the next chapter I will build on this to describe the process in detail and how it was enacted by our group.

Chapter 5 Methods: Engaging in Cooperative/ Collaborative Inquiry

Introduction

> So congruent knowing is not just about validity and truth. It is about affirming in action what we deeply value for its own sake (Heron, 1996, p. 55).

Choosing the right methods was crucial to me. It was important for me to find methods that fit with my values and my experience. I was also conscious that I wanted to work in a way that could be beneficial for the women who agree to be part of the group. I wanted a reciprocal process. As I have discussed I am an insider researcher so I also needed a method in which I could be fully present and embodied. This research, for me, is values driven and came from my own experiences.

In this section I will provide some more detail on what using CI meant for this research and how we engaged with the process as a group. In the previous section I have provided some information on CI, in broad methodological terms. I will build on this to detail what we did and how it worked for us as a group. I will begin by discussing limitations and sampling, recruitment and the group.

I will then move on to the process which will be divided into three main parts of the process- the beginning which will focus on the first session. The middle which will focus on the second to fifth sessions and thirdly, the analysis and conclusion which were the focus on the last three sessions. Some aspects of the process were important throughout the eight sessions but the main focus shifted which is why I have divided this section into three parts.

The research questions which we explored cooperatively in this research are:

- What are our experiences and understanding of class?
- What impact did higher education (HE) have on us?
- How has our class position changed and how does this impact our class identity?
- How can we understand the barriers and supports to higher education and access from our perspective and how can I draw on this as an educator/lecturer?

The purpose of this research group was to discuss and examine our stories and lived experiences, how the experience of being working class women who went to and succeeded in HE and to use our expertise to co-construct knowledge. The group formed with this at the centre, and with some knowledge about how the group might work. It is also important to note that, although some people knew each other before the group, as a group most of us did not know each other. What we had in common was an interest in engaging in this research, based in our experiences.

The methods used in this research were chosen so our group could work together in a process which was open and challenging. We used the space to answer the questions by working through our own and each other's experiences, and situating them within the wider social structures. This included examining the barriers we encountered, how our classed positions impacted our experiences, particularly of education and what that meant for us now in professional jobs. The complexity of our experiences is central to the findings chapters.

Recruitment

Recruitment for the group was organic. As I was on the doctoral programme I had been speaking about my research with friends. Before I was even thinking about recruitment a few friends mentioned that they knew some people that they thought might be interested. So when I was ready to recruit I asked if they would pass on the information sheet and ask them to contact me if they were interested.

One of the women who I recruited this way said she had mentioned the research to two other women who she had met at HE and asked if she could pass on the information sheet. As a result of this two other women joined the group. Denscombe (2014) describes snowball recruitment as a way to identify participants and this was key to our group formation.

Originally I planned on having a group of 8-10 women in the group. Group size is an important factor in CI, as having a group that is too big or too small can affect other

factors, including relationship building and group cohesion (Heron, 1996). However because of Covid I needed to make sure it was eight maximum, as the room I was planning on using was only suitable for a maximum of eight people with social distancing. At the recruitment point there were Covid restrictions on how many people could gather and how much space was required in a room to ensure we could be 2 metres apart. When the group reached seven participants quite easily I didn't seek to recruit any more participants due to the ongoing and changing Covid restrictions, and the size of the room that was available.

The process for recruitment involved a few steps. An important part of this process happened before I had even thought about recruitment. As I mentioned I used snowball recruitment. When I was ready to form the group I sent the information sheet to friends who had shown interest in the research. I then contacted those who expressed an interest by text and following this I had a phone call with each woman. I feel like these phone calls were very important for two reasons. They gave me an opportunity to ensure that the group members knew this was a group process where we would work together, to give them some information about how CI works. Even though I had this in the information sheet I felt it was very important to discuss it. Heron (1996) discusses the importance of participants in a CI fully engaging in the process, so it was important to be open and honest about what it would involve. It gave people the opportunity to decide if this might be the right research for them. I ended each call by encouraging them to think about this research and if they want to engage and to let me know. It was important to offer this space after the conversation so they had time to reflect on their interest and make an informed decision about participating, even though almost all the conversations ended with people saying they were as, if not more interested after hearing more about the research and the process.

The second reason these phone calls were important was it was the beginning of the process of building relationships. In all of these conversations the women told me aspects of their stories and I told them aspects of mine. I found these calls engaging and exciting. Conversation flowed freely and even in this initial stage I felt connected to the women and their stories. There was an energy about the topic and our experiences. This allowed me to see the potential of this research and this way of researching. These conversations

were a source of motivation and affirmation for me, as all of the women were very interested in the topic and engaging in the process.

Limitations and sampling

It is important to acknowledge that we were a small, relatively unique group. We all have postgraduate qualifications; one Higher Diploma, five Masters and one PhD. This is not a typical group of working class women. Even in the wider population the level of qualifications that we hold is not typical; in fact as a group we are untypical. Most women like us do not go to HE and finding others who did isn't easy.

In addition to how untypical we are as a group, we are also only 7 women (6 for most of the process). We recognised that within the group we had similarities and differences in our experiences and saw some things in different ways. This research is not claiming that there is a universal experience or that we are representative of the wider population of working class women who have gone to HE. We recognise the importance of our own stories and it is important to acknowledge that there are other stories, other women, who may see things differently. We have used our experiences to co-created knowledge that will add to the discussion on this topic but do not claim to represent all working class women. However, despite differences between our stories there was significant common ground when we started to listen to each other and to discuss and analyse together. We also recognise that an important part of the process was the feeling of being heard and understood by those like us. This is a feeling that was missing for us in HE spaces.

It is also important to acknowledge the commonalities of our group. Different experiences can also come from different intersections with class and gender. We are all white, able bodied, cis women. We are all from Dublin. None of us moved away to another place to go to HE. As experts on education and access, all but one of us work in either education or community development roles. Everyone except me is a parent. These factors influence how we view and experience the world, and they impact the knowledge we create. None of these factors were criteria for being part of the research, but using snowball sampling meant that my own networks were the first point of contact.

The spaces in the research group filled up very quickly meaning my own network was influential in gaining participants, I did not need to go beyond it to form the group. This contributed to the similarities in the make-up of the group.

The Group

We are a group of women who all identified as working class when we went to HE. We have all been successful in obtaining academic qualifications which has opened up career trajectories that were not possible without those qualifications. Before our first session that is what we knew about each other as a group. We knew this was a common thread in our stories.

We were a group of six working class women, (initially seven but Annie only came to the first meeting and could not continue in the process after that). We are all from, and still living in Dublin. We range in age from 30's to early 50's, so our early school experiences are from the late seventies to the early noughties and our HE experiences range from the nineties to now. One of the criteria for being part of the research was to have completed undergraduate level HE at least five years before the research began in October 2020.

All seven of us have postgraduate qualifications including, Higher Diplomas, Masters and Olivia has a PhD. In our first session when we spoke about our stories there was a shared sense of pride in our collective and individual accomplishments, and a feeling that we had achieved high levels of education, despite the many barriers we had encountered.

At the time of the research the women had children ranging in age from 4 years old to adult. Their children had different educational experiences than we did as most went to school outside their local area and some went to private schools. Some of the rationale for this was related to finding a non-religious school, and also their desire for their children to have opportunities not afforded to them was also evident.

Before starting the group I could see that there were two distinct sub-cohorts, those who went to HE as teenagers and those who went as mature students. Myself, Grainne and

Katherine all went in our teens, while Olivia, Ronnie, Gemma and Annie went as mature students. This meant we had very different starting points related to our experiences.

Name	Teenage/Mature	Adult Education/ Further education	Access programme	Current area of work
Annie *(only 1st session)*	Mature	Adult Education	Yes	Education
Gemma	Mature	Further Education	Yes	Education
Olivia	Mature	Adult Education	Yes	Education-Admin
Ronnie	Mature	Adult Education and Further Education	Yes	Education
Grainne	Traditional	None	No	Community
Katherine	Traditional	Further Education	No	Community
Sorca	Traditional	Further Education	No	Education

The Mature students in HE

The women who went as mature students- Olivia, Ronnie, Gemma and Annie were also mothers when they were studying. They had worked in different jobs including retail, marketing, printing and hairdressing. Olivia and Ronnie were early school leavers, Gemma completed the Leaving Certificate Applied and Annie completed the Leaving Certificate. In returning to education they all started in adult and community, or further education. Both Gemma and Ronnie did PLCs and Olivia did the Leaving Certificate as a mature student, and all three attended the Trinity Access Programme and went on to complete degrees in Trinity college.

The Teenage students in HE

Of the three went to HE when we were eighteen or nineteen, none of us went straight from sixth year. Grainne repeated her Leaving Certificate from home, studying by herself to try to get the points to go to HE. Katherine did a PLC in an FE college, to build her art portfolio as she wanted to study art in HE. I repeated my leaving certificate in an FE college and then did a post leaving certificate course (PLC), social and community studies, in another FE college. Grainne and Katherine both worked throughout their HE experience. They had part time work to fund their education. I had a different experience. I took a year out after second year and worked full time as a care worker for the year to have some money when I went back.

The Process

The group process consisted of eight sessions, which lasted ninety minutes each. The first session was where we set the ground rules and started to get to know each other and have some initial discussions. The second to fifth sessions were where we had open discussion. The final three sessions where we started to analyse both the content of our discussions and in the final session the process itself. I will give an account of the process broken into these three sections.

As I have discussed dialogue was an important aspect of the group process. Telling our own stories, listening and responding to each other's in a respectful way was evident from the first session. There was a genuine interest in each other and in both the experiences we shared but also what was different about our experiences. Bray *et al.* (2000) describe "dialogue requires careful, active listening with each party, not thinking about a rebuttal but concentrating on what is being said, considering the whole person who is speaking, and being very conscious of one's reactions to what is said" (p. 95). Even in the first session where some of the group were very keen to tell their stories there was meaningful dialogue, there was active listening and there was the beginning of relationship building.

The first session

The first session was planned with the group, based on availability of the group and the room. We agreed to meet on Tuesday evening in a community room in the a community enterprise called The Green Kitchen. I organised to have coffee, tea and biscuits at the beginning.

Although I have a lot of experience facilitating groups I felt quite nervous. Even though I wanted the session to be organic there were important tasks that needed to happen including finding agreement on Group contract; Purpose of the group; Pseudonyms and confidentiality; Consent; Introductions. I was also the timekeeper and needed to make sure we all had time to check out before finishing on time. The first meeting happened in September 2020 when there were significant Covid restrictions. People needed to sit 2 metres apart and numbers who could meet together was restricted. A lot of work was moved online so people were meeting less in person.

We agreed on a group contract at the beginning of the session. This part of the process went quicker than I expected. There was no big dilemmas to discuss as there was agreement on each of the points raised. The contract included confidentiality, trust, respect each other's experiences, no judgement, the room is a safe space to explore, even different views and experiences, stick to time, everyone's equal and everyone's voice is equal.

It seemed like agreeing a group contract was something everyone had experienced. It is a tool regularly used in women's groups and in adult education. I also think there was an element of anticipation where we really wanted to talk about our experiences. The general conversation in the group flowed very easily and we started to share parts of our stories and what this process might mean for us. There was a positive energy in our interactions. The first topic that was discussed in the group was accent and having a working class Dublin accent, which I will return to in the findings.

The first meeting was face to face and I think this was really important. We got to look each other in the eye and get a sense of each other. The conversation moved effortlessly

and everyone got involved. Everyone had something to say and we were creating a space where we could say it, without judgement and more that than in a space where there was an understanding of our experiences. Ending the session was difficult as people wanted to keep talking. I had to remind everyone that we had lots more time and to bring anything unfinished to the next group and this was a useful way of framing the process. This wasn't just one session to vent or tell our stories and leave. It was a space to reflect on our stories, our discussions and our reflections. We had somewhere to bring them back to and make sense of them together.

Heron and Reason (2008) discuss the importance of sharing our stories as a way to find common ground, an important part of building community in the group. Finding resonance in each-others stories is a precursor to finding meaning in them. Having an unstructured opening session was an important part of the process.

Another important aspect of the first session was for me to be very honest about what I would be getting from this process, information to write a doctoral thesis, but it was important for me to also be clear this research had meaning for me on a personal level too. I was the researcher, but also a fellow working class woman who went to HE. I think I was also a bit nervous about naming this, as it separated me out as the researcher, a role I was less confident, and less experienced in. I had never done participatory research and was concerned about being the researcher might separate me out from the group.

The groups response to my naming what I would gain from the research was grounded in care, solidarity and pride- proud that I was doing this. They provided reassurance and articulated their commitment to the process. Their response was a starting point for me in resolving, to some degree, the dichotomy of my dual roles. I will explore the feeling aspect of the process in more depth in the next chapter, but it was an important aspect of this part of my journey in the group.

My reflections after the group also related to this duality of roles and how it had gone. Finding the balance between structure and flow was on my mind throughout the session but overall I reflected

My biggest issue was one of allowing the conversation to flow- moving between and building on others thoughts. I felt that this was important to help create a space that is ours and not just mine.

I didn't want to limit people- the importance of voice remained central, despite this leaving me feeling a little uneasy as a researcher. The tension of being an insider researcher with a thesis to produce was in the background.

Heron (1996) describes the potential chaos of an unstructured session but how this can be part of a CI process. Reflecting back now, having gone through the transcripts and listened back to the session many times, it feels less chaotic than it did in the moment. I wasn't trying to figure out when I should contribute, watch the time and listen carefully all at the same time- I could just focus on listening. The structure or agenda items happened quite quickly and the bulk of the session was engaged conversation about our classed experiences. Our stories were real, they helped us to see that we had experiences in common. Deciding to run with the group, rather than try to make the session more structured was, I believe, the beginning of us building a caring, relational group process *together*.

After the first session I reflected on the energy, openness and sense of pride in the group. There was a very real sense that our stories were not easily shared and this space was valuable and needed. In her checkout Gemma summed up the feeling when she described the first meeting as

It just was so relaxed. I've just had that, that was better than any glass of wine. That was so relaxed to just hear people talkin and just be listened to. I really enjoyed that. Gemma

In my reflective journal I describe a '*warmth in the room'*, a sense of '*comradery and support*', '*attentive listening*' as well as the '*use of humour and laughter'* throughout. Reflecting back now there was a sense of belonging, of being in the right room at the right time, with the right people. This is really important as belonging is a significant theme I will explore in depth in the findings.

The middle sessions

I have grouped these four sessions together but will describe the process of group development that happened during these sessions. In the description it may seem like a linear, seamless process but it was less formulaic than that.

It is important to note that due to Covid restrictions the group moved from being in the room to online, via Teams. This was the first time I was involved in research online, either as a participant or a researcher. Everyone in the group had moved some or all of their work online so had some experience of engaging online. A few people in the group were not familiar with Teams so I offered to join the meetings early in case anyone wanted to make sure they could get in. One woman took me up on this and we worked through any difficulties, so she had access when the group started. The only other technical difficulty was one group member who couldn't change the settings so for the first session online she could only see the person who was talking and not the whole group. In the next session where this was resolved she found it much easier to engage and felt more part of the group. Other than these technical issues meeting online worked very well. I had been very nervous about this but as a group we took it in our stride.

The other impact of Covid was the level of energy and fatigue, particularly in the fourth session. It was January, we had entered another lockdown and we were feeling tired, fed up and frustrated. This had an impact on the tone of the session but also had an impact on the content as in this session there was anger and frustration at the lack of support, particularly related to work. The level of frustration with the circumstances created by Covid were heightened by the knowledge that inequality was still evident in education today and this was being exacerbated by Covid. I will explore the content of this in the findings but wanted to note it here as part of the process because the circumstances in the outside world impact us as humans and this became part of the research.

Bray *et al*. (2000) discuss the importance of informal time in a CI. In my experience of groupwork this often happens before, or just after the group, walking in, getting a cup of tea or leaving. This wasn't completely eliminated by moving online as I opened the meeting space early and we chatted informally (and without any recording) until everyone

arrived. However this is not the same. The smaller, informal chats had no space to happen and when the meeting ended everyone logged off. Although I don't think this had a significant impact on our group, it definitely had some. It's difficult to say with any certainty what might have been different, but at times there was really heightened emotion that dissipated, which may have encouraged us to chat informally. On the other hand there was a relative comfort being at home and not having to travel to the group. One group member had said it was great as she had gotten lost on the first night.

During these four sessions we moved between our own and each other's stories and how we view the world. Using CI, which helped us to create a democratic and respectful space meant that we shared the space, and everyone had an opportunity to engage. This doesn't mean that everyone engaged equally or had equal time, we engaged in our own way, at our own pace. The check in and check out provided a platform where we all had time and space to share, and the main part of the session happened organically, often linked to check-ins and reflections.

A key aspect of CI is reflection as part of the process. The sessions took part approximately four weeks apart. This gave us time to go back into our lives and think about what resonated, what challenged or made us uncomfortable, and what stuck with us from the last session. It also gave us space to reflect on how our own stories intersected or diverged for the others in the group.

Being named: ownership

There were three members of the group who regularly mused about how this process could be something bigger, beyond me writing a thesis. This conversation also formed part of the discussion about being named or not. Those who were most interested in being named wanted to be able to point to the research as something that would inform a more collective action. Bray *et al.* (2000) discuss the difficulty when some of the group want to move outside the process to communicate the knowledge from the CI, but others don't. "At the same time , the option of not communicating to the public arena may be distressing for those members of the group wish to avoid the loss of the group's voice

about its experience as part of a larger dialogue around the question being explored by the inquiry" (Bray *et al*., 2000, p. 117). There was a concern that if they weren't named in the thesis that they wouldn't be able to use the experience of the process in other settings. We agreed that the anonymity is for the thesis and that outside that communicating our experiences was possible. The other aspect of this was knowing I would be writing a thesis, and communicating our experiences which was enough for some group members. There was also an understanding that the thesis may be the beginning, and some, or all, of us could work together again in the future to communicate our knowledge and experiences further. This meant that the process of analysis in the group was crucial.

Analysis in the group

> Collaborative inquiry is an open process that seeks answers to questions that have no pre-set answers. It is a discovery-oriented form of inquiry, not a confirming or validating one (Bray et al, 2000, p. 89).

The final three sessions were mainly focused on analysis. This is another core part of CI, incorporating analysis into the process. Analysis of the data in the group was a complex process. I am uncomfortable with the term 'data' to describe the rich stories and experiences that were shared and understood within the group, so I will use the terms experiences and stories instead of data to reflect the qualitative and lived nature of this study. The initial analysis happened within the group. The final sessions provided a more focused process for analysis.

It began with what people chose to share in the group. We were thinking about our experiences and making choices about what we think is useful to share in the process. It continued in the reflections that happen outside the group, both on our own experiences and on what we have heard within the group, and in what we chose to bring back to the group- the initial individual analysis that brings topics, experiences and reflections back into the space to be interrogated further. Grant *et al*. (2011) suggests that the group need to be involved at all levels including analysis and interpretation as a way of making meaning from their stories and experiences. We were able to make sense not just of our

own stories but of how they were interconnected and influenced by wider structures, highlighting the importance of analysing together. Misztal (2003) explores the importance of collective memory in facing structural inequalities and power. She describes how they "define the nature and boundaries of entire societies to whom the stories belong" (Misztal, 2003, p.53). Working together helped us to recognised the power at play in the educational system and the impact it had throughout our time in education, up to and including HE. Our stories paint a picture of an unequal system which placed significant barriers in our way, and we succeeded despite the system and not because of it.

We discussed the possibility of us going through a more formal process of analysis as a group but it was clear that the women didn't have any additional time to invest in the process so we agreed that I would bring some themes that I could identify in the transcripts and we would think about if they fit or not, and how important they were for us as a group. I transcribed each session myself helping me to become familiar with the stories and experiences that were shared in the group sessions. I did a more in depth analysis after the fifth session to bring some key ideas back to the group for us to discuss and analyse together. This involved listening back and reading through the transcripts, looking for recurring ideas, or ideas that were stressed as important by one or more of the group, and coding the sessions which allowed me to start to identify some themes.

Bray *et al*. (2000) assert that "the inquirers must be concerned with avoiding self-deception and confirming the results of the work to others" (p. 104). It was necessary for us to have time to think about the themes from our group, especially as I was bringing ideas to the group for us to interrogate. I sent an email outlining the key ideas that I had found in my analysis and suggesting we start there after we had checked in. We discussed the themes, often by reiterating aspects of our collective stories, or expanding on them. These discussions were rich and textured. After this session I again went back to the transcripts and started to create a visual representation of the themes and ideas, building on our discussions. I did this using posters and post-its. This process allowed me to move things around as I found stories or ideas that seemed to fit together. I took photos of these posters and sent them to the group, asking them to think about what we should prioritise for the next session.

As a researcher this was a really interesting process- sharing the process of analysis allowed me to ensure I wasn't reading into things that were not there. Allowing the time in these sessions, and between them meant that I could go back to the transcripts and sense check what the group were highlighting- and bring this back to the group. It also provide space for each member of the group to reflect on the process as a whole and all our discussions and reflections and bring these back to the group. The group were assertive in highlighting some themes and focusing on ideas that had reoccurred throughout the process.

The initial analysis in the group allowed us to work together to make sense of the knowledge we created. The lead role I took in this process was the best way to involve the group, given the needs and interests of the group. This was also a clear acknowledgement that I was going to benefit most from this part of the process, as I needed the information to write this thesis. The group were supportive of this but they had already made a significant contribution to the process and a large time commitment.

The process allowed us to see some themes in a clear way and saw general agreement about how they were linked to our stories and experiences. It also allowed us to see themes that some women in the group felt needed to be named.

Bray *et al*. (2000) describe the process where group members "contribute a variety of possible interpretations during the meaning making process" (p. 118) and validity is achieved through consensus. This was the case for some of the findings in our group. But there were also some important findings which didn't have a consensus. These findings remain important, as this research doesn't intend to present one universal truth about our stories, but to demonstrate the experiences which shaped our experiences of education, particularly HE. We worked together to make meaning from our individual and collective experiences and in doing so to create new knowledge on the topic, that can add to the wider scholarship on this topic.

The use of reflexive thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2022) allowed for congruence within the broader research process. This linked back to particular perspectives on class and methods underpinned by democratic, reflective and cooperative processes which allow for us to construct new knowledge based in our experiences of being working class

women who have attended HE. Reflexive thematic analysis is also guided by principles which allow for flexibility in the process, which was necessary for this research.

One thing I needed to think about in this part of the process was the level of support I was getting from the group. I needed to be clear that it was important to be honest and it was ok to disagree with me and with each other. Some members of the group asked what I needed at this point and I was clear that whatever the group prioritised or saw as important was ok- it wasn't just about what I thought. The fact that we had worked in a democratic way throughout the process helped at this point, as I was one of the group. We spoke as and when we wanted, there was no chair or formal structure, and I didn't have priority, except for facilitating the check in and check out. The key principles of CI and using them throughout the process was really important at this point to ensure the balance of power, as much as possible (Heron, 1996). However, as I was taking a leading role in the analysis outside the group meetings there was a shift. I tried to minimise the impact on the sessions themselves but as I was sending information in advance I was highlighting the researcher aspect of my role. What was helpful was that we had spent time sharing our stories and knew that there were similarities and differences, and there had been respect in the group even if someone else's experiences and perspectives were different. The relationships we had built in the group were really important for this part of the process, as we had created a space where all our voices were important and could be heard.

It is also important to again note that I continued the process of analysis after our CI group had ended. Bray *et al*. (2000) discuss how the learning and findings from many CIs are not shared. This means that the learning remains only in the group so can't have a wider impact. As this CI was my doctoral research it was clear from the beginning that the research would move beyond the group, as I had to write a thesis, present at conferences and intend to write papers. I communicated this to each member of the group before they decided to be part of the process and we acknowledged it throughout the process, and more than that it was not only motivation for me but for some of the group who felt what we had experienced and the knowledge we had created needed to be shared.

The final session

The final session was focused on reflecting on the process as a whole and what it meant for us. It was a space for us to discuss how the process had impacted us and it also allowed the group to bring any last thoughts on the topics we had discussed throughout the process. There was a comfort in the session, with each other and with the topic. But this was also an ending and so was tinged with mixed feelings about this.

Another aspect of the final session was also a sense of unfinished business. We had created this knowledge and it had opened us up to both our own and each other's experiences, but we hadn't done anything collectively to change things. We left this open and mused that some, or all of us could come back to this in the future. There was also a hope that having a thesis and future conference presentations or articles based on this research might start some conversations.

"Given the time and energy busy adults will invest in collaborative inquiry, it is important for the group to celebrate its shared experience in whatever manner and at whatever time it deems appropriate" (Bray *et al.*, 2000, p. 111). Endings are important for any group. Most of our group sessions happened during Covid lockdowns and our final session was no different. If we had been meeting in the room I would have organised nice tea and cakes for us to celebrate together, but unfortunately the group was going to happen online. I felt very uncomfortable with not being able to mark the ending so I checked if all the group members were ok to meet me or give me their address so I could drop a mini party to them. Everyone agreed so I organised a small gift bag with cakes, chocolates and a funny memento of our time together. I dropped them to everyone before the group so we could have tea and cake together at the end of the last session. We also made sure we left time in the session to turn off the recording and have this informal time together at the end. When Covid restrictions lifted we also went out for dinner together.

Co-creating knowledge

The purpose of our CI was to co-create knowledge about the experiences of working class women who went to HE, using our own experiences to interrogate the systems of education. McNiff (2013) describes knowledge creation as "a living process. People generate their knowledge from their experiences of living and learning… there are no fixed answers because answers become obsolete in a constantly changing present" (p. 29). We were thinking about our past, present and future and how they are interconnected and influenced by structures which can see working class as less than or 'other'.

The knowledge we created is about the experiences of a seldom heard group. As I had stated there is very limited research on this topic, from a lived experience perspective, in Ireland. We spoke about not hearing stories like ours, either in academic writing or in more mainstream representations. By raising our voices we are being intentional and presenting the knowledge we created as a critique of current systems. Although Heron (1996) asserts that "anything written down is secondary and subsidiary" (p. 101) in a CI, I would argue that having our stories written down and contributing to a body of knowledge on this topic was a driving force for the whole group. We recognise the barriers in the system and want to highlight them to others. Therefore it was important to capture our new knowledge and to write it down and disseminate it. Sharing our stories wasn't just about the group, it was about the broader discussions about HE and class.

The knowledge we created has a political intention, so to not write it down and share it would mean keeping the new knowledge to ourselves. We would still hold the knowledge individually and it would have an impact on us and around us. But we wanted more from this research. Sharing our stories and discussing the power and powerlessness that were aspects of our collective experiences were something we want to challenge. It is a starting point for naming the barriers so we can challenge them.

It is important to recognise that this research also had an impact on us as individuals and we all have new learning that is significant for us. Working together to create new knowledge can be a "generative transformational evolutionary process" (Mc Niff, 2013, p. 66). In the next chapter I will discuss the sense of empowerment we gained from this

process. Heron (1996) describes "the proper outcome is not something on paper, but something within persons" (p. 101). We all discussed the importance of being part of this process and how it impacted us, just as going to HE had. Bray *et al*. (2000) assert that "in the process of telling the story, people realized they have acquired a tacit knowledge about things that previously they would not have been able to articulate" (p. 95). We discussed the lack of naming of class in Ireland and not having the language to articulate some of our experiences and how by working together we had found the language, which was empowering. We also recognised how our experiences were related to our current practice and our way of seeing the world, particularly recognising the importance of care and empathy, which was discussed in depth, especially in the final session. Our ability to articulate and make sense of our experiences came from not just our own individual stories but from our collective stories and how we worked together to make sense of them. I will discuss this in the next chapter where I explore the importance of the process itself and the findings related directly to this.

Personally the process of writing this thesis, the theory, the process and the stories has been immensely important for me. It has not only allowed me to develop a level of scholarship beyond my own expectations but it moved my thinking and my ability to be reflexive to a new level. It has enabled me to bring myself and the other women's stories beyond our discussions in the group. It has allowed me to reflect on my own practice and to bring the new knowledge into my professional and personal journey. Emerald and Carpenter (2015) describe the emotional impact of doing research with people and hearing their stories. They assert that "It contributes to developing an awareness of the way things are, and foreshadows our work to understand the way things could be better" (p. 747). It can generate hope, stories, and writing them down, can present hope.

Beyond the group process and before the findings

After the group meetings were finished I continued the analysis. Heron (1996) discusses the importance of not just noticing but "paying heed" to the information that is generated in a co-operative inquiry (p. 115). The importance of "giving it careful attention, noticing something about it. This involves an extra, intentional directing of awareness" (Heron,

1996, p. 115). This is important throughout the CI process and it continued beyond the group when I went back into the transcripts and the group analysis to deepen my understanding. It was important for me to give extra attention to the stories and experiences that we told, discussed and analysed within the process, to delve deeper in to our collective analysis.

When I started this process I was immersed in the experiences and discussions. I felt like I knew them really well, so I needed to think about how I could go deeper into them. In hindsight an important part of this was stepping out of them and going back with a fresher perspective. When I stepped back from the analysis I went back to the literature and the theories that I had started with and expanded my reading to look at some different perspectives. This aspect of the process highlighted the importance of praxis, and provided a space where I was finding meaning in the merging of the stories and the theories, allowing me to go deeper into both. The two aspects supported me to develop a more scholarly understanding of my research and brought me back into the process of analysis.

Braun and Clarke (2022) describe some qualities and dispositions that are important in using thematic analysis (TA). They describe the need to embrace the uncertain nature of researching and analysing this way. For me this linked with the unstructured nature of CI and the importance of process driven, rather than results driven research. They also emphasise the importance of "a critical and questioning approach to life and knowledge" (p. 7) which links to asking deeper questions about experience. They link TA to "the ability to embrace the idea that knowledge comes from a position , and a disinterest in the idea of a singular universal truth to be discovered" (Braun and Clarke, 2022, p. 7). These ideas about qualitative research were important to me at all stages of the process, including the analysis- both within the group and beyond it. They caution against "positivism creep" (Braun and Clarke, 2022, p. 7) in qualitative research, which felt like an authentic position for me and an encouragement to stay within the process based qualitative research journey. They describe "positivism creep" as placing value on aspects of quantitative research "such as valuing objectivity, control of 'bias' and the search for the ultimate truth" (Braun and Clarke, 2022, p. 7). This research is not about finding a neat answer to the questions, but is positioned in the messiness of lived experiences. It is not a search for a "simple, fixed and unitary truth" but recognises

"nuance, partiality and messiness" (Braun and Clarke, 2022, p. 12). TA recognises and acknowledges the subjectivity of the researcher and the importance of reflexivity. The analysis was a continuation of the research process, with me as an insider researcher. I would also add that this research moves beyond the individual to critique structures in society, which are more static and 'fixed'. Our subjectivity is within social structures which position us and critiquing them is influenced by our positioning.

Being authentic as a researcher was part of the research journey for me. Finding a participatory, process driven, qualitative way of researching allowed me to be inside the research, as an embodied human (Heron, 1996). Care, relationship, equality, authenticity, honesty and empathy were important to me and influenced my decisions engaging in and the how of this research. My values, and those of the group, informed the analysis process, both in the group and beyond. They were also values that were central to the whole groups interactions and stories. Our values are "deeply embedded" even though they can shift over time (Braun and Clarke, 2022, p. 14). It was not possible for me to be a reflexive researcher without thinking about my own values and why they were important to me. My values, and working from a values driven perspective is part of being authentic and present in the research process for me. This was something that we discussed in the group- about the importance of our values, and the classed experiences linked to them. Our values were part of the analysis we did together and have an impact on the findings, which I will discuss further in the next chapter and in the discussion.

The analysis of qualitative stories and experiences is complex. Bringing the initial analysis to the group, within the CI process, provided both opportunities and challenges. One of the challenges was in relation to the timescale and having enough time together to work through the stories and experiences, to find meaning with the group. One of the ways I found to make the best use of our time together was to provide space in two sessions to discuss this analysis, and a final session to finish the process. This meant that if the group emphasised something I hadn't identified, I was able to go back through the transcripts and bring more information to the next session. I also presented the analysis in a different way for the second session- using post-its and posters. Based on the analysis and discussions in the group I presented a number of themes and sub-themes. These related both to the topic- working class women and Higher Education, but also the

process, the how of the research, how we had experienced it and what it meant for us- and for a broader audience.

The themes evolved through the analysis process. The importance of praxis- bringing the experiences and theories together was part of this process. There were ideas that were discussed in the group that came to life when I read theory that helped to frame and explain them. Some themes took longer to refine and theorise. I have reflected on this and think part of this is that the complexity and messiness of lived experience can be difficult to define or put in a neat box. Theories that have the complexity to help with developing an understanding of lived experiences can also be complex to understand and apply. Using theory to support me to work through themes was an important part of the analysis.

Reflecting on, and coming back to stories, themes and topics gave us the space to interrogate not just our stories but how we could, or couldn't, represent them with language at different points and how academic knowledge can provide a frame for exploring them in a different way. The practical way of knowing emerged in our reflections on how we are now engaging with language, challenging classism or asserting our knowledge in spaces outside the group. It was also evident in how our engagement in the group evolved over time as we moved deeper into the cycles. In the analysis sessions we were more focused on the bigger picture and how our stories could inform the broader discussion on this topic. It was not just about telling our stories but about how the new knowledge we had created together was something that we now possessed and could use.

Conclusion

The importance of the process was discussed and I gave some detail about the different steps involved in this CI process. This included limitations and sampling, recruitment and our group. I also discussed the process, broken down into the first session, the middle sessions (including the impact of Covid), the analysis in the group and the final session.

I concluded this section by discussing the importance of co-creating new knowledge in a CI process.

I discussed the process of analysis, both inside and outside the process of CI and how important being a positioned and reflexive researcher was for this process. The importance of values and stories was central to this part of the process.

In the next chapter I will discuss the affective, embodied and storied elements of the process that gave it significant meaning for us in the group.

Chapter 6 Findings: Process, group, embodiment and voice

> Perhaps for those of us who learned silence through shame, the hardest thing of all is to find a voice, not the voice of the monstrous, singular ego, but one that summoning the resources of the place that we come from can speak with eloquence of, and for, that place (Kuhn, 1995, p. 103, as cited in Reay 2017, p. 198)

Introduction

In the previous chapter I have discussed the use of Co-operative Inquiry (CI) and the importance of using a participatory process for this research, related to my own values and way of working. My own practice, both working with children and families and as an educator is relational and I aim for it to be reciprocal. This was at the heart of the research and informed the research design. In this chapter I will explore how important working together through the process was to the research and how some of the findings related directly to the process. These findings are based *in* the process. I have discussed the importance of voice and story, and in this section I will explore how our collaborative inquiry deepened our understanding of our own experiences which allowed us to co-create knowledge on the topic. It was being together in the process that created opportunities for reflecting on and about our own and others experiences. We worked through some difficult experiences by being present, empathetic, non-judgemental and understanding.

In some ways this is a more difficult chapter to write because I am immersed in the raw, embodied feeling part of the process, both my own and all the women in the group and want to ensure I do justice to the depth of the process. The pauses, the laughs, the deep breaths, the anger, the sadness, the fun and the engagement as a whole person are at the centre of this chapter. The reflections between sessions and the depth of feeling about our own and others experiences could only be explored at the depth they were because of this wholeness, and the wholeness was possible because of the process and the space we created together allowing us to be our real selves. Wholeness for me related to feeling like I could be my authentic self, to express myself truthfully, including humour, emotion and classed parts of myself that are not always welcome. It was something we discussed as a group, being able to be honest and real in the space we created. In this chapter I want to capture some of the essence of this process and why it was important for the co-creation

of new knowledge about our classed experiences of education. It is also important to note that although I am presenting this aspect separately from the next chapter, they are intertwined.

In the methodology chapters I have discussed and given some detail on the process and how it worked. In this chapter I will move beyond this to demonstrate that researching in this way was a meaningful aspect of this research. It is quite likely that interviews would have elicited much of the detail of peoples stories and experiences, which I could have analysed and written up. My intention as a researcher was to try to ensure that instead of taking peoples stories and making sense of them myself, that this would be a collective process where we could make sense of our experiences together and in doing so we would all benefit from the research. This was very important to me in remaining whole, and in developing an authentic identity as a researcher. It is also a core aspect of participatory research (Heron, 1996). As such it is just as important for me to ensure the importance of the process is represented in this thesis, alongside the content of our discussions, analysis and findings.

In writing this chapter I will draw on discussions we had in the group, reflections on the process itself and extracts from my reflective journal that I kept throughout the research process.

The group

I have provided an outline of the group in the last chapter. We were initially seven women, but were six after the first session. The group had women who had started university as mature students and those of us who went to HE as teenagers.

In the first meeting we agreed a group contract which included confidentiality, trust, respect, no judgement, the room is a safe space, everyone's voice is equal. This created the space for us to share our stories and our experiences with each other, without fear of judgement and was the starting point for us in building relationships. In listening and speaking we recognised a value in both our own personal experiences and in our collective experiences. Although there was no one typical story, we recognised patterns

and experiences that resonated. There were discussions about how I would take all the information away and there was trust that I would represent our stories, discussions and the knowledge we created, from an insider perspective, in a way that was real and accessible. I was recognised as one of the group, with shared experiences.

The importance of working class stories and voices being represented by other working class people has been explored in the literature review (Lynch and O'Neill, 1994; Case, 2017; Reay, 2017; Crew, 2020; Stone, 2020; Walkerdine, 2021) and was an important part of the research process. This research was an opportunity for us to be open, honest and critical of our experiences in a group that exuded the values that we highlighted as linked to our working classness and our view of the world- care, empathy, authenticity, equality, solidarity, humour, honesty and integrity -within reciprocal relationships. The group wasn't always an easy or comfortable place. There were times where we felt anger, frustration and sadness, related to our own stories, the stories of others in the group as well as a lack of hope about how little seems to have changed.

A space for voice and story

> But thinking through class is still vital because it makes us confront the issue of who has wealth and power. It also focuses our attention on which stories and versions of a social world are listened to, and encourages us to ask why (Reay, 2017, p, 7).

As I have discussed, Reay emphasises the importance of working class voices, and telling our own stories. Often working class stories are mediated by those with power, and interpreted from that position (Lynch and O'Neill, 1994). In the literature review I have discussed the importance of working class voices, including Paula Stone (2020) asserting that "rarely are the people from the working-class allowed to speak for ourselves" (p. 12). Using CI provided us an opportunity to create a space and place to tell our stories, share our experiences and use that sharing to help make sense of them. The process of each session included a check in and a check out of the session. This allowed us to bring reflections on the previous session, or events since the last session into the group space. As a group we were then able to decide what was pertinent to focus on in that session. It

offered a space for meaningful discussion. The reflective space away from the group allowed us to think about what was of importance and worth bringing back to the group.

Belonging: As part of the process

Throughout the process we continually named this as a space that was different, where our voices were equal and heard and where we felt comfortable. We created a space where we felt we belonged. The sense of belonging we felt was linked not just to being able to tell our stories but to feel safe to do so, and to feel heard and understood. There was a significant connection between story and belonging. Lynch and O'Neill (1994) highlight the mediation of working class voices in research, while others, as I have discussed in the literature review, describe how difficult it is to be yourself in middle class spaces (Case, 2017; Crew, 2020; Walkerdine, 2021; Tugwell, 2022) and the feeling of alienation that can bring. Our group acted as an antidote to these experiences for us.

We talked about having carried our experiences of class and education with us and how this process had supported us to express ourselves, and find language to articulate our stories, knowing that others understood the experience. We talked about how the process helped us to feel seen, heard and gave us confidence.

> *These conversations have been really invaluable into, into giving us, giving me a sense of place, and a sense of landing my journey in a context in that I'm not alone. And it's been really valuable.* Katherine

We spoke about the importance of this space in being able to share, but also to find a deeper understanding of, our own experiences.

> *I felt like I was able to say things that I just don't ever say to anybody, you know that I wouldn't really talk about to anybody* Gemma

> *A lot of stuff in my head that I've never really given voice to* Katherine

The prioritising of voice has been something that was very important to me in the research design, and in the group we discussed how our stories are not usually heard. Everyone

in the group spoke about the lack of working class voices and stories throughout their education, something which made us feel outsider or 'other' as a result. We got to listen to each other's stories and this sharing allowed us to hear and see other women like us who had similar experiences. When we spoke about incidences where we were slagged or looked down on because of our accents we didn't have to elaborate on what this *felt* like. We had a shared understanding because we had all experienced it. We all recognised our accent as a marker of being working class and we all had experiences where we were made to feel less than, or 'other' because of it.

There was also a feeling of not being alone, finally finding somewhere that these difficult conversations could happen, as they weren't conversations that happen either with family, or with colleagues. We don't encounter many other women like us, with similar backgrounds and trajectories and if we do these are not the kinds of conversations that are easy to start. Words like '*cathartic*' and '*amazing*' were used in the group to describe the feeling of finding a safe space to articulate our stories and the emotions entangled in them. Often, in other spaces, we were made to feel like our anger wasn't justified and we shouldn't express it.

> *I felt, I was really, I felt that it was amazing. And actually, when I was in the meeting, with yis, I felt like it was like therapy. I don't know why. But I really did, I felt like I was able to say things that I just don't ever say to anybody, you know that I wouldn't really talk about to anybody. So it was great to have people to be able to say that to.* Gemma

> *I, as I say, found this last session very interesting and inspiring as well, Because, em, yeah, here were people who were just like me. And I think we all had a shared kind of same experiences, same type of em, not even upbringing, but we all had experiences I suppose, em as, I suppose working class people… So that's that kind of thing played with me a lot over the last few weeks, and I kind of came away from that feeling more empowered, because I felt no, this is my accent. And you've the problem, not me. And I think that's the way I'll go forward.* Olivia

> *I suppose it's looking at other people. Listening to their experience has made me realize I'm just like everyone else.* Olivia

> *You're not alone in your anger. It's not just in your head. It's actually this, this behaviour is wrong. And I think that's what I found really, really comforting, It's not just me.* Katherine

The group and the space we created together meant that we felt safe and held- able to express emotion and tell stories that can be hard to tell and hard to hear. There was support in the group to do this. There was a sense of belonging.

> *It was really an amazing space to be in.* Katherine

Emotions within the process

This was also a space where emotive or emotional responses were part of the process. The quotes in this and the next chapter give a sense of the emotive nature of some of the discussions. Feeling strongly about something impacted what was brought back to the group. Charlesworth (2000) emphasised the embodied and felt nature of class and how powerful emotions related to class experiences are felt. Our view of the world is connected to our habitus and the emotional impact of our experiences.

This was important from the first session. In the telling of our stories, our educational journeys and achievements, there was a huge sense of pride in ourselves and in each other. Every time one of us spoke about what we had done there was a palpable response in the group.

> Reflective journal- *There was a sense of pride- in ourselves and expressed when listening to others stories. There was a great sense that we had done something, that is unusual or not typical for women like us* 7 Oct 2020 (after 1st session)

This was an essential part of the group process, the space to express how we felt about the issues of class inequality which we both witnessed and experienced. Each session we spoke about our stories, our real lived experiences of being working class women. We found a space where we could be honest about both our experiences and our feelings. We heard each other and because of our shared knowledge, based on our experiences, we understood and we didn't judge. The affective and lived experience of class were part of the process (Charlesworth, 2000; Walkerdine, 2021). Care, solidarity, pride and social

justice were present for all of us. Expressing feelings about injustice we have experienced or we still see in the world isn't something we can do in most spaces but we created this space for ourselves, where we could be angry or sad and honestly articulate the depth of these feelings, and their impact on us individually and collectively. The section below where we came back to a topic gives some sense of how this worked for us in the group. I will also present numerous examples in the next chapter, where emotion was an important aspect of the experiences we spoke about. This honesty and the space to come back reflectively allowed us, as a group, to move forward. By naming our experiences, feelings, positions and feeling accepted we were able to delve deeper into these issues. This allowed for discussions that were based in our experiences but not stuck in them.

Savage *et al*. (2015) describes the "profound emotional imprint of social mobility" (p. 214) and the emotional impact of being a fish out of water. Crew (2020) highlights the "emotional labour" (p. 84) of working in a middle class space and how finding other working class colleagues can create a sense of solidarity. This impacts on how and where we feel comfortable to be ourselves and to express our feelings.

Anger was a common feature of many sessions, both looking back at our own experiences and in hearing about some of the current practices in education. In many cases the anger was a reaction to an experience that someone shared that was part of their story, it was at times part of the story, and it was also expressed in response to examples of inequality that were discussed about how things still are.

> *I'm bloody raging. Like, I'm raging at the stories that I've heard. I raging that children were made, children, Fucking children, I don't care if it was the forties or yesterday. Children were made feel that way by adults, adults who should have fucking known better. And they're still doing it. It doesn't matter when we are, they're still doing it.* Katherine

In one particular session many of the check-ins related to feeling angry about an experience discussed in the last session by Ronnie. This space to bring back ideas, feelings, topics was an important part of the process, particularly for moving from being stuck in something, to making some sense of it together.

This particular discussion was about the support, or lack of support that was available to students during that phase of the Covid pandemic. At the time we were in a post-Christmas lockdown and teaching and learning had moved online again. There was discussions about the availability of equipment, how some gatekeepers were preventing equipment from being provided (even though funding was provided and there were laptops available). We felt concern, anger and frustration, which continued into the next meeting, as the feeling of powerlessness and care, or lack of care, stuck with some of the group over the month between meetings.

One part of an exchange on this topic is presented here.

Katherine: *I was thinking about Ronnie, what you were saying about the laptops, and I just have to say, like, I'm still feeling the absolute rage from it… D'you know, and that mistrust, and again, it's like, it's like taking up space and resources, that you're not allowed. If you look a certain way, or come from, a certain way, you're invalidated in that space, because our lecturers don't look like us. Our teachers don't look like us. And then maybe they do, I don't know… To me, it's systemic. And it's rooted in, in the fact that they won't give the laptops out.*
…

Gemma: *And that's, again, comes back to who are our educators? Who are the educators, what class are they coming from? why are the Department not hiring? Why is there no diversity in our education system? That's the answer…I think we need to have diversity, from the top end in the education system, to empower our children to be powerful in their voice…they need educators to empower them from not just in secondary or Further, in primary, all across. And that is where the change needs to happen…And it's like power. It's like this power that people have in these schools…I'm sorry, Ronnie, but I was so upset like Katherine, I could not stop thinking about that. And you know that you were trying to get your classes online and all that, the power that they had.*

Katherine: *Like how are they meant to…nothing about me without me. Do you know what I mean? And yet, we've created a system where like, the, like working class areas, schools, …But what is that if the staff don't like, inherently don't like the communities they're working in?*

Ronnie: *Yeah. Actively dislike them.*

Katherine: *Exactly. You know, and that's for a myriad of reasons. And I don't know how you dismantle those structures.*

Ronnie: *It's so stressful… they (colleagues) don't want to do the live classes. Oh, you know, some, so the kids will do a Tik Tok of you... the same people were talking about, in [a social context] It was like it was a pissing contest…one of them, her kids are privately educated. The other one is in a really good school in (Place) and they're like, oh, my daughter gets three live classes a day, oh mine gets five live classes a day and they are loving that their own children are getting live classes, but they will not put on live classes for these kids that they work with*

Katherine: *Its infuriating. nail on the head. And like, I feel like it's, we're, we're working within the boundaries of a toxic system.*

The experience of one group member, and the depth of feeling it induced, was a catalyst to explore how current systems sound very like the systems we encountered when we were in school, and highlighted how much change is still needed, including ensuring a more diverse teaching pool, which needs to include more working class teachers. The lack of understanding of the context of working class children's lives, highlighted by the discussion about laptops and online classes, tapped into feelings of anger and despair, but some anger being directed at the individuals, the anger was primarily aimed at intransient and uncaring systems, that don't understand or value working class experiences.

There was frustration in this interaction which was related to a number of issues. Frustration at current systems, at the lack of change since we were in school, at the lack of people like us in teaching roles. There was also frustration about not having solutions or wanting to find solutions and how this was impacted by being a lone voice, asserting a different perspective, trying to challenge or disrupt the status quo. The group was a space where we could think about what this meant for us and our own sense of belonging. It also provided a space to build ourselves back up, particularly in the realisation that we might be alone in work, but we were not alone in how we felt or how we viewed the world and the inequalities and classism we saw and experienced.

Ronnie: *No but it is, It's crazy. It's actually disgusting. And it's sickening. And I feel like leaving the school because I flipping hate it. You know.*

Olivia: *Don't leave it you have to... I think you could be the change Ronnie, you could be*

Gemma: *Yeah*

Olivia: *I know it's means sticking your head above the parapet.*
          …

Sorca: *One of the things around what you've been talking about Ronnie is that idea of, you know, being the disrupter. And how, how have you experienced that yourself. Because I'm like that in work as well... d'you know, and I'm seen as a troublemaker. I'm seen as, you know, different. For me, in some ways, like, I mean, although it takes a lot of energy, and there's times where I don't have the energy for it... And that's me, embracing my class and standing up for my beliefs and what I believe in. And it's something that not everybody does. And it's something that I think we completely underestimate how difficult it is to do…But it's hard, you know, it can feel very, very lonely.*

Ronnie: *Oh, it is for me, it is definitely because I would be a bit like that but, no you're right yeah.*

Sorca: *But there's so much of it, I think, related to class. You know, we see injustices that we experienced, whereas other people see headaches.*
          …
          I think part of the problem with the education system is that this is the belief, is that the middle class dominant culture, people believe that that's the only culture, and then they go and work in areas, working class areas, where culture is different, and experience is different, and values are different and priorities are different. And they don't know how to cope with that because it's so alien to them.

Ronnie: *They revert back to, they look down on it, they revert back ..because I'm better than you, you know, and that shows, like my kids deserve to be getting live classes but I don't deserve...ours wouldn't, are not mature enough.*

The reality of being working class in spaces that are built on middle class ways of knowing and ways of being can be exhausting, isolating and can impact our sense of belonging. Ronnie began that conversation by talking about leaving her job because she is seen as 'caring too much' and this is seen as a problem by her colleagues. It again highlights a clash of values in work and highlighted the importance, and the rarity, of the space we created. We discussed the impact this can have on us as individuals, especially when we are often isolated because we challenge the status quo, both by being in those spaces but also by calling out the inequality we see. The solidarity of being in a space

together, alongside the isolation of being a lone voice in work, highlighted the importance of the sense of belonging for us in this group. It highlighted the importance of our class backgrounds and habitus in understanding and experiencing the world in a particular, classed way. This is particularly important in the context of class regularly not being part of wider discussion of inequality in Ireland, and of the questioning of the relevance of class in wider social science.

This sense of belonging helped us to feel this was a space where we could express our feelings, even more difficult ones. We felt a sense of solidarity and care. We spoke about how being together made us feel empowered and stronger. We allowed ourselves to express feelings that we often feel are not welcomed in other spaces. This included being able to express our anger and frustration at the systems that impacted our journeys and are continuing to impact working class children and young people, like the above examples. The anger came from both our own stories but also from not seeing change in the systems.

Gemma: *I don't think they care. It's not acceptable. We can't accept it*

Olivia: *Yeah. See this is what I'm saying*

Katherine: *This makes me angry. And I'm like just burn it to the fucking ground.*

Ronnie: *I say burn it to the ground.*

Katherine: *D'you know what I mean, I'm sick of having a polite conversation, sick of having to listen to someone else's point of view denigrating where I come from.*

Katherine's anger at the systems was expressed very clearly in her assertion that we need to "*burn it to the fucking ground*" and start again. Again the conversation started with the lack of care that was at the heart of the inequalities we saw and experienced. It was also linked to those voices that are heard, and those that are silenced.

The 'polite conversations' often lack the depth of feeling that we were able to express in the group. They prioritise particular ways of communicating that can make us feel excluded, as it can be difficult to express anger 'politely' or respectably. The way we

communicated allowed us to express the depth of feeling, such as frustration, sadness and anger as evident in the interactions presented here. Many of the themes presented in the next chapter have added depth because they came from embodied and felt experiences.

Engaging in the process in this way wasn't easy. Reflecting on difficult experiences, whether our own or each-others brought up strong feelings, as I have outlined above. At times this led to feeling unheard (outside this space) and sad, angry or frustrated. Despite the group creating a sense of space and solidarity, it also opened up our knowledge about how little seems to have changed in some places, and how children from working class backgrounds can still be seen as less than or other, and exploring our own difficult experiences led to discussions, in a number of sessions, of anger, helplessness, upset, and rage. These weren't easy feelings and show that although it was an empowering and useful process, it wasn't straightforward and easy. It was difficult and challenging at times. This was possible because we cared about what we spoke about but also about each other.

> *The awareness has actually kicked the gut out of me* Olivia
>
> *I feel like from the start from when we first met, em it was great to get all the things that I was thinking off my chest. And I've been feeling like that since I've been having these meetings, and I love having these meetings. I love knowing that I'm not the only one. I thought that I'd feel better. And I don't, I mean, I do feel better, but I feel more anger, every month that we have these sessions and, so like, I really, really mean that. Like, last month, I was really upset when I came off. Thinking about the kids in that school. I wanted to go into that school* Gemma

I believe that the care in our group allowed us to name the difficult emotions and experiences that often go unsaid when there is a lack of understanding or care.

Being in it together

The significance of this research topic was something that came up throughout the group. We discussed the importance of sharing our experiences with the world, particularly within education. This was one of the reasons the women engaged with the research, and

gave up their time to be part of it. There was a collective element to our journeys and we discussed the importance of feeling part of something and how difficult it can be when it is not present.

For most of the women in the group, having this space and reflecting on our experiences collectively gave us a voice outside of the group- there were examples of challenging queries like "but what's your role" or "where are you from" as coded classism based on accent, and not accepting it anymore. One woman applied for a new job, telling us she is better qualified for it than others who would apply, and she realised this based on her reflections through this process.

> *Katherine mentioned communal learning. That's, this is what this is. We are all learning. We all take it back to our respective lives or careers, don't we? I take so much back from this.* Ronnie

There was also a sense of freedom in being able to name and discuss class, both lived experiences and from a more political stance. This is not something that is easily discussed outside of the group, in other spaces we occupy. The group provided a space to reflect on what it means to be working class and what going to HE entailed and the consequences of it, both good and bad (especially with family and friends).

Another key aspect of this was the centring of our values, and of care in particular. Care was lived in the group, in how we responded to and respected each other's stories, but also in how we valued care in our lives. We found working in care-less spaces very challenging, but we used this group to create a care-full space. I reflected on this in my journal writing:

> *There is a great sense of care in the group- for each other and for the topic. The space- even online- is a warm welcoming one* 14 Jan 2021 (after 4th session)

Care was something that was very important for all of us in the group. It formed part of our stories, fuelled our emotional responses and was lived in the space we created together; empathising with each other, listening carefully to each other's stories and perspectives and asking if we were ok when we were having difficult conversations. It

was evident in the careful responses to difficult stories and strong emotions expressed in the group.

Being in it together also led us to feel empowered and we explored how being and feeling empowered and supported gives us confidence to use our stories and our voices in other spaces, and gave us the permission and the confidence to challenge.

> *But I go in there with my head held high just that little bit more now from having these discussions. So it's done so much for me.*   Gemma

This feeling of empowerment was discussed in the final session and the conversations and discussions we had about the process of meeting together as a group.

Group reflection on the process

In the final session we focused on the process and what it had meant for us and how we had experienced it. In the initial part of the meeting, as part of the checking in process, everyone spoke about what the group and this process had meant for them. The quotes below framed the beginning of this session and are presented with minimal editing. They are how we framed our reflections on the process.

> *I found it all very empowering. I really have. I think it's even helped me make some decisions and changes that I've needed to make, address certain things. But yeah, I'm very thankful for it.* Ronnie
>
> *Yeah, it has definitely made I suppose, I never felt like that, Just because I had got to, I suppose not the top of my game, But like, I'd done all I could within education. But I never actually owned it. And I never felt, like I, I always feel I'm I am that imposter. I'm this person that has all this, but because I haven't, I suppose got the, everything else that goes with. It didn't feel real. And it didn't feel like it was mine. So I think this experience has kind of made me realize, no like, it was you that did it. It wasn't someone, they didn't just say, ah be nice and give her a degree. You know, that I did it. And it was some reason that sent me back to college in the first place... Yeah, the whole experience, I suppose it's looking at other people. Listening to their experience has made me realize I'm just like everyone else. And I'm not, yeah, I because I just thought that I was probably different.*   Olivia

191

For me, I just think that this whole process has given me confidence in myself. And that I would have thought I'm a bit confident, but I really feel more confident. It was more the sharing of stories that I felt that, I'm not on my own. Look I know, I knew Ronnie, so I knew I wasn't on my own in that sense but when we hear other people's stories and what they've gone through, and worse than what I, what I would have experienced like… you know, Jesus, like, you know, it just really made me just grow actually and develop myself as a person. This whole process has helped me to just really have confidence in myself. I am not being humble about anything anymore, and it's you know, we shouldn't have to be, so it's given me that confidence in meself. Gemma

I think for, for me, it's like that it's given me I suppose permission to be proud about what I've done and stopped downplaying it, like, plámásing it off as if it wasn't a big deal, and sure everybody does this. Em, everybody doesn't do it for, for lots of different reasons, and I did, and kind of against the odds really, and just to be proud of it, and to hear like, amazing women, like you kind of say that, you know that you're allowed to be proud of it. I think again, that's been it's been a huge thing for me. Yeah. making that mental leap, like, so thank you, to you all. Katherine

I'm really similar kind of, that thing of em, just being proud of it. Because I suppose I hadn't thought about it, cause its a very long time since I went to college. And just thinking back that experience and what it was like, and that kind of trying to stay under the radar and not be noticed. Because that imposter thing. I kind of, that's my pattern with a lot of things ever since. Em, like even the area of work I'm in, there's areas of this work, where there's, you know, much more respect and pay, but I didn't go into the areas where you get more respect and pay even though I'm doing as good work I'd argue with some of those people. It's like that pattern has continued. And it's making those links between now and then, it's been really interesting and those patterns set up when I was like in my late teens. Grainne

I can't believe I've done something that for me, has such meaning. And also, I think, for all of us has some meaning… I'm struggling with the word but it's the only, it's the right word. I feel powerful. You know, and it's not that I feel like I have this amazing power over people. It's I have this power in myself, and something that I started I think is kind of, it's like a little ripple. And it's kind of rippling out, you know, like, there's been times when I've been listening back to the transcripts, and people have said, you know, some guys ask them where I was from, or, you know, I've applied for this job or whatever. I'm actually really emotional because I'm like, I didn't do that, but I started the process, you know, and it's made me feel powerful. It made me feel like what else can I do? You know, what, what like that what I, what I've been shying away from and hiding away

192

from that actually I can do and that's, it's, I didn't expect to have that kind of experience. You know, I think the experience has been much more emotional for me than I ever thought.   Sorca

The initial comments related to a renewed, or new sense of pride in our accomplishments which was embedded in hearing each other's stories. The benefit for us came from being in a group process together, and sharing in a space in which we created knowledge, which allowed us to reflect on our own and others experiences. We could see ourselves in each other which created a sense of belonging, something that was often missing in our experiences of HE. The sense of belonging which we created by sharing our stories and listening to each other was even more important in the context of the topic, and the lack of belonging which formed a significant part of most of our stories.   Belonging or unbelonging is a key theme which I will discuss in detail in the next chapter.

There were also reflections on experiences that had come from the process. Grainne reflected on how trying to protect herself in HE had created patterns which she could see were still part of her way of being. The impact of her HE experiences were profound and long lasting.

When I responded in the group I was reflecting on feeling powerful and seeing and hearing the group throughout the process had reminded me that we can have a positive impact on the world, even if it starts with some small ripples.

There was also some discussions on having or creating a legacy, beginning with this process and the thesis, but this was only part of the discussion and wanting to find ways to replicate the "sense of belonging" which we had achieved by being together was something that needed to happen for those walking the walk now and in the future. There was a sense that something needed to come from this process, that could go beyond our small group.

I feel like we don't want to let go, we built this. And it's like we want to make a change somewhere down line or be part of a change and encourage others somewhere. Gemma

Final reflections on the process

The check out in the final session, which was also a check out of the process also evoked similar responses. The sense of togetherness we had created in the group was named by Katherine, while others spoke about how the process was empowering and opened our minds

It's like we're locked into everyone else's kind of journey now Katherine

I think it's overall it's just been a fantastic experience for me. Really, really, just like I said, when I was checking in, just I grow after every session, I just grow in there. It's just opened my mind more and I get more confident all the time. That's what it's done for me. Gemma

I learned so much from, the same as you Gemma, and all the girls. I learned so much from each and every one of youse individually, and I take it away, it seems like I adapt it. And it does make your mind grow. It's like going back to college, or going to college for the first time. You can't switch it off, you know, you've learned something, and it makes you question, it makes you think. And it definitely, one way or the other make, it gives you options, you know. Ronnie

I find it, I'm thinking about it, like, after, like, even after the meeting, and before we have the meeting, I think about it a lot. And think about what's like, I didn't want it to turn into a kind of an, I know we all spilled our guts, and, you know, past experiences, but I didn't want it to be like, this happened to me and just happened to her. I wanted it more to be like to show, I suppose where we were and where we are now. And I think we did get that across a lot you know that, yeah, we all had faced different, you know, what would you call it, I have no words even, you know, trials and tribulations throughout our lives… it was an honour. Like I feel honoured that I was like, in a small way contributed towards your study. Olivia

I'm really thinking back to that 19 year old who started college and I remember at the time, it's really on my mind this evening… And I just thought I was the most powerful. I was in college, I thought I was the most amazing. And then I got into college and realized, 'Oh fuck, this world is a very different world to the world I know', and the confidence starting to be ebbed away. But now … I want to feel like I did before I knew what the world was like, at 18, 19 just kind of, you know, that sense of just power going in there. And that there's nothing. I've never really found that exactly feeling again since. But just going through this process made me think, you know, before I realised, before I went into those sociology classes,

and realized, actually, some people's lives are much easier, and there's people in my class who should be here and they didn't get here and why are they not here, they're just as clever as these people. And like that, before all that kind of knocks you down a bit, you know, and but I think this process kind of helps the building back up process. But I keep thinking of bjork now because.. it's weird, Remember being 19, listening to Bjork, going in on the number 10 bus thinking this is it, this is the life. Grainne*

I, the exact same as all you amazing women, it's been a really, really engaging process. And it's really made me think about like, legacy and what you inherit, but also what you can put forward as well. And I used to think that sometimes you were just, and sometimes I still do, like kind of screaming into the void, d'you know, like that, no one's gonna listen, and it doesn't matter. But what the, this time with you all has just has really shown me that it does matter. And the questions that I can ask, and the awareness that I can have in the, whatever room I'm in, and whoever I can bring into that room, that's important and the little bit of power that I might have, and it's very little, it's very bloody little, but to use it in a way, you know, in the same way that the women that I met on my initial journey when they showed me the piss hole sculptures in the snow, and opened a world to me that, that's something that you can pay it forward. And, before I think I got apathetic and a bit lazy about it because it didn't matter. But this, you really kind of grounded me back in that it does matter. So thank you to everyone. Katherine*

My final reflection in the group was raw and emotional. The sense of solidarity and belonging that we created was grounded in the relationships we built and the sharing of our experiences. The depth of trust and care allowed us to move beyond ourselves to create a collective experience which allowed for the creation of knowledge together. I felt an immense sense of gratitude for the group and the journey we went on together.

I just don't have the words to thank you. Firstly, like just that jump at the beginning and agreeing to be part of this.… how we all came together and like the respect and, like the first session we had, one of the words I kept writing was pride. And it was like, every time somebody told their story, everybody was proud. Like, it wasn't just that we were proud of ourselves, everybody was proud. And I think that's something we've carried, that kind of sense of, d'you know, it's not just me who did it, like there's other women doing this too. And it's great that we're doing it, you know, and this idea of lifting each other up… Whatever idea I had in my head about doing the research this way, the experience has completely blown that out of the water, it's gone way beyond my expectations. And it's been, for me, a really amazing experience. And, and I feel a huge sense of responsibility now, that, you know, I need to do justice to what we've talked about, I need to find,

I mean, even some of the stuff you're talking about today, I, you know, I just kind of reflecting on how do I, how do I write some of this stuff up in a way that, you know, somebody else doesn't have to go on Google three different things to try figure out what it means, d'you know, it's like, from the bottom of my heart, like, I am so unbelievably grateful for everything ... And, I suppose all I can do is try and, was it Katherine said you hate the word authentic. But just make sure that what I produce is authentic. You know, and I don't mean it in a fucking fluffy tick box way. I mean, in a guttural real life way. And I suppose that's, that's my next part of the journey. But d'you know, I think this year has just been incredible. And thank you all so much. Sorca

The final session was filled with care, understanding and gratitude. Our collective engagement in the process as whole people was cathartic and useful. The relationships we built and the trust we developed in the group allowed us to share our stories, in a space where we felt we belonged, where we were understood and where we could share this particular part of our lives that isn't seen or understood by most people. It gave us confidence to think about how we could be the ripple and move beyond the group, to find ways to enact change. Seeing ourselves collectively also allowed us to analyse these experiences in a way that supported us to co-create new knowledge.

Conclusion

The process was a core part of this research. It brought us together and gave depth to the themes which I will present in the next chapter. It allowed us to return to important topics, to interrogate them and to make sense of them in a way that moved beyond ourselves to a more sociological and outward looking perspective. It allowed us to see our experiences within the context of educational and societal structures and institutions.

I have detailed how the group created a space, a sense of belonging which allowed us to be embodied co-researchers in this CI process. The impact of the process is detailed in our own words, highlighting the importance of the methods in ensuring this research was reciprocal and meaningful.

In the next chapter I will discuss the themes that were core to our discussions on class and education and provide stories and interactions that were possible because of our deep embodied engagement in the CI process.

Chapter 7 Findings: Class, belonging and education

Introduction

In this chapter, I will present further findings from the research. This chapter begins with a broad exploration of what being working class means to us. It continues with a focus on family and the role family plays both in education and in class identity. Family is a very significant theme that is revisited throughout this chapter. I then explore experiences of education, both before and during HE and the influences and impacts. This section is dominated by the concept of belonging, or unbelonging and how this framed our experiences. This theme continues into post HE and work spaces and linked back to concepts of being working class, by asking the question 'Are we middle class now?' which was also a significant theme of the research. The chapter closes by exploring the affective and gendered experiences of class and care. I will also explore how this was something that was lived in the group.

What does being working class mean?

In the literature review, I presented theories of class and what is and isn't prioritised in different theories. I want to present our perspectives on what it means to be working class, based on our stories and our discussions in the group. One of the research questions we explored was 'what are our experiences and understanding of class?'. This section is a general exploration of class in Ireland and is not intended as a comprehensive analysis of class in Ireland. Its purpose it to provide a frame of reference for the rest of this chapter. I will explore family, education and work in later sections.

I will focus on different kinds of cultural, social and economic capitals, including accent, place, time and leisure, media and representation, poverty and financial security, within the context of judgements from both inside and outside.

Accent as a marker of class

As a group of working class Dublin women we recognised that accent was the most significant marker of class for us, and how we are identified as working class by others.

It came up repeatedly throughout the process, both in relation to past and present experiences. We discussed how we are positioned in relation to others based on our accent and this linked to whose voices are heard and represented.

Olivia talked about the fact that not only is accent a marker of class but that you are judged by your accent, and in a negative way if you have a working class accent. Accent was linked to ideas of intelligence.

> *People shouldn't just look and say, 'oh, she speaks like that, so she must be stupid' and that just really, that's one thing that of all workin class, it really galls me. You know, people would say, 'Oh, she speaks like this and he speaks like that, you mustn't be from anything'. And 'he mustn't have any morals'.* Olivia

Katherine spoke about how those with particular accents are listened to and how others are dismissed.

> *You just listen to these people with these accents. And they're talking rubbish, like, absolute rubbish… we might have a cup of tea together having a conversation about something, like the problem is sorted. These are just two kind of scangers, according to them, from Clondalkin like, and I know, I don't know, it's kind of put me in a frame of mind that, em, is maybe a bit kind of angry, really… It's just the idea of the, an then you're othered.* Katherine

Gemma responded to Katherine by commenting on the confidence that can come with a particular accent.

> *You could talk a whole lot of gibberish but if you sound confident you get away with it!* Gemma

Olivia made an interesting comment linking accent to intelligence when she described her lecturers in Trinity college. She associated a 'posh' accent with being a genius.

> *…all English lecturers. An really like, you know that kind of posh English accent and very, you just feel 'oh Jesus like this is totally on my league, these people are like geniuses'* Olivia

What is interesting about these conversations about accent is that they are at times contradictory. We recognised that we weren't less intelligent because of our accents, even if we were judged as such. However, as with Olivia's comment, at times, we found

it difficult not to associate particular accents with intelligence. The impact of habitus and misrecognition is difficult to overcome, even in a process where we are trying to interrogate it. This highlights how ingrained aspects of wider cultural values impacts us and our sense of selves. The value that is placed on 'posh' accents is part of our everyday experiences and can be difficult to recognise or challenge, even in ourselves, especially when we are positioned and judged based on our working class accents.

In our reflections we tried to recognise the positive aspects of our accent. Grainne spoke about accent as a way of recognising others with a similar background and as a way of connecting with other parents at her children's school. She chose a school thinking it would be very diverse but has found the opposite.

> *I have found the three other women who talk a bit like me, and we kinda, talk to each other. It's the strangest thing ... when ya think your kids are going to a very diverse place, and like, the opposite. Like it couldn't be any less diverse. Even class never mind, race or ethnicity, you know.* Grainne

Annie also saw a positive in her working class accent. She spoke about how the students she works with were interested in where she is from, because she has a Dublin accent and she asserts that having a working-class Dublin accent and places in common, helps to build a connection with her students.

> *I've a Dub accent… but some of the kids would say to me, where are you from?... they make a connection with you because you're a Dub and eh like you're from Inchicore.* Annie.

This comment from Annie is particularly poignant as this was something that was mostly missing for us in our school experiences, which I will discuss later in this chapter.

These, and other experiences which I will highlight in relation to education, were important aspects of our sense of identity, including how we were perceived and positioned by others. We discussed how we continue to be judged based on our accent and how we speak.

Accent, as a marker of class was significant in our discussions throughout the process. There was an ease in the group with hearing others like us and being able to recognise the experiences of others, linked to having a working class Dublin accent.

Place

Place was named as a marker of class, and part of classed identity. It is closely linked to accent as being from a particular area usually went with having a particular accent. This means that there is overlap between the previous section on accent and this one on place. Where we were from was important to all of us. It was also a way for others to 'position' us within social structures. It also led to us feeling outside if where we were from was slagged or derided.

The clearest example of this was shared by Katherine when she spoke about comments about where she was from, from another student in HE.

> *But she burst in she like 'Jeasus, the first time Clondalkin wasn't in the news today, Katherine, for drugs or killin'. I was like alright, okay. That's how people view where I'm from, like that, is that how they see where I come from? But where I come from, is where my lovely nanny lives and makes her lovely blankets and volunteers in the credit union. And it's a, it's a village, you know what I mean, because that's the life of, the lived experience I have, but for her for kind of thinking on that was like, was just so different. And that was, that was, really hard like*. Katherine

Katherines story highlights the disconnect between how she saw her community and how it was viewed by others, related to its representation in media. This challenged her world view and in doing so positioned her as different, leading to a recognition of class and class differences. Grainne also describes how having the area she is from slagged in HE was a catalyst for her to become 'silent' and not open herself up to further hurt. I will explore this further in the section on HE, where it is linked to a lack of belonging.

In relation to place we also discussed the advantages that can come with being from a more affluent or middle class area, which highlight the inequalities that are structural in Irish society. Foxrock, a very affluent area in Dublin, was mentioned a number of times as a place where people had their voices heard, and could influence policy and society.

Olivia	*If this was Foxrock the parents will all be, you'd hear about it in the independent and you'd hear about it on today tonight or primetime. If that was Foxrock, all the parents would be together.* Olivia
Sorca	*But how do the parents in Foxrock get access to primetime? It's because they have the social networks.*
Katherine table.	*It's because they're working on primetime. You know, it's they're at that*
Gemma privilege.	*Because they've had the privilege from the start, we don't have that*

Through this and similar discussions on place we explored ideas of power and influence. The cultural and social capitals that are interconnected with place and where you are from influence those whose voices are and are not heard. We recognised who holds the power and discussed the importance of place in this. The parents from Foxrock could use their networks to gain access to media to highlight issues. Where you're from influences what school you go to, who you meet and what opportunities are open, or closed to you. The link between accent and place, both significant markers of class in Ireland, could be used to trace who holds the power and who is "*at the table*".

Family, habitus and connections

We spoke about our families, and our place in them throughout the process. Stories related to family were connected to both positive and challenging aspects of our journey. The influence of family on us, particularly early experiences impacted how we saw ourselves and how we engaged with education. Our habitus, and our classed positions influenced our relationship to educational structures. We were also 'constrained' by our habitus in terms of our choices (Reay, 2004). In this section I will just focus on the wider importance of family, particularly related to class identity and later in this chapter I will return to their influence on our educational trajectories.

Family was discussed in a way that recognised the history and wider context of our family histories, particularly deprivation. The intergenerational aspect of family formed part of

our classed identity. Bissett (2023) describes "stories that carry the past into the present for a future yet to be" (p. ix). In our conversations about family Gemma discussed family histories and how they impact our sense of self, our class and who we are.

> *Like I don't know if you can change that element of who you are. It's in the fibre of your being. That's who you are and it's the stories of your life. And yes, it's the hardships you tell your children.* Gemma

The quote from Gemma highlight the central role of family, family circumstance and history in how we think about class. The hardships faced by us, or our parents, the "*stories of your life*" are part of family history that Gemma tells her children in order to recognise past and current class positioning, and to keep the history alive. It also fits with Walkerdine (2023) asserting that the affective aspects of class are transmitted across generations to become part of who we are. The connections we have to family are impacted by past experiences, habitus and the stories that are part of our history. In later sections I will explore the impact of HE on family relationships.

There is a connection between our habitus, and early socialisation in our families, where we are from and our accents which form a significant part of our class identity. They are also important factors in our trajectories to and through HE. Accent, place and family, including family connection, or disconnection, are still important aspects of classed positioning for us now, after going to HE and I will return to them in the discussion, particularly in relation to being ascribed a class position.

Economic dimensions of class

Surprisingly money wasn't a significant aspect of our discussions of class. However, as I have detailed in the literature review it is significant in how class is theorised and 'measured', so is important to include. A lack of resources, and memories of there not being enough money to cover essentials, was discussed, but related to experiences from childhood which highlighted our experiences of poverty. This related to school supplies, lack of holidays and generally having a lower standard of living than others. Economic security was named by Grainne in her dilemma about her class identity, given she is more

financially secure than her parents were. Lack of resources was something we associated more with our past, including during higher education. It was also a significant factor for Gemma in her lack of choice in going to HE and being sent to work, and is evident in stories about being othered or treated differently because of book money.

Family history was an aspect of class that was linked to economics, and in particular poverty. Gemma spoke about her parents growing up in tenements and not having enough food, and how things weren't much better for her growing up, but that her children are having a different experience. She sees this as important for them to understand the working class roots of their family.

> *And it's to do, I think to do with some of the hardships that you felt, some sort of hardship that your parents told you about their life, in the tenements… my kids don't have that struggle, but they know my struggle, because I tell them about it and it stays with them. And so that working class element stays with them... So I think that has a lot to do with keeping that sort of class thing alive..* Gemma

I would assert that the lack of discussion about economic factors of class is related to our current positions. All of us are in relatively secure employment (although Olivia was moving jobs as she had been on temporary contracts and wanted some financial security), are home owners (have mortgages) and have a sense of feeling privileged because of these things. The research happened during Covid, when many people were on reduced pay, or were furloughed from their jobs. We saw how lucky we were to not be in that position. This may have impacted the lack of discussion about money.

We did acknowledge money as a significant marker of class, and its central role in classifications and class position. We discussed judgements made about how working class people spend their money. Gemma described the phenomena of working class people buying things and spending money "*trying to prove that they're not poor*" which sparked an interesting discussion. Spending money on brands was discussed, with particular expensive brands now being associated with the working class. This led to a discussion about the potential reasons people may spend money on items that are very expensive. We posited two different general perspectives. The first is wanting to demonstrate to the world that they are good enough and can afford expensive items, wanting to belong and to avoid judgement. This can be linked to feeling 'respectable' and accepted.

> *Just trying to prove that you can afford it ... my child can have the best.* Gemma
>
> *Havin to spend too much on a jacket to prove you're, look, I'm as good as you.*
> Olivia

We also spoke about how there can be a pressure to conform, to not stand out. Parents want to protect their children, as they see other children or young people who have been groomed by gangs and drug dealers being able to buy these luxury items, and trying to keep their children away from this.

> *The lads that have one, like they're drug dealers or whatever. Or their parents are borrowin out of the credit union to bloody buy them for them.* Gemma

Judgements were made from within communities, linked to fitting in or not. But we also discussed how they were made from outside too, related to being seen as valuable and respectable, or in particular 'deserving' of luxuries such as televisions and clothing.

In our discussions we reflected on how these judgements are especially pointed for those on low income, in social housing or on social welfare payments, related to stigma and the use of language such as 'underclass'. Judgements are made about how 'they' can afford flat screen TVs or other 'luxury' items, which reveal an underlying classism that Katherine names as "*They just don't like us*". Katherine was referring to colleagues who make value judgements about others, outside their own class, but our conversations also touched on the broader perspective in society that judges those without resources as 'other'.

Culture and leisure as markers of class

We also had wider conversations about what class means in Irish society and discussed, culture, media and time. These discussions were often more general with some examples from our own experiences, including about cultural and leisure activities that signify class. This ranged from discussions about permission, activities and time, to talking about clothing labels and, as noted above, proving you are not poor.

They're allowed, the middle classes are allowed their leisure, ya know they're allowed to sit in these public spaces and take it, like you see how people utilise parks and stuff Katherine

Katherine described the time and the knowledge available to the middle class in relation to leisure, and what is seen as the norm and acceptable forms of leisure.

you have like leisure. And you have like, you know, it's that self-permissive access, like you said that there, like going skiing 'naturally'. And you can just keep adding that, to that can't ya, like, goin to art galleries, eating in establishments that have Coulibaly [designer] *light fittings ... There's just kind of cues of what ya do at the weekend* Katherine

I find the use of the word 'naturally' here interesting. It had also been used by Olivia in this discussion. Katherine isn't suggesting that some of these activities are not undertaken by working class people, but it is how they are 'naturally' part of middle class culture which is of interest to her. Particular aspects of cultural capital are part of their everyday lives. I will return to this later as part of Katherines story, as she studied fine art and recognised the cultural differences between her and middle class students. Art, and cultural activities, are an important part of her identity, but were not 'naturally' part of her early experiences.

Despite the advantages of being middle class that we discussed in relation to culture and leisure, there was also a feeling of not wanting the constraint that we associated with it. The pressure to perform and to follow a particular path was seen as restrictive. This was linked to lack of free time for children and the expectation that they would go to HE, whether that was what they wanted or not. We differentiated ourselves from a middle class 'them' and positioned ourselves as less restrictive and more interested in happiness.

And I've been thinking about like, my mam and like my aunt's attitudes and stuff like that to their kids. And it's like, well, whatever makes you happy. You know, you do whatever you want. And if it's not college, it's not college, and that's fine. But I'm thinking about like, the activity laden middle classes and the parents. I was like, there's no fucking way that college is not an option for those children. Katherine

That sounds like prison though. Olivia

206

This is relevant as often we are, or feel, 'other' (particularly in middle class work spaces) and the judgements in society more broadly are made about those with less power and influence, but within our group, as we were with others like us, we could look at 'them' without fear of being othered in this space. We could assert the positives of our own, classed experiences and make judgements, like the examples above related to children not having any free time due to multiple activities, and us seeing HE as a choice rather than a parents decision. This may also be linked to challenging the constraint of early habitus (Reay, 2004) and finding ways to assert the agency which we have gained through education, placing 'worth' on our experiences.

Media and representation

Another aspect of culture that we explored was the way working class people and working class lives are represented in the media, including TV and movies. Katherine was particularly passionate about this and how the regular, warm interconnected lives of the working class are ignored for 'poverty porn' or criminality.

> *I was trying to think you know, of films or TV shows that show like working class, in a positive light, like, you know, and its either you know, they're either drug dealers or cleaners or they're like, I was thinking of you know that it's or it's just heart sore to watch. It's like the struggles of it, like 'I Daniel Blake' or 'Sorry, we missed you'. D'ya know what I mean, like, these are just really tough watches about the hardships that are experienced. And I was thinking maybe it was like 'normal people' that was on telly this year, and that showed the Mam, she was obviously a working class, single mother. And she was a cleaner, but she just had so much compassion and empathy…it's hard to find like representation, you know.* Katherine

> *You're right, it's very hard to find stuff where working class people are not portrayed as the bad guy. You know, or somebody, a character to feel sorry for.* Sorca

There was a general feeling in the group that it was difficult to find any authentic representation of working class lives, particularly Irish ones, in TV and movies. Many of the representations of working class lives were written and acted by those with no lived experience of working class lives. There was also a feeling that when actors from

working class backgrounds became famous that they were continually asked about particular aspects of their lives, and in a way that is different to middle class actors.

Katherine and Ronnie both spoke about some disruption to the status quo by up and coming artists, musicians and rappers, who are representing a lived experience of class in Ireland. Ronnie spoke about the impact of having a working class spoken word poet working with the students in her school, and the connection she made with the students. She described how

> *And all these fellas and girls, most of them are from Dublin, and they're all getting these kids into poetry. But it's all through rap and all.* Ronnie

> *There's a lot of articulation happening in a way that just was kind of absent, maybe or more easily dismissed or something… proud of where they come from… they're putting those lived experiences out there.* Katherine

There was excitement about working class artists like Gemma Dunleavy, Elayne Harrington (MissElayneous) and Denise Chaila telling working class stories through song, poetry and spoken word and how these voices are important, as we are hearing working class accents, voices "*articulating their lived experience*" Katherine.

Time

Time, including perceptions of flexibility and resources, was also a factor which was associated with class and classed positions. This was linked to flexibility of work, and the perception and experience of some of our group was that the middle class parents from their children's school, appeared to have more flexibility in the boundary between work and leisure time. Autonomy, particularly in relation to work, was associated with having more free time.

> *So what I'm seeing actually now is the level of freedom that middle class parents, the types of jobs they have, in that they can bring their kids to school, collect them from school, and in the way that if you're working in a shop or a restaurant, you don't have that freedom… And I think Covid has really shown it as well, they've*

huge freedom to work and independence in their work, and they can work from home or come in and out. Grainne

If you go back to the idea of activity, leisure and time being indicators of your class, that if you have autonomy to make those choices, you can choose to, you're not on a clock, you know. Katherine

Some of us also recognised this as part of our own work, and the privileged positions we are in. Time was related to both flexibility of work, but also economic freedom which this provided. I have discussed time as a form of capital and we discussed how particular jobs are much more constraining, while more middle class or professional jobs seemed to allow a greater amount of flexibility which converted to time.

Our discussions about class and how we see and experience it shows our perspective of class as relational and oppositional. We see ourselves in relation to others like us, and make distinctions which distance us from those not like us. Those with similar accents, interests, relationships and from similar places were who we positioned ourselves with. This becomes more complex when we go to higher education and our positions change, which I will discuss in relation to habitus clivé later in this chapter.

Lack of discussion about class in Ireland

Language is substance, in that it has potency in both its presence and its absence. (Bissett, 2023, p. 86).

In the last section I explored class and markers of class from the groups perspective. It is important to situate this in the broader context, related to feeling in the group that there is a lack of acceptance of Ireland as having a class system, as I have discussed in earlier chapters, the lack of discussion about class in Irish society more broadly impacts how we position ourselves and how we are positioned. It is difficult to define something, or to recognise your place in structures which are outside general discussion, or you lack the language to think and talk about it. In our group class began to be seen more clearly when we went to HE, and the inequalities became more visible. The differences between ourselves, our opportunities and those of middle class students became evident. This

awareness has continued into our working lives but we now have some knowledge and understanding to articulate classed experiences.

In the following excerpt from a discussion on this topic we explored these ideas and how we saw and experienced them. Katherine spoke about how the working class can be positioned within the 'arts', and when the arts are introduced to those from working class backgrounds, there is often an expectation that they will be part of a process to create the art, an expectation that isn't there for middle class consumers of the arts. This positioning is linked to classed perspectives that are enacted, but not necessarily named. This links to her knowledge working with community arts but highlights the broader issue of class being a topic which is often off limits.

Katherine: *So you know, it's like, you're devil if you do and your devil if you don't, if you bring it up that there is a class issue, right, you're bemoaned at because you're like 'Jesus Ireland doesn't have a class system'. You know, if that's what you're, 'that's the Brits, the Brits have the class system. We don't'... And then if you don't bring it up, then are ya, am I not being true to where I came from.*
We don't have a lexicon for it, because we decided that we weren't, we didn't have a class system, because that was an English thing. So that's, so there's, there's a whole kind of unlearning of that. And a critical discourse needs to happen.
But it's interesting, though, because it manifests very much in terms of arts and culture access, okay. So if you look at like, Where, where, and how people in different class areas, engage in the arts, you know, when you're in from Foxrock, and Dalkey, you're a consumer and a purchaser, you will go and sit in the audience, you will buy your ticket, you will purchase the picture to hang on the wall. If you come from a disadvantaged background, you're made, you have to contribute in part to the making, your labour is needed.

We also discussed how there can be a reluctance to associate yourself with being working class because of the negative connotations in our society and not wanting to be 'other' or lesser. This can have an impact on the psyche, including feeling confident, about yourself or your place in the social structures.

Sorca: *… the effects of austerity are really being felt by more people. So more people are starting to realize, actually, I'm not one of them, I'm one of*

210

> *these. And when that happens, we'll be like, because we ARE the majority, but people just aren't willing to identify.*

Katherine: *… why is it that they are unwilling to identify, and that's because culturally, to be seen as working class is to be seen as lesser.*

Gemma: *… And I do agree like, yes we are, the working class is the majority, but not the majority with confidence, and that was what I was trying to say, that was only, we are a minority that have been through and educated, and have a bit of confidence to go and do something. But the majority don't have the confidence, that's what has to rise, the confidence has to be given. And I don't know how, but I just, I just want to see children just being pumped with confidence, and power, you have to be empowered. And I, the only way I see, and I know I have to try and look outward and try and be more, you know, try and look at other ways, but I just keep coming back to the education system and saying they are not being given the confidence from a young age.*

This discussion highlights some interesting points that are linked to concepts of class and class identity. The lack of discussion about class and who is working class is seeped in both historical and current representations of the working class as less than. It is also framed by whose voices are part of these conversations, and the power in having your voice heard and represented in these discussions. The narratives around class impacts how working class people see and identify themselves as working class, as to do so is almost seen as an acceptance of being lesser. Gemma highlighted the role of education in building confidence, linked to gaining acceptable cultural capital, so as to be recognised as having worth in society. It is interesting that she asserts that "*confidence has to be given*", and sees education as both a barrier to developing confidence and a route to it. This may relate to her experiences of education, challenges in her early experiences and going to HE as a mature student and the confidence this gave her. However, as I will discuss later in this chapter, the education system can be a difficult experience for working class people, so opportunity to build confidence is not straightforward. The system isn't designed to challenge inequality in society. The role of education in changing the trajectories of some individuals, but not challenging the inequities in the system is part of this wider discussion.

The lack of discussion and language about class in Ireland is an important factor in some of the other findings, particularly in relation to not knowing about class until going to HE,

and expecting people there to be like you, until you realise they aren't. This is particularly pertinent where inequality was seen and recognised but not in the context, or language, of class. I will discuss this further later in this chapter.

Conclusion

What is really interesting about all the aspects of being working class we spoke about was how the deficit perspective of class, which was highlighted in the literature review, was evident. We all had experiences of classism, based on our accent and where we live or are from. Family was an important aspect of our classed identity. The enduring dispositions of our childhood habitus and the importance of our families in this highlights the importance of family, both histories and current relationships. Our families and our family histories influence who we are and family was important to everyone in the group. However, as I will discuss later in this chapter for some of us there was a shift in family relationships related to going to higher education. The context of culture and leisure activities that are seen as acceptable, respectable, or 'natural' by those from middle class backgrounds also shaped our view of class. The perception of working classness was under the middle class gaze and judged from this perspective. Even with our lived experience we saw class framed this way and at times bought into it, for example Olivia's perception of the professors with their posh accents being intelligent. For some of the group, with children still in school, there were concerns or challenges in navigating the middle class schools with their working class values and accents. That despite money not being as big a concern as it was for our parents, our current financial resources didn't change our formative experiences of class and this was linked to our family histories and how they formed part of our classed identity. Although we have had some success as individuals, the systems and power within them have not changed.

Belonging

In the previous section I have explored markers of class as we discussed them in the group. They are an important starting point as in this section I will discuss belonging as a significant overarching theme of this research. In the last chapter I discussed the feeling of belonging that came from this group, but throughout this chapter I will explore a lack of belonging, as it is also a significant aspect of stories related to our families, our experiences in education, particularly HE and how it remains a constant in our work.

Belonging came up repeatedly throughout our process. It was part of all of our stories and we all shared experiences of not belonging in education at different times. The influence of enduring habitus was a very significant aspect of the experiences of everyone in the group. I have connected belonging and habitus here as many of the experiences we shared were linked to coming from a working class background and attending HE, which is grounded in middle class ways of being and knowing.

As I have discussed in the literature review habitus is a way of being in the world that is linked to the norms and dispositions that are accumulated in our families and communities (Bourdieu, 1985). I have also discussed how this is internalised and gives us a sense of who we are and where we feel we do and don't belong. It is closely related to the concept of 'field' which describes spaces and places with particular expectations. Habitus and field are interconnected and can have a significant impact on our sense of belonging in different places, and with different groups. We have places where we feel at home and have a sense of belonging; immediate family, partners and children, as well as friendship groups were particularly important. When we move outside these spaces and away from the people we know we can start to feel like a 'fish out of water' which can impact our sense of belonging. The distance between these spaces isn't necessarily physical but is always cultural.

> *When you're surrounded by that environment, it's your family, your friends, your bubble stays the same until you move outside your bubble* Gemma

Gemma describes the safety of the familiar and how this changes when you move outside, which can impact belonging, relationships as well as your own sense of self.

213

Accent, belonging and education

We had lots of discussions about how when we talk about culture in Ireland, we are often only referring to middle class experiences. We discussed how this permeates all level of the education system and is maintained by the dominance of the middle class in teaching roles (Keane and Heinz, 2015) . Ronnie describes teaching as a *"dynasty"* where teaching was almost like as family business, with parents and broader family members all being teachers. We discussed how this can have an impact on how working class children and students are perceived and treated but also on how we feel working in these spaces. In the next section I will give some examples of the impact of having teachers with working class Dublin accents, and the positive impact they had on us. On many occasions in our discussions we came back to the question of how to ensure there are working class voices, and perspectives at all levels of the educational systems, particularly in decision making roles. The importance of telling our own stories, and hearing others like ours relates to the role of voice and story in challenging particular perspectives (Couldry, 2010). We discussed the significance of having more than one lone voice challenging the dominant narratives linking working class and deficit, as this is *exhausting* for one person.

Belonging was something we returned to throughout the process. In our educational experiences we didn't encounter many teachers who sounded like us, or we felt understood us or our communities. When thinking about voice and story, accent is part of this. We had stories where accents like ours were absent, and when we did encounter them it was really important to how we felt not just about ourselves, but about belonging in education. It was rare in our educational journeys and we only had two examples from our group. We discussed the importance of formative experiences of having teachers with a working class Dublin accent and how important this was, as most of our teachers were from outside Dublin. This was linked to feeling a sense of belonging and feeling known and understood.

> *I didn't go anywhere else outside Dublin. So, so somebody coming into the room with a Dublin accent, was like, 'Oh, thank you God, I'm real'. 'I'm real', you know, 'I, I've got a Dublin accent, so I mean something'.* Annie

> *It's real, it's real, a familiar voice, that's real. It does feel real. It's the familiar voice and it feels real. I had one teacher when I was in secondary school that was*

from Ballymun. And I loved him and we all loved him. We listened to him more because we felt like he was on par with us, cause he had the same accent, and that's all I remember. Every other accent wasn't familiar so you feel the sense of authority over you know, there's an authority over you cause it's not the same, but when it's the same they're equal. Gemma

Atkinson (2015) discusses the importance of feeling seen in creating a sense of belonging, "The need and desire to be recognised by others, in the sense of having some kind of worth and value in the eyes of others, so as to bestow justification on our existence" (p. 62). The quotes from Annie and Gemma highlight how having teachers that sounded like us had a positive impact on their engagement and sense of belonging, and how having an accent in common gave them a sense of worth. This is important in any discussions on teacher education and providing clear routes for working class students to become teachers. It is also relevant in any discussions on student engagement, and how we can create a sense of belonging in education at all levels by recognising its importance and how to create it. In this case by ensuring there are teachers like us, at all levels of education, including HE.

The influence of Family

Family was particularly important for *when* we went to college. The three of us who went as teenagers did so with family support. Parental support was necessary to be able to go to HE at this age. For the mature students there was a difference in their experiences, to each other and to us. In this section I will present the two different experiences separately to highlight the influence of family on 'teenage' and 'mature students' experiences.

Teenage students

For the three of us who went to HE as teenagers, we all experienced support from our families, even if there was a lack of knowledge about what going to HE really meant. There was a desire for us to be happy, and if going to HE was what we wanted then we were supported. However, this support came from different places. Grainne highlights

her Mas pride in her accomplishments, while Katherine frames the gap between support and the reality of how this impacted her relationships in her family.

> *I remember my Ma was thrilled with me going to college. Like when I got my degree she was so emotional. I said before she wanted to ring the Tallaght Echo, and get a picture taken of her daughter who got, and you know, so she was so, just so proud that I'd gone to college. She was absolutely, oh my god, she was so full of pride… I was very fortunate. I didn't experience any of that kind of pushback.* Grainne

> *I got through it on blind ignorance. Because my dad said, you can do whatever you want… and they just looked at me like I had 10 heads like, and but they never said I couldn't… . I just went in and I was like, okay, doing this now that's great. But I had to unpack it a lot. But also like, you know, I'm the, I'm the oddball in the family. You know, I only have one brother and we get on really well. But like, my aunts and uncles and my cousins. Like if I say something, it's like, 'oh, here she goes'. Okay, the eye roll, the fucking, you know what I mean? That's my place in the family now because of what I've done.* Katherine

Katherine also spoke about the complexity of her wider family not placing value on her education. She spoke about her family not understanding that she needed to attend college. They felt that as she wasn't earning by being there that she could take time off for caring responsibilities, and would make arrangements without checking with her. They booked flights for her to attend appointments with her grandparents, without checking with her first.

> *They used to book me a ticket to go with him [*grandad*] and my nanny to be the chaperone, for the cheque book, because I was only in college. It didn't matter. I wasn't asked, I was the only grandchild who was in college and what I was doin wasn't as important to someone taking a day off work.* Katherine

My story was different too in that both my parents had returned to education and placed a value on education, and we were supported and encouraged by this. My older siblings were contributing financially, and I was eligible for a grant, which made family support a little easier.

> *There was a lot of support at home. And one of my brothers had got an apprenticeship. So he was handing up money… we had the grant, so we weren't asking for money. I had so much support from home. I was absolutely so*

*unbelievably lucky… And they both [*parents*] went back, before I went to college, when I was in secondary school, they went to Pearse College. And my Da did, he did what would probably be the equivalent of TAP now, a pre university course. And my Ma did her Junior Cert. And they both loved it. So I had that as well. Like, you know loving education and talking about it.* Sorca

What we had in common in these stories is support from family, but they also highlight the complexity and diversity of family situations which made this support possible. This is important to state as the next section highlights the lack of support, but is not about making a value judgement about good/bad parents. There was a care in the group in how stories about our families were told, and heard, and it is important to try to maintain that in the retelling here.

Mature students

The mature students in our group were Gemma, Olivia, Ronnie and Annie. Ronnie and Annie spoke about leaving school and getting jobs and not thinking about going to college until later in life. Ronnie spoke about not seeing HE as an option until she was older and her husband had studied part time. I will highlight Gemma and Olivia's stories as they provide an insight into the experiences of those who aren't supported to go to HE when they are younger, but who find a way later as mature students. Their stories are powerful, authentic, and provide depth and insight into the complexity of family and education.

Olivia describes being kicked out of school at 14, after many difficult experiences. She remembers her parents just accepting this and not challenging it. She began working with her Dad the next day. Gemma spoke about the impact of lack of family support to go to HE, even though she had secured a place.

Gemma and Olivia described specific experiences in their families where there was resistance to them going to college, as mature students. They were asked why they were bothering, being told they weren't a real student or that aspect of their life was not spoken about or discussed. The lack of family support had not changed, despite them being adults now and in a position to made the decision themselves.

Gemma

Gemma spoke about her determination to make it through secondary education, despite being 'kicked out' after her Junior Certificate. She "*begged them to take me back*" and completed the Leaving Certificate Applied. She spoke in depth about her desire to continue in education but how the lack of support meant she didn't have the opportunity when she was younger. Gemma had hoped to go to college when she finished school but was told

> *You have a job waiting for you Monday, so it was taken away from me, so I never wanted to leave education*

The 'time' required to complete an educational qualification was not afforded to her, due to both the view of education in her family, particularly her Ma, but also the practical economic necessity to contribute to family finances. The lack of economic capital influenced Gemma's trajectory. However, when she had to complete some modules for a youth work job she rekindled her love of learning and the desire to continue in education once she started.

> *So I actually went back to Marino college to do, to do that, and eh, I just couldn't believe how much I loved college. because I'm not as crap as I thought I was, like I actually love learnin.*
> *The minute I went back there I said I'm never leaving education, that's it I'm back and by God I am never leaving and I'm still the same I still love doing like PD [*Continuous Professional Development*] courses, I still love learning and, I just love learning. We do have, we'll be learning forever.* Gemma

When she went to HE as a mature student she still encountered some resistance from some of her family. She spoke about how her Da was supportive but her Ma wasn't.

> *Because my Da used to say, when I was in university, I'm delighted for you, but there's a university of life out there and if you can't walk down that road and be able to defend yourself when someone says, and you don't know how to interact with people, socially, you haven't got a hope!*

> *Me Mam wasn't really supportive of me going back so and then me Da was.*

218

Her Da's support came with a caveat, that there are other important skills, like being able to engage with people. Gemma also spoke about her Ma's resistance to HE which included not attending her graduation. Gemma is empathetic towards her Ma but also wants to change the family narrative by ensuring she supports her own daughter, in her education.

> *When I graduated from Trinity, my Ma wouldn't come. Because she didn't understand why and how I would want an education. But I don't blame her. Me Da was only delighted because he used to get thrown out of place. So she, I didn't blame her because I understood that she didn't understand that. Yeah, but I always tell my daughter 'yer nanny didn't understand that, but I want that for you. But that's if, that's what you want, then I'm there to support you'.*

Gemma also spoke about how the resistance from her family was a motivator for her, to prove she could do it even if they didn't see the point. She described an encounter with her nephew and brother in law, where she felt both supported (by her nephew) and unsupported (by her brother-in-law). She also told us that this nephew was the next person in her family to go to HE.

> *[he] said 'She's not in Trinity. She's in TAP.' 'Yeah, but I'm going'. He was like 'but you're not, You're not in Trinity'. And he just took me down. I mean, I kept looking at my sister saying 'I'm gonna actually lose it with him'. And my nephew kept saying 'but she is in Trinity. She's in Trinity'. 'She's not really, she's not really'. And I just remember thinking, 'see you ya bastard', I said, 'I'm gonna fucking go to Trinity, you pig and I will graduate'. And it was actually my own family that put me down.* Gemma

Gemma's stories highlight the complexity of navigating family when moving outside the familiar. Her own desire to go to HE, was not understood by some family members, which although challenging and upsetting was also motivating- to prove them wrong.

Olivia

Olivia was '*kicked out of school*' when she was 14 and started working. She returned to education when she took a break from her job, where she wasn't in a position to get a promotion because she didn't have a degree, even after proving herself in the company. She went to an adult education centre and despite her concern that she wouldn't be able,

with encouragement from the staff to try, she completed the Leaving Certificate. This encouragement and belief in her was in contrast to previous experiences of education, and family support.

> *I always look to that Leaving Cert, two years of it, and I, two years, best two years of my life.* Olivia

Even at this point in her return to education, as a mature student, she encountered resistance from her parents and siblings. Olivia described the lack of conversations about this part of her life in her family and how hard this was for her.

> *It wasn't even spoken about. I'd walk into me mothers and it wasn't even acknowledged nothing like, Jeez how,' how's it going in the college?' or, nothing, it wasn't spoken about. Even, even the day I graduated. The day I went, even started PhD, graduated the PhD, never ever spoken. No one has ever in my family ever acknowledged me as a doctor or nothing.* Olivia

She also spoke about her mother not realising she was a student in Trinity College until she went with her to collect something. Olivia had been a student there for over three years at this point and had spoken about being a student and studying:

> *And when we drove out I never forget it, because when we went back home, my other sisters were there. She said 'she's going to Trinity'… it only kind of hit her then… But it was only that, it actually registered with her and she said, she said to my father, 'She's in Trinity College, she's going to Trinity college'. It literally only dawned on her.* Olivia

Olivia also spoke about her Dad as an avid reader and interested in literature and philosophy. However when she went to HE she described how he started to compete with her.

> *He started competing then, like so when I'd come up to the house, he starts saying 'Did you know?', like start talking about natural science and stuff I've studied*

And how he didn't discuss her achievements with her but spoke to an uncle about how she was studying at PhD level.

> *Me daughter, 'Olivia's not here now. She's the one that's doing the PhD, She's my', and that was the first time I ever heard him saying that, it was told back to*

me… it kind of made me feel Jeez he actually did acknowledge that like, that was the only time ever though. Olivia

Oliva spoke about caring for her very ill Dad while completing her PhD. Her family didn't place a value on her studying and prioritised their own work.

I was in the middle of my PhD and asked to mind my father, who was dying ... and they kept saying, 'but you're not working', and I said 'I am actually working I'm being paid to do this'. And they're like, 'ah just, you do it'. So the pressure was on me from them all doing that. Because they couldn't see the worth in it, none of them. That was the difference. And they're all saying 'well we're working'. And I was like, 'people I'm working too'. That's the difference. Olivia

When Gemma and Olivia were recounting their stories it was filled with the emotion that they experienced at the time, and continue to feel when they reflect on these difficult experiences. They spoke passionately and with sadness and anger when they recounted these stories. Although the memories were from a number of years ago they still felt it like it was a recent event.

When we explored these kinds of experiences there was also a sense that this was, in part, linked to aspects of working class habitus. The idea that other options were seen as more practical and realistic, including the financial reality for many families where deferring earning a wage for 4 more years, can be seen as a challenging and linked to family hardship, both past and present. Gemma spoke about having a job waiting for her when she finished her Leaving Certificate and having no choice about taking it. As discussed earlier, contributing financially was prioritised over going to college.

You have a job waiting for you Monday so it was taken away from me so I never wanted to leave education Gemma

My mother would have been like, 'that's stupid, would you go out and get a, get a job' and goin on like that Olivia

It's all really down to just that they don't understand…for years, kept saying,' get a bloody job', 'would ya ever get a job? You've got too much time on your hands, get a job'. Olivia

The complexities of navigating family dynamics, and their varying attitudes towards education, and HE in particular, is an additional aspect of our journeys. In Gemma's experience the prioritising of having a wage and contributing to the family was valued more than education.

Conversations related to family emerged and re-emerged throughout the process. They included discussion about how we had been afforded opportunities in education that our parents hadn't and this evoked empathy rather than anger towards unsupportive parents and how you stepping outside what is considered the norm in the family and community has created a space that they don't fully understand. This is something that I discussed in the literature review (Case, 2017; Law, 1995; hooks, 1994). Listening to each other's stories helped us to reframe our own, and the sense of feeling lucky and privileged by those of us who went to HE in our teens was definitely heightened by hearing the challenges faced by Olivia and Gemma in particular. Discussions about our own, and each other's, parents lives also helped us to appreciate parts of our own stories. Empathy was a feeling, and way of being, discussed throughout the process, but was particularly poignant when we reflected on family support, or lack of, that we experienced. Empathy towards our parents and empathy towards each other. There was a palpable sadness when Gemma spoke about fighting her way back into school, getting a place in college only to be told she had a job waiting and she would not be going to college. Gemma's empathy and care for her family, in her recounting of these experiences and in her reflections on her journey since were beautiful and sincere. These moments and subsequent discussions were at the heart of the research process.

They also highlight how we are positioned, not just by those from outside our class but by our own families and communities. Stories that are told in our families and communities are also part of our experiences. The research suggests they are part of the framework in society for setting structures or boundaries for how 'people like us' should engage with the world. Families are where we learn how to be in the world and what is expected, or not, of us. The gap between our families experiences and ours was something we spent some time exploring. Again empathy and care informed these discussions, and trying to find meaning in the difficult aspects of our stories was something we did together. We recognised the difficulty with understanding something which is outside your *bubble*, or experiences.

Deep down that they are inside, proud. Probably a little bit hostile they never had those opportunities. It's alien to them. It feels weird for them to praise you because they feel like they shouldn't. Oh, we're not supposed to praise. Our children are not supposed to have PhDs Gemma

But now I kind of think, okay, because what we were all talking about, they don't understand. You know, they're out of their depth with it. Olivia

People can be scared of, of you moving on. And they don't understand it. And it's not that you want to pull you down or drag ya down. They just don't understand it. Ronnie

You're in a box, and you're gonna stay in that box, and look at you getting out of your box now Ronnie

It's all their hang ups about it, isn't it. Katherine

What is and isn't valued by our families and communities can also be linked to what we know and have experience of, but also what we have access to or where we feel we should be, our habitus. Katherine discussed how we can see our families and communities in a different way after going to HE. She explored the challenges of going to HE and how it isn't a choice that would be comfortable for all working class people as it involves taking a giant step outside of what you know and trust. This can have an impact on family relationships too.

Because there's safety and comfort there, where they are, where they're not challenging or being challenged and stuff like that. And it's a difficult leap and we all know that. Katherine

Katherine also spoke about the new knowledge she acquired when she studied Art and how her parents reaction highlighted the gap between what she was learning and her parents knowledge, their cultural capital. Katherine was learning about feminist artists, who were challenging the way women should be perceived both in the art world and in society, but it was very far removed from her parents world.

This was like amazing. It was like, you know, women can be messy and yeah, and like it was just like, I was blown away by it… And I remember coming home to like my mam and dad and like, 'Oh, my god, look at this'. And they're just sitting across the kitchen table going 'what the fuck is she doing?' It wasn't the maths,

it wasn't the equation. It wasn't like, it was just all of a sudden it was like, what is she learning? ... And my mam would be looking at books going, 'fucking hell, like, what are you doing'? Katherine

The gap in knowledge, or cultural capital that fit with the education system, had an impact on our experiences of education. But this was also liked to wider family experiences of education. All of our parents left school after either primary or secondary. For their generation there was an expectation that they leave school to get a job, as well as there being a cost to continue in education.

Just like my parents never mentioned college to me because they didn't have college mentioned to them. And it was expected for them go school for a very short amount of time and then get a job. And for them, you hurry up and finish school when you finish you gonna leave after the junior cert quick, cause you needed to get a job that's just the way, it was a working class thing, it wasn't because they didn't want to be educated ... AND they hadn't got the money either, They weren't in that position to be able to pay for education. Gemma

HE and discovering class

It isn't just our perceptions of our families that change by going to HE. It also impacts our perceptions of ourselves, particularly in relation to class and our position in society. This can also be influenced by conversations, or lack of, about class and inequality within families and communities, and Irish society more generally.

In the group we discussed how our awareness and knowledge of class began, or changed, when we stepped outside our own working class habitus by going to HE. We began to see that other people didn't have the same kinds of experiences as us and at times they highlighted our lack of 'fit' in this space. There were a number of stories where going to HE highlighted our differences, and the impact of our classed habitus. In our families and communities we shared an understanding based on our experiences up to that point. Going to HE meant stepping outside that '*bubble*' and being in a place where we often felt 'other'.

I think when it hits you for the first time you go, cause I was similar I didn't know class existed. I thought everyone lived the way we did. And when I got to college I thought a handful of people from every school went to college. I thought that's how college worked, that you were really lucky ones, you were one of the handful but I went in and some people, like everybody in their class went to college. It was as natural as going from junior infants, to senior infants and it was such a shock, and I wasn't aware of class until then. I wasn't aware that for some people, this is just the norm. This is just what you do and it was a real shock to the system, it really was. I didn't think class existed, because you think everyone just lives like you. Grainne

This was also linked to our experiences of who we encountered in education, and the lack of working class accents and voices throughout our education, particularly in HE. Katherine spoke about assimilating to fit in, in order to find a sense of belonging.

I feel like I took on the attributes then of the middle class people that I was with in college, you know, like, I assimilated because I didn't have the, the words, I didn't have, I was embarrassed. Katherine

We reflected on how the lack of naming of class in Ireland prevents us from having a language that we can use to describe our place in the structures.

It's a lexicon and a language around these things that we don't have at the minute. Katherine

In my family these structures, and barriers were discussed so I had some language for them and for challenging them. And even with that I knew that some of the other students didn't feel I belonged. Many of the others in the group found the response of other students unexpected and impactful on their sense of belonging in HE.

These experiences link to the idea of misrecognition. Bourdieu (1984) describes the concept of misrecognition as the internalisation and acceptance of the social structure, that those with power and influence are in those positions because they are best placed to make decisions. The education system has a significant role in socialisation and maintaining the status quo. The system is presented as meritocratic, where those who deserve to go to HE are awarded places on the basis of their individual achievements. The knowledge and lived understanding of class became apparent when we went to HE. It was going into this world that wasn't designed for women like us that our differences

became very clear. The experiences we had previously were with people like us, in places like the ones we came from and with cultural and social similarities. The boundaries that we experience as part of misrecognising classed experiences relate to both our families perspectives on HE and also our own experiences. Going to HE gave us a different perspective, which is both challenging and potentially transformative. It can be shocking to start to recognise the way the world positions you as working class, especially when that position is 'other'. It is even more difficult when we don't see others like us and the experience is done alone.

We discussed many incidences of culture shock which led to a recognition of class, and of being working class. Many of these experiences were shocking and discombobulating. Feeling 'other' and different was a difficult experience. These realisations of class differences were part of the process of understanding class and classed experiences. They were an additional and challenging lesson from HE.

Katherine discusses her journey to recognising that she was working class, when she went to HE. She describes believing she had a posh accent until this point and how others in her class named her and where she was from as working class, and open to derogatory comments.

> *And I got to college and em, like I didn't know I was working class until I got to college… And I was confronted, like, I didn't know you went to art galleries with your parents d'ya know what I mean, I studied fine art.* Katherine

What is interesting to me is how some of the group, who said they didn't see class until they were in HE did see elements of inequality and difference. Gemma discussed how those with the money to pay for books were treated differently than those who didn't have money. Katherine spoke about not applying to NCAD (National College of Art and Design), because it 'seemed' like it was too elitist. Annie spoke about hearing a teacher that sounded like her. In the group we discussed the importance of having language to articulate our experiences, and how this wasn't easy, linked to the lack of naming and discussing class in Ireland. I will return to this in the discussion when I will explore the importance of naming class, our own classed positions, even though they are complex and nuanced, but linked to the importance of providing a language for those who are

where we were, trying to find the language to articulate their experiences. Our voices and stories are part of the discussion on giving the words and space to seeing and naming class.

I was an outlier in the group in that I remember knowing that I was working class before going to HE and I didn't expect everyone to have had experiences similar to mine.

> *I definitely had a sense of my class going into college. It's something like, I grew up in a family where we talked about politics, and we watched all the, you know, today tonight, and, you know, the news and all that kind of stuff. So I had a sense of that you know, we weren't the same as everybody.* Sorca

I also went to DIT and not a university so there was a different mix of people in the group, which was different for most of the group (HEA, 2019). There were a lot of students from outside Dublin, but those from Dublin were mainly from middle class backgrounds, however this wasn't a barrier to me forming friendships. This wasn't the case for most of the group. I've also reflected on the importance of going to Further Education to do a Post Leaving Cert (PLC) course before going to college, and the confidence I found in the process, which helped me to find my voice.

> *There's just something in that system that helps people to find a voice.* Sorca

In relation to being working class, coming from a working class family and living in a working class community, there was also a sense that going to HE was moving outside your habitus and away from what was expected, which could also be seen as devaluing more traditional working class roles or trajectories. The value that is or isn't placed on different kinds of education and occupations was discussed in the context of class and the lack of value that was given to jobs associated with being working class. This was also framed in the context of the Covid pandemic, with who really were the essential workers and what roles did they fulfil.

> *I think it's part of a different, you know, there's a value system as well, there like, that not everyone has to go to college. Do you know what I mean? Some people want to work in, in trades, and they want to work with their hands and stuff like that. So then we have to, we have to kind of unpack the bias, that means that*

> *college is better, d'you know what I mean, and value, you know the difference.*
> Katherine

> *It's not the pinnacle of society.* Olivia

> *In terms of being a society, that can be self-sufficient that you need everyone to take different roles. But it's like, again, it's a bigger global question of like, why do hedge fund managers get a gazillion euro and nurses, you know, aren't getting their bloody annual income increase. Do you know what I mean? Because it's like, it's like what is the value?* Katherine

However, the status that is ascribed to the attainment of educational credentials works to ensure that HE, which is the 'natural' route for the middle class is presented as 'better' but is also necessary for an increasing number of jobs. It was also necessary for us all to be in the jobs we have, so despite our perspectives the value placed on HE is increasing and as individuals we have benefitted from this.

Classed experiences in education

Exploring our experiences of education was central to our discussions. We spoke about education at all levels and specific experiences that had stayed with us. There were many examples of how the structures in the education system were used to make us feel 'other' and impact a sense of belonging, or unbelonging, particularly in HE. This included the dominance of both middle class culture in the curriculum and lack of teachers like us who understood our lives and experiences.

Formative experiences

The family is the primary site for the socialisation of children, and what they learn, or don't learn in the family impacts their ability to engage in society, and education in particular. It becomes part of their habitus (Bourdieu, 1984). "The curriculum is designed to match the symbolic mastery learned in the middle and upper classes, so that such children do well at school while those endowed only with practical mastery fail"

228

(Burawoy, 2018, p. 8). Our ability to succeed in education is linked to having the right kinds of knowledge and culture, the right habitus.   Schools act as a site of social reproduction, providing opportunities for those from the right backgrounds to succeed.

School Book money

Experiences related to class and lack of understanding of the realities of working class lives began in primary and secondary school and continued throughout our educational journeys. Three members of the group spoke about how we were treated in secondary school, because we didn't have the books needed. The reasons for not having books were related to poverty or lack of value placed on education within the family.

One of these stories is mine, where I wasn't given my books in sixth year. Our school had a book rental scheme and my parents didn't have the money to pay in September, but in previous years had always paid when they could. A new principal decided to make an example of me and I went a few weeks without books.

> *I have a book story as well, and every time I think of it I just get so mad. So our school did a book rental scheme… my Ma always paid at some point over the year. She never was able to pay it at the beginning of the year cause as you know, school costs… But in sixth year, I went into school to collect my books. They would not give me my books, they would not give me my books because I didn't have the money. And I said 'but my Ma will pay. She's always payed' and they said, 'No'. I, two weeks, in sixth year, and I, I was one of the ones who engaged in school, and went to classes and did my homework. And they would not give me my books.* Sorca

Reflecting back, even the idea that working class children would not want to have access to their school books over the summer holidays is a classed position, and sends a message about lack of trust and assumptions about the value of education in working class families.

Olivia spoke about sharing books with her sister and the lack of support from the school and felt looked down on. The lack of support for education, which was part of her experiences in her family, was continued and exacerbated in school.

And of course the school instead of being a support for you, turned on you. So it was like the school would look at you, especially myself and my sister who had the one set of books between us. So we were singled out kind of like you're obviously not going anywhere. Olivia

Gemma spoke about how children whose parents couldn't pay 'book money' were treated differently and not given opportunities that were given to other children. The memory evoked strong feelings of being rejected and treated poorly by the system and the inequality that was evident in how different children were treated, linked to their families ability to pay.

It, you know, working class school, but how we, how badly we were treated by the teachers because my mam couldn't pay our book money, but see the children whose parents paid their book money at the start of the year, they were allowed, they were the ones that, you know, got the favours, that got to do everything… And the ones that didn't, and this is a vivid memory, just you just brought it back to me. God, I wanna scream now. Em how badly the ones that were, that book money wasn't paid were treated, like treated like a dunce… But it's the different treatment that you got, because of the money that you had. And I think that shapes a lot of when you go in, when you go further. It shapes how you think of yourself. Gemma

As I have discussed in the last chapter the process of telling our stories still evokes anger and sadness and reminds us of the position that working class children are placed in where they can be embarrassed and humiliated by those in positions of power. It was interesting that memories of being denied books was something that stayed with all three of us and our vivid recollections still evoke a strong emotional response. These kinds of experiences mean that we have strong empathy, and feel angry, when we hear about similar experiences that are still happening today.

Higher education, class and belonging

In this section I will focus specifically on experiences in HE which impacted us. There were many examples of difficult and challenging situations, acts which I consider symbolic violence which positioned us as 'other'. These included our accents, or where we were from, being slagged and disrespected, which didn't help us to feel like we were

somewhere we should be. It also led to a realisation about the inequality that is inherent in the systems, of being working class, different and 'other'.

Although there were many examples I will present two which give a sense of the kinds of experiences we discussed. The affect of the stories from Gemma and Katherine have stayed with them. These experiences and others like them contribute to a feeling like we don't belong in HE. These feelings of unbelonging were a significant part of our HE journeys.

Gemma

> *And when he heard my voice he goes, because he actually genuinely he was only a kid of 19, and he just genuine just said, looked at me and went, 'Do you mind me askin but how did you get in here'? And I said 'Well I got in here through an access program because I didn't have privilege. And I didn't have, that one to one, you know that one to one that you might have in [private school] college'. I said 'I didn't have that', and then he just kind of looked at me like that. I did think, I do, I do, kind of a bit defensive. You know, about 'a one to one that you had'. But when I thought about it after, I actually felt for him cause he, he doesn't understand and have the social skills to be in the real world. Gemma*

What is interesting about this experience is that the other student felt entitled to ask the question. The implicit classism in the question was not obvious to the person asking it, and this is linked to the positioning of working class women in Irish society, and how it was unexpected to hear someone like Gemma in this place. It highlights the unnamed barriers and challenges for working class students within HE and how the examples can appear small, but are enmeshed in the structures which make us 'other' in these settings. These experiences have stayed with us many years after they occurred, reminding us that we were and are in spaces that weren't expecting us and how comments can be part of what excludes us. This also links to Grainne's comment that these kind of comments didn't feel micro, but had a significant impact on us.

Katherine

> *She came in like, she's the most beautiful woman and I know she didn't do it to be mean, but she burst in she like 'Jeasus, the first time Clondalkin wasn't in the news today, Katherine for drugs or killin'. I was like alright, okay. That's how people view where I'm from, like that is that how they see where I come from. But where*

I come from, is where my lovely nanny lives and makes her lovely blankets and volunteers in the credit union. Katherine

This story is presented already in relation to place and media, but it is most profound here in how it positioned Katherine and impacted her ability to be herself in HE. The other student had an image of the area based on media reports of drug dealing and criminality, which was very different to how Katherine viewed where she is from. In the group Katherine made excuses for her as her intention didn't appear to be malicious but the memory has stayed, these openly classist comments can have a lasting impact on us.

During the discussion that followed this story Katherine went on to reflect on the realisation that people saw where she was from in this way and the fact that she didn't respond or challenge the comment because at the time she didn't know how she could respond. The importance of place as a marker of class was highlighted for her. She now names this as classism and understands the importance of place and where you are from as part of this.

The experience of having aspects of your sense of self, your accent or where you are from in the above examples, questioned or critiqued may appear minor to those who have not had similar experiences, but they had a significant and lasting effect on us. Our sense of solidarity was built on sharing and shared experiences like these, but also on the shared understanding that they weren't small and that how we felt was understood in an affective way. The lack of belonging we had experienced in HE was real and was validated by hearing the stories of others in the group.

Belonging, Friendship and Higher education

Finding a sense of belonging is more than engaging in the academic part of HE. The relationships formed can be important, not just while you are in HE but also after. In relation to who we formed friendships with this was influenced by social class and acts of symbolic violence.

Grainne discussed some reflections on who she was friends with in college, and realised she had no Dublin friends in college. She discusses how being slagged about where she was from very early in her HE journey, somewhere she was proud of, impacted her whole college experience, who she became friends with, deciding not to speak up in class and just focusing on the academic side of HE.

> *And I can only think of one situation where somebody very, kind of made some, slagged where I was from or made some comments about where I was from. And I was a bit taken aback. And I realized after that I didn't have one friend from Dublin in college, like my class was over 100 in it, at least 50% were from Dublin. But they didn't talk like me and they're all from parts of Dublin that I wasn't from and they went to places where nearly everybody in their class went to college. It was like the done thing.*
>
> *And I realized all my friends are from the country. And I often wonder back, was that just the way it happened, or was that a way of, I didn't want any more comments about where I was from, and maybe I thought people from the country wouldn't have an opinion"… "and I often think later, it, was it a strategy? And I don't know for sure to get through it, that if I didn't hang out with anyone from Dublin, they wouldn't pass comment that my accent was a different Dublin accent and therefore, I often wonder, because it's too much a coincidence that most people in my class were from Dublin, and I didn't hang around with them… I was so upset when somebody passed comment about Tallaght and where I was from in Dublin, but I was never bothered with somebody from the country slaggin Dublin. So I don't again, I don't know what that was about why one thing really upset me and the other didn't. … I was like, going, was that a coping, was that way dealing with it was that way that, because I'm a little bit like that now, I'll kind of get myself out of situation before somebody could judge me very badly. I'm a little bit, I think I'm a little bit like that. And I'm wondering was that what I was doing there that the minute I got that comment, I was like, alright, I'm stepping out of being vulnerable to any more comments like this. So yeah, it really struck me. Yeah, and that thing microaggression I don't know if my meaning of that is.. I have that... understand that. Because, like that guy making that comment, but it felt quite **macro**, to be honest at the time, like rather than, but I know that it's microaggression is probably the term for it.* Grainne

Grainne says a lot in this short passage. At the heart of it is feeling 'other' and not belonging in HE, because of classed differences which were highlighted by both her accent and being from Tallaght. This led to a realisation that going to college was natural for some students, and their classmates all went too. This set her apart, and made her 'vulnerable' to their comments. It also highlights the Dublin versus 'the country' and how as Dubliners we recognised accent and place but we didn't have knowledge about

the classed relations outside this. So Grainne did not perceive comments about Dublin more generally as pointed and 'macro' because they didn't single her (or Tallaght) out, so friendships were 'safer' with these students. Grainne uses the term 'strategy' to think about how she found a sense of belonging with these students.

Oliva responded with a similar experience related to her friendships in HE. She highlights the importance of finding other people who didn't judge you and you were comfortable with.

> *I can relate to you Grainne. I, all through the three phases of going back to college, masters, PhD. I never had any Dublin, Irish friends. I know I was a mature but d'you know who I gravitated towards, all the foreigners and I'm still friends with ... because nobody judged me. Y'know and no one's made a comment, cause you're that age and you're doing this, Or, you know, there was no comment, No, they took me as I was and I think that's where I felt comfortable. So it's funny that you said that, It totally resonated.* Olivia

In the discussion that happened Gemma provided a possible explanation for particular friendship groups, naming working class students as a minority group in university. She also highlights the additional difference when you are a mature student.

> *I'm thinking of it like, like, you're moving towards the minority groups. Because you're within a minority group in a university. So the majority are middle class, you know, from Dublin, or whatever. And you're in a minority, so you go with the other minorities, and I would have felt like that as well. When I was in university. I would have, I was a mature student. So I stuck with the mature students. Em because we were the minority group… (being friends with Ronnie) And I think we would have spent our four years together because we just sort of zoomed into each other because nobody else, nobody else, were friendly. I know that's a terrible thing to say, but they weren't open to you, nobody else were open to you. Or like, you wanted to invite in, where we were more inviting to people.* Gemma

The importance of finding a sense of belonging, of finding people who accepted you is highlighted in these stories, linked to values of being open and inviting to others.

These experiences are important parts of our stories of HE. They highlight the structural issues in HE, which position working class women as 'other', as well as demonstrating how our working class habitus has not prepared us for these spaces. They highlight the difficulties that we encountered, how we were 'other' in HE which allowed for acts of

symbolic violence that impacted not just our experiences while in HE, but have stayed with us. Savage (2015) uses the base camp analogy to describe the different starting points of different classes and these experiences highlight the steep climb we had to succeed, even before thinking about the academic aspect of HE, that wasn't there for those from middle class backgrounds.

Intersection of Class, Gender and Age

I want to present another part of Olivia's story to highlight the intersection of class, gender and age, which was part of her experiences. Olivia discussed an experience where she was bullied by a professor, based on her class, age and gender. He questioned why she was there and what she would possibly do with a degree in science. His actions had a significant impact on her feeling of belonging- a feeling she was already struggling with as a mature, working class woman, studying in a prestigious university. Olivia recalled:

> *He seemed to just pick on me in first and second year in science… And I stand out because I'm the granny… couldn't wait for the class, And your man comes in and he says 'hello' to everyone. He looks at me goes, 'you're in the wrong place'. I went 'no', and I'm looking at him thinking he's gonna joke and he says, 'you're in the wrong place'. And I said, 'No, no'… We'd get into the classroom and again, he'd just started abusing me. So he, I was real kind of, cause I didn't really have many friends I used to just go into the library and work. So when he set assignments I went straight to the assignments and start doing them… people were asking me advice, 'Olivia, how did you do that?' So I was telling them, 'yeah, you do this'. And so when it came to the scores, he gave me a D. And I said to him, 'em can I ask you about my scores?' He said, 'Look, you got a D accept it move on'… And I said, 'I just want to know where I'm going wrong'… he said, 'Look, what what's this? What, what are you going to do with your life? Think about it, you're a certain age, you're obviously not fit out for Trinity'… So when it came to the actual day of the exam, he stood behind me at exam, and I was shaking. He was standing right over.. over me right behind me, as I was writing… And it did put a mark on me. It did make me feel and it kind of made me feel I need to do more, em to kind of prove myself in each other class. I felt yeah, he just really, really made me feel so small. And like making those remarks like, all the time.*

She also recalled feeling powerless and not knowing what processes were in place to challenge his bullying, but also worrying that if she said anything that she would be targeted further:

> *But I never complained about him.   Again if that was anyone else, they'd have complained. I didn't. I said, I just said nothing. And I always wish I'd have feckin said something… I thought it'd go against me, I thought it'll be like a mark and then people.. all of Trinity would know say watch her she's a trouble maker… I should have spoken up for myself because I felt again in myself I didn't have a right to be there. So I was this fake person sitting in there. And sure he's right maybe. Like, where am I going after this?... He just really, really made me feel so small… I felt unworthy. I felt Trinity are going to cop on now. What's this one doing in here? Get her out. That's, I thought it was kind of like a conspiracy they'd all, he'll tell someone else and then they'll say, 'Jesus, your woman, yeah, I know her. Yeah, what she's doing in here'. I really thought they'd pull the plug on me, that's what I was afraid of.*

In the group we discussed how Olivia's experience was related to class, gender and age and it is difficult to know the intent behind the bullying. Olivia didn't see him respond to any of the other students in a similar way. However we discussed the experiences of feeling like you're somewhere you shouldn't be and waiting to be found out and removed as an imposter.   The lack of belonging we felt as working class women added an additional layer to any feelings of being an interloper in HE. Olivia's story also highlights how one person can have a significant impact on your opportunity to build a sense of belonging, in a place that is outside your original habitus. It also highlights how this can add to feelings of powerlessness.

Survival strategies in higher education

Going to HE meant moving outside what we knew and where we belonged. The experiences which I have detailed above are examples of additional barriers which impacted our sense of belonging in HE. In the group we spoke about how we found ways to survive in HE. Grainne and Olivia spoke about who they were friends with, Gemma spoke about recognising us as a minority group in HE, and gravitating towards other minority groups, Ronnie spoke about the importance of other mature access students,

while Katherine spoke about 'assimilating'. I spoke about challenging and debating. We all found ways to survive, as working class women, in HE.

Grainne spoke about how she didn't engage in classes, to avoid putting herself out there to be criticised. She reflects on how her awareness of class developed when she went to HE, and this awareness has made her feel angry about the inequality in education and society more generally.

> *I admire when youse were talking about putting yourselves out there and talking in class and not going to get a response because again, my way dealing with it in my degree, I don't think, now it was loads of us in the class, until the very end of third year, there was one lecture I spoke up once in class. Cause he asked something, I probably shared a story before he what he was doing research on [topic related to class]…But for three years I never once opened my mouth in a class EVER. I wasn't givin them a chance to make a comment, I wasn't givin anyone a chance.*
>
> *So I was one of these students who went and got my final result and I got a first in me degree and I got the second highest in the year and they were all like, 'who the fuck are you?' basically, like the lectures like 'who are you?' I was offered two scholarships there and then to come and do masters and all this, they'd no idea who I was. I was the kid who, and I was a kid I was 19/ 20, in the library studying. I felt such a weight responsibility that I've been given this opportunity, that I was a feckin thick, when everybody else was drinking I was studying. But yeah, I knew so much more than most of them.*
>
> *But I mean, NEVER opened my mouth in three years, not one time. And I think it was that thing, I think you can cope, by either getting in there and like fuck you, you will not stop me or you can just choose to, I'm not making myself vulnerable to comment, you know. And because I think I felt that way because, I'd to repeat to get to college in the first place. And me accent, I was very conscious of the fact, I was a repeat student. And I only discovered in first year when we were doing sociology, that there was class differences in going to college, I didn't realize that if you lived in certain areas, it was almost guaranteed you'd get to college, I didn't realize that. So at first I was just like, it made me feel like I don't belong. And then as I got older, it made me feel angry.*
>
> *But em, It's just really interesting, the different ways you deal with it. And I just listening to everybody talk about where gender comes in, where age comes in. There's so many other elements to it as well. But I do agree Gemma, I think accents can, I don't know it can be, and again, I'm thinking that out recently, how much was my perception and how much, how much was me take, and how much was actually accurate, cause actually they didn't notice me. And I was reading into things that people didn't even notice me. And I didn't, they didn't want to talk to me because I'm this and maybe they just didn't notice me. I don't know.*

> *So I'm thinking about that a lot recently as well, what's the perception, but again, that idea of silencing yourself because you're just not gonna take a chance of being rejected.* Grainne

Grainne explores a number of issues here. The sense of belonging, or lack of, linked to prior experiences and realising that you are different to most of the other students and how this impacted her engagement in class, even the lecturers didn't know who she was. She also discussed the sense of responsibility she had, needing to make sure she worked hard and passed. But the underlying concern throughout this is the idea of "*silencing yourself*" as a way to protect yourself, a way of being in a system that wasn't designed for women like us. What is also interesting about Grainne's experience is that she is the only one in our group who didn't attend an adult or further education programme prior to going to HE. She is the one who speaks most directly about lack of any voice in her HE journey. The rest of us in the group who had the adult/ further education experiences speak about it as a process for finding voice as well as knowledge and language for HE.

Katherine responded to Grainne's experiences by reflecting on the lack of cultural capital that we had as working class students. We didn't have the 'instructions' or the 'keys', the "decoder ring" (Case, 2017) about how the system works, so had to use our intuition, to feel our way through. She also linked this to an awakening in relation to her own class position and a recognition that it was later when she developed the skills needed to challenge. The importance of having the language and the skills to challenge these kinds of classist comments is not something we had, but needed to learn.

> *But there's a vulnerability, because we're not given the keys. It's like, it's like, you know, having to make flat pack furniture without the instructions. Yeah, building it on intuition. Like, you have to give yourself the foundation to be in this space, like I thought I had a posh accent. I'm not joking, like I was I was absolutely fuckin tick when it came to class.* Katherine

> *And now I have the tools and the skills, I didn't have that, but at 19, I just, I didn't.* Katherine

I had the experience of having other students in my class try to dismiss my perspective and opinions in subtle ways. But having grown up in a family were discussion was

welcomed and finding my voice, and a way to express my view of the world I wasn't deterred by their responses. Reflecting back, being outspoken and challenging was my way of coping with the feeling of being 'other'.

> *Because I think I'd found some sort of voice in that [FE], out of the secondary school system. I was challenging stuff now. I mean, when I think back now, like those people rolling their eyes at me the whole time, there was people who didn't want to have anything to do with me, because, you know, she's that crackpot over there. So definitely I was seen as different because of that. But I didn't care enough, I think because I was very quiet before that. And suddenly I had this voice.* Sorca

There was also a sense that looking back at experiences was interesting and was a way to reflect on, and at times reframe our experiences. The sense of feeling like an outsider, a fish out of water had stayed with the group. The lack of belonging was something that we could only recognise as ingrained in the structures when looking back. At the time it felt more like a personal failing, rather than a structural issue. This highlighted the fact that we beat the odds, and got through, despite the systems and not because of them.

> *I felt like that [waiting for someone to ask me to leave] everyday. I used to be waiting for them to say 'You out!'* Gemma

> *And it's funny the day that I realised that I was just as good as anybody was the day I graduated. Which was sad really. Because when I looked at who got a first, who got a 2.1, I couldn't believe where I stood in that line. And I thought oh my god, why did I doubt myself for four fucking years?* Gemma

> *And I think it's that kind of, the curtain, you know, like the Wizard of Oz and the man behind the curtain, you can see the workings of what goes on.* Ronnie

The reference to the Wizard of Oz from Ronnie echoed my own belief that often it is only at the end of the journey that we can really understand where we are now. And it also highlights that when you don't know the systems or have the right culture or habitus, that being in HE can feel like everything powerful, and how without the cultural capital, including family and friends who have been to HE and can guide you through the system, that is your reality. You can feel powerless and that the difficulties are your own individual deficit. The realisations we had, either after leaving HE or through this process helped us to reframe the barriers we encountered as structural, rather than personal. It

also highlighted how we are positioned differently now, with more options as a result of gaining academic qualifications. There was also a confidence in being able to discuss where we were, and where we are now with other women who had a tacit understanding. We have built knowledge over time which also impacts our current positions and in turn our ability to look back together.

Class and choice in higher education

We also spoke about how our choices were limited, in terms of where to study and what to study. Some of these discussions related to the prioritising of care in our choices but they were also linked to lack of knowledge and information. In our group there was four women who worked in education, two who worked in community development and one who was moving from contracting to a public service role.

Katherine described not even applying to an institution because of its reputation as elitist, which shows some level of class knowledge before going to HE. This is interesting as she says she didn't realise she was working class. She also describes the lack of understanding of this decision by her teachers in FE who wondered why she wouldn't want the best.

> *I was I was absolutely fuckin tick when it came to class... I didn't apply to NCAD because I didn't want, I intuitively knew that was an elitist you know, art, the art world in general was bad. But this is like the, the ground zero of the elite. I just like, it was like, I won't fare well in this space, so I'm going to opt out… I would have got the highest marks in Ballyfermot and stuff like that, and I went to DIT and I remember, like, my teachers were like, disappointed in me like that I had no ambition. And I was like, no I want to go to a college that's going to be nice.* Katherine

This example from Katherine is really interesting as she associated the elite with art and a particular institution, rather than linked to class specifically. This is an important distinction and relates to earlier discussion about not talking about class, which leaves us without the understanding and the language to articulate experiences. However it doesn't explain how Katherine studied fine art but works in community development.

I studied fine art. Like I went to college to look at painting, to learn. You know what I mean, so it wasn't that I was, I didn't have any notion that I'd give back. But like, within my second year, I was working in [community setting]. Katherine

This was also something that was at the beginning of this doctoral research for me. As I have mentioned my own experience of reading a chapter from *Formations of class and gender* by Beverley Skeggs (1997) made me question how I had chosen social care. I had very limited guidance counselling in my all girls working class secondary school, and we had limited subject choices, including no honours maths. I wasn't exposed to different kinds of courses or professions either through school or in my family or community. My own working class knowledge didn't have a reach beyond my limited experiences.

Grainne also spoke about how we felt limited in our choices, and how although there were areas she was interested in they seemed like too big a step to take.

Even though I went to college, I could never, saw myself as a doctor or psychologist or anything like that, even though I was interested in those areas, but that wasn't like, okay, you can go to college but come on, cop onto yourself. Don't get too carried away. You can't be one of those people Grainne

We discussed how our lives and what we were and were not exposed to, and lack of knowledge about the educational system and career choices linked to courses, had an impact on our ability to make choices. This 'constraint' of our habitus was enacted in how limited our choices appeared (Reay, 2004). We all had poor or limited career guidance in school. We also spoke about the lack of cultural capital in our families to guide us, in a system they didn't have knowledge of.

We discussed how this didn't appear to have changed much as we also see this in the young people we know. We spoke about seeing them have similar, limited knowledge of HE, courses and career opportunities. We wondered about some of the possible reasons why this is the case, beyond not seeing different roles or having the right kind of knowledge about systems of education. There was two main reasons we discussed- wanting to understand the way our society is and to understand their lives, or wanting to make it easier, or better for the next generation and to give back.

I know people that have suffered because of class. And because they've suffered, they want to know why, want to know, want to learn about it. Gemma
They probably want to go in there and make a difference. Ronnie

If you're, I'm lucky enough to have this opportunity, I feel I've to give something back. I can't make it just about me that'd be selfish. I have to make it about someone else. Grainne

This links to theory about the values and more community oriented ways of viewing the working classes, and the centrality of collective care (Folkes, 2021). How true this is in modern, neo-liberal Ireland is debatable. As a society we have become more individualistic. The erosion of time to volunteer and precarious funding and privatisation of community, caring and youth services is changing how communities function.

We spoke about some expectations from school which were gendered, as well as classed, ranging from not offering honours maths to expectations that we would pursue caring courses and professions. Katherine spoke about the principal in her secondary school being shocked and almost annoyed that she would study art and not nursing.

There was an assumption in the school that the really bright or academic girls would go on to college, but it would be like the vocational thing, you know what I mean? So when I wanted to do college like, my principal hauled me into the office and gave out to me and said like 'you're wasting', like, 'what is art'? Because I didn't, I didn't apply for the CAO because I'd got into Ballyfermot to do my portfolio. And I was hounded for months that I was just wasting my education. I had to go be a nurse like, like civic, like she was evoking, this was a nun as well, it was civic duty and was vocational and all that kind of stuff. And I thought, you know, like that was her assumption for me. These, this is what these girls are good for. Katherine

It stems from like what was deemed an 'appropriate', and I use inverted commas there, like an 'appropriate' profession for women. Katherine

Our trajectories were influenced by our habitus, which was classed and gendered and positioned us in a particular way. By going to HE we challenged taken for granted expectations for women like us, but our choices also illustrate some 'constraint'.

Habitus and moving outside your "bubble"

There were lots of comments and discussions about how education has changed us, in lots of different ways. We were able to identify both good and bad aspects to these changes and how this impacted our interactions in different spaces and 'fields'. Going back to our families, friends and communities changes, because we have changed through education. We have acquired new cultural capital which is different from our families and friends. It can also change how we view aspects of the world or our perceptions of them. This makes us feel different and can have a significant impact on our relationships and encounters with family and friends. An important aspect of this related to how learning new ideas and also how to research ideas can change our positions and views of the world. We also have to make decisions about who or what is important for us and find a way to operate between both worlds.

When you go through it, you can't go back. Katherine

You can still have the little, daily chats about God knows what, d'ya know but, you know, you have changed, and you have moved on a little bit d'ya know. And I think maybe, you don't think well I'm this more intellectual person, I'm superior to you, because you don't think that, but something does change. And maybe they pick up on it. Ronnie

It's just that you have an opinion now, a different opinion. Like if I was to think back to before I ever went to college, like… when I hadn't even looked at two sides of a story or just come up with this bloody idea, without actually doing a bit of research on it. When you have, have been through the system, the education system, you know how to research you don't just take things at face value, you have to know where facts are coming from. So you have got, when your opinion is there, it's opinion based on something now. …And that's what I think the difference is… I do think that we do, for me as well, I think sometimes I do kind of talk to people differently. Em, if I talk to me friends, like I'm not, I don't talk in a kind of erudite, you know like an erudite type…because otherwise I'll never have relationships with your friends anymore. And I still want to have my relationships with my friends… not everything is about education. So for me, when, if life gets me down, or if something happens in my life, they're always going to be the people that I need. Gemma

[you] have to bespoke your personality to who you're with. Olivia

Katherine explored the idea that critical thinking is a new skill that we develop in HE which means we look at the world in a different way and gives us a way of articulating ourselves, which can differentiate us from our families and friends.

> *It's your critical thinking, it's how you look at the world, and the perspective it gives you. It's the language around it, you know, you look at things in a way.* Katherine

Going to HE can change us, not just in that we are more aware of class and inequality, but that we can see the world in a different way and we can grow in confidence.

> *I can tell you I'd have more confidence now to do something that I would have had 10 years ago. That's only speaking for a minority of us that are educated, that have been through the education system.* Gemma

On a number of occasions Gemma made a link between education and confidence. For her going to HE was a way of gaining confidence, even if that only emerged after she graduated.

We discussed how education changes us as individuals, and in doing so changes aspects of our habitus. We have additional cultural capital and economic capital, and often different social capital. We have kinds of knowledge which are recognised and as a result are able to work in jobs that require academic qualifications. Often these jobs are better paid and have a higher status than working class jobs. We are also more exposed to people outside our communities of origin. However the transition into professional work, while still having our embodied working class habitus, including our accent, was not unproblematic, which I will discuss in the next section.

Work, class and belonging

> *It's like we've gone from Kanzas to Oz and there's no going back. I'm always the 'other'.* Katherine

In the literature review I described the concept of habitus clivé as feeling stuck between worlds, or classes, and how this can lead to a feeling of not fully belonging in either. This was discussed throughout the group process, in relation to family, friends and work. It involved making choices about how we were with particular people and in particular spaces and the impact this had on our overall sense of belonging. It also related to how we identified our class positioning.

The concept of habitus clivé helps us to frame our positioning as more in-between, rather than in a middle class box.

> *It's like that no-man's land then as well. Because , you know, you can't go back, but you're not middle class and you don't want to be. And you're not accepted there anyway.* Sorca

We discussed concepts of social mobility and assumptions that if you go to HE you 'aspire' to be middle class. However there was a strong rejection of this by everyone in the group, with reflections on the importance of formative experiences, the barriers that we had to overcome to get to where we are now, wanting to hold on to ways of being and values that are important aspects of our working-classness. Binns (2019) discusses the concept of working class heritage, which acknowledges a different route, but also links the accumulation of capitals with becoming middle class. Savage (2015) describes the mountain, and we have climbed more of the mountain to reach this point than our middle class peers. Some of these ideas have been explored earlier in this chapter. We all valued our qualifications and the opportunities that they had opened for us, but we see ourselves as more than just our qualifications or our jobs. Our formative experiences are just as, if not more important, than our educational experiences in giving us a sense of who we are and who we want to be. Bourdieu (1984) discusses the role of qualifications in relation to inherited class positioning and the ability of those with inherited cultural capital to make more gains from their qualifications. Our education has provided additional cultural capital (qualifications), which we have been able to use to gain entry into more middle class employment, which has provided opportunities not available to most working class women.

> *I want the, the best things about working class plus the opportunities of being middle class, if we could melt those together in an ideal world it'd be great.* Grainne

However this cultural capital hasn't provided a sense of belonging in middle class work spaces. Feeling caught between worlds was particularly relevant when we discussed our jobs. The only exception was a few particular examples when colleagues were mostly working class, or social justice was at the core of the work and the team. There were some discussions about how we are perceived in these, mainly middle class spaces, and the impact this can have on our sense of belonging beyond HE. The feeling of being caught between worlds was significant for everyone in the group.

Work and working in professional jobs, which we were able to get because of the cultural capital associated with our qualifications was discussed on a number of occasions. These discussions were often related to a feeling of not belonging and being different or 'other' in these places. I will discuss this further in the next chapter.

Learning to navigate both worlds can be exhausting, isolating and challenging at times. Engaging with middle class colleagues we can experience a clash of values and practices, particularly in relation to practices of care. This was discussed in relation to current jobs and how some of us actively excluded ourselves from spaces where the dominant discourse lacked care and empathy. Ronnie spoke about having to avoid some spaces in her work, as otherwise she would be listening to derogatory and classist comments.

> *I know that's a bit isolating an all, It's not healthy mentally. But it is better for me than to listen to people running down kids… I'd end up having a big stand up row with them.* Ronnie

> *…She [a friend in a similar role] said you can challenge, but your challenge has to be every time you have a cup of tea.* Katherine

We also discussed the role of colleagues and their ways of seeing the world as linked to our sense of belonging, especially when it was part of the workplace culture. There were many comments about how it was difficult to be in spaces where individualistic and competitive ways of being were prioritised and where we were recognised as different.

> *And they're so protectionist of their own little patch, and their own ideology, that no matter what I said, or did, it just wasn't gonna resonate.* Katherine

> *They kind of wonder how did you end up here?* Olivia

You don't belong here, so how did you get here?   You don't belong with us. Gemma

You don't know anyone. Olivia
Does your dad know my dad? Ronnie

Oh, what's your background? And like, I'm not, I always get confused by that question. Olivia

[Moving between] that's why it's sometimes hard for us to be sure where we fit in. Gemma

The values that are important to us, are not necessarily the values that are important to people I work with. You know, I know, that's not all class, but it's definitely, for me, a huge element of it.   Sorca

Just came at me like a ton of bricks, that people like again, I go back to that they just don't like them [working class people]. *They don't like them, don't trust them, don't care.*   Katherine

Grainne described a smoother experience where she felt there was shared goals and values, related to the work of the organisation. Katherine describes a sense of feeling "whiplashy" moving between organisations where she has felt like she belonged and others where she felt 'other'. The sense of finding spaces where our values and way of thinking about the world are valued and respected is a significant aspect of feeling a sense of belonging in work.

I think because I've always worked in youth and community work, it, I don't think it's been as big an issue because I know where I work, there's always quite a lot of people from working class backgrounds in any job I've been in so, particularly in youth work, so it's never been as much [clashing values]. Grainne

The team in that organization [community] were very like-minded and we were all just like, delighted to be on this boat together paddling in the same direction. D'you know what I mean? It was, it was, it was really an amazing space to be in and to grow up in because I was 'one' when I started there.   Katherine

We also discussed some benefits of being between worlds. Although we could see that going to HE seemed easier for those from middle class backgrounds, we could see that we had the benefit of learning about, and finding ways to navigate, both worlds which gave us insight into both. Ingram and Abrahams (2016) describe this as a third space.

> *We're coming from a working class background, so we have that working class environment and working class people around us. And then we've moved into a middle class, eh spectrum as well, where we've been surrounded by middle class and we might work with middle class and be surrounded. So it's like a mixture of both were middle class people have probably only ever mixed with middle classes. So we kind of had both.* Gemma

> *Some people try to pigeonhole you. I mean, like, we can, shapeshift if you want between the two.* Ronnie

Gemma is highlighting the fact that we have broader experiences of both worlds, which gives us insights not available to others who haven't stepped outside their own bubble. However, despite the ability to navigate both worlds Ronnies comment highlights how this doesn't stop colleagues trying to 'pigeonhole' you into how they see you. In her own case she was not recognised as a fellow (fully qualified) teacher but as an "SNA teacher" because of the work she did. An SNA (special needs assistant) is a support role within a school, and is not given the same status, by some individuals and the system itself, as teachers.

Changing Class?

Going to HE provides us with new capitals, particularly cultural capital but can also provide economic and social capital, and as I have discussed can lead to changing relationships with our families and communities. It has provided us with employment opportunities where HE qualifications are necessary. We considered whether this means that our class has also changed. Habitus relates to where we feel we belong, who we belong with and what is, or should be important to us. We all still identify, to varying degrees, as working class but recognise that this isn't a simple categorisation, but is messy and lived. We joked about how liking olives or avocados doesn't change the structures that impacted our lives and experiences. The habitus of our lives before, during and after

HE are not the same as those who have experienced a middle class habitus throughout their lives, or those from a working class background who haven't gone to HE. We examined how class is often coded with specific experiences and events- graduating from HE, going to museums, financial security and how we identify ourselves within some of the narratives of class. The following excerpt is from an exchange on this topic

Grainne   *So I'm thinking, god so if I live in a, I own my own home, and I have a job where I'm given autonomy, And I go to museums, what does that mean? … You know it's a tricky one. When is it an actual fact that you're working class and when is it just an identity you have for yourself*

Katherine   *like, if the benchmark is, is that you have a third level education, you're deemed middle class, we've all ticked out that bracket.*

Sorca   *That drives me mad the idea that only middle class people are educated. Ya know, It's saying something very derogatory about working class people*

Olivia   *… There's people who have no degrees and no, even Leaving Cert, and they might sit and read Oscar Wilde every night*

Grainne   *My granny was like that, my Dad's mother read everything, she left school early but she read all the time… so what does that actually mean cause I don't think it's money either because I know a lot of people in the trades that are absolutely loaded, but very much would consider themselves working class, so it's just really, yeah, it's a tricky one*

Grainne identifies financial security and cultural capitals that are part of her life now, while Katherine acknowledges the cultural capital that is part of having a HE qualification. Olivia and Grainne mention people who are self-educated, through reading, but may not have any qualifications. The complexities of these contradictions, combined with what Grainne describes as being working class as "*just an identity you have for yourself*" highlight the in between spaces and the complexity of classifying people. The affective aspects of class are not something that is quantifiable.

These discussions were deepened when we considered the experiences of some of the women's children, and how different their experiences are compared to their own.

Reflecting on how our experiences were qualitatively different from our own parents, and how the next generation were benefitting from the cultural, social and economic capitals that had come with going to HE, highlighted the impact of HE on family life and experiences. Some women named their children as middle class and described the experience of being, or feeling, working class in a household that was predominately middle class. Most of the children were, or are attending school outside the area they live in and some are or did attend private schools. The desire to offer opportunities to their children that were not open to them was also discussed. This was linked to feelings of leaving your own class behind and also challenges in engaging with other, middle class, parents in that world. It was another experience of feeling like an outsider and demonstrated that we are not part of, or accepted in, that middle class world.

> *With the kids, and their world is quite different to my world, the world I grew up in, and I'm trying to come to terms with a lot.* Grainne

Class, Gender and Care

When we looked at themes, in our sessions on analysis, I specifically asked if we should talk more about gender, but in the discussion that followed it wasn't named specifically by most of the group as being a key theme. It was very important for Grainne, but for the rest of the group it was named as a less important factor than class. When I went back to the transcripts issues related to gender did arise for everyone in the group, but in different ways. Issues in relation to care, caring responsibilities, choice of course, current job roles (including being seen as the one who cares, or cares too much) were intertwined within other themes. Gendered habitus was present in our stories, particularly in relation to care. Values, which are gendered and classed, such as care, empathy, solidarity and cooperation were also important to our engagement in the research process and in how we built relationships in the group.

In reality although most of our conversations skirted around concepts of gender, they were enmeshed in our experiences of being working class women. Our conversations were framed from our position as women and this influenced who and how we are in the world. The expectation of us as caring was not in any way denied or rejected, if anything it was asserted and defended, particularly in discussions about us caring too much and

how this was seen as a bad thing by middle class colleagues. However, for the most part, we saw this as particularly classed and associated our caring, empathetic and focus on relationship as not just about being women but being working class women, our habitus and experiences are both classed and gendered.

I was reflexive about why gender wasn't named as clearly as class in the group. The group process was open, honest and emotional at times. Our stories were at the core of our discussions. In many ways this is not unusual for a group like ours, but the space to name class specifically is unusual so I think we prioritised this in our group. Our gendered experiences were integrated into our stories, and lived in our interactions with each other.

In the group gender was mostly highlighted in relation to care and caring responsibilities, gendered work and how they fall disproportionately on women still. Grainne spoke about leaving a Master's programme to care for her child who had become ill. Care and gender were intertwined in these discussions. Gemma highlights the additional responsibility of being a mother and a student, when the caring of children is still predominately done by women.

> *I think the things that are impacting me now in terms of going further in education or career is my gender…I took the focus with the kids…and promotion opportunities, I wouldn't dream of going for them because it would mean more hours and being away from the house. So that's definitely had an impact and part of that is just choices I've made as well.* Grainne
>
> *You sacrifice that for your kids, like the offset is that you have more time with your children.* Olivia
>
> *A father… is not going to have as much struggle in education as a mother…if the child is sick in the morning, who has to take the day off work? It's gonna be me.* Gemma

Grainne was probably the most explicit about the impact of gender on her experiences, not specifically in HE, where class was the dominating factor, but in life subsequently and particularly in relation to her role as a mother. It is interesting to think about how gendered and classed habitus were factors in Grainne's experiences. The centrality of care in her choices and missing opportunities as a result is a core part of her story. Grainne

strongly believed that this experience was more closely related to gender than to class. In the first meeting Grainne said

> *And it's interesting that we're all women as well because to be honest, I often think that class was really defined the first 20 odd years of my life, but my gender I feel has defined the last 15, way more I'd argue in a way, so just the experience of being women as well as. A couple of things people said, so I felt like askin, I wonder is that to do with being a woman as well?, but I didn't. So, but I think that is a really big part of it as well, definitely I count as being a huge bit, as I've been an adult. It'll be interesting to see if that comes into it as well.* Grainne

There was discussion based in Grainne's experiences and view on the impact of caring responsibilities on her opportunities. Katherine spoke about middle class women having the means to buy in the care so that their choices and opportunities were different. She recognised the classed aspect of Grainne's experiences. The affective dimensions of class were linked to the intersection of class and gender, and its impact on values and priorities, particularly in relation to care. Discussions about clashing of values in a work context were positioned in a care or careless, and classed frame.

We all spoke about taking on caring as part of our jobs, and for some this was in contrast to middle class colleagues. On a number of occasions Gemma spoke about colleagues who lost the caring aspect of their role when they started to think about promotion, highlighting the lack of value placed on care within the education system. Ronnie spoke about feeling looked down on because she cared about the children she was teaching. These views are related to the lack of value placed on care and caring at all level of education, and in society more widely.

> *It is, it's class. It's not gender but its class.* Ronnie

> *But the language around it, though. You get on well with the kids. The implication is that that's a bad thing.* Katherine

> *Because you care you're a half-wit. I know they view people who care like half-wits, cuz why the fuck would you care, you're a teacher. And it's an oxymoron, isn't it?* Ronnie

> *They love the people who'll do the kind of, the pastoral work they call it, but you're not given any hours to do it. You know, there's no promotional opportunities with*

it. Nobody really cares whether the students are being looked after. Except us who actually do care. Sorca

Ronnie spoke about the challenge of working with middle class colleagues who place less value on care and empathy than she does and how difficult it is to work somewhere that doesn't share your values, particularly in relation to the importance of care. She lamented;

But it is soul destroying, I have to say. It'd crush your spirit. Ronnie

The additional element of Covid and lockdowns added to discussions about gender. This related to who was caring, who were frontline staff and who benefited. There was a feeling that a heavier burden was falling to all women, but particularly working class women.

But it's that idea of the cycle again, is that we're not just carrying the burden of women and class. We're carrying the burden of fucking society here. Katherine

Care and how it was enacted both in our personal and professional lives remains at the core of how gender was articulated and discussed in the group. It would be interesting to hear the perspectives of working class men, or middle class women to see where there is overlap and divergence between these two elements, class and gender.

Care and gender through the process

The affective and lived dimensions of being working class women was present in our interactions in the group, where care and relationship were central. The values that we discussed as working class women were lived within the process of this research and how we moved through the cycles of reflection. Our feelings were openly shared when we told our own stories and also when we responded to others. These feelings were an expression of care at every point in the process. Even the anger came from a place of care, and sometimes as a reaction to colleagues, or others, looking from their middle class perspective and describing us as caring too much. This was seen as a way to invalidate our credentials by being critical of our lived values, which didn't emphasise the individualistic and competitive nature of the middle class world, but kept care and empathy at the core of our lives and our work.

The centrality of care created a sense of solidarity, especially when it was missing from our experiences in work. We could express dismay at the lack of care in our society and work, in a space that was full of care. The importance of being together reminded us that caring isn't a flaw and it is and should be valued.

The group process was immersed in classed and gendered ways of being, including in both the groups assertions about what was important and useful in the group process, but also in my analysis of the process as a whole, particularly the role of care, emotion, solidarity, voice and story, support and positionality – all aspects of research that are associated with 'feminine' and feminist traits and ways of being. They are aspects of feminist research.

Conclusion

In this chapter I have presented and discussed the key findings from this research. I began with thinking about how we understand class, including accent, place, family and other cultural and societal aspects of class. I linked this to our assertion that there is a lack of discussion about class in Ireland which can impact the ability to see and name it. Belonging was a key theme which ran through the chapter, particularly in relation to experiences of symbolic violence in education. This also was a feature of work and how classed experiences continue to be an issue in middle class jobs. I discussed the difficulty with current classed positioning, based on fixed classifications, which doesn't explain our current positions, and whether we have changed class. I concluded this chapter by exploring the intersection of gender and class in our experiences, focusing on our situating of care as core to this.

In the next chapter I will highlight the importance of voice and story in knowledge production, and how using participatory methods allowed for us to empower each other in this. I will explore the importance of working class experiences, related to family, gender and work. I will discuss the classification of class and how being caught between worlds is related to cultural and social capitals and challenging a deficit view of being

working class. I will conclude the chapter and this thesis with some final reflections and conclusions, including highlighting the contribution of this research.

Chapter 8 Discussion

Introduction

In the previous two chapters I have presented the findings from this research, including highlighting the importance of the process. The voices and stories of our group and our discussions have provided insight into our world, in order to present a deeper understanding of our experiences. The classed experiences of inequality are at the core of this research and the importance of class analysis in recognising, naming and understanding this inequality has been crucial. Our original classed habitus does not prepare us for the middle class education system and we have continued to play catch up throughout our lives. Power, and how it is enacted within the social structures, is linked to some of the key themes of this research; voice and story- whose are heard?, who produces the knowledge?; how class is classified.

In this chapter I will discuss in more depth some of the key themes of this research, in order to explore the full significance of the experiences we explored, by thinking through and across the themes. The key theorist that I have used in this research is Bourdieu, so I will return to some of his main concepts to examine their usefulness, and limits, for thinking about class. I will then explore the importance of voice and story and how they are crucial in knowledge production that moves beyond the dominant voices, to broaden the perspectives in research. This is linked to whose voices are heard and represented, and how including seldom heard voices, and accounts of lived experience, provides a different perspective, particularly in relation to barriers and benefits of HE for working class students. I will also explore classed experiences, linked to both education and gender.

The importance of class analysis in examining classed experiences and how this related to classification will also be discussed. I will spend much of this discussion articulating the challenges of narrow classifications of class and how this impacts our experiences, which highlights the importance of class analysis in recognising, naming and challenging inequality in our society. This is also important in the context of voice and story and how everyday experiences are missing from particular ways of viewing and measuring class.

I will then discuss the importance of this research and its originality and contribution to wider discussions on class and education. I will make recommendations based on the themes that evoked passion and even rage in our group. I will conclude this thesis with some final reflections on this doctoral journey for me as an educator and academic.

Returning to Bourdieu

I have discussed my journey to finding theory that adequately describes class and classed experiences. My view of class is that it is complex, relational and, when we include everyday experiences, it can be messy. I want to return to examine the key concepts from Pierre Bourdieu and how he conceptualises class which I introduced in earlier chapters of this research. I will discuss what aspects of his concepts are useful in thinking about the findings and in how I conceptualise class. As I have discussed, using Bourdieu's theory was about finding theory which was useful and complex enough to think about class is a way that recognised both the structures and the everyday experiences and how they affect class and class positioning, and could handle the complex nature of class. I have also discussed how other writers, including Skeggs, Reay, Finnegan, Crew etc., who have used Bourdieu's concepts to explore experiences of class including education and gender, were also important in negotiating his complex ideas.

Habitus has been an important concept in thinking about class in this research. It has been core in theorising how we experience class. Our primary socialisation leaves us with enduring dispositions that impacted our trajectories and our experiences of HE and work. Despite gaining additional capitals, cultural capital in the form of academic qualifications and economic capital due to the kind of work we can access because of our qualifications, who we are is still significantly influenced by our habitus, at least in part. The enduring nature of habitus, and early socialisation are important aspects of our past and current class positioning, linked to finding places where we do and do not belong (Bourdieu, 1984). The 'constraint' of early habitus, combined with values and affective classed experiences mean that our social positioning is complex (Reay 2004). I will discuss this in more detail later in this chapter.

Going to higher education meant stepping into a 'field' which was outside our '*bubble*'. For most of us this opened our eyes to class, inequality and the different experiences of middle class students. The concept of field is useful in distinguishing the spaces where we feel we belong, and those where we do not, that our habitus has not prepared us for (Bourdieu, 1984). The interconnection between habitus and field, which is central to Bourdieu's conceptualising of class is effective in analysing classed experiences. Moving into other 'fields' provides an opportunity to be reflexive about our social situation and the status, or lack of, associated with it (Schirato and Webb, 2002). It also helps us to understand feelings of belonging, or unbelonging, and the need to find strategies to help us survive. Many working class students assimilate to avoid being seen as 'other' and misrecognition is a useful way to explain this (Loveday, 2015). The concept of misrecognition is helpful in explaining the acceptance of taken for granted perspectives, and how social reproduction happens behind forms of symbolic capital, hidden within the structures (Bourdieu, 1984) and ways of being that are deemed 'respectable' (Skeggs, 1997). It is also useful as a way of understanding how moving outside of familiar fields can lead to a move from misrecognition to a form of recognition, of beginning to recognise the barriers and unequal structures that not only made our journeys more difficult, but also positioned us as 'other'. In the research group we discussed the shock of realising we were different and the arduous process of realising that the deficit is with the system and not with us. The power of misrecognition was evident in our discussions where we had to continually remind ourselves and each other of this. Friedman (2016) describes the process of negotiating the emotional aspect of feeling caught between worlds as "largely a solitary undertaking" (p. 145) but this research process allowed us to be open about the extent to which our working class habitus was still part of us, our embodied, affective classed selves which valued collective and caring ways of being in the world. We could recognise how this separated us from middle class students and colleagues. It also impacted our ability to recognise experiences of symbolic violence as part of a system that positioned us as deficient. Being in systems that were not meant for us opened us up to challenging experiences where we were 'other', an additional challenge of going to HE.

This leads us on to how the concept of habitus clivé, or feeling stuck between worlds, was an element of our trajectories into middle class dominated jobs and helped to explain the distance to our families and communities created by going to HE (Friedman, 2016),

which also impacts our social position. The process of our collaborative inquiry gave us an opportunity to engage with our working class habitus, and to inhabit a space where we did not feel caught between worlds. It was a collective rather than a solitary experience. Although this was an affirming experience, as I have already detailed, it also highlighted the in-betweenness of both working class and middle class spaces, and how we needed to adapt to fit in, or remain 'other'. Friedman (2016) critiques Bourdieu's perspective on this, asserting that Bourdieu frames it as unusual, however, as with Friedman's research it was a common feature of our group.

The accumulation, composition and use of different forms of capitals, which forms a significant part of Bourdieu's theory, is crucial is thinking about class and inequality (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992). Our group was particularly focused on cultural capital and how by gaining academic qualifications we had increased our cultural capital expanding our opportunities. Thinking about cultural capital also provided a frame to recognise the advantages for those with the 'right' kinds of cultural capital, and the critique of access, which may open the door but does not attempt to change the unequal structures. I will discuss access in more detail later in this chapter.

We focused less on economic capital, and we acknowledged that economic capital was not as big an issue in our current lives as it was in our earlier experiences, which I will discuss later. Our levels and type of capitals has changed and despite enduring aspects of habitus, so have aspects of our positioning and experiences. We are less 'constrained' (Reay, 2004) as we have more knowledge about 'the rules of the game' and can assert agency in choosing if and when to engage.

Habitus clivé was crucial for framing our experiences after HE. The in-between space was a feature of all our experiences, some to a lesser degree. However, the process of this research was an opportunity to reflect on our habitus and to reconnect with, and place value on, working class ways of being. As I have discussed Couldry (2010) asserts the importance of voice and story in assigning worth to our experiences. Being together over a prolonged period of time gave us the opportunity to inhabit aspects of our working classness that is not valued in middle class work spaces. We laughed a lot and there was an irreverence in our humour, which has value in working class spaces, but we were also critical and reflective in our discussions, bringing in the knowledge and aspects of cultural

capital that we acquired by going to HE. The solidarity in our group meant we could inhabit both aspects, which are often separate, and there was a level of comfort in being able to reconnect with ourselves that was different from the in-between spaces we often inhabit. This helped us to place a value on ourselves and our expertise. Being able to comfortably inhabit both sides was an unusual experience as we usually move between worlds (Ingram and Abrahams, 2016).

The use of Bourdieu's concepts in exploring the multidimensional nature of class was also useful in critiquing social reproduction, and the role of education in maintaining the social structures. This included challenging the framing of the working class as deficient by removing the opaqueness of how habitus, capitals and field interact and prioritise middle class knowledge and ways of being; their habitus, cultural and social capital lead to being able to feel like a 'fish in water' in educational structures (Reay, 2017). These were also important factors in finding a sense of belonging, or unbelonging, in HE and in work. Thinking about this together helped us to recognise and celebrate our achievements, and to acknowledge the differences in our journeys to middle class students and colleagues, but also to family friends and others in our communities who had different experiences, and continue to experience significant, often hidden, inequalities (Friedman, 2016). Inequality and the misrecognition that helps the systems to endure, and for the positioning of social inequalities as individual deficits, was key to our discussions.

I found the concepts of habitus, misrecognition, symbolic violence, habitus clivé and capitals particularly useful in thinking about class identity and positioning. They are multidimensional concepts that can help us frame experiences in a way which recognises the unusual trajectories inherent in our stories; they also help us to see a collective experience, because, despite having different stories we all recognised how they were interrelated and helped to frame our classed experiences within wider sociological theory.

The complexity of Bourdieu's theory is also useful for challenging how class is classified in narrow ways. The complexity of everyday experiences are not captured in narrow categories, based on employment and education levels, but including wider aspects such as cultural and social capital, as well as aspects of classed identity and embodied habitus,

which can help us to frame class in a more complex and real way. I will discuss this in more detail later in this chapter.

Although Bourdieu's concepts have been useful in conceptualising classed experiences I found it useful to build on this to explore the gendered experiences of class. As I have discussed, class is often theorised in relation to employment relationships that can exclude women. Although Bourdieu moves away from this, it was important for me to find other academics who included a clearer focus on gender, that more fully integrates the insights of feminism, and to recognise the complexity of dynamics at play, not just across class but within the working class. The ideas of Reay, Skeggs, Walkerdine and hooks, in particular, helped to bridge the dual experiences of being working class and the affective nature of women's classed experiences. Irish equality studies, including Lynch and O'Neill, Lynch and O'Riordan, Grummell and Bissett supported me to provide an Irish context and highlight the importance of care and solidarity. Charlesworth (2000), although not from a feminist perspective, was also important in articulating the affective experiences of class, and how this is impacted by stepping outside your community. I will return to explore the importance of feminism and equality studies for this research later in this chapter.

It was also necessary to move beyond Bourdieu to articulate particular perspectives in relation to voice and story. Bourdieu's theory recognises the inequalities in whose voices are heard, and the struggle for representation, and in particular how this is embedded in wider social structures. However, for this research I needed to explore voice in a way that highlights the micro and macro aspects of voice and story. The importance of voice and story in research has a significant grounding in feminist research and the writing of Reay, hooks and O'Neill have been invaluable in building on other theory. The work of Couldry (2010) was also significant in articulating the importance of voice and worth. As I move through this chapter, I will discuss how the work of Bourdieu and other academics have helped to explain the classed experiences at the core of this research.

Voice, story, empowerment and knowledge production

> The underside of the presence of words and stories is the lack or void that exists where there is silence and/or struggle with and for words (Bissett, 2023, p. 87).

Voice and story were integral to this research. In this research, voice and story are framed as important in recognising and challenging the unequal structures by placing value on them and thereby recognising the expertise within them (Couldry, 2010). I have engaged in research 'with' and not 'on' with seldom heard voices at the centre of this research. I see voice and story as a way of recognising the value and expertise in our stories and as a way to use them to present a different perspective that can challenge taken for granted views on class and classed experiences. We have knowledge and expertise that is worthwhile and useful (Thompson, 2000), in itself, for us and how our perspectives about education in Ireland, particularly access and barriers can contribute to wider scholarship and debate.

Throughout this research I have emphasised the importance of voice and stories. It is important to acknowledge the plural 'stories' and not a singular 'story'. Our stories illuminate how the personal is political, and how our lives are positioned in wider societal and political structures (Connolly, 2018). There are other stories, other trajectories, other intersections, other ways of experiencing the world which exist outside our group. Qualitative research is valuable and necessary, but is not singular or static (Braun and Clarke, 2022). Facts and figures can be attractive to those who want to present a picture that demonstrates responses are 'fair' and appropriate. The complexity of including lived experiences, which by their nature are varied, can make it less concrete to policy makers and those with the power to make change, but without the stories, without the knowledge inherent in living our lives, we can never truly understand the world around us and the experiences of those in it.

This research points to the link between power and voice, and how empowerment within research is significant in any process related to seldom heard voices. Collaborative or participatory research includes empowerment as key to its aims. Freire (1996) frames critical thinking as necessary for true dialogue. This connects the group to the world and to each other, seeing this as a process, "as transformation, rather than as a static entity-

thinking which does not separate itself from action" (p.73). Being in a process together, using Cooperative/Collaborative Inquiry (CI) provided space to know ourselves, to pause and opportunity for self-empowerment.

This research makes very clear that working class voices are hard to raise in middle class spaces. Katherine spoke about not having the language and Gemma spoke about not having the confidence, until much later and even then Ronnie spoke about how the inequality was so ingrained that you would need to continually challenge both systems and deficit perspectives. Case (2017) describes how "for years, I tried to suppress my voice of origin, my heritage, my family, my people as a result of internalized classism" (p. 20) and links this to the prioritising of middle class ways of being and knowing in education. She also highlights how she saw this as "practical and necessary to get my degree" (Case, 2017, p. 20). The process of losing her voice was something she embraced as a way to 'succeed' in the academic world. It was important to fit in, in order to succeed. It was much later when she reflected on her journey that she recognised the misrecognition and symbolic violence that were at the core of her experiences. She says "it never occurred to me, not once, that I should embrace my own voice and just speak like me. That came much later" (Case, 2017, p. 20). During the research process, we used our voices in the group and the sense of solidarity and understanding also encouraged us to use them outside. However, as lone voices in these other spaces this was not easy, and not always possible.

A key aspect of this research is the importance of having a sense of solidarity and a space to embody our classed ways of being in the world, to replenish our reserves for going back to spaces where we didn't feel heard or empowered. We expressed our feelings of pride, empathy, sadness, frustration and anger that were part of our experiences, past and present. It was somewhere we were 'in between' together. Crew (2020) describes "the emotional labour this must take to deal with these issues, time and time again" (p. 84) but finding a space to talk about these experiences and to be understood allowed us to vent but also to interrogate and reflect on them. Feeling empowered allows us to not just find our voice, but to use it. So empowerment is an important part of this research, in that we felt empowered, to tell our stories, to interrogate what they meant and to have them shared. The research process, and feeling empowered had an impact on how we thought about ourselves and how we engaged with the world, and what we brought back to it. We

spoke about the ripples of this research moving beyond us (Bray *et al*., 2000), and I will outline one example of this of this later in this section.

This makes it important to advocate for research that moves past the researcher as the dominant voice. By hearing voices singularly, by using interviews, I could have provided a way to find and represent the stories. However using Cooperative/collaborative Inquiry (CI) allowed us to build a space together, which deepened the learning for all of us, and was not confined to me as the researcher. The importance of shared space, democratic and caring engagement and being truly ethical and meaningful about participation are core aspects of participatory and co-operative research that move it beyond the academy, and allow it to have a life of its own outside writing up (Bray *et al*., 2000; Heron, 1996). Working together, listening to, and telling, our stories helped us to understand our own experiences in a deeper and collective way; and in doing so interrogate some of the taken for granted notions of who is the researcher/ expert and challenging linear ways of thinking about and doing research. It highlights the importance of meaningful participatory approaches in challenging the researcher-participant binary.

Who tells the story: Knowledge production

> The production of 'knowledge' is therefore not neutral, in that those with power and various forms of capital therefore quite often get to tell their story or the story they want to tell about others, often with visceral effects (Bissett, 2023, p. 6-7).

Voice and story are also closely related to the production of knowledge, who tells the story and what stories are told. As academia has been an elite and predominantly middle class space, working class stories have been mediated through that lens and perspective (Lynch and O'Neill, 1994). What questions are asked and by who, and how, reveal aspects of who we are as researchers. Working class academics are researching from an insider perspective which is changing some of the discussion on class and what it means to be working class, particularly working with predominately middle class colleagues. This is also happening in the context of class identity being positioned between worlds, which provides a different frame from the "objective, value free social science" (Bissett, 2023, p. 7) that has dominated much of the academic discussions of class. Our

experiences position us, and in this research we have approached the topic recognising our expertise. We have not tried to be 'objective', but by being reflexive have provided different perspectives, which demonstrates that there are other ways to think about class. This highlights the possibilities for producing knowledge that can add to wider discussion on the topic, from a socially situated position.

The challenge of being a different, and often lone voice, both in education and in 'professional' jobs was "*exhausting*" (Katherine). This research demonstrates that telling our stories brought us into each other's worlds and into the broader world of others like us, which helped us to find and use our voices, by both telling our stories and challenging inequalities. The importance of telling stories and providing an alternative perspective is highlighted in critical race theory (Yosso, 2005). In a similar vein, Case (2017) discusses the importance of "counter storytelling" as a way to resist "the dominant narrative", and finding ways to raise our voices is an important aspect of challenging inequalities (p. 18). This research highlights how stories helped us to explore and to challenge how and where they fit into the dominant discourse of inequality and education. This was part of the process of co-creating new knowledge. A key contribution of this research is that it is knowledge that is positioned in our stories and as "useful academic knowledge" it can "open up ways of seeing that have not been experienced before" (Thompson, 2000, p. 105), particularly for those with different experiences to us. It provides a different, and often unheard perspective, which I believe is valuable in and of itself.

For me becoming a researcher meant exploring the kinds of knowledge produced, how it was produced, who by and for. As I have already discussed I had a difficult relationship with some impenetrable theory and my journey through this research process has repeatedly reminded me of who the knowledge producers are (typically), and how this was part of my difficulty with theory. The production of knowledge can be hierarchical and biased, without naming (or at times recognising) the bias (Bissett, 2023; Finnegan, 2012; Lynch and O'Riordan, 1998). This research is not neutral, and the knowledge we produced is from our perspectives and our stories. It is grounded in our experiences, good and bad, and our collective reflexivity, within the CI process, on what they mean both for us and for broader social science and higher education in Ireland. Research on class in Ireland is predominantly quantitative, providing significant data on class inequality in education, particularly HE. It tells us who goes to HE, their backgrounds and what they

study (HEA 2022). Research that focuses on lived experience is much less prevalent (O'Neill, 1992; Lynch and O'Riordan, 1998; Finnegan, 2012; Bissett, 2023). When stories and experiences are at the centre of research they allow us to view the world from a particular perspective, and to emphasise the voices of those who are seldom heard in the academic world (Charlesworth, 2000; Thompson, 2000). The methods and centrality of voice in this research makes it valuable and nuanced and contributes to the broader research on class and education in Ireland because of this.

Lynch and O'Riordan (1998) emphasise the importance of "intensive qualitative research to unpack the black box behind the statistics which have repeatedly shown working-class students to be disadvantaged in education" (p. 453). Our stories and trajectories provide insight into how the structures create barriers for students like us and the classed inequalities that make our journeys more challenging. This is influenced by the lack of fit between our habitus and the experience of HE. The difference between working class "social and cultural background" and what is valued in education, particularly HE, creates an additional barrier for working class students (Lynch and O'Riordan, 1998, p. 460). The acceptance of this, and the positioning of working class culture as deficient can lead to acts of symbolic violence which further impacted any sense of belonging in this field. This is also linked to power and perspective, and whose voices are heard and which kinds of knowledge are valued. The presentation of quantitative research as 'neutral' or 'objective' hides the capitals and power of those who can make decisions about how classifications are made (Tyler, 2015; Bissett, 2023). The stories in this and similar research highlight the complexity of classed identity, particularly related to succeeding in HE.

This research can add depth and offer a different perspective because it is qualitative and from the perspective of voices rarely heard in academia (Lynch and O'Riordan, 1998). Quantitative data about particular groups provides a reference point for seeing who is, and isn't, included. As I have discussed, there is a lot of useful data about who goes to HE in Ireland, what schools they attend and what courses they choose ((Lynch and O'Riordan, 1998; CSO, 2016; HEA, 2022). However, there is limited research on the stories and experiences behind the facts and figures. Using stories and experiences provides valuable insights into what influences the numbers (Lynch and O'Riordan, 1998), and a depth that is not possible without stories.

It is also useful to note here the overlap in the findings and those of other research based in lived experiences in Ireland, which highlights the impact of structural barriers on working class students and their endurance over time. Similar to this research, both Lynch and O'Riordan (1998) and Finnegan (2012) discussed differences in type and volume of cultural and social capitals in working class families and the impact of this on experiences of working class students in HE, particularly in having, or pursuing a sense of worth in HE. They also highlight the role of misrecognition in students experiences of the education system. Finnegan (2012) also highlights the role of class identification and dis-identification for working class students. In our group and we linked this to the lack of discussion, language or acknowledgement of class in Ireland.

The absence of working class voices in examining the barriers in the current system is stark, and including voices and stories from others like us will help to answer some of the difficult questions in relation to the education system and the inequalities within it (Lynch and O'Riordan, 1998). The real life experiences of underrepresented groups can bridge the knowledge gap and provide a way to think about, and critique, systems that maintain inequality, and taken for granted perspectives that view working class lives as deficient. The difficulties in education begin at a young age, with a disjuncture between working class culture and the middle class systems, lack of representation in both teachers and the curriculum, and continue throughout our education with experiences of symbolic violence and being 'other' (Lynch and O'Riordan, 1998).

The importance of recognising care and solidarity, in the context of an unequal society is core to Irish equality studies and research from this perspective is qualitative, storied and recognises and values lived experiences and the status ascribed, or not, to some stories (O'Neill, 1992; Lynch and O'Neill, 1994; Lynch and O'Riordan, 1998; Lynch *et al*, 2007; Bissett, 2023). Research from this perspective supported me to view class and gender together, as it values intersectional and qualitative approaches. Although it is important to state that equality studies goes beyond this, these are the aspects that were important for this research and in supporting me to understand, interpret and prioritise voice and story, and care and solidarity, in particular.

Within our group process there were a few occasions where some of the group were frustrated that our voices and stories were confined to this group. I spoke about ways I hoped to share our expertise outside the group, including two upcoming conferences and making a submission to a consultation on the new National Access Plan (NAP) and asked if anyone wanted to be involved. Two of the women joined me to write the submission to the new NAP consultation. We used a shared document and included the core points from our discussions in the group, focused on class inequality in the education system.

There was significant enthusiasm that we were sharing our expertise beyond the group and out into the field of HE and access. It was a way to make the ripples of the process tangible and to present our submission on an equal footing with others, highlighting our expertise and our perspective (Bray *et al.*, 2000). For all three of us it was the first time we were involved in something like this, related to our own experience and stories. It was an opportunity to frame and share our perspectives and our expertise. It was a way to challenge the taken for granted view of who produces the knowledge. It also highlights the importance of researching in a participatory and collaborative way and is one example of how this research was powerful. This research resulted in us making a submission to the new NAP, applying for new jobs and being more surefooted in challenging inequality in our everyday experiences, a significant impact beyond this thesis.

I believe that with the increase in 'working class academics' and the sharing of their stories and others like those in our group, there is possibility to explore issues like social reproduction, social mobility, access and participation in a much more nuanced and lived way. By telling our stories and hearing others like us we can recognise the barriers and also 'resist' the dominant middle class ways of being and knowing, together. As Crew (2020) articulates we can find solidarity and strength to challenge the system, and also to support students like us. Although there has been an increase in the numbers of working class students going to HE there is still limited knowledge and understanding of these experiences. Understanding complex experiences requires time and investment to find real answers. However, to be meaningful, they also require commitment and willingness to address the inequalities that are integral to stories like ours.

I want to reiterate that working class voices provide a different perspective, different stories and as such can be challenging for those who have benefited from the current

systems. "We should attend carefully to what working class students say about society and education because it is only by listening to these voices that we can begin to develop a proper 'bottom-up' perspective of the educational system" (Finnegan, 2012, p. 339). It is not only important for us to find and use our voices, but it is crucial that there are ways for our voices to be heard. The process of talking to each other was a way of reframing and owning our stories, as a way to present our perspectives and to challenge others. The ripples from this research creates change and we can use this knowledge to challenge inequality, both in education and in wider structures.

The importance of voice has also become increasingly important for me as a practitioner. The process of doing this research was enmeshed with experiences where I either had no voice or my voice was not heard, and how this was disempowering and impacted on my own sense of agency, purpose and belonging. Working together with this amazing group of women, and finding a significant sense of belonging, reminded me that I have a voice, even though it isn't always easy to use in particular spaces, and that it still isn't always heard. My voice was heard here and by recognising that there is power in both my own and our collective voices it has reminded me of the power of voice and how as a practitioner I need to continually find ways to enact values that prioritise care and empathy, but also to be willing to listen to the voices of students and hear what their perspectives are.

Voice and story for me are connected not just to power and whose voices are heard, but also to knowledge production and what that means for how our experiences are presented and shared. In the literature review I discussed the position of Lynch and O'Neill (1994) which stated that researchers can "claim to know and understand you better than yourself" (p. 309), which leaves us voiceless. In this research, I have continually endeavoured to work collaboratively and centre our voices and stories, in an effort to ensure that I make no such claims. We are all experts in our own stories, and finding time and space to reflect on them, in our case collectively, provided insight and nuance that can be difficult to see in the living of a life. The process of this research was pivotal, in providing time, space and support to reflect and explore together. For me the *how* of this research is, and always has been, crucial to both knowledge production, but also to the importance of voice. Collaborative and participatory research is not easy, but it is essential if we want to understand and find meaning in both our own and others stories.

My view is that this research demonstrates that meaningful and participatory research is crucial to understanding the systems, why working class students do not benefit from the educational system in the same way their middle class peers do, and finding ways to challenge and change the structures to be more inclusive. This needs to be supported, funded and integrated into consultation and development in the sector. This, and the research of Lynch and O'Riordan (1998) and Finnegan (2012) demonstrate that the system has multiple barriers for working class students, including lack of capitals, 'constraint' in our habitus, and seeing ourselves as deficient, rather than the system as unequal. There needs to continue to be alternate ways to access HE, taking into account the stories of those who have gone these routes before, while also challenging the inequalities in the systems which make these routes necessary. The importance of us researching our own experiences adds an additional layer of nuance and knowledge, that through a reflexive process has provided important new knowledge to these wider discussions on education.

Finding a voice in Education: Further and Adult Education

It is important to think about where we lose our voices and where we find them again. Our varied early experiences of education all involved inequalities, whether that was being 'kicked out' at a young age, lack of career guidance, 'book money' or expectations that we would pursue 'vocations'. These experiences can impact our ability and ease in using our voices, particularly in other educational spaces, such as HE. However, one place where we all found a voice was in Adult Education and/or Further Education. I want to mention this as a smaller, but important aspect of the research. All but one woman in our group went to FE, and/or adult education. We all spoke about these experiences as being amazing, engaging and helping us to find a way to move further in education. The experiences were empowering.

For me personally, it is where I found a voice, and going from being very quiet, to being outspoken and engaging in debate. Olivia describes it as the best experience of her life and Ronnie as a way to see a route to HE. Annie described the confidence she got from

feedback on her writing and Katherine described a whole new world opening up that she knew nothing about. Gemma described being back in education and knowing she didn't want to leave it. The only member of our group who didn't go to FE/ adult education was Grainne and she describes the process of losing her voice in HE. Again, this is not to say that these are universal experiences but that these were our particular stories and they are important in showing that this route to HE was extremely important in our group.

O'Sullivan, Byrne, Robson and Winters (2019) highlighted the importance of "bridging capital" to support success in higher education. The gap between working class capitals and middle class educational spaces is a barrier and an additional challenge for us. Their research is in relation to access programmes in specific universities. However, I would argue that our experiences in adult and further education provided a form of bridging capital, which supported our journeys to and through HE. We gained cultural capital, in that we were learning about new ideas and perspectives, and additionally we learned about routes to HE and were in an environment where it was seen as positive. It is important to state that all of the mature students in our group also went to an access programme, highlighting the additional step they availed of in order to succeed in HE. The importance of having multiple routes into HE is highlighted in our stories. Our trajectories were not typical and we used these alternate routes to find success in HE. We also found something else; language, confidence and voice that supported us in our onward journeys to HE. Adult and Further education was somewhere we found some belonging. It is not possible to say if we would have had such success in education without access to these educational spaces, where we found a sense of belonging, and a sense that we could do this. What is clear is that they provided a positive experience of education, and a feeling that we could succeed.

There is ongoing discussion about the current status and funding of this sector, but the changing profile of the sector, which is moving from the political democratic purpose of adult and community education towards 'job activation' is changing the nature and purpose of it, which is not possible to go into here (For more information: Murray, Grummel and Ryan, 2014; Bowl, 2017). However, it is important to state that without different access routes our group would not exist, so any commitment to access and widening participation needs to ensure a commitment to securely funded adult education and further education. Our stories and those of others like us highlight the importance of

these routes and should feature in discussions about the importance of this sector, and its role in challenging inequality in the structures.

Working class experiences

At the core of this research is how class is lived and experienced, from a working class perspective. As I have already discussed our voices are seldom heard, particularly in academia. The typical knowledge creators have different experiences and different perspectives.

Our group is quite unique, and we have overcome many challenges to be where we are. We are all highly educated, all working in what are generally considered middle class/professional jobs. However, as I have discussed, habitus endures and the embodied and affective aspects of class are sustained even after going to HE. Walkerdine (2023) discusses how current ways of being can emanate from our parents or grandparents experiences, without us having the specific context. The shadows of affective class experiences can live on after the meaning has been lost. Walkerdine (2023) argues that the "family practices and biographical and inherited ways of doing things"(p. 481) are part of how we live class and how we inherit class practices, which can also be gendered and can cross "historical and biographical time" (Walkerdine, 2023, p. 482). Habitus is inherited and influences what is expected from us, and where we feel we belong. The generational aspect of habitus and family is particularly important to explore for those who step outside what is expected. Even though going to HE provides new knowledge and new experiences, it can also provide insight into how the working class are viewed from a deficit perspective, which can challenge our sense of class identity and position us as 'other'.

The experience of working class students and the impact of HE on their sense of belonging in the world is discussed by many academics, particularly those from a working class background (Reay, hooks, Walkerdine, Case, Ingram, etc.). Some important aspects of classed experiences include the affective experiences of class, linked to our families and communities and the constraint of habitus and our lack of capitals (Reay, 2004). The

affective aspects of class, working class values and seeing the world from that perspective are part of our stories and are also clearly articulated in the literature. Folkes (2021) discusses the importance of community, place and family. While Reay (2004) discusses the 'constraint' which is part of our working class habitus and our 'choices'. A key aspect of our journeys is feeling caught between worlds, like a fish out of water with our families and community, and in the middle class world of work. This can impact family relationships, friendships and ability to find a sense of belonging in work contexts. A sense of belonging is impacted by incidences of symbolic violence and experiences of inequality, past and present. We are changed by the experience of going to higher education, and this can lead to feeling in between, no longer fully belonging in either world (Walkerdine, 2021).

Family, habitus and capitals

In this research family had a significant impact on our trajectories and our HE journeys. The importance of family including habitus and capitals, or lack of, were significant. Bourdieu (1984, 1986) provides some framing to help us to explore the impact of family on our educational journeys. Habitus, field, misrecognition, habitus clivé are all interacting in how our family and classed positioning influences us, and how these relationships can be changed by going to HE. The changes in family, as detailed in the previous chapter included a lack of understanding, seeing the world differently or feeling removed from family life, because you are different now. The habitus in working class families can mean that going to HE creates a distance. In our group, the distance was not universal and there were some stories where family support was evident and crucial, particularly for those of us who went to higher education as teenagers. However, the enduring nature of habitus, particularly embodied and affective habitus connects us to our younger selves and the habitus of our families.

Classed experiences and the role of family were also evident in the literature, particularly from working class academics or those of working class heritage (hooks, 1989; Reay, 2017; Case, 2017; Binns; 2019; Crew, 2020; Stone, 2020; Walkerdine, 2021;). Looking back, and being reflexive, they could see how education had changed them, and had a

significant influence on their sense of identity and relationships with family, feeling disconnected or alienated at times and what this means for social inequality more broadly. In earlier chapters I spoke about the role of misrecognition in buying into the taken for granted, deficient, perspective of the working class (hooks, 1989; Case, 2017) in order to succeed in a middle class world and it was only through deep reflexivity that they reclaimed their working classness. Navigating this path was often painful and challenging. Law (1995) describes her mother's concern that "education destroys something" (p. 1), and can have a significant impact on family relationships. Case (2017) describes the role of education, and trying to fit in, as central to "my complicity in allowing education to destroy the respect, patience, pride, and loyalty my family and broader community deserved" (p. 19). I discussed Bourdieu's perspective that reflexivity is needed to challenge the taken for granted perspectives of how the world is; and in doing so it reveals the power dynamics at play in what is and is not given value in society, highlighting the importance of moving beyond our own stories to interrogate what they explain about the systems and structures that position us as less than. In our group stories about families were filled with emotion and, in some of them, there was sadness about the changed relationships and positioning within our families. Again this is not something that is part of any wider discussions on HE for working class people. HE as a route to becoming 'socially mobile' is presented as wanted and positive. It is presented from an outsiders perspective. This emphasises the importance of the voices and stories of working class students being part of policy and practice in HE. It is also useful in thinking about who are the educators, their understanding, or not of working class lives (O'Neill, 1992; Lynch and O'Riordan, 1998), and how those of us from working class backgrounds can challenge deficit perspectives. Being reflexive in the CI process demonstrated that we could move beyond ourselves and theorise the importance of family and relationships, including how they can change after HE, and these classed experiences in a broader way.

The pull of our working class habitus and our connection to our families was challenging for some of the group. Although by going to HE we have changed somewhat, the affective and gendered aspects of our habitus remained fundamental to who we are (Walkerdine, 2023). The enduring nature of our habitus was not easily lost, even after going through HE. It continued to be part of who we are and in how we are positioned. However, we were changed by the experience, which meant we can also be positioned differently by our families and communities. This was particularly relevant in both Olivia

and Gemma's stories. I will discuss this further in relation to habitus clivé later in this chapter.

This research points to the significant impact of lack of capitals in our families on our educational journeys. Returning to Savage's (2015) analogy of the mountain and starting at different points, in order to reach the top of the mountain the working class need to do much more to climb the mountain. Bathmaker *et al*. (2016) describe emotional rather than practical support for working class students. Crew (2020) describes how "middle-class families pass on their cultural, economic and social advantages to enable their children to succeed in the educational system, whereas working-class families, who face economic constraints, may not have this, more elite knowledge" (p. 100). The findings of this research echo this, with lack of knowledge about going to HE, the content of our programmes, lack of knowledge in how to navigate the system and the impact of financial constraint on going to HE. There was also a 'constraint' in our choices as we did not have information about different programmes and the status linked to them, or felt they were not for women like us. A recent study by Morgan, LaBerge, Larremore, Galesic, Brand and Clauset (2022) found that those who are working as academics are much more likely to have parents who also have PhD's, "faculty are up to 25 times more likely to have a parent with a Ph.D." (Morgan *et al*., 2022, p. 1).

The cultural capital, and knowledge about the inner workings of the educational system provides a significant advantage (Lynch and O'Riordan, 1998; Reay *et al*. 2005). Savage (2015) describes the ability to keep privileges and advantages, as a way of recognising the long-term class benefits associated with certain class positions. Reay *et al*. (2005) describe hot and cold knowledge in the differences between working class and middle class parents knowledge and understanding of the education system and how to get ahead in it. The passing on of recognised and useful knowledge, which is already ingrained in the education system, is a way to ensure that the "advantages endure over time" (Savage, 2015, p. 46). While Friedman and Laurison (2020) acknowledge that for those without these advantages success "takes longer, happens less frequently and often represents a markedly more labour-intensive, even exhausting experience" (p. 226). Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992) discuss the importance of knowing the 'rules of the game' in order to be able to benefit from it, and how misrecognition plays a role in maintaining the status quo, with taken for granted perspectives hiding the inequalities that come from capitals,

but also familiarity with particular fields, and relative comfort related to our habitus. Symbolic, or hidden capitals allow the middle class to benefit because their habitus and capitals 'fit' in HE.

Family support and habitus which positions HE as natural is an advantage, or privilege of the middle class, which is rarely mentioned, even though it is an additional barrier for working class students (Reay *et al*., 2005; Reay, 2017; Crew, 2020). Class advantages are constructed and legitimised through cultural and social capital, and as Bourdieu (1986) asserts this allows them to be more hidden, and unacknowledged. Their habitus prepares them for this world and the status quo supports their comfort. Friedman and Laurison (2020) describe how privilege "acts as an energy saving device, allowing some to get further with less effort" (p. 226) highlighting the benefit of their habitus and capitals.

This was also important in wider discussions about the programmes and institutions which working class students attend (Friedman and Laurison, 2020). As I have discussed Medicine is dominated by middle class students, while care programmes like ECEC and Social Care have more working class students. Although there are more places, and more working class students in HE, there is still a significant disparity in the status of programme and institutions where they study (HEA, 2022). This is linked to both knowledge about the systems and the points gained in disadvantaged schools, which excluded us from the more prestigious opportunities. So the lack of cultural capital, both ourselves and our families, as well as habitus, within a middle class education system, constrains choices for working class students (Reay, 2004).

Family support was crucial for when we went to HE. The support, or lack of that we discussed in our group wasn't about blaming or further pathologizing our families (Lynch and O'Neill, 1994). There are structural issues that mean working class parents do not have the knowledge necessary to understand the inner workings of HE (Reay *et al*., 2005) and often working class students are left to navigate these systems; generally with very limited or poor career guidance from school.

An important aspect of the difficulty in family relationships is related to misrecognition and how going to HE can create an awareness of the inequalities in society for us, and the

positioning of working class as less than; or as I have discussed in earlier chapters, there can be an acceptance of this 'taken for granted' perspective (hooks, 1994; Case, 2017). In our group there were discussions about assimilating to fit in, and also beginning to recognise and question the social structures but not having the confidence, language or ability to challenge them. In our group we discussed how critical thinking and assessing information which was part of our education journeys. Katherine spoke about the "*eye roll*" of wider family when she presents a perspective that is different and asserts that "*that's my place in the family now*". Our perspectives can become different to our families which can be challenging.

Succeeding in higher education can change and frame the perspectives of working class students, creating a distance from families and communities; leading to habitus clivé, which is a key finding of this research. The importance of early habitus and family is embodied and felt, it is part of an affective dimension of classed experience. The disconnect to earlier experiences, that can result from going to HE is an additional challenge for working class students and graduates.

Class, affect and gendered experiences

In this section I will discuss the affective dimensions of class, and how class is felt within our stories and experiences. Skeggs (1997) discusses the role of affect and the feeling level of classed habitus and how this is "reproduced at the intimate level as a structure of feeling" (p. 6). In the findings, I discussed the depth of feeling inherent in our stories and discussions, including anger, frustration, exhaustion, isolation, sadness, helplessness, upset, rage, but also solidarity, care, humour and pride. The importance of values, of solidarity, empathy and prioritising of care are highlighted in this research. We had the opportunity to reconnect with the positive aspects of our classed habitus and to place value and 'worth' on it and ourselves. Walkerdine (2023) discusses the affective aspects of class and how "affect was everywhere in the sense that I came to understand what was happening by the feel of what was going on" (p. 478). Charlesworth (2004) also articulates the affective dimensions of class and how they impact both current and future trajectories.

Our experiences of class are relational and are connected to our stories being grounded in our affective experiences; how we felt, and feel about them, and the significant impact this has on us. In the findings I have described some particular interactions in our group that were particularly emotive for us. The ability to be reflexive about difficult experiences and share stories allowed us to reframe some aspects that impacted the emotional aspect. Charlesworth (2000) asserts that stepping outside your original position is important in being able to reflect on early classed experiences. In this research taking a step outside our day to day lives to engage in this process provided a space to reflect. Conversations about our families were filled with emotion, some of which has changed over time, which was also described by Case (2017). The care in which difficult stories were told and heard allowed us to interrogate the complexity of us going to HE for our relationships with our families. There was some movement from anger and frustration, to understanding and acceptance. However, there were emotions connected to particular experiences, that had not changed over time. The memories about school book experiences, or being slagged about our accents or where we were from continue to evoke anger, but are now also tinged with sadness. The sadness is linked to recognising what we missed by not belonging and the role of these kinds of comments in making us feel 'other'. The experience of being in this process together, although difficult at times, provided a space to express the feelings within our stories of classed experiences which, allowed us to feel empowered by them and each other, and feeling pride rather than feeling '*humble*'. The emotional and affective aspects of our experiences are core to our stories. They are also important aspects of the autoethnographic accounts in the literature, in particular Walkerdine (2023), Case (2017) and hooks (1989) which recognises the embodied habitus which endures, through our stories and how we feel about them.

As I have discussed earlier, much of the literature on class relates to the male experience of particular kinds of work and there is limited qualitative research on the lived experience of class in Ireland. Bissett (2023) asserts that the focus on "man as an economic actor, has led to the neglect of the gendered affective relations without which life would be virtually meaningless" (p. 109). An important aspect of this research is the prioritising of care, relationship and affect as both gendered and classed in our experiences. As a group of women although we had different stories, we found significant commonality in care. This was also evident in the stories in O'Neill (1992) and Bissett (2023), where there were echoes across time and communities which centred the affective dimensions

of being a working class woman. Equality studies highlights the importance of the affective and lived experiences and the solidarity that can be found through care and relationships (Lynch et al., 2007; Crean, 2018). For me these aspects of working class women's experiences are linked to our original and enduring habitus. Recognising shared values, which supported a shared understanding and solidarity in our group, demonstrated the importance of classed and gendered experiences as crucial to our understanding of the world, including our place in it. It also highlighted a significant challenge in educational and work spaces where that sense of solidarity and care was absent, leading to a sense of isolation and unbelonging (also highlighted by Lynch *et al*., 2007). The group process allowed us to create an experience where we valued and recognised the importance of these aspects of our working classness and to challenge from this perspective, so even as a lone voice in our own workplace we had support, solidarity and care in our group to guide, motivate and energise us.

Walkerdine (2023) also discusses the "affective work of the women" and although it can sometimes be hidden "should not be underestimated" (Walkerdine, 2023, p. 484). The stories of the women in Kilmount (O'Neill, 1992) and Bridgetown (Bissett, 2023) are connected by dimensions of class which are lived in everyday moments, and how they are driven by power and policy, but also challenge this through solidarity and care, particularly for family and neighbours. Although our circumstances were different there was also an affective and care-filled dimension in our group, and a shared understanding of the values that centred this way of being, a sharing, not of material and economic resources, but of solidarity and care.

I would argue that a significant aspect of our experiences as working class women is felt and affective, based on our own and our wider family and communities experiences of class. It is part of our habitus, both classed and gendered. We experience class on a feeling level (Walkerdine, 2023). Thompson (2000) asserts that "I am sure we learnt much more about the meaning and reality of working class identity from the lives of our mothers and from the ways in which they and we negotiated our femininity"(p. 75). The historical context of working class women as carers within the family was significant in our group; even when our Ma's worked they also were the ones that took on the caring roles in our families. Grainne spoke about prioritising caring for her children over further study or career. We carry the affect of the caring, working class woman into our current

roles and recognise ourselves as different because of it, not because we are women but because we are working class women (Walkerdine, 2023). The affective nature of our classed experiences informs our desire to keep what is good about being working class related to being caring and empathetic, particularly over being competitive and care-less. It relates to the values we prioritise, which we recognised as classed, embodied and lived.

I think it is useful to differentiate the experiences we discussed in our group and those in O'Neill (1992) and Bissett (2023) as it highlights other aspects of class beyond the affective dimensions, but linked to gendered and classed experiences. There are some similarities but also marked differences in our experiences, which highlights intra-class differences (Reay, 2004).

There is overlap in how women "carry much of the burden of poverty" (O'Neill, 1992, p. 116) and assertions in the group that it is still women, and working class women in particular, that carry the burden of keeping everything together. As Katherine said "*But it's that idea of the cycle again, is that we're not just carrying the burden of women and class. We're carrying the burden of fucking society here*", which was especially heightened during Covid lockdowns. When the women in our group spoke about their children they were also carrying the majority of the responsibility in relation to care and education.

Although the economic dimensions of class are broader than gender I want to explore them here as it allows me to discuss intra class differences, which are also gendered. It is important to note that the central role of financial pressures as discussed by both O'Neill (1992) and Bissett (2023) were known to us, but only from our past experiences and not our current positions. The prominence of economic capital, or lack of, is a key aspect of class theory, classifications and discussions, but it wasn't central to our discussions. This again highlights the intra class differences which separates our group from other working class women who haven't had many of the opportunities that we have been afforded because of the accrual of cultural capital, in the form of academic qualifications. Our understanding of poverty is different from theirs, and as much as we understand and recognise the impact of poverty, especially as some of their descriptions echo our previous experiences, it does not permeate our current existence in the way that it does for the women in their research. This is something to consider in relation to current class positioning and feeling caught between worlds, which I will discuss in more detail

later in this chapter. It is also important in relation to voice and story and whose voices are heard. O'Neill (1992) asserts that "it is particularly important that people who directly experience poverty should make a contribution to this debate" (p. 117), and although the women in our group have this experience the distance from it doesn't make us the right people to articulate these experiences, and take the platform from those who know it more intimately in the current political and social climate. Again this emphasises the importance of recognising that experience is not universal and it is not possible for this research (or any other research) to make conclusive assertions based on the experiences of a small group of people. However it is possible, as I have demonstrated, to articulate how these experiences can highlight wider issues and contribute to wider debates, both on class and education.

This, again, highlights that the make-up of our group and our trajectories are not typical of working class women. The accounts of the women in both O'Neill (1992) and Bissett (2023) highlight numerous challenges, particularly with economic and cultural capital. There is some overlap in our experiences related to the cultural capital; the lack of understanding of working class lives in educational structures and with staff members; the lack of representation in both curriculum and staff, of working class lives or people; the expectations that highlighted a lack of knowledge about our lived experiences. Some of the assertions made by O'Neill (1992) resonated with our earlier experiences of school, even mentioning specifically school books and the lack of understanding of teachers. What is also interesting is that O'Neill (1992) recommends that "there needs to be training for teachers to enable them to understand working-class culture and problems experienced by families living disadvantaged lifestyles" (p. 199), while our group went much further in asserting that a significant amount of teachers should be working class, so have an embodied understanding rather than a learned one. Gemma asserted that "*we need teachers from working class backgrounds. We need, children need to hear a familiar voice*".   I would assert that this difference links to our current experience, with three members of the group working in education. We are positioned differently in the educational structures as a result. Although we may feel powerless in these positions at times, in comparison to the accounts of the women in engaging with educational structures (O'Neill, 1992) we are in a significantly more powerful position. Our qualifications gives us knowledge and cultural capital about the way the system works and the level of change needed to make a real difference for working class students. Our

experiences, however, also form the basis of the illusion that access and participation routes level the playing field and allow working class students to succeed, in the same way that middle class students do. Our education gave us knowledge and skills but the system and the barriers remain.

This also highlights the link between power and class, and how it can be impacted by finding ways into middle class spaces. Our education and success in higher education has provided knowledge and access to employment which is not accessible to the women in O'Neill or Bissett's studies, and this has afforded us some limited power, both over our own trajectories and also over how we position ourselves and see the world. I think the differences in what we want for education and educators, and how we positioned, or not, economic capital provides a clear example of the changing perceptions of the world because of our changed position in it.

Higher education, work and habitus clivé

This research adds to discussions about what is lost by working class students when they go to HE, especially with the narrative that we can no longer be working class. Binns (2019) argues that this is not the case with other specific aspects of identity, including race and gender. Walkerdine (2021) asserts that;

> Education, it seemed, gave us so much but it also took so much away, and produced a horrible sense of alienation from the environment of our growing up. Neither any longer unproblematically belonging where we came from, we also did not feel a secure sense of belonging in the new place, where thoughtless assumptions about us were often the norm and pointed questions about our origins often asked (p. 62).

The experience of going to HE has led to a feeling of being caught between worlds, that of our early experiences, family and community, and that of the middle class worlds of HE and employment.

This in-between space, habitus clivé, is not a comfortable space to be in and isn't part of discussions of social mobility, which focus on moving up and away from your class, and lacks the perspective of those who don't want to escape their class (Folkes, 2021;

Walkerdine 2021; Stone, 2020; Binns 2019; Crew, 2020; Bentley, 2020; Case, 2017; hooks, 1989). What is interesting about all of these writers is that they come from working class backgrounds, so are providing an insider perspective. They are embracing "resistance capital" (Yosso, 2005, p. 80) and challenging the narrative about how class is perceived, and in particular, measured. Many have conducted qualitative research and have placed voice and stories at the centre; presenting concepts of class from a different perspective, a working class perspective. Case (2017) describes "reclaiming working-class identity, advocating for working-class perspectives from a strengths perspective, and both naming and resisting middle-class cultural norms in academia" (p. 17). The collective voice can push back in a way that is much more difficult as an individual. Crew (2020) discusses how finding ways to resist acts of symbolic violence, particularly after finding others like them, other working class academics, had created a sense of solidarity, that was absent from the middle-class work spaces. Crew (2020) recognises difference in language, accent, hair, tattoos, sense of humour and resistance. She describes "pride in resisting the respectable (middle-class) femininity" of some of the women in her study (Crew, 2020, p. 80). There isn't an acceptance that we must change to fit in, but a questioning of how to change the systems.

Bourdieu's concept of habitus clivé is useful for thinking about how working class graduates experience middle class work places. In this research we are all working in what would typically be classified as middle class, professional jobs. Our educational credentials have provided these opportunities. Case (2017) articulates the challenge of being different in these middle class spaces: "At the same time, my working-class body and habitus betray me as an accidental insider who behaves without proper middle-class manners, attire, communication style, and competitive individualism" (Case, 2017, p. 17). In this research we discussed a clash of values between us and our middle class colleagues. We recognise a difference between the competitive and individualistic middle class way of being which is in contrast to seeing ourselves as caring and community oriented. It's not just that we *see* ourselves as different, we *are* different. Despite having the right educational credentials we still have the 'wrong' accent, live in the 'wrong' place or have the wrong way of seeing the world, in Ronnie's case "*cares too much*". Our enduring classed habitus remains.

The group had a different set and level of resources than our middle class colleagues. We didn't have 'the bank of mam and dad' to support us, particularly in HE, or parents connections to improve our social capital, and we still felt 'outside' in many cultural spheres. The difference in cultural capital, embodied habitus and in turn values was particularly important in our stories. Crew (2020) explored this idea within her research and found that there was uneven access to capitals; "after becoming academics, my respondents reported having varying degrees of economic, cultural and social capital that was not comparable to that of their more advantaged colleagues" (p. 28). So although in comparison to family and friends we may be seen as 'socially mobile', the advantaged remained higher up the mountain, and we are still experiencing symbolic violence because of our working classness- accents, vocabulary, clothes etc. Wright (2015) describes the interconnection between "individual attributes" and "material conditions" that shape class and class experiences (p. 4). Our formative experiences shape who we are and how we got here, but "the cultural trappings of a privileged class background may provide more concrete advantages" (Friedman and Laurison, 2020, p. 222) so we continue to play catch up when we are in employment.

HE provides cultural capital that has altered our trajectories, offered choice in relation to employment and changed our perspective of the world, but it does so at a cost and an entry into a space that is not easily inhabited and where we are caught between worlds. It is important to return to the broader discussions on access and participation here as they were an important part of our trajectories. The challenging experiences of HE, which I have detailed in the findings, paint a different picture than the positive, socially mobile working class student making their way through HE. Lynch and O'Riordan (1998) discuss the lack of voice given to the perspectives of students "on the social mobility process itself" (p. 450). Our experiences highlight the fact that as working class students we were 'other' and the system sought to "re-socialise" us "not only academically but also existentially and culturally" (Loxley *et al*., 2017, p. 50) in order to fit in and belong. These experiences are central to our current feeling of being caught between worlds, and our class identity. In the findings, I described 'strategies' we used to survive in HE, including being silent, finding the few others like us, challenging or assimilating. These experiences challenge the comfortable perspective of those who have an assumption that making the working class, who go to HE, more middle class, is a positive experience (Crew, 2020). It challenges the perspective that we need to change individuals and not

systems (Lynch and O'Riordan, 1998). Archer *et al*. (2002) asserts that the "individualistic focus on widening participation is inadequate" and there is a need to challenge "institutional cultures" if access is to have any meaning in tackling issues of social injustice and inequality (p. 197). Lynch and O'Riordan (1998) argue that access and participation policies "does not challenge the institutionally and structurally grounded hierarchies and inequalities that necessitate redistribution in the first place" (p. 450). Reay (2004) asserts that making the working class middle class through education does not tackle the inequalities. In our group we discussed the same system, with the same barriers and the fact that despite us having altered our trajectories the unequal system remained for working class students now. This realisation made us both angry and sad, as I have discussed in the findings chapters. This research provides an important perspective on access as it was crucial to our journeys, but also challenges the limited way that it is enacted which does not tackle wider inequality in both education and society. I will discuss the importance of class analysis in recognising and challenging these inequalities later in this chapter.

The other key aspect of the access and widening participation discussion relates to both the institution attended and the type of course that working class students undertake. Bourdieu (1985) describes prestige and reputation as forms of symbolic capital, "in which the different forms of capital are perceived and recognised as legitimate" (p. 724). Bathmaker *et al*. (2016) describe the English system and the differentiation between 'elite' or prestigious universities and other institutions. The status of the 'elite' is legitimated through the use of symbolic capital, that justifies the status ascribed, which maintains the inequalities in the education system. This discussion on access is moving from numbers going to HE, to the opportunities open to some, and closed to most. Bathmaker *et al*. (2016) describes how "the class structure of dominant and dominated is recreated and legitimated through the HE system" (p. 151) and with widening participation this happens through the presentation of the elite universities as providing better 'quality' education. The advantages of the privileged middle class can continue by maintaining a "tiered system" (p. 151).

In Ireland, statistics from the HEA (2022) demonstrate a similar stratification of middle class and working class students, described as affluent and disadvantaged. As I detailed earlier working class students are most likely to attend Technological Universities

(formally Institutes of technology) and study "child care and youth services" while affluent students are more likely to attend RCSI (Royal College of Surgeons) or Trinity college (HEA 2022). So the issue of access is moving and changing. More working class students are going to HE, but the inequality in HE is becoming more focused on the prestige of the course and institution attended, and the longer term benefits of particular trajectories.

This disparity is also mentioned in the NAP as a strategic goal; "ensuring a more diverse population across all programmes and levels of study, both undergraduate and postgraduate" (HEA, 2022, p. 23). Again, this is a recognition of the inequality not only in going to HE but in the unequal opportunities available to those who do go, linked to programme of study and institution attended. However the link between programme and place of study, and knowledge, or lack of, of the system, the 'rules of the game' and the 'constraint' of habitus means that making the right 'choice' is natural for those who have the right cultural capital and knowledge of the system (Reay, 2004). It is another barrier for working class students whose families don't possess this, as I have discussed earlier. As a practitioner this is particularly important for me, teaching in one of the institutions with the highest number of 'working class' (low SES) students, but I also teach on Care programmes, which lead to lower status and lower paid professions.

Access and participation, although they have made a difference to working class students, including most of our group, are still unable to address the inequalities of the education system, or society, as the current policies are working within an inherently classed and unequal system (Loxley *et al*. 2017). I will discuss this further in relation to the importance of class analysis in recognising and challenging inequality, both in education but also in society.

Classification and class position

I need to return to the earlier discussion on the messiness of class, and the difficulty of measuring this as different than categorising people, using specific pre-defined criteria. I have discussed the limitations of quantitative measurements of class and how they try to

contain the messiness of lived experience in a simple way, and I presented the thoughts of the group on current class position, and we acknowledged that because of our educational attainment (cultural capital) and the opportunities that provided for professional employment (economic capital) and our broader social networks (social capital) we all have different experiences than our parents, and in some cases siblings. We saw generational changes between our parents, us and our children in relation to our resources. Despite this we all identified, to varying degrees as working class. This was in part linked to how we were positioned by others, because of our accent or where we live/ are from in particular. However, we also positioned ourselves related to affect and values which we associated with being working class or our working class 'heritage' (Binns, 2019).

We recognised the importance of gaining specific cultural capital, in the form of academic qualifications, in having access to opportunities. In the past HE was only for the most privileged in society, but 'widening participation' and 'access' routes mean there are more HE students coming from working class backgrounds (Finnegan, 2017).

Our current class positioning is complex. In the literature review I discussed two different perspectives about 'working class academics' from Carole Binns (2019) and Teresa Crew (2020). They both conducted research with people working in academia from working class backgrounds. They both acknowledged that there was differences in their participants experiences, and acknowledgement of their working class experiences as children and how it impacted their sense of belonging in academia. Binns (2019) describes a "childhood habitus" which remain in the background for some while is at the centre of their identity for others. Some participants embraced being in a middle class world, while others pushed back in order to keep aspects of their working class selves. This, at times, was linked to people's ability to 'pass' as middle-class, which Crew (2020) linked to language, accent, clothing, humour, tattoos, and family.

In both their studies, as in this research, there were ongoing experiences of symbolic violence linked to being working class, or from a working class heritage, and working in a 'professional' job. They included examples of accentism , elitism and coded questions- e.g. 'where did you go to school?'. Crew (2020) recognises the importance of agency

and ownership of our identities in how we embrace, or not, our working classness as part of our identity. She says,

> This book acknowledges the complications with the term 'working class academic', but to 'remove' a preferred class identifier once someone gains professional employment diminishes their agency and obscures any difficulties they may have experienced in comparison to someone with advantaged forms of capital (Crew, 2020, p. 130).

Case (2017) describes "the widespread assumption that a doctoral degree erases the prior self, renders working-class faculty like me invisible" (p. 23), which can lead to the hidden nature of symbolic violence which denies class. She describes the importance of "(re)claiming working-class identity, recognizing strengths of working-class culture, as well as resisting oppression and rejecting respectability" (p. 25). She asserts that owning our working class status is a tangible way to help others, particularly students, to feel like they can and do belong in HE.

Bourdieu (1985) discusses the classification process as linked to the possession of symbolic capital. The power to classify is part of a "struggle over classifications" in which those with legitimated capitals are endowed with the power to classify (Bourdieu, 1985, p. 734). Crew (2020) argues that we need to name ourselves as working class, to present a view on working classness that challenges the deficit perspective, to struggle against classification that deems us as less than. Recognising and highlighting the "cultural wealth" (Yosso, 2005) that we bring as part of our working classness, including 'resisting' the dominant narratives which position us as deficient or 'other' is a way of challenging the status quo, and the idea of the uneducated working class. It also highlights other possibilities and trajectories outside those which are presented as the norm for working class students. The idea that 'you have to see it to be it' and representing possibility is important in challenging taken for granted framing of working class lives. Accepting a middle class label, is in some ways acknowledging that we are now on a level playing field with middle class colleagues, but research is demonstrating that this is not the case, we are still 'disadvantaged' despite achieving academic qualifications (Williams, 2022; Crew, 2020; Friedman and Laurison, 2020; Binns, 2019).

It is important to say that not all those from working class backgrounds see the world in this way or see themselves as WCAs. Some people have made a smoother transition to

middle-class worlds and others are trying to 'pass' in that world so are reluctant or unwilling to challenge the status quo. However, there appears to be an increasing number who are "coming out of the class closet" and owing their working-classness (Pifer, Riffe, Hartz, and Ibarra, 2022, p. 9).

Finnegan (2012) discusses how "class is made and remade" and one aspect of this is "smaller scale cultural battles over class" (p. 63) and I think the concept of the working class academic is one of these smaller battles. Crew (2020) as quoted above links this to the ability, as educated working class people, to maintain our sense of agency and identity linked to our previous and current struggles to succeed, or even just survive, in academia (or other professions). Articulating our stories, which involved climbing from the bottom of the mountain (Savage, 2015) removes the idea that it was a simple or easy journey or transition. So if class is made and remade, and we have to 'see it to be it' I would assert that it is important for there to be educated working class people in professional roles, as while those who started their journeys with the requisite cultural, social and economic capitals may find ways to understand the difference, we know it, experientially, presentationally, propositionally, and practically. We feel it in our bones.

For me reading about and hearing the experiences of other working-class academics was an important reminder of what was missing for our group, in our HE experiences. There weren't working class academics to see us and relate to our experiences of feeling other and unbelonging. Many working class academics write about their ability to see and support students from working class backgrounds and how this impacted their teaching and their roles in academia (Crew, 2020; Binns, 2019; Pifer *et al.*, 2022; Case, 2017), and as "openly working-class faculty serve as a resource to working-class students as mentors and role models that illustrate belonging for those feeling excluded" (Case, 2017, p. 29). This made me reflect on my role as a practitioner working in HE, and what my role is or could be in relation to being a 'resource'. The rise in the numbers of working class students and academics, and the resulting research on their experiences opens up a different perspective, which has the potential to change systems. This may sound naïve and idealistic but meeting some of these people and recognising the potential we have both individually, but more importantly, collectively, to challenge the status quo and turn the mirror on the current systems by highlighting different perspectives, voices, stories

and experiences; of centring working-classness within and outside HE; of gathering and supporting and empowering each other; and of enacting change.

Much of these discussions are related to working in academia, but I include them here as they are not significantly different from the discussions in our group. We recognised how we are seen as, and treated as outsiders in middle class spaces, in our jobs. In the findings, I discussed the differences between more middle-class dominated work places and more working-class spaces, and how this impacted our sense of belonging. The continuing experiences of symbolic violence mark us as different and with class not being a protected status, there is limited, if any support to challenge this classism, unless we are willing to speak up, often as a lone voice.

I want to also note that despite EDI (equality, diversity and inclusion) policies and programmes in HE there is limited reference to class. In my experience as a practitioner I often here about EDI events related to gender, race, disability and sexual orientation (which are also important) but have only on one occasion seen reference to class. As class is not a recognised category in Irish equality legislation it is also often not part of wider discussions of equality and diversity. A campaign to 'Add the 10th' names class as socioeconomic status, including clothing, accent and income as part of this in their campaign material (ATD Ireland). Class is not mentioned, again related to our difficulty with naming class in Ireland, but also potentially linked to the challenge of measuring class in a broader way. This is a bigger discussion than I can't enter into here but I mention it as it highlights both the recognition of the kinds of experiences we discussed, but also how inarticulate we are in naming and challenging inequality and class in Ireland.

The Working Class Academics and The Alliance of Working Class Academics are opening spaces for these conversations and for networking to happen in a less individualistic or transactional way. They are providing spaces built on working class ways of knowing and being, and are embodied with working class values, including care and solidarity. The importance of voice and story, and the challenges of engaging in the academic world as an outsider, are central to their purpose. They have curated care-filled spaces through conferences, writing retreats, seminars, meeting spaces, support and mentoring. There is a prioritising of the collective, which is refreshing in a sector which valorises the individualistic, self-serving academic.

For me, at times, reading the literature of other working class academics was a similar, if qualitatively different, experience to being in the group. I could see and recognise aspects of my own story and how other academics saw and experienced the world in similar ways to me. It reinforced how I experienced, or didn't, a sense of belonging in the individualistic, competitive, academic world. As a lecturer it was also important in feeling less alone and realising that there were others who had similar experiences to me who were finding ways to embrace their class identity and find others to achieve a sense of belonging. It also reminded me of the importance of really seeing the students who are like me, and recognising the barriers which they are currently trying to traverse and naming my own journey, as other academics had done. This has changed my practice, and one example of this is naming my background as working class, rather than coding this by saying where I am from, a small but significant shift in language.

Class and classification

This discussion is positioned within a wider debate about how class is classified and by whom. In earlier sections I have discussed different perspectives of class, and the role of stratification theory in how categories of class are used to differentiate between the classes. I have also argued that the classifications are made by those with power and influence, so even though they are presented as neutral, they emerged for a particular perspective, which gives status to particular jobs and educational qualifications (Tyler, 2015).

I have also argued that Bourdieu's theory of class is more complex, which is more difficult to quantify. The importance of micro aspects of class and lived experience provide a complicated picture of class and working class experiences, and adding in the everyday classed and gendered experiences of working class women adds additional complexity which is difficult to measure.

I would argue that the current ways of 'measuring' class ignore the difficulties that we encounter and our enduring habitus, which impacts the prevalence of habitus clivé for

working class students who have acquired HE qualifications. In our group we discussed our current class position and Grainne said:

> *I want the, the best things about working class plus the opportunities of being middle class, if we could melt those together in an ideal world it'd be great.*

This short quote highlights the position of not wanting to leave behind the positive aspects of being working class, particularly felt and affective aspects, but recognising the "*opportunities*" of middle classness, particularly work, financial security and confidence. Finnegan (2021) asserts that "upward movement… is not simply about occupational mobility but is related to a desire for control and autonomy in shaping one's life" (p. 240). This research found that our trajectories have provided more choice and opportunities but we still lag behind our middle class peers in terms of the possession and ease of accumulation of social and cultural capital (Crew, 2020) as well as being marked by aspects of our embodied class, particularly accent. The advantages of a privileged class background continue to provide advantages beyond HE (Friedman and Laurison, 2020).

The gendered experience of class is also useful in thinking beyond narrow classifications of class. The importance of affect and the feeling level of class is highlighted by Walkerdine (2023), who describes how she is "trying to establish the central importance of understanding the feeling and affect of class" (p. 478) and how this is felt in relationships and everyday interactions, including how the classed nature of "affective practices" and the importance of community and solidarity in the "ways of being and doing things" which "served to keep the community together" (p. 481) were important. Reay (2004; 2017) also emphasises the affective nature of class and how it is lived and experienced. She discusses the importance of relationships and our relational connection to working classness.

Skeggs (1997) was important in supporting me to both see myself in research but also her perspectives highlight the gendered experiences of class and the importance of care, which is not valued in the educational structures. The role of 'respectability' in how working class women are positioned and assessed is linked to cultural and social capitals and how having the right kinds can impact both belonging and success in educational spaces for working class women. How we are positioned in relation to our capitals and

our respectability is part of our stories and our sense of belonging in both education and work spaces in this research.

The political importance of "beginning with women's lives" (p. 206) is discussed by Bettie (2014) to make our stories and experiences more visible. She highlights how linking class with employment and particularly men's paid employment has led to women being invisible in class discussions This again emphasised the importance of our stories and of working class women's stories in thinking about class and how it is lived in everyday experiences, which is crucial to this research.

Perspectives from Irish equality studies have also provided an Irish context within this discussion. They highlight the importance of including the embodied and affective dimensions of class which are grounded in equality studies. O'Neill and Bissett highlight the importance of lived experiences in recognising and challenging inequality within the systems and the power, or lack of power, inherent in them. The importance of voice and story, of lived experience, of qualitative and insider research, of critiquing inequality, along with the prioritising of care and solidarity are core contributions to this research and highlight the role of equality studies and feminism in my journey to understand both my own experiences, those of our group and how Irish society views working class women (O'Neill, 1992; Lynch et al., 2007; Bissett, 2023).

Including gendered perspectives and experiences can also help us to think about class more broadly than narrow classifications. As I have discussed, the lived embodied experience of class is missing from quantitative measures of class, which were historically based on men's occupation, ignoring the classed experiences of women. As I have discussed the work of O'Neill, Skeggs, Reay, Walkerdine and Bettie, in particular, have highlighted the gendered nature of class discussions and the importance of including these aspects to provide a fuller perspective which includes women.

In an earlier section, I have highlighted the importance of affect in women's classed experiences and I believe this is also useful in how we think about and theorise class in a broader way. Including women's experiences, and moving beyond neat categories related to one particular dimension (usually employment) provides a wider and fuller frame for exploring class as lived, messy and embodied, within a historical and sociological context

(Walkerdine, 2023). In my view this can change how we frame other discussions, including how we categorise those who are working class but have 'succeeded' in middle class spaces, like the women in our group who have gone through HE and are working in professional jobs.

An additional argument against narrow classifications is how they are related to power and status (Tyler, 2015). I have discussed how classifications which 'other' or stigmatise groups only serve the interests of the classifiers. They assert their position as 'above' and reap the rewards that are linked to this. The stigma attached to being labelled working class can lead to it being rejected, which can impact the possibility of collective understanding of class (Tyler, 2015). Understanding class can support us to see the power at play in maintaining inequality, and assessing the 'misrecognition' of power in these classifications.

Classifications are also impacted by who produces the knowledge and what kinds of knowledge are assigned value. The prioritising of academic knowledge over practical is ingrained in the educational structures, which serve to ensure social reproduction for the middle class. The need to challenge the acceptance of taken for granted positions, and particular perspectives and kinds of knowledge, in relation to class, highlights the importance of class analysis.

In our group class was defined both relationally and oppositionally. The connection to our working classness was part of our habitus and early relationships, but it endured in how we positioned ourselves outside middle classness, despite being highly educated and working in that world. This was regularly related to the lack of care in those spaces, and we recognised care as at the heart of our working class values and ways of being, the affective aspects of our class positions. The inequalities of working class students journeys form part of our identities, because despite current positioning, ticking some middle class boxes, we have the knowledge and experience of the additional hurdles, the ability to see into both working class and middle class worlds in a way that is linked to our stories, and is embodied. We bear the scars of our working classness and although they may not be visible to the outside world, because of our education and our jobs, like all scars they are reminders of our journeys and they are part of who we are. They can tingle unexpectedly and remind us of not just our past but our current positioning as not

fully belonging in either world. We have been changed by going to HE, and see the world in a different way, but we also still hold many of the same values and prioritise care and relationship over self and individualism. We still see, and experience, inequality and recognise that the system needs to change, despite that fact that we succeeded (see also Reay, 1997). In our group there was an affective belonging to working classness, based on our shared values, and our positioning of care and empathy in priority positions (Walkerdine, 2023). It also related to still feeling on the outside, particularly in work, where middle class values and ways of being were the norm and we were perceived as different and even difficult in these spaces. Simple classifications cannot capture the felt and affective nature of class and classed experiences.

It is important to explore classification in the Irish context and linked to the discussions which have a particular focus on the Irish experience. Most of the literature on class in Ireland, particularly in relation to education is quantitative and uses a stratification perspective (Finnegan, 2017). The ethnographic work of both O'Neill (1992) and Bissett (2023) and the work of Silverman (1992), Lynch and O'Riordan (1998), Crean (2018), Finnegan (2012, 2017) and Pierse (2011) help to contextualise and deepen the particular experience of class in Ireland. Their research highlights experiences of class which are often missing from discussions of inequality and demonstrate many challenges and barriers for the Irish working class. The descriptions in O'Neill (1992) and Bissett (2023) are crucial in exposing the challenges in the everyday lives of the residents of two working class communities, particularly the women's experiences.

This research highlights the importance of having a language to name class, which is necessary to understand and challenge the inequalities inherent in our classed systems. In the group we discussed the culture shock of realising you are viewed as 'other' or 'deficient' in HE. The lack of discussion of class in Ireland left us inarticulate to discuss our experiences, or even to understand them. Added to this the deficit perspective of working classness means that many working class students find ways to assimilate so as to fit in. Finding ways to avoid being labelled can lead to "socially constructed silence" (Welton, 1995, p. 153 as cited in Fleming *et al*., 2017, p. 41) which reinforces the lack of discussion of class. In our group we could recognise classed experiences in HE (and earlier school experiences), but were only able to clearly articulate and understand them later, with some realisations happening in this group process. The opportunity to discuss

class and classed experiences was also a motivating factor for all the women in the group. Class matters and being able to discuss it is crucial in being able to understand it and its impact. The enduring nature of class structures and inequality in Ireland is evident in the statistics which highlight who goes to HE and what they study (HEA, 2022). Later in this chapter I will discuss the role of access in this and why class analysis needs to part of this discussion.

O'Neill (1992) and Bissett (2023) provide rich accounts of two working class communities and the everyday struggles, which were distinct and different from the struggles in our group. They highlight the enduring nature of class and class relations. Despite being thirty years apart, there are recurring experiences and feelings. The experiences in our group highlights how HE can alter trajectories. The variation in experiences between their participants and this research highlights the intra class differences, between those who have gone to HE and those who have not. Despite overlapping affective class identity, our trajectories and current experiences are different. This highlights the complex nature of class identity when it includes lived experiences and acknowledges the enduring disposition of habitus, which is not captured by narrow classifications of class.

Bourdieu's way of theorising class as social, cultural, economic and political is useful in helping us to recognise that our habitus, our early experiences and socialisation sustain and our classed positions are within a social structure which endures, and replicates. The complexity of class identity is evident in the intra class differences in experiences and capitals, despite similarities in the affective experience of class (O'Neill, 1992; Finnegan, 2012; Bissett, 2023). The everyday experiences and stories highlight the stark inequalities in the systems and our trajectories. As I have discussed, the fact that all the women in our group have the specific privilege of higher education qualifications has opened doors that are closed to other women who have similar backgrounds to us.

Friedman and Laurison (2020) argue that "a person's class destination is never fully captured by large, aggregate occupational classes"(p. 222). Categorisation, which uses a snapshot of quantifiable metrics can miss the impact and influence of lived classed experiences. In the group we spoke about the importance of our formative, affective, classed experiences, and the impact they have on who we are now, how we practice in

our current roles and we also discussed the importance of raising our voices both to challenge the barriers we see and to show that when opportunities, which are dominated by the middle classes, are 'offered' to us, there is possibility to succeed, but we need to traverse more challenging terrain to get there. As I have already discussed we also need to make decisions about what we are willing to give up to do this, and can feel stuck between worlds.

Thinking about, and trying to argue about, current class labels and positioning is important as it is part of wider discussions on inequality, particularly classed inequalities. It is evident from this research that going to HE has provided some insulation from particular aspects of classed inequalities, particularly in relation to economic capital. Tyler (2015) asserts that

> The most effective forms of class analysis are concerned not with undertaking classification per se, but rather with exposing and critiquing the consequences of classificatory systems and the forms of value, judgements and norms they establish in human societies (p. 507).

This is a discussion that is changing, particularly with more auto-ethnographic and biographical research by working class students and academics, which is providing a different perspective. As more people like us go to HE and become the researchers, because working class experiences and perspectives are different, the questions and methods of research can change and voices like ours will be part of these discussions, with inequality and social justice at the centre. The positioning of research and researchers can challenge the 'neutral' or 'objective' framing and diversify, not just the stories and voices that are presented but what stories are told and by whom. As I have already discussed, knowledge production is impacted by who holds the power to decide what is valuable, and who is producing, or gatekeeping the knowledge. I have engaged in this research as an insider and my own positioning has, in my view, enhanced and deepened this research. This is particularly true in relation to the 'how' of this research and the group that came together and built community in the process.

I want to acknowledge, that for me there is also a sense that regardless of how I position myself I will be positioned by others based on their own perspectives. As I have already discussed I see class as relational, embodied and lived. These are difficult concepts to

measure, and categorise, but they can be researched, analysed and discussed publicly. Currently, I see myself as driven by working class values and ways of knowing, and by my own sense of social justice and experiences of inequality, based on my class. I am trying to embrace the benefits of the 'third space' which gives me insight into both worlds.

This is important for me as an educator and a researcher. My knowledge and experience of inequality is key to my professional identity. My experience of being categorised and positioned as 'other' within the education system gives me an insight that informs my engagement with students in particular, but also with colleagues. It isn't easy to inhabit this space and the challenges, particularly structural ones, can be tiring and demotivating. This research process has taught me that reciprocal research is possible and that solidarity and connection with others is not only useful but necessary to be able to continue to both recognise and challenge inequality. The process of being with this group of women reminded me of the power we have together and how being in a space with others who recognise your values and beliefs, in our case linked to our class, is empowering and energising. In the solitary process of writing a thesis this became even more evident to me. It helped me to recognise that a sense of belonging is a form of support that is truly important in both asserting agency and in standing up for what you believe. I, as an educator, "refuse to accept a preordained future" (Bissett, 2023, p. 113) both for myself and for the students I teach.

The importance of class analysis

Education has been crucial to the opportunities available to both me and the women in our group. However, it has not changed any structures or the inequality which is at the heart of our experiences. Thompson (2000) argues, and I would agree, that "in order to change the circumstances of entire groups and communities of poor people, a different quality of commitment is required, including the commitment to a bigger redistribution of economic and other resources" (p. 181). Using the language of class, and inequality, is necessary in order to include the role of economic, cultural and social capital and how aspects of class privileges are hidden. It also moves the focus from individual deficit to "the very real constraints of structure" (Thompson, 2000, p. 181). I would also argue that

among the 'other resources' is the need to change the educational structures which favour the middle class, including the curriculum and educators at every level from early childhood education to HE.

Education is presented as a way to move class, to become socially mobile and to become middle class and 'respectable'. However, as I have discussed, this is not wanted by many working class students, and is not a simple or easy process, which can lead to a feeling of not belonging in either working class or middle class worlds. Additionally, Thompson (2000) argues that "widening educational participation does not solve class oppression. Individual solutions do not solve the problems of class relations in capitalism" (p. 55). This is a key aspect of my choice in using class analysis in this thesis. Exploring class involves examining the structures and everyday experiences and how they interact, which provides a frame to think about the power structures and how they affect both groups and individuals. It provides a way to challenge the narratives that stigmatise the working class, and the 'underclass', and the impact of the powerful systems and structures on this. Recognising the importance of lived experience in theorising class highlights how "experience and struggle in everyday life can only be legitimised when accorded the status of theory, and only then, in the context of rational and sustained debate" (Thompson, 2000, p. 94). The positioning and perspective of theorists influences how they see and theorise the world, emphasising the importance of diverse perspectives to contribute their expertise to these debates.

Discussions of access are also part of this conversation as they are presented as a way to allow students into HE who would not have the opportunity without these routes. It is framed as a way to be socially mobile, to move class. On one hand this is a recognition of the inequality in the system, but it also provides a frame for HE to be seen as meritocratic and accessible, with these additional supports (Loxley *et al*., 2017). It can contribute to the opacity of the system and the advantages it bestows on some groups. As I have discussed in earlier chapters, access in Ireland is enacted in a way that continues to position working class students in a deficit position. Access happens within an unequal system but doesn't make any attempts to challenge the barriers and inequalities. It is a way to maintain the status quo while also ensuring there is an educated workforce to meet the needs of the economy (Loxley *et al*., 2017). There are supports to access HE, so if you don't make use of them the problem is with you and not the education system which continues to replicate social inequalities. Finnegan (2017) asserts that "the major

obstacles remain the same as they were before access policies were mainstreamed-finance, institutional practices and cultural barriers" (p. 156). The culture within educational institutions remains middle class and as such is a significant barrier for working class students. Our stories, which I have discussed in the findings, emphasise the challenge of everyday experiences and lack of belonging in HE. The disconnect between our cultural capital and habitus, and that of HE, positions us as 'other' and is an additional barrier for us.

Access was important for our group, and for many other working class students who are able to use it to access HE. I am not arguing against access policies and programmes. I am however, asserting that the current format, which is focused on individualistic and deficit perspectives of working class students, and which fails to address inequality within systems or wider society, is a tool of social reproduction, and allows for the narrative that if you work hard enough you can succeed within the current system (Loxley, *et al*., 2017). Setting and missing targets, as has happened with each National Access Plan, highlights the limited reach of such policies. The 'constraint' of working class habitus is also evident in the unequal access to programmes and institutions that have higher status, as set out previously.

Class analysis frames power and positioning, recognising how inequality becomes ingrained in the systems. I have highlighted classed inequalities, particularly in the education system, which is significant in determining future opportunities. Education continues to be a site of class reproduction, with unequal structures, unequal access to capitals and providing benefit for those who have the privilege of the right kinds of capitals and knowledge (Reay *et al*., 2005; Finnegan, 2012). Class analysis allows for the recognising, naming and critiquing of power. Archer (2003) asserts that using class allows us to use both lived experience and "patterns of inequality" to explore class in both a personal and a political way (p. 12). It provides a framework to include the individual story but to do so within the unequal structures of our society, and educational system.

It is also possible to recognise shifts and changes in how class is understood and lived across time and space, which is particularly important in terms of those who move outside that which is expected of them (e.g. going to higher education as a working class woman). Using class to underpin our experiences of higher education is political, and using class

analysis not only allows for this, it provides a framework to move from the individual "towards a commitment to political engagement" (Mahony and Zmroczek, 1999, p. 4). Tyler (2015) asserts that "the problem that class describes is inequality" (p. 496) and that class is a site of struggle which recognises and challenges the inequalities. Ignoring class or trying to individualise the difficulties and inequalities in our society only serves those who benefit from the current systems. Class also highlights the importance of misrecognition and stigmatisation of some groups in attempts to dismantle collective and community oriented ways of being in, seeing and challenging the world (Thompson, 2000). Using class highlighted the inequalities in our journeys, the limiting of our choices and the fact that we were, and still are, 'other' in higher education spaces.

Yosso's (2005) cultural wealth perspective also provides a framework to recognise and value the positive aspects of working classness and how we can use our different kinds of knowledges and experiences to challenge the deficit perspectives of class, which are linked to how power is enacted. It is a way to reject particular perspectives and reframe them from our own positions, recognising our strengths and who we are in a positive and affirming way. This also allows us to engage our 'resistance capital' in order to highlight unequal systems and how we are positioned within them. In this research it also supported me to place value on our experiences and stories as valuable knowledge.

I think it is useful to return to Bourdieu at this point as his theory has helped to explain our experiences of class in a way that recognises the complexity and richness of lived experiences. The concept of misrecognition is really important, not just for explaining our journeys but also how we were met by others. The belief of the middle class about the role of merit in systems in which they excel, highlights that misrecognition is not just something we experienced, but there is an unequal effect as some benefit while others do not (Friedman and Laurison, 2020). Working class students enter social spaces, and fields, where we are 'other' and encounter people who didn't understand our current or early experiences, leaving us open to and subjected to symbolic violence, which further alienated us from spaces where we were struggling to belong. This lack of belonging, linked to embodied habitus and affective dimensions of class begins in early educational experiences and continues beyond HE into work spaces, which are also dominated by middle classness. As I have already discussed, our cultural, social and to some extent

economic capitals continue to lag behind those who started with more resources, both visible and hidden.

This research also highlighted intra class differences, as we are different from other working class women, and have access to different opportunities. Although we have some experiences in common, and share an affective experience of class and being classed, this has changed over time after going to HE. We have different amounts of capitals, as I have already discussed. The lived experience of class is complex and this knowledge highlights the importance of looking at class in a broader way than categories which focus on narrow, measurable metrics but miss the qualitative and lived experience of class. 'Not everything that can be counted counts, and not everything that counts can be counted'. The importance of seeing beyond the simple explanations involves not just seeing the bigger picture but how power and structures open or limit opportunities and trajectories within it.

Conclusion

In this chapter I have discussed the key themes from this research. I have discussed the importance of voice and story and in ensuring seldom heard voices are included in both research and policy development. The production of knowledge is related to the positioning of the knowledge producers. I have argued for a broader perspective of what class means and have articulated the importance of the class theory of Bourdieu, supported by Bourdieusian feminist scholars and Irish equality studies in exploring not just the structures but the everyday experiences of class which impact our position and our positioning in society. The effect of enduring habitus and affective experiences of class are also important in highlighting the long term impact on class positioning. I have discussed the use of education by those with power and status to maintain the status quo and social reproduction. The importance of access is discussed in the context of this unchanging system.

The importance of class analysis as a way to recognise and challenge inequality was also discussed. The rich, complex experiences of class are at the centre of this research and

they highlight the challenge of being positioned as deficient or less than, but also the power and importance of solidarity and a collective experience to both recognise this positioning but also in challenging the power structures which are used to categorise. I have argued that class analysis is necessary in Ireland to move from an opaque system to one where all forms of capital which bestow privilege and maintain inequality are recognised as such.

In the final chapter I will discuss the significance and contribution of this research as well as making recommendations, both for further research as well as related to class and education in Ireland.

Chapter 9 Conclusions and Recommendations

Introduction

In this chapter I will discuss the originality and contribution of this research. I will make some recommendations for further research. I will also discuss recommendations from this research related to the importance of naming and discussing class, class and education in Ireland and recognising and valuing working class knowledges.

Originality and Contribution

In this section I will discuss the originality and contribution of this research. I will discuss my contribution to theoretical discussions of class in Ireland from a Bourdieusian perspective. The importance of this research in the broader body of Irish education research, particularly qualitative, is also significant. The use of qualitative and in particular participatory methods will be highlighted both in terms of originality and contribution. I will also link this to wider discussions on knowledge production. I will conclude this section by discussing the significance of key findings.

In this thesis I have used the concepts of Pierre Bourdieu and applied them to discussions of class and education in Ireland. Much of the scholarship which utilises Bourdieu comes from outside Ireland, particularly the UK, so this research contributes to discussions of class from a Bourdieusian perspective, within an Irish context. I have used his concepts to critique the power structures in the Irish education system which allow academic qualifications to be gained and used to ensure social reproduction of the classes. I have applied the concepts of misrecognition, related to the lack of acknowledgement of the 'fit' between middle class capitals and the education system. Bourdieu's concepts are important as they emphasise the importance of recognising class as broader than employment and qualifications, and includes everyday lived experiences linked to habitus, habitus clivé and misrecognition. This thesis contributes to wider discussions of class in Ireland from a Bourdieusian perspective.

I believe that this research is important and meaningful because it contributes to a small body of qualitative work on the everyday experiences of working class students and higher education in Ireland. It explores the understanding and experience of class in

Ireland. This topic is under researched from a lived experience perspective. The originality of this research is in both the topic and the methods, including the fact that it is insider research. It is also meaningful in that three of the group are working in the Irish education system, so have expertise from this perspective too. I have discussed the changing conversations about class which are being driven by 'insiders' presenting different perspectives which provides alternative ways to think about class and classed experiences. This research adds to the wider discussion about class and education in Ireland, and does so in a way that centres underrepresented voices and experiences.

This research, as I have already discussed, sits firmly in a collaborative, participatory and qualitative field. The importance of this research is not just present in this thesis, but in the ripples which have gone out into the world because of our engagement in this process (Bray *et al*., 2000). I believe that using participatory methods adds additional value to this research as it moves it beyond the academy, into the lives of the women in our group, and I include myself in that. This research is now part of each of our stories and we have each taken something from it into our lives, both professional and personal. I think these ripples are significant in that whatever happens to this thesis, the research itself is alive in us and in how we bring it out into the real world.

Knowledge production can be limited in that it is linked to academic knowledge and knowledge outside this world, or which prioritises other ways of knowing is often overlooked or not recognised (Bissett, 2023; Heron, 1996; Lynch and O'Neill, 1994). There are different ways of knowing and by expanding how we see and recognise the world around us we are opening up possibilities to know and understand the world in a broader, more nuanced and potentially messy way. This also opens up the opportunity to recognise expertise as wider than academic qualification or specific kinds of research. It offers the possibility to democratise knowledge, to hear seldom heard voices and to ensure those voices aren't lost in the process of converting their knowledge into the academic, dominant and specific way of knowing the world (Lynch and O'Neill, 1994). Inequality and absence of particular voices in research, including the mediation by outsider researchers, can impact its influence on concepts of social justice. In order to understand the world we need multiple stories, perspectives and processes, as well as recognising different kinds of expertise. This is the only way to really see how the world is, not just from our own, privileged, or not, positions.

This research contributes to current discourse related to knowledge and co-production of knowledge, particularly form a socially situated positioning. It challenges the idea of the knowledgeable researcher and participant by using a participatory and democratic research process in which all members are recognised as experts.

This research confirms that there is limited popular discourse on class in Ireland, which means we do not have a language to articulate our experiences. It is also difficult to recognise our position in society when we don't talk about power and inequality as part of a classed system. The individualising of social problems, and presenting them as personal deficit rather that structural barriers is also difficult to articulate without the language of class (Bissett, 2023; Finnegan, 2012). This research adds to the small body of research, focused on lived experience, which highlights this lack of discussion of class in Ireland, and more particularly from an insider perspective.

Our society and education system are not meritocratic or equal (Finnegan, 2012, 2017; Lynch and O'Riordan, 1998). There is a lack of understanding of the barriers and experiences of working class students at all levels of education and until there is a willingness to create ways for our voices and stories to, not just be told, but *heard* that gap in knowledge will remain. Our experiences of belonging, (or lack of), symbolic violence and habitus clivé can be difficult to hear, but they form part of the current system and the positioning of working class students within it. I have argued that the system needs to change, to recognise and respect the culture and values of the wider population and not be limited by a narrow, middle class, way of experiencing the world. I would also argue that it is important to have research that comes from our perspectives and presents our stories from a socially situated position.

Our experiences point to the prominence of middle classness in higher education in Ireland. As I have discussed for some "*It was as natural as going from junior infants, to senior infants*" (Grainne) while for us there was a feeling of being 'other' and not seeing others like us. The lack of belonging in HE for working class students is a barrier which is rarely discussed and this research demonstrates its importance in our trajectories and experiences. This research therefore contributes to current discussions on class and education in Ireland, including access and participation in Irish HE.

The exploration of class, from a gendered perspective is also important as it demonstrates the differences in our experiences, from both a classed and gendered perspective. The experiences of working class women differ from both middle class women and from working class men. However including our experiences in exploring class is important in highlighting the lived experiences of class, which are immersed in affective and relational experiences.

This research is grounded in a careful exploration of everyday experiences. The positioning of our stories within research is based in ways of knowing which values lived experience as real and meaningful knowledge (Oakley, 1981). The enduring nature of our habitus (Bourdieu, 1984), combined with the affective dimensions of class, including how aspects of this are passed between generations (Walkerdine, 2023), are important in current discourse related to the importance, or absence of class in discussions about inequality. In this research I have highlighted the importance of drawing from equality studies to enhance our understanding of class, and how gender and gendered experiences can complement this discussion.

A key contribution of this research is the centring of voice and story and of placing value and 'worth' on our stories as knowledge (Couldry, 2010). Our experiences and our collective reflections on them provide a socially situated perspective on class and education in Ireland which is often omitted or mediated in the academic sphere. This research has highlighted the significant knowledge which we co-constructed, beginning with our stories, which critiques taken for granted perspectives about class and education in Ireland. The value which we placed on our stories and the knowledge we co-created is significant for both wider discourse on this topic but also for our own sense of empowerment, which we carry into the world.

Areas for further research

The process of engaging in this research has been both challenging and enriching in equal measure. It has opened up ways of thinking about knowledge and research that will contribute to any further research I engage in. The importance of exploring class and

classed experiences has been highlighted in this thesis, and particularly in an Irish context, so there are many areas that I could recommend. However, I want to focus on the importance of co-constructing useful knowledge and the importance of working class voices and stories. Using a research process that is reciprocal and meaningful for those who engage in the research is also important. It is with this in mind that I have two suggestions of areas for further research:

The everyday experience of class and higher education is under researched in an Irish context and I would recommend further collaborative research, or participatory action research(PAR) with working class students/ past students to contribute further to this body of knowledge. I am particularly interested in exploring the perspectives of students in DEIS schools, and their perspectives on the trajectories and opportunities within education as they see it. One reason for considering PAR is that it builds in an action, which creates ripples that move beyond the research. The importance of knowledge moving beyond the academic world is crucial to any future change and the political intent of PAR fits closely to this aim.

I would also recommend a similar research project to this one but from the perspective of working class men. This would provide further knowledge which is also necessary for gaining a fuller picture of how the education system works, or not, for them. It would also provide a way to compare the experiences of working class men and women. I am particularly interested in exploring the embodied and affective dimensions of classed experiences from both perspectives.

Recommendations

These recommendations are related to three specific areas; Class in Ireland; Irish education and class; and Class and academic knowledge. These areas are interrelated and overlap.

We need to name class in Ireland

In relation to class in Ireland, this research has highlighted the lack of discussion of class in Ireland, which leads to us not having the language to name, understand or challenge our experiences. This can lead to the individualising of social problems. In order to change this those of us with a voice need to use it to speak about class, inequality and how the systems work to maintain social reproduction. We need to find opportunities to name and discuss class in Irish society.

In this research I have centred our stories and our voices. I have highlighted the importance of coming together and how we built solidarity and understanding together, which gave us knowledge and energy to challenge inequality outside our group. It was through this collective experience, where we sought and found language, knowledge and understanding of our positioning and our perspectives, that we could articulate the importance and value of our expertise. We need to find ways to build solidarity, in this research it was through telling and listening to stories, through empathy and through committing to working together to co-create knowledge.

The research process also highlighted for us the importance of naming class, naming our classed experiences and supporting, or challenging, others to recognise both the disadvantages and challenges we encountered but also the strengths we bring- our 'cultural wealth' including "aspirational capital", "resistance capital" "navigational capital" and "familial capital" (Yosso, 2005, p. 78-79). Inhabiting the 'third space', being caught between worlds, gives us understanding of the world in a way that is different to those who have only experienced one class (Ingram and Abrahams, 2016). We have experience of both working class and middle class worlds which gives us insight not available to others. This experience provides us with an opportunity to recognise classed inequality which we can then challenge, but in order to do this we need the language of class.

In this thesis I have argued for a perspective of class which is nuanced and complex. I have discussed the importance of lived experiences of class and of enduring habitus, of belonging and unbelonging and of misrecognition and symbolic violence. In order for us

to find a language to discuss class in Ireland we need to move away from narrow quantifiable classifications which are easy to measure, but lack the nuance of life experiences. The affective dimensions of class and the stories behind the numbers provide a much wider frame to theorise class in Ireland and to recognise the inequality inherent in our society and systems. We need to think about, write about and discuss class from our perspectives. This research is a significant part of my own journey to understand the importance of class and how it has impacted my trajectory and my past and current positioning in the social structures. It has allowed me to recognise the importance of having the language to challenge and it has given me energy to support others to find the language and understanding to articulate their experiences.

I believe it is important to recommend insider research which can centre working class stories, without being mediated by those with different perspectives. I recommend networks and spaces where we can discuss class, gain the language to recognise and articulate our experiences and create a sense of solidarity, which was core to the success of our research group. I would assert that it is important to continue to name ourselves as working class (or from a working class background), while acknowledging the privileges we have gained from academic qualifications, to ensure others can see different opportunities for women like us.

We need to challenge the lack of working classness in the Irish education system

I have a number of recommendations in relation to education and class in Ireland. A key finding of this research is that we did not encounter teachers like us, working class teachers who understood and valued our knowledges and ways of being in and seeing the world. This meant that many educational experiences were challenging, as we were viewed as deficient. We need to name the inequality in the system and challenge notions of meritocracy. I recommend that we increase significantly the number of working class teachers and educators at all levels of the education system. However, as we discussed it is extremely challenging being the only working class teacher so there needs to be multiple teachers in each school, and networks for working class teachers (and other

professions) to find the solidarity we created in our group, in order to build their reserves to challenge the inequality within their everyday work.

Related to this we need programmes that support working class students to enter teaching. The Turn to Teaching programme in Maynooth University is an example that could be replicated in all teaching programmes and all HE institutions.

A further recommendation is that our school systems, including curricula, are examined and changed to ensure there is an equal representation of working class lives, everyday experiences and culture. This should include recognising different kinds of knowledge and different ways of knowing. This needs to be led by those who understand the challenge of going through the education system as 'other', working class voices at the centre of these discussions and decision making process. Related to this all EDI programmes should give an equal weighting to class as the other areas which they focus on, and be led by those with lived experience.

It is important to acknowledge the inclusive nature of the national access plan (NAP), however it is also important to note that targets are set and missed and the voices of those who do not benefit from the current systems are not heard to inform future plans. There needs to be qualitative participatory research and processes built into any such plans to ensure the voices, stories and experiences of working class students are included, both those who go through HE but also those who do not. There also needs to be ways to listen to, use and enact the contributions of these experts. I would advocate for insider researchers to conduct such research, to avoid experts who claim to know you and your story better than you know it yourself (Lynch and O'Neill, 1994).

Adult and further education, as well as access programmes were important in this research for our journeys to HE. They provide 'bridging capital' between our habitus and cultural capital, and that which is valued in the education system. There is a struggle in this sector over the purpose of education, and the move towards 'job activation' over democratic principles is concerning. The importance of the democratic purpose of education in this sector and the important work in bridging the gap in capitals needs to be maintained and not lost in this struggle. Our small group has been able to contribute meaningfully to our society because of what we bring, but also because we were able to find ways to engage in HE, by using adult and further education as a bridge, a stepping stone.

We need to value working class voice and story as knowledge

In relation to class and academic knowledge it is important to note the small amount of qualitative research on class and education in Ireland that recognises, and values, voice and story as central to knowledge creation. I would assert that we need to continue to name our working classness, whether we see it as heritage or part of our current positioning (Binns, 2019; Crew, 2020). There is a rise in those of us who are naming ourselves as working class academics, or working class professionals in other sectors, and including our own and others stories to highlight and challenge the unequal systems is important for a number of reasons.

Firstly, we are visible to current and future working class students, demonstrating possibility about their own trajectories. In earlier parts of this thesis I discussed the importance of cultural capital in seeing possibility, in terms of education and future careers. Reay (1997) describe the possibility of transformation or the impact of 'constraint'. In order for those coming after us to not be constrained in the same way we were, we need to be visible, to present options and potential trajectories, and demonstrate that they are achievable.

Secondly, we can highlight and prioritise the voices and stories of others like us and in doing so also highlight the 'cultural wealth' which we bring to the academy and the world. Our perspectives provide an alternative to the taken for granted (middle class) ways of thinking about the world, including the deficit perspective of the working class. We can challenge the barriers inherent in current systems. There are positives in our working class experiences, alongside the challenges in the systems, which we also need to emphasise.

Thirdly, by naming ourselves as working class academics/ professionals we can find others like us. The process of this research highlights, for me, the importance in creating a network, or networks of working class academics, or wider working class networks to articulate our experiences and through solidarity use our knowledge and positions to challenge, to enact 'resistance capital'. In order for this to happen we need to name ourselves as working class, or having 'working class heritage'.

All of these recommendations are influenced by the first one- we need the language of class to recognise and understand our positioning, in order to understand ourselves and also to challenge the inequality of a classed system. This again highlights the importance of class analysis of Irish society, including by the working class.

Final reflection

The process of this research has been important both professionally and personally. I have learned so much about theory and how it can support me to understand the world around me, and my classed experiences in it. However I have also learned that we have knowledge and expertise that is within us, in our stories and this knowledge has value. I have learned that challenging taken for granted perspectives is *exhausting* but is also freeing, and how finding solidarity with others who understand is key to being able to keep going. Without the group, and the meaning I found with the other women, this would be a different thesis. The process facilitated me to engage at a level which deepened my understanding of not just the topic but of myself.

I want to end this thesis by thinking about my own professional identity as a practitioner-an educator, and a researcher. This research process was significantly influenced by my identity as a practitioner in social care and early education. Working with groups, in an emergent and group led way was a significant aspect of my earlier practice. This allows for a more democratic and reflexive space, which means the group can evolve. I needed to find a way to inhabit the role of researcher while also holding those aspects of my previous roles that I placed significant value on. The process of doing this research has reminded me of the importance of this way of working and has motivated me to find ways to bring it into my classes, to really listen and value the knowledge inherent in each student. The importance of reflection and really deepening my engagement with reflexive practice has been significant and crucial, and now informs my practice in a more substantial way. The process has also opened up possibilities which I couldn't have imagined, particularly in recognising myself as a researcher, in embracing that aspect of my role, and of truly owning the title.

The deepening of knowledge and awareness of class and classed experiences has been significant for me. Interrogating my experiences in a group with other women was profound and because of the strength of the group process I was able to be authentic. Reflecting on this and in particular on where I do and don't belong was challenging. However it affirmed my commitment to having open, inclusive practices in my teaching, and my engagement with students, and was a prompt to me when I needed one.

My engagement in and commitment to researching in a participatory and collaborative way has provided me with knowledge and skills as a researcher. As I have discussed, I wanted to undertake research that was reciprocal and this process has been instrumental in helping me to form an identity as a researcher, with something important to say. It has also been crucial in finding a way into theory and to finding complex theory which can support me to articulate classed experiences of HE. Working in a system where teaching workloads make engaging in research arduous, particularly if you don't know the 'rules of the game', but finding meaning in this research process, and moving beyond the structures to find support in this process has changed not just my skills but my perspective. The value I place on my own knowledge and experience has changed and the skills which were at the core of my previous work are important and useful for research, particularly 'with' others.

I have always been driven by a strong sense of social justice, which comes from my family, my knowledge and experiences of inequality and makes me sensitive to injustice. Through this process I have a stronger understanding of the importance of my habitus and my early experiences on this. It has highlighted for me the enduring nature of habitus, and the long term influence on life. HE opened doors but my habitus pointed me in particular directions. My core values remain connected to my younger classed self. This informs the kind of lecturer I strive to be, and my positioning within systems. It has highlighted the importance of belonging for me.

My day to day work is impacted as I continually think about the experiences we discussed in the group, particularly unbelonging, and what I can do to challenge, or change that. I often feel unheard in the wider education structures so, for now, I am focused on what I can do in my classes and interactions with students, particularly underrepresented and working class students. Connecting back to my own experiences, listening to the stories

in our group and researching this topic has heightened my awareness of the significant impact of habitus and field in belonging. As a new semester has started I am trying to include small but practical practices, which I hope will make my classes feel like somewhere to belong.

My experiences of being a student are varied as I went to college at eighteen, and later returned to do a Masters part-time, completed a full time HDip before starting on this doctoral programme a few years later. I have had different struggles with being a student, including lack of belonging, especially in my earlier experiences. Finding a sense of belonging, particularly in this doctoral programme has been an essential part of my learning journey. It has also impacted my identity as an educator, and the research process and the doctoral programme have solidified the importance of belonging and of wanting that for the students I work with.

The importance of recognising the knowledge in our own and each other's stories has been a powerful learning experience for me in this process. Reflecting on this has reminded me of the importance of creating space to support students to find and value the knowledge in their experience, and to use it. I am also aware that I am working within a system that can have a limited view on expertise, and what constitutes knowledge. I need to continue to reflect on how to do this without creating additional challenges for the students in the wider structures.

The process of this research has given me hope about how powerful our stories are and how eloquently we can tell them, including the macro and political influences and barriers that form part of our journeys. This research is a small attempt to share our stories, with a hope that others will hear them, particularly those who will understand our experiences as they resonate with their own and collectively we can recognise the power and influence of our stories to enact change, and ultimately to remove the barriers and work towards a more equitable educational system. For me it has reminded me of the importance of my voice in both my own work, in how I interact with the students I meet, particularly the ones I teach, in challenging the assumptive positions that are ingrained in academia and in wider discussions on class and education. It has emphasised the importance of being visible and presenting a perspective that may be challenging but is driven by knowledge, experience and values.

A key reflection is related to value, what and who are valued and how we are positioned within a hierarchy can mean we need to recognise and value ourselves. In relation to class in Ireland this is particularly difficult as we don't discuss it openly. This is a lonely and difficult thing to do but finding others who understand, are from working class backgrounds and recognise the importance of class in understanding inequality can create community and solidarity which values us and our expertise. Being understood and being valued are crucial to belonging.

So, I am ending this thesis as a researcher who values lived experience and the power of stories to help us to realise the knowledge and expertise we possess. I have been reminded of the positive aspects of working class experiences, which are core to who I am, both as a person but also as a practitioner. The power of solidarity and community has been crucial to my ability to be deeply reflexive about the experiences of working class women who have gone through HE, and to recognise and articulate the importance of our stories, and the potential for belonging that is within them.

Appendices

Appendix A- Invitation

Invitation to take part in a research group

My name is Sorca Mc Donnell and I am studying at Maynooth University. As part of my doctoral studies I am conducting some research about what it was like to be a working class woman and go to higher education and what effect it had on us at the time and since. I have been thinking about my own experiences and think it would be very interesting to work with a group to find ways to explore and share our knowledge. In this research we will explore and reflect on our experiences of education and class.

The research will take place in a group, over a number of sessions to allow time and space to reflect on and explore the themes. It is planned that we will meet about every 4 weeks over about 8 months, so about 8 meetings. These meetings will be about 90 minutes each and will most likely be an evening. I am hoping they will take place in a community room. However as we all know Covid-19 has meant that social distancing could be around for a while so we may need to have the meetings online or meet in a much bigger room. I can discuss this further with you.

What is involved?

Attending the meetings and being an active member of the process. This means helping to decide on group rules, supporting each other in the group process, suggesting ways to think about our experiences. It also involves reflecting outside the group. We will think about ways to support us to do this. We will also think about how our knowledge might be used in our own lives, our communities or our work. As this involves reflecting on past experience I am looking for people who have finished college more than 5 years ago.

More Information

I am very happy to chat to you more about the research and any questions, concerns or queries you might have. You can decide if you want to participate after you feel you have had all your questions answered. I understand that it is a big commitment and you will need time to think about it.

You can contact me at: Sorca.mcdonnell.2015@mumail.ie or 0XXXXXXXXX

Appendix B- Information sheet

Information Sheet

Thank you for taking the time to read this information sheet. I am looking for 8 women from working class backgrounds who went to Higher Education to form a group for this research. I will be part of the group and want to work together to think about what going to college meant for us. Please have a read of the information and you can call or email me to get more information or ask any questions about the research and what it might involve. My contact details are at the bottom of this sheet.

Purpose of the Study.

The study is an opportunity for us to work together to think about what it was like going to college, coming from a working class background and what it has meant for our lives. It is a space to reflect on our experiences and build knowledge together.

I am Sorca Mc Donnell and I was doing this research as part of a doctorate programme. As part of my studies in Maynooth university I have to do research on a topic related to education. I have a supervisor who will support me through this research. His name is Fergal Finnegan.

What will the study involve?

The study will involve being part of a group of 8 women. As a group we will work together to explore and reflect on our experiences. It is planned that we will meet 8 times over 6-8 months. Each session will be about 90 minutes long. You will be an active member of the group including making decisions about the process, suggesting ways to think about the topic, reflecting on the process and sharing your experiences and reflections on them. There is a significant time needed but I hope that you will get as much from the process as you give. It is an opportunity to reflect on an aspect of our lives that is rarely discussed, which may have a positive impact for us and for future students like us. Due to physical distancing restrictions we may need to have the group on an online video conferencing platform MS Teams.

I hope the research will begin in September/ October 2020. I am planning on using a room in a community centre. As this research will take place over a period of time and will involve lots of discussions based on our experiences we will make some key decisions together, including what information you decide you don't agree to have included. This means that although you sign a consent form at the beginning you can still make decisions about your participation as we go through the process.

Who has approved this study?

This study has been reviewed and received ethical approval from Maynooth University Research Ethics committee. You may have a copy of this approval if you request it.

Why have you been asked to take part?

You have been asked because you come from a working class background and went to Higher Education and finished more than 5 years ago. You have expressed an interest in thinking about that experience to me or someone else who has passed your information on to me with your consent.

Do you have to take part?

No, you are under no obligation whatsoever to take part in this research. However, I hope that you will agree to take part and be part of this group where we will work together in a participatory way. This will consist of 8 meetings of the group and reflecting on the process outside of these meetings. It is entirely up to you to decide whether or not you would like to take part. You can contact me for more information as you might want to ask some questions before deciding if this group is for you.

If you decide to do so, you will be asked to sign a consent form and given a copy and the information sheet for your own records. If you decide to take part, you are still free to withdraw at any time without giving a reason and/or to withdraw your information up until such time as the research findings are anonymised. You may also decide that particular parts of your information will not be used. This will be after the group process has finished and you have time to reflect on the process.

What information will be collected?

The group sessions will be audio recorded. All discussions during the group session will be recorded. If we need to have the group online using MS Teams it will be recorded there. The research will explore what it meant to be a working class woman in higher education. We will think about our time in education and how we think about class and gender as it relates to education. As it will be an ongoing collaborative process other topics may come up in the group which may be sensitive.

Will your participation in the study be kept confidential?

Yes, all information that is collected about you during the course of the research will be kept confidential. During the research process all the information collected will be anonymised. After the process you can decide if you would like to be named in the research. All hard copy information will be held in a locked cabinet at the researchers' place of work, electronic information will be encrypted and held securely on MU PC or servers and will be accessed only by myself. Fergal Finnegan my supervisor will read anonymised material from the research.

No information will be distributed to any other unauthorised individual or third party. If you so wish, the data that you provide can also be made available to you at your own discretion. Within the group we will discuss confidentiality and how we ensure we respect each other and our information. We will also discuss what we should do if confidentiality is broken.

'It must be recognised that, in some circumstances, confidentiality of research data and records may be overridden by courts in the event of litigation or in the course of investigation by lawful authority. In such circumstances the University will take all reasonable steps within law to ensure that confidentiality is maintained to the greatest possible extent.'

What will happen to the information which you give?

All the information you provide will be kept at Maynooth University in such a way that it will not be possible to identify you. We will discuss this at the first group meeting. On completion of the research, the data will be retained on the MU server. After ten years, all data will be destroyed (by the PI). Manual data will be shredded confidentially and electronic data will be reformatted or overwritten by the PI in Maynooth University.

What will happen to the results?

The research will be written up and presented as a doctoral thesis. It will also be presented at national and international conferences and may be published in academic journals. A copy of the research findings will be made available to you upon request.

What are the possible disadvantages of taking part?

It is possible that talking about your experience may be emotional and may cause some distress. Please see next section as it provides information on what will happen if any group member becomes distressed.

What if there is a problem?

During each group session we will spend some time checking in at the end of the session. It is hoped that any issues that arise for individuals can be supported in this process. However if you experience any distress following the group you can contact The Samaritans at 116 123.

You may contact my supervisor fergal.finnegan@mu.ie if you feel the research has not been carried out as described above.

Any further queries? If you need any further information, you can contact me: Sorca Mc Donnell. Email: Sorca.mcdonnell.2015@mumail.ie   Phone: 0XXXXXXXXX

If you agree to take part in the study, please complete and sign the consent form overleaf.
Thank you for taking the time to read this

Appendix C- Consent form

Consent Form

I……………………………………………………….. agree to participate in Sorca Mc
Donnell's research study titled
A co-operative exploration, and reflection on the experiences of working class women who have attended Higher Education.

Please tick each statement below :

The purpose and nature of the study has been explained to me verbally & in writing. I've been able to ask questions, which were answered satisfactorily.   ☐

I am participating voluntarily.   ☐

I give permission for my participation in the group process with Sorca Mc Donnell to be audio recorded or recorded on MS Teams if online.   ☐

I understand that I can withdraw from the study, without repercussions, at any time, whether that is before it starts or while I am participating.   ☐

I understand that I can withdraw permission to use the data right up to the anonymisation of the data. This will be after the group has finished meeting.   ☐

It has been explained to me how my data will be managed and that I may access it on request. ☐

I understand the limits of confidentiality as described in the information sheet   ☐

I understand that after the group process has finished I can decide if I wish to be named in the final research.   ☐

Signed…………………………………….   Date……………….
Participant Name in block capitals ……………………………………………...

I the undersigned have taken the time to fully explain to the above participant the nature and purpose of this study in a manner that they could understand. I have explained the risks involved as well as the possible benefits. I have invited them to ask questions on any aspect of the study that concerned them.

Signed……………………………………. Date……………….
Researcher Name in block capitals …………………………………………...

If during your participation in this study you feel the information and guidelines that you were given have been neglected or disregarded in any way, or if you are unhappy about the process, please contact the Secretary of the Maynooth University Ethics Committee at research.ethics@mu.ie or +353 (0)1 708 6019. Please be assured that your concerns will be dealt with in a sensitive manner.

For your information the Data Controller for this research project is Maynooth University, Maynooth, Co. Kildare. Maynooth University Data Protection officer is Ann McKeon in Humanity house, room 17, who can be contacted at ann.mckeon@mu.ie. Maynooth University Data Privacy policies can be found at https://www.maynoothuniversity.ie/data-protection.

Bibliography

ADT (n/d). *Add the 10ᵗʰ*. Available at: https://www.atdireland.ie/wp/socio-economic-discrimination-add-10th-ground/

Adkins, L. (2004). Introduction; Feminism, Bourdieu and after. In In L. Adkins, & B. Skeggs (Eds.), Feminism after Bourdieu (pp. 3–18). Oxford: Blackwell.

Allan, D. and Duckworth, V. (2018). Voices of disaffection: disengaged and disruptive youths or agents of change and self-empowerment? *British journal of special education*, 45(10), DOI: 10.1111/1467-8578.12201

Alliance of working class academics. Available at: https://www.workingclassacademics.com/

Archer, L., Hutchings, M. and Ross A. (2003). *Higher education and social class: issues of exclusion and inclusion.* London: Routledge Falmer.

Arruzza, C., Bhattacharya, T. and Fraser, N. (2019). *Feminism for the 99%.* London: Verso.

Atkins, L. and Duckworth, V. (2019). *Research methods for social justice and equity in education*. Cambridge: Bloomsbury.

Atkins, W. (2015). *Class.* Cambridge: Polity press.

Baker, J., Lynch, K., Cantillion, S and Walsh, J. (2006). Equality: putting theory into action. UCD Equality studies. Available at: https://researchrepository.ucd.ie/rest/bitstreams/4704/retrieve (accessed 12ᵗʰ of May 2024)

Ball, S. (2003). The teacher's soul and the terrors of performativity, *Journal of Education Policy*, 18(2), 215-228.

Ball, S. (2015). *What's wrong with education policy research? Seven fallacies*. University of Brighton Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=k9ZkF4WFraY (Accessed 22ⁿᵈ of May 2020)

Barnacle, R. and Dall'Alba, G. (2017). Committed to learn: student engagement and care in higher education. *Higher education research and development, 36(7), 1326-1338.*

Bathmaker, A., Ingram, N., Abrahams, J., Hoare, A., Waller, R., and Bradley, H. (2016). *Higher education, social class and social mobility: The degree generation*. London. Palgrave MacMillan.

Bardon, S. (2017, May 20). Varadkar wants to lead party for 'people who get up early in the morning'. *The Irish Times*. Available at:

https://www.irishtimes.com/news/politics/varadkar-wants-to-lead-party-for-people-who-get-up-early-in-the-morning-1.3090753

BBC (2017). Society and the conservative party. Available at: https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-politics-38553797

Bentley, L. J. (2020). *Jackie Goes Home: Young Working-Class Women: Higher Education, Employment and Social (Re)Alignment*. Unpublished doctoral thesis. University of the West of England.

Beswick, K. (2020) Feeling working class: affective class identification and its implications for overcoming inequality, *Studies in Theatre and Performance*, 40(3), 265-274, DOI: 10.1080/14682761.2020.1807194

Bettie, J. (2014). *Women without class*. Oakland: University of California Press.

Binns, C. (2019). *Experiences of academics from a working class heritage: Ghosts of childhood habitus*. Cambridge: Cambridge scholars publishing.

Bissett, J. (2023). *It's not where you live, it's how you live*. Bristol: Policy Press.

Blythe, S. L., and Wilkes, L. (2013). The challenges of being an insider researcher. *Nurse Researcher, 21(1), 8-13.*

Bourdieu, P. (1977). *Outline of a Theory of Practice*. Cambridge: Cambridge university press.

Bourdieu, P. (1984). *Distinction: A social critique of the judgement of taste*. London: Routledge.

Bourdieu, P. (1985). The social space and the genesis of groups. *Theory and society,* 14(6), 723-744.

Bourdieu, P. (1986). The forms of capital. P. 46- 58. In J. E Richardson (Ed.), *Handbook of theory of research for the sociology of education*. Connecticut: Greenwood press.

Bourdieu, P. and Wacquant, L. (1992). *An invitation to reflexive sociology*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Bray, J. N., Lee, J., Smith, L., Yorks, L. (2000). *Collaborative inquiry in practice: Action, reflection and meaning making*. Washington DC: Sage.

Brown, P. (1990). 'The third wave': Education and the ideology of parentocracy. *British journal of sociology of education*, 1(1), 65-85.

Brah, A. and Phoenix, A. (2004). Ain't I a woman? Revisiting intersectionality. *Journal of international womens studies*. 5(3), 75-86.

Braun, V. and Clarke, V. (2022). *Thematic analysis: A practical guide*. London: Sage.

Broderick, R. and Smith, J. (2022). Demographics in the higher education sector. Department of further and higher education, research, innovation and science. Dublin: Government of Ireland. Available at: https://assets.gov.ie/241799/19101e0d-e765-4beb-9971-0a0a0c0056e1.pdf

Bryant, M. (2021). Latin to be introduced at 40 state secondaries in England. *The Guardian*. 31 July 2021. Accessed at: https://www.theguardian.com/education/2021/jul/31/latin-introduced-40-state-secondaries-england

Burawoy, M. (2018). *Making sense of Bourdieu: From demolition to recuperation and critique*. Available at:http://burawoy.berkeley.edu/Marxism/Making%20Sense%20of%20Bourdieu.Burawoy.pdf (accessed 26th of July 2021)

Burnell Reilly, I. (Ed.) (2023). *The lives of working class academics: Getting ideas above your station*. UK: Emerald Publishing.

Butler, T. (2007). *Understanding social inequality*. London: Sage publications.

Case, K. A. (2017). Insider Without: Journey across the working-class academic arc. *Journal of Working-Class Studies*. 2(2).

Charlesworth, S. J. (2004). *A phenomenology of working class experience*. Cambridge: Cambridge university press.

Cocker, J. (1995). Common People. Available at:https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yuTMWgOduFM (Accessed 1st of June 2020)

Connolly, B. (2018). Reflective practice and the feminist lens: The other side. *Adult learner: The Irish journal of adult and community education*, 23-35. Available at: https://www.aontas.com/assets/resources/Adult-Learner-Journal/14668_Aontas_Adult_Learner_2018_WEB%20new%2023-11-2018.pdf

Connolly, P. and Healy, J. (2006). Symbolic violence, locality and social class: the educational and career aspirations of 10-11-year-old boys in Belfast, *Pedagogy, Culture and Society*, 12(1), 15-33, DOI: 10.1080/14681360400200187

Coru (2017). Social care workers registration board- Criteria for education and training programmes. Available at: https://coru.ie/files-education/scwrb-criteria-for-education-and-training-programmes.pdf (Accessed 1st of June, 2020)

Couldry, N. (2010). *Why voice matters: Culture and Politics after Neoliberalism.* London: Sage Publications.

Crew, T. (2020). *Higher education and working class academics: Precarity and diversity in academia.* London: Palgrave Macmillan.

Crew, T. (2021). Navigating academia as a working class academic. *Journal of working class studies*, 6(2), 50-65

Crew, T. (2022). Classed markers of a working class academic identity. *Journal of class and culture,* 1 (2). Doi: https://doi.org/10.1386/jclc_00011_1

Crew, T. (2023). Reading the Posh newspapers. In Burnell Reilly, I. (Ed.), *The lives of working class academics,* (pp. 173-185). Bingley: Emerald publishing.

Crean, M. (2018). Minority scholar and insider-outsider research status: Challenges along a personal, professional and political continuum. *Forum qualitative social research*, 19(1), 17.

Crean, M. (2018). Affective formations of class consciousness: Care consciousness, *The sociological review*, 66(6): 1199-1193.

CSO. Census of Population 2016 – Profile 10 Education, Skills and the Irish Language: Third level. Available at https://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/ep/p-cp10esil/p10esil/tl/

Curristan, S., Maître, B., Russell, H. (2022). *Intergenerational poverty in Ireland.* Research series number 150. Dublin: ESRI.

Curzon, L. B. and Tummons, J. (2013). *Teaching in further education: An outline of principles and practices. Seventh edition.* London: Bloomsbury publishing.

Darder, A. (2018). Decolonizing interpretive research: Subaltern sensibilities and the politics of voice. *Qualitative research journal*, 18(2), 94-104. DOI DOI 10.1108/QRJ-D-17-00056

Denscombe, M. (2014). *The good research guide: for small scale research projects.* Berkshire: Open university press.

DES (2011). *National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030: Report of the Strategy Group.* Dublin: Government publications.

DES (2021). *Education indicators for Ireland December 2021, Department of Education.* Available at: https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/055810-education-statistics/ accessed on 3rd of November 2022

DES (2019). *Statistical bulletin: Overview of education.* Available at: https://www.education.ie/en/Publications/Statistics/Statistical-Reports/2018-2019-statistical-bulletin.pdf (accessed 27th of July 2021)

Duckworth, V. (2014). *Learning trajectories, violence and empowerment amongst adult basic skills learners.* London: Routledge.

Duckworth, V. and Smith, R. (2018). Women, adult literacy and transformative bonds of care. *Australian journal of adult learning, 58(2), 157-183.*

ESRI (2019). *About us, a history of the ESRI.* Available at: https://www.esri.ie/about-us/a-history-of-the-esri

Etherington, K. (2004). Becoming a reflexive researcher. *Counselling and psychotherapy research, 4(2), 46-47.*

Evans, S., (2010). Becoming 'somebody': examining class and gender through higher education. (p. 53-72). In Taylor, Y. (Ed.), *Classed intersections: Spaces, selves, knowledges.* England. Ashgate.

Finnegan, F. (2012). *The knowledge factory? A study of working class experience, identity and learning in Irish Higher Education.* PHD thesis: Maynooth University. Available at: http://mural.maynoothuniversity.ie/6734/1/Ph.D.%20F%20Finnegan.pdf

Finnegan, F. (2016). Let's get critical: biographical research, critical realism and the challenge of producing emancipatory knowledge. In Evans, R (ed). *Now, Before and After Narrative Research.* Magdeburg: Nisba Verlag.

Finnegan, F. (2017). Working class access to higher education: Structures, experiences and categories. In Fleming, T., Loxley, A. and Finnegan, F. (Eds.). *Access and participation in Irish higher education.* (pp. 139-58). London: Palgrave Macmillan.

Finnegan, F. (2019). Moving against and beyond neoliberal higher education in Ireland. In Telt, L. & Hamilton, M. (Eds.), *Resisting neoliberalism in education.* Bristol: Policy Press.

Finnegan, F. and Merrill, B. (2017) 'We're as good as anybody else': a comparative study of working-class university students' experiences in England and Ireland, *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 38, 3, 307-324, DOI: 10.1080/01425692.2015.1081054

Finnegan, F., Fleming, T. and Loxley, A. (2017). The purpose of access: Equality, social mobility and the knowledge economy. In Fleming, T., Loxley, A. and Finnegan, F. (Eds.). *Access and participation in Irish higher education*. (p. 107-38). London: Palgrave Macmillan.

Fleming, T., Loxley, A. and Finnegan, F. (2017). Key trends in Irish higher education and the emergence and development of access. In Fleming, T., Loxley, A. and Finnegan, F. (Eds.). *Access and participation in Irish higher education* (p. 23-44). London: Palgrave Macmillan.

Fleming, T., Loxley, A. and Finnegan, F. (Eds.). (2017). *Access and participation in Irish higher education*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.

Folkes (2021). Re-Imagining Social Mobility: The Role of Relationality, Social Class and Place in Qualitative Constructions of Mobility. *Sociological Research Online* 1–18. Ds:O//dIo: i1.o0r.g1/107.171/1773/6103760870840240290988555127

Freire, P. (1996). *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. London: Penguin Books.

Friedman, S. (2016). Habitus clivé and the emotional imprint of social mobility. *The Sociological Review*, 64, 129–147 DOI: 10.1111/1467-954X.12280

Friedman, S. and Laurison, D. (2020). *The Class Ceiling: Why it Pays to be Privileged*. Bristol: Policy press.

Galbin, A. (2014). An introduction to social constructionism. *Social Research Reports, 26, 82-92*. Available online at: www. researchreports.ro (accessed 11th November 2018)

Gayá Wicks, P., Reason, P. & Bradbury, H. (2008). Living Inquiry: Personal, Political and Philosophical Groundings for Action Research Practice. In Reason, P. and Bradbury, H. (eds.), *The sage handbook of action research. 2nd edition*. London: Sage.

Goldthorpe, J. H. (2016). Social class mobility in modern Britain: changing structure, constant process. *Journal of the British Academy*, 4, 89–111. DOI 10.5871/jba/004.089

Grant, J., Nelson, G. and Mitchell, T. (2011). Negotiating the Challenges of Participatory Action Research: Relationships, Power, Participation, Change and Credibility. In

Reason, P. and Bradbury, H. (eds.), *The Sage Handbook of Action Research. 3rd edition*. London: Sage.

Gray, J. and O'Carroll, A. (2012). Education and class formation in 20th century Ireland: a retrospective qualitative longitudinal analysis. *Sociology, 46(4), 696-711*. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1177/0038038511428750 Accessed 17th of May 2019.

Grenfell, M. (2014). Pierre Bourdieu: Key concepts, 2nd edition. London: Routledge.

Grummell, B. and Ryan, R. (2017). Gendered experiences of non-traditional students in Irish higher education. In Fleming, T., Loxley, A. and Finnegan, F. (Eds.). (2017). *Access and participation in Irish higher education* (p. 197-214). London: Palgrave Macmillan.

Haase, T. and Pratschke (2017). *A data plan for equity of access*. HEA. Available at: https://hea.ie/assets/uploads/2018/05/HEA-Data-Plan-Report-2017-V16-Haase-Pratschke-Final.pdf (Accessed 2nd of June 2020).

Harford, J., Fleming, B. and Hyland, A. (2023): 100 years of inequality?: Irish educational policy since the foundation of the state, *Paedagogica Historica: International journal of the history of education*, DOI: 10.1080/00309230.2022.2155979

Haraway, D. (1988). Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective. *Feminist Studies*, 14(3), 575-599 https://www.jstor.org/stable/3178066

Hatch, J. A. (2002). *Doing qualitative research in education settings*. New York: State university of New York press.

HEA (Higher Education Authority) (2015). *National Plan for Equity of access to higher education 2015-2019.* Dublin: HEA.

HEA (2018). Key facts and figures in higher education 2017-2018. Available at: https://hea.ie/assets/uploads/2019/01/Higher-Education-Authority-Key-Facts-Figures-2017-18.pdf (Accessed 2nd of June 2020)

HEA (2019). 2019/20 Equal access survey information leaflet. Available at: https://hea.ie/assets/uploads/2019/08/EAS201920.pdf (Accessed 2nd of June 2020).

HEA (2020). Socio-economic profile of our universities and institutes of technology. Accessed at https://hea.ie/2020/12/07/new-hea-data-provides-in-depth-insight-into-the-socio-economic-profile-of-our-universities-and-institutes-of-technology/

HEA (2022). *National Access Plan: A strategic action plan for Equity of access, participation and success in higher education 2022-2028.* Dublin: HEA.

HEA (2022). Socio-economic profiles 2019/20. HEA. Dublin. Available at: https://hea.ie/statistics/data-for-download-and-visualisations/students/widening-participation-for-equity-of-access/socio-economic-profiles-2019-20/ (accessed 25th of October 2022)

HEA (2022). Student participation. Available at: https://hea.ie/statistics/data-for-download-and-visualisations/students/widening-participation-for-equity-of-access/dis-2020/1-introduction-dis-2020/ accessed 3rd of November 2022

HEAR (2020). Higher education access route. Available at: http://accesscollege.ie/hear/(accessed 26th of May 2020).

Hedges, C. (2022). Class Matters and the Professional Doctorate: Making the Invisible Visible. In Trotman, D. and Saunders, L. (Eds.), *The Professional Doctorate in Education: Activism, Transformation and Practice,* Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars.

Heron, J. (1996). *Co-operative inquiry: Research into the human condition.* London: Sage.

Heron, J and Reason, P. (2008). Extending epistemology within a co-operative inquiry. In Reason, P. and Bradbury, H (Eds), *The sage handbook of action research. 2nd edition.* London: Sage.

Heron, J. and Reason, P. (2011). The practice of cooperative inquiry: Research with rather than on people. In Reason, P. and Bradbury, H. (Eds.), *The Sage handbook of action research. 3rd edition.* London: Sage.

Hill Collins, P. and Bilge, S. (2020). *Intersectionality. 2nd edition.* Cambridge: Polity.

hooks. b. (1989). *Talking back- thinking feminist, thinking black.* Boston: South end press.

hooks, b. (1989). Choosing the margin as a space of radical openness. *Framework: The Journal of Cinema and Media,* 36, 15-23.

hooks, b. (1994). *Teaching to transgress; Education as the practice of freedom.* London: Routledge.

hooks, b. (2000). *Feminism is for everyone.* London: Pluto press.

hooks, b. and Palmer, P. J., (2016). *Dialogue at St Norbert College.* Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=klrhqs35W9w Accessed 19th January 2019.

Ingram and Abrahams (2016). Stepping outside of oneself, how a cleft habitus can lead to greater reflexivity through occupying the third space. In Thatcher, Ingram, Burke and Abrahams (Eds), *Bourdieu the next generation* (p. 140-156). London: Routledge.

Jarvis, P. (2007). *Globalisation, lifelong learning and the learning society. Volume 2. Sociological perspectives*. London: Routledge.

Jones, O. (2011). *Chavs: The demonization of the working class*. London: Verso.

Kandaswamy, P. (2018). Reflections on class: Intersectional anticapitalist pedagogies of our times. *Feminist Formations*, 30(3), 16-24.

Keane E. and Heinz M. (2015). Diversity in initial teacher education in Ireland: the socio-demographic backgrounds of postgraduate post-primary entrants in 2013 and 2014. *Irish Educational Studies*, 34(3), 281–301, http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/03323315.2015.1067637

Law, C.L. (1995). Introduction. In Dews C. L. B. & Law C. L. (Eds.), *This fine place so far from home: Voices of academics from the working class*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, pp. 1-10.

Law, C.L. and Dew, C. (1995). *This fine place so far from home: Voices of academics from the working class*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.

Lawson, J. E., (2007). *An examination of cooperative inquiry as a professional learning strategy for inner city school leaders*. University of Manitoba.

Ledwith, M., (2005). *Community Development: A Critical Approach*. Bristol: Policy Press.

Ledwith, M., (2005). Personal narratives/ political lives: personal reflection as a tool for social change. *Reflective practice*, 6(2), 255-262.

Ledwith, M. (2007). On being critical: uniting theory and practice through emancipatory action research, *Educational Action Research*, 15(4), 597-611.

Ledwith, M. (2009). Antonio Gramsci and Feminism: The elusive nature of power. *Educational Philosophy and Theory*, 41(6), 684-697.

Longhofer, W. and Winchester, D. (2016). *Social theory re-wired: New connections to classical and contemporary perspectives*. London: Routledge.

Loughran, H. and McCann, M. E., (2006). *Crumlin community case study: Experiences and perceptions of problem drug use*. Dublin: Stationary office.

Loveday, V. (2015). Working-class participation, middle-class aspiration? Value, upward mobility and symbolic indebtedness in higher education. *The Sociological Review*, 65, 570-588.

Loxley, A., Finnegan and Fleming, T. (2017). Access and widening participation- stories from the policy domain. In Fleming, T., Loxley, A. and Finnegan, F. (Eds.). *Access and participation in Irish higher education* (p. 45-86). London: Palgrave Macmillan.

Loxley, A., Finnegan and Fleming, T. (2017). Routes in: Access categories, mechanisms and processes. In Fleming, T., Loxley, A. and Finnegan, F. (Eds.). *Access and participation in Irish higher education* (p. 87-106). London: Palgrave Macmillan.

Lynch, K. and O'Neill, C. (1994). The Colonisation of Social Class in Education. *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 15(3), 307-324 Stable URL: https://www.jstor.org/stable/1393146 Accessed: 28-05-2019

Lynch, K. and O'Riordan, C. (1998). Inequality in Higher Education: a study of class barriers, *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 19(4), 445-478, DOI: 10.1080/0142569980190401

Lynch, K., Lyons, M. and Cantillon, S. (2007). Breaking silence: Educating citizens for love, care and solidarity. *International studies in sociology of education. 17(1-2), 1-19*.

Lynch, K., Grummell, B., and Devine, D. (2012). *New managerialism in education: Commercialization, carelessness and gender*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.

Mahony, P. and Zmroczek, C. (1997). *Class matters: "working-class' women's perspectives on social class*. London: Taylor and Francis.

Mc Niff, J. (2016). *You and your action research project. 4th Edition*. London: Routledge.

Mellor, J., Ingram, N., Abrahams, J. and Beedell, P. (2014). Class matters in the interview setting? Positionality, situatedness and class. *British educational research journal*, 40(1), 135-149, DOI: 10.1002/berj.3035

Merrill, B., Finnegan, F., O'Neill, J., & Revers, S. (2020) 'When it comes to what employers are looking for, I don't think I'm it for a lot of them': class and capitals in, and after, higher education, *Studies in Higher Education*, 45(1), 163-175, DOI: 10.1080/03075079.2019.1570492

Misztal, B. A., (2003). *Theories of social remembering*. Philadelphia: Open University Press.

Monbiot, G. (2016). Neoliberalism- the ideology at the root of all our problems. *The Guardian*.   15   April   2016   Available   at: https://www.theguardian.com/books/2016/apr/15/neoliberalism-ideology-problem-george-monbiot

Morgan, A. C., LaBerge, L., Larremore, D. B., Galesic, M., Brand, J. E. and Clauset, A. (2022). Socioeconomic roots of academic faculty. *Natural Human Behaviour*. https://doi.org/10.1038/s41562-022-01425-4

Navarro, Z. (2006). In search of a cultural interpretation of power: The contribution of Pierre Bourdieu. *IDS Bulletin, 37(6), 11-22*.

Nic Fhlannchadha, S. (2018). DARE HEAR Facts and Figures Report 2017-2018 Summary. Report prepared by the Irish Universities Association, on behalf of the participating HEIs. Available at: http://accesscollege.ie/wp-content/uploads/2017/02/DARE-HEAR-Facts-and-Figures-2017-2018-Summary-Report.pdf (accessed 26th of May 2020).

Noddings, N. (1992). *The challenge to care in schools: An alternative approach to education*. New York: Teachers College, Columbia University.

Noddings, N. (1995). A morally defensible mission for schools in the 21st century. *The Phi Delta Kappan*, 76(5), 365-368.

Oakley, A. (1981). Interviewing women: A contradiction in terms? In Roberts, H. (Ed) Doing feminist research. London: Routledge

Oakley, A. (2016). Interviewing women again: Power, time and the gift. Sociology, 50(1), 195-213.

O'Brien C. (2019). Mind the gap: Affluent students have firm grip on top university courses. *The Irish Times*. October 21 2019. Available at: https://www.irishtimes.com/news/education/mind-the-gap-affluent-students-have-firm-grip-on-top-university-courses-1.4056946 (Accessed 7th of May 2020)

O'Neill, C. (1992). *Telling it like it is*. Dublin: Combat poverty agency.

O'Sullivan, K., Byrne, D., Robson, J. and Winters, N. (2019). Who Goes to College via Access Routes? A Comparative Study of Widening Participation Admission in Selective Universities in Ireland and England. *Social Inclusion, 7(1), 38–51* DOI: 10.17645/si.v7i1.1647

OECD (2019). Education at a glance: Ireland. Available at:
https://www.oecd.org/education/education-at-a-glance/EAG2019_CN_IRL.pdf
(accessed 1st of June 2020).

Orme, J. (2002). Social work: Gender, care and justice. *The British journal of social work, 32(6), 799-814.*

Pierse, M. (2011). *Writing Irelands working class*. London: Palgrave.

Pierse, M. (2021). Working class writing in Ireland today: The 32 and beyond. In Mc Veigh, P. (Ed.), *The 32: An anthology of Irish working-class voices*. London: Unbound.

Pierse, M. (2023). Tackling 'the taboo': The personal is political (and it's scholarly too). In Burnell Reilly, I. (Ed.), *The lives of working class academics,* (pp. 203-218). Bingley: Emerald publishing.

Pifer, M. J., Riffe, K. A., Hartz, J. T. and Ibarra, M. V.. (2022). Paradise, nearly forty years later: The liminal experiences of Working-Class academics. *Innovative Higher education.*

Prichard, A. (2018). *Ways of learning, 4th edition*. New York: Routledge.

Reay, D. (1996). Insider Perspectives or Stealing the Words out of Women's Mouths: Interpretation in the Research Process. *Feminist Review*, No. 53, Speaking Out: Researching and Representing Women (Summer, 1996), pp. 57-73.

Reay, D. (1996). Dealing with differences: Reflexivity and social class in feminist research. Feminism and Psychology. 6(3), 443-456.

Reay, D. (1997). Feminist theory, habitus, and social class: Disrupting notions of classlessness. *Women's Studies International Forum*. 20(2), 225-233.

Reay, D. (2004). 'It's all becoming a habitus': beyond the habitual use of habitus in educational research, *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 25(4), 431-444, DOI: 10.1080/0142569042000236934

Reay, D. (2004). Gendering Bourdieu's concepts of capitals? Emotional capital, women and social class. *The sociological review*. pp. 57-74.

Reay, D. (2017). *Miseducation: Inequality, education and the working classes*. Bristol: Policy press.

Reay, D. (2022) Lessons from abroad: how can we achieve a socially just educational system?, *Irish Educational Studies*, 41(3), 425-440, DOI: 10.1080/03323315.2022.2085766

Reay, D., David, M. and Ball, S. (2005). *Degrees of Choice: social class, race and gender in higher education.* Stoke on Trent: Trentham Books.

RTE (2021). *Tokyo 2020: Portland row bursting with pride after Kellie Harrington won.* Available at: https://www.rte.ie/sport/olympics/2021/0808/1239652-portland-row-bursting-with-pride-after-harrington-win/ (accessed 9th of August 2021).

Reason, P. (1999). Integrating action and reflection through cooperative inquiry. In *Management learning special issue: The action dimension in management: Diverse approaches to research, teaching and development.* 30(2), 207-227.

Reason, P. (2011). Three approaches to participative inquiry. In Denzin, N. K. and Lincon Y. S (Eds.), *The Sage handbook of qualitative research. 4th edition.* London: Sage.

Reid, C. and Frisby, W. (2008). Continuing the journey: Articulating dimensions of feminist participatory action research (FPAR). In Reason, P. and Bradbury, H. (Eds.), *The Sage handbook of action research. 2nd edition*. London: Sage.

Ryan, R. (2019). *How Inequality in Education in Ireland is Produced, Reproduced, Justified, and Resisted at the Intersection of Disability and Social Class*. PhD thesis, National University of Ireland Maynooth. Available at: https://mural.maynoothuniversity.ie/11183/

Saltzberger- Witternberg, I., Osbourne, E. and Williams, G. (1999*). The emotional experience of learning and teaching.* New York: Routledge.

Savage, M., Cunningham, N., Devine, F., Friedman, S., Laurison, D., McKenzie, L., Miles, A., Snee, H. and Wakeling, P. (2015). *Social class in the 21st century*. London: Pelican.

Sayer, A. (2002). 'What Are You Worth?: Why Class is an Embarrassing Subject' *Sociological Research Online,* 7(3), Available at: http://www.socresonline.org.uk/7/3/sayer.html (Accessed 26th of May 2020).

Schirato, T. and Webb, J. (2002) Bourdieu's Notion of Reflexive Knowledge, *Social Semiotics*, 12:3, 255-268, DOI: 10.1080/10350330216373

Shor, I. and Freire, P. (1987). *A pedagogy for liberation*. London: Mac Millan.

Shuike, P. (2021). We make this path by walking: The practices and principles of the first international working-class academics conference. *Journal of class and culture. 1(1), 63-78.*

Skeggs, B. (1997). *Formations of class and gender: Becoming respectable*. London: Sage.

Skeggs, B. (2004). *Class, self, culture*. London: Routledge.

Skeggs, B. (2004). Exchange, value and affect: Bourdieu and 'the self'. *The Sociological Review*, 52, 75-95.

Skeggs, B. (2015). Introduction: stratification or exploitation, domination, dispossession and devaluation? *The Sociological Review*, 63, 205–222.

Skeggs, B & Sayer, A. (2020). *Does class still matter? Lancaster sociology*. YouTube. 30th July 2020. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mE-GCiVgqyc

Socket, H. (2012). *Knowledge and virtue in teaching and learning: The primacy of dispositions*. London: Routledge.

Stone, P. (2020). Confronting myself: Using auto/biography to explore the impact of class and education on the formation of self and identity. *European Journal for Research on the Education and Learning of Adults*. https://doi.org/10.3384/rela.2000-7426.ojs1346

Tangney, S. (2014). Student-centred learning: a humanist perspective. *Teaching in higher education, 19(3), 266-275.*

Thatcher, J., Ingram, N., Burke, B. and Abrahams, J. (2016). *Bourdieu: The next generation. The development of Bourdieu's intellectual heritage in contemporary UK sociology*. London; Routledge.

The accentism project. Available at: https://accentism.org/ (accessed 21st October 2022)

The Irish Times (2018). *Feeder schools map*. Available online at: https://www.irishtimes.com/feeder-schools/rosary-college/60841M (accessed 17th November 2018).

Thompson, J. (2000). *Women, class and education*. London: Routledge.

Thompson, W. (2017). Crossing Crumlin road. *ESPN the magazine*. (Accessed at 27 July 2022)

https://www.espn.com/espn/feature/story/_/page/enterpriseMcGregor/conor-mcgregor-shaped-dublin-roots-prepares-fight-floyd-mayweather

Toy-Cronin, B. (2018). Ethical Issues in Insider-Outsider Research. In Iphofen, R. and Tolich, M. (Eds.), *The Sage handbook of qualitative research ethics*. London: Sage.

Tugwell, S. (2022). 'We tell our stories in order to live': Working-class existence and survival in the academy. *Journal of working class studies*, 7(1), 36-47. Available at https://journals.uwyo.edu/index.php/workingclassstudies/article/view/7241/5845

Turn to teaching. Maynooth University. Available at: https://www.maynoothuniversity.ie/turntoteaching

Tyler, I. (2015). Classificatory struggles: Class, culture and inequality in neoliberal times. *The sociological review*, 64, 493-511.

Wacquant, L. (2002). The sociological life of Pierre Bourdieu. *International sociology*, 17(4), 549-556.

Walkerdine, V. (2021) What's class got to do with it?, *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education*, 42(1), 60-74, DOI: 10.1080/01596306.2020.1767939

Walkerdine, V. (2023). Afterword: Affective histories and class transmission. *The sociological review monographs*, 71 (2) 477-487, https://doi.org/10.1177/00380261231152043

Walsh, J. & Loxley, A. (2015). The Hunt Report and higher education policy in the Republic of Ireland: 'an international solution to an Irish problem?', *Studies in Higher Education*, 40(6), 1128-1145, DOI: 10.1080/03075079.2014.881350

Weininger, E. (2002). Foundations of class analysis in the work of Bourdieu. In E. Wright (Ed.) *Alternative foundations of class analysis*. (p. 116- 166). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Wilson, A., Reay, D., Morrin, K. & Abrahams, J. (2020): 'The still-moving position' of the 'working-class' feminist academic: dealing with disloyalty, dislocation and discomfort, *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education*, DOI: 10.1080/01596306.2020.1767936 (Accessed 9th of July 2020).

Wilson, N. (2022). *Thinking Together: A feminist collaborative inquiry into pedagogical approaches for domestic violence work in Ireland*. PhD thesis, Maynooth University.

Whelan, C. T. and Layte, R. (2004). Economic change, Social mobility and Meritocracy: Reflections on the Irish experience. ESRI

Working class academics. Available at: https://workingclass-academics.co.uk/

Wright, E. O. (2015). *Understanding class*. London: Verso.

Yosso, T. J. (2005). Whose culture has capital? A critical race theory discussion of community cultural wealth, Race Ethnicity and Education, 8(1), 69-91, DOI: 10.1080/1361332052000341006