

Bottom of the class? The leaving certificate applied programme and track placement in the Republic of Ireland

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Across many countries, young people are differentiated into academic and vocational tracks, a pattern that is closely related to their social class background. The Irish secondary system has been largely undifferentiated, but the introduction of a pre-vocational programme, the Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA), has brought an element of tracking into upper secondary education. This article explores whether allocation into the LCA track reflects processes similar to those highlighted in international research. It goes further than these studies by explicitly recognising the role of school organisation in influencing student's learning careers and educational decisions. The purpose of this paper is to estimate the determinants of track placement in the Republic of Ireland. Using in-depth qualitative case study interviews with students from Irish post-primary schools, this paper examines the factors influencing students' decisions to enter the LCA programme. This paper explores the extent to which individual agency and school-level factors influence track choice by focusing on the learning careers of individual students within specific school contexts.

Keywords: tracking; student choice; inequality; educational trajectories

Introduction

Differentiation into academic and vocational tracks is a common feature of upper secondary education across a number of countries. A large body of work has emerged on the profile of young people taking these different tracks. Virtually all studies over the past several decades have found that children from middle and upper socio-economic backgrounds are overrepresented in academic or college-bound tracks while those of lower social standing are disproportionately found in the general and vocational tracks (Gamoran and Mare 1989; Useem 1992; Gamoran 2010). Explanations for these patterns generally draw on two contrasting perspectives. Social reproduction theory views tracking as an institutionalised and unjust form of discrimination which excludes children from working-class backgrounds from an important means of social mobility (Bowles and Gintis 1976; Willis 1977). This framework attributes the overrepresentation of working-class youth in lower tracks to the way in which schools serve to reproduce broader social differentiation by allocating working-class students to 'suitable' pathways, thus preparing them for their future work roles (Bowles and Gintis 1976). Alternatively, the rational choice perspective argues that the decision to enter a certain track reflects the differential

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costs and benefits attached to educational participation for different social groups; thus, factors that enter into the decision include the subjective evaluation of educational performance and the perceived probability of success at university (Becker and Hecken 2009). Both sets of theories can be seen as devoting comparatively little attention to the impact of school organisation and process (Smyth and Banks 2012). Both sets of theories can be seen as devoting comparatively little attention to the impact of school organisation and process. Social reproduction theorists critique the school as a functionalist institution, as actively engaged in producing class differences. In particular, rational choice theorists focus on decision making at the level of the family and/or the young person, tending to view the school as a 'black box' rather than unpacking the potential role of the school in shaping decisions (Smyth and Banks 2012).

While theoretical work on social differentiation in tracking tends to ignore the school context, the work of a number of empirical researchers, most notably Oakes, has advanced our understanding of the role of schools in track placement. The types of tracks or course offerings provided by the school have been found to reflect what can be seen as the perceived suitability of certain kinds of knowledge for particular groups of students (Oakes 1985; Oakes and Guitton 1995; Tach and Farkas 2006). Such accounts provide very rich insights into the factors shaping tracking and track placement at the school level. What is missing, however, is an exploration of the way in which schools frame track 'choice' and whether there is, in fact, a choice for students, raising important questions about the relationship between structure and agency.

The purpose of this paper is to consider how young people decide to enter a pre-vocational track, Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA), at upper secondary education level in the Republic of Ireland. Using five young peoples' accounts of the process shaping entry into LCA, we examine the extent to which school processes and organisation affect track placement at upper secondary level. To do this we firstly focus on how track placement is affected by practices such as streaming and assessment in lower secondary education, as well as the nature and delivery of information provided to students. Secondly, the in-depth interviews with young people allow us to investigate the influence of young peoples' learning careers and in particular the extent to which earlier experiences of educational difficulties shape subsequent trajectories. Focusing on micro-level processes of decision making allows us to examine variation in experiences between (different groups of) students and to explore the role of the school in shaping these processes.

Tracking in the Republic of Ireland

The Irish secondary system is composed of a three-year lower secondary programme, at the end of which students take a nationally standardised examination, the Junior Certificate. Grades achieved in this examination influence the type and level of subjects or programme that students can access at upper secondary level. Students also have the option of taking the Junior Certificate School Programme, whereby students learn in separate class groups within schools. The lower secondary phase is followed by an optional 'Transition Year' and a two-year upper secondary programme, which has fully differentiated tracks. The majority of students who complete upper secondary education take the traditional Leaving Certificate, which includes the Leaving Certificate Established (LCE) and the Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme (LCVP) where students are eligible for entry to higher education (Smyth, Banks, and Calvert 2011).

A small proportion of students (5% in 2013) take the LCA, which offers a prevocational-type curriculum and is aimed at preparation for the labour market and participation in post-school education (e.g. the further education sector) but does not offer direct access to higher education (Gleeson and Granville 1996; Gleeson and O'Flaherty 2013). This track is mostly orientated towards young people at risk of leaving school early and students who have learning difficulties, young people who tend to be disproportionately from working-class and non-employed households. The curriculum has been designed to offer a mix of academic and vocational elements; however, there is a degree of gender typing in the kinds of vocational courses offered (e.g. Hair/Beauty, and Construction) which leads to strongly gendered patterns of module take-up (Banks et al. 2010). Research on the LCA has highlighted marked differences in the social profile of LCA students (Gorby, Watson, and McCoy 2005), with almost 20% of students from non-employed or semi-unskilled manual households (Banks et al. 2010). LCA students also differ from other students in the LCE/LCVP programmes in that they are more likely to have lower reading scores on entry to secondary education, have received learning support, and been allocated to a lower stream class at lower secondary level (Banks et al. 2010).

In the Irish case, curriculum differentiation is accompanied by significant differences in the nature of assessment and the signalling value of the qualification awarded. While all students are expected to graduate with a Leaving Certificate, LCA students are accredited and assessed differently to those taking LCE and LCVP. The decision to enter the LCA generally takes place before students sit the Junior Certificate examination, so often students have not yet received any national examination results. The way in which schools select students for the programme is highly varied with some offering 'open evenings' to parents and information sessions for students. In other schools, however, assignment appears to be based on earlier ability grouping, with the lowest stream class automatically becoming the LCA group. It has been argued that the LCA programme, while serving an important role in Irish upper secondary education, also has negative implications for some young people. On the one hand, the programme serves to enhance the engagement of students struggling with schoolwork, by adopting more flexible and student-centred teaching approaches and a more vocationally oriented curriculum (Banks et al. 2010). However, the LCA programme, not unlike vocational programmes in some other national contexts, has also been argued to have an unintended consequence, that of social exclusion. The way in which LCA is provided in some schools means that students often feel excluded from other Leaving Certificate groups and in some cases are segregated from the main student body (Trant et al. 1999). Such exclusion continues into the post-school years, as participants are encouraged to enter into specific and often vulnerable (Byrne, McCoy, and Watson 2009) industrial sectors of the labour market and precluded from entering higher education, at least directly.

Data and methods

Gaining access to the 'student voice' is now widely acknowledged as an important element in educational research. Students have unique perspectives on learning, teaching and schooling; and efforts have been made to reposition students by including their perspectives in educational research and reform (Weis and Fine 1993; Rudduck, Chaplain, and Wallace 1996). This approach particularly allows for the 'primacy of respondent' treating students as 'experts who provide valuable information' (Sarantakos 1988). The use of the student voice is central to this paper, which uses in-depth

qualitative interviews with young people who have left school and are reflecting on their experiences. The data used in this paper are from a larger study of student experiences of the LCA programme in Ireland involving life history interviews with 29 young people who had participated in the LCA between 2002 and 2006 (see Banks et al. 2010). Individual semi-structured interviews were conducted during 2008 by members of the research team, using a topic guide that covered a range of life and identity domains (perceptions of past, present and future lives). Potential participants were fully informed about the objectives of the research, what their participation would entail, why they were selected and assured of confidentiality and anonymity in the reporting of results (pseudonyms were utilised where verbatim quotes are cited). The interview transcripts were analysed using the computerised qualitative analysis programme QSR NVivo. Descriptive categories were first generated and applied to textual passages (Bazeley 2007). These descriptive categories were then merged into coherent analytic themes. The themes created were both emergent themes and themes previously highlighted in the relevant literature.

Out of these 29 interviews, we selected five cases that exemplified a full range of educational experiences and family circumstances where we could fully investigate the role of individual agency and school processes as determinants of entry into the LCA programme. In selecting the five cases from the interviews, we identified commonalities and created specific student typologies that included: those who wished to enter the labour market; those with special educational needs; those who felt they were misguided by the school into taking the programme; and those who struggled with schoolwork in lower secondary education. The rationale underpinning the selection of the five interview cases was based on the extent to which they best reflected the typologies. Although the typologies were developed to reflect different student profiles, there remains considerable overlap between each of the individuals' life histories in terms of educational pathway and life stage. Three males and two females were selected: Maurice, Jackie, Barbara, John and Thomas who were aged between 21 and 23 at the time of the interview. From these interviews, we gained a comprehensive range of views, perceptions and reflections about their experiences in lower secondary school prior to entering the programme and the process of decision making leading to LCA entry. We situate these young people's experiences within the social and institutional structures and seek evidence of the ways in which students self-select tracks or whether tracks (schools) select students. The data used here draw on discussions of life in school prior to LCA during lower secondary, the decision-making process around taking LCA, and perceptions and expectations of the programme. Furthermore, these individual life histories allow us to gain an understanding of the role of school or institutional forces in shaping decisions and outcomes. As with all qualitative research, we had to make difficult choices about the quotations we chose to analyse, those we included in this article and those we omitted (Rubin and Rubin 1995; Merriam 1998). Examples, therefore, are not meant to be quantitatively representative but rather to illustrate the different pathways into LCA, the role of individual agency, family and environmental factors and institutional factors (agency, structure and resources). Names have been altered using pseudonyms (Table 1).

The differentiation of students into the LCA and LCE/LCVP programmes is a critical point of transition in students' educational careers. We employ two concepts commonly used in life history analysis as a way for framing the findings: firstly, educational trajectories in lower secondary education or the direction in which life was moving for them; and secondly, critical turning points in student decision making, where we consider

Table 1. Case study profiles.

	Main characteristic	Social background	Location	School
John (22)	Wished to enter labour market/early leaver	Working class	Urban/regional	Boys' secondary
Thomas (22)	Wished to enter labour market	Working class	Urban/regional	Large coeducational secondary
Maurice (21)	Special educational needs	Middle class	Urban/city	Large coeducational secondary
Jackie (23)	Misdirected into taking LCA	Working class	Urban/regional	Large coeducational secondary
Barbara (22)	Self-selected into LCA	Middle class	Rural	Girls' secondary

significant contexts or people that influenced choices. By using these concepts, we examine how institutional and personal characteristics shape student choice and subsequent educational pathways.

LCA student 1: John

Research recognises that working-class students are disproportionately found in non-academic and vocational tracks; however, much debate still remains about why this is the case. Our first student, John, is 21 and from a working-class family and housing estate in a small regional town. He is one of the youngest in a large family, none of whom had gone to college. John differs from the other students selected for this paper in that he left school in fifth year before completing the LCA. A notable feature of John's educational trajectory is how young he was when he began to withdraw from school. This he attributes to the death of his father during his first year at secondary school, which led to feelings of alienation within the school. His disengagement from school also appears to have been influenced, however, by his working-class background and a disconnect from middle-class school culture. Since first year, John and his group of friends from his local 'area' had been 'split up' across all the classes at lower secondary level: 'We were all gone into different classes, so we couldn't interact with each other because we were a bit of a menace to society ... so, they moved us from class to class anyway'. These comments highlight John's sense of 'we' to refer to his social group and 'they' to describe his school culture. Aware of this cultural mismatch, he felt neither him nor his type of family 'fit in' to the school:

A lot of the teachers knew a lot of the peoples' parents, there wasn't much to know about my parents, me father was an alcoholic, you know, me mother was trying to rear nine children, so, she probably didn't fit into their kind of category, I suppose.

His rejection of school was accompanied by a very early entry into the labour market, albeit on a part-time basis, at age 11. He never considered going to college and while at school his main aim was to 'get a job and earn money'. Influenced by his older brother, he decided he would like to 'get a trade' and viewed the LCA as a way in which he could

make contact with potential employers to get an apprenticeship. He felt that he would not 'need a Leaving Cert' to work as a tradesman. He acknowledges, however, that there were other influences, which centred around preserving his peer group and working-class background, impacting on his decision (Willis 1977). Choosing LCA meant that many of his friends would be reunited in the same class again:

A couple of the lads that I had been separated from for three years from my own area said that they were going into LCA and I thought well I'm going into a trade, I might get a bit more of an education.

This comment clearly suggests that John had considered leaving school early and, at the time, the LCA suited his needs. He now feels differently about his decision, however, and wishes he had completed the 'normal Leaving Cert':

In the back of me own mind I knew the trade I was going to go into wasn't going to necessarily need a Leaving Cert, so what was the point in doing a normal Leaving Cert, now I see it differently, but, but late.

LCA student 2: Thomas

The LCA programme is generally targeted at students who have experienced difficulties with their schoolwork during lower secondary education and/or are perceived as being at risk of early school leaving (Smyth et al. 2007). Our second student profile, Thomas, is a clear example of a young person at risk of early school leaving who, by taking the LCA, was enabled to finish school. Like John, he was from a working-class family and had limited access to information and guidance at home. He attended a large coeducational community school in an urban area of a small city where he still lives with his parents. It is difficult to pinpoint when Thomas first decided to leave school early as he had had a negative educational trajectory throughout the lower secondary stage. Therefore, his decision to enter LCA is framed within his desire to leave school after his Junior Certificate when he hoped to start an apprenticeship. Like John, he felt that the traditional Leaving Certificate would not benefit him as he associated it with accessing higher education – something which he had never considered: 'Just the ordinary Leaving Cert wouldn't have done much for me because I didn't want to go for college, I didn't want points like'.

Disadvantaged students and their families tend to be more dependent on their schools for accessing information about the types of tracks available and what entry to a particular track means for later life (McCoy et al. 2006, 2010). In Thomas' case the guidance counsellor played an important role in his decision to take the LCA. His initial preference to leave school early changed significantly when he was directly approached by his guidance counsellor who persuaded him to try LCA for a year, after which he decided to stay for another year and finish school:

It was the guidance counsellor who told me, and he brought me in and said what are your options and all, what I planned on doing, I just said I wanted to leave, he just said would I try it for a year and I just said I might as well like you know.

In contrast to John, Thomas appears to have had direct intervention by the school who questioned what he wanted to do. Thomas' decision was made when he realised LCA was

not ‘about the points’ for going to college and he began to take a real interest when he realised the subjects were practical:

When he talked to me it grew on me a small bit you know, all the subjects and the ... education, if you know what I mean, it wasn’t about the points, there was no pressure of exams like.

Similar to John, however, Thomas acknowledges the role of his peer group in his decision. He described how five of his friends who ‘all grew up in the same place’ and ‘all went to school together’ were approached by the guidance counsellor to see what they wanted to do after lower secondary level. As they felt the programme would be ‘better for trades’, they decided to do it. Thomas has a positive opinion of the LCA but considers it solely a programme for students who want to leave school early. Thomas now works for a large construction firm and despite the economic downturn feels that his job is secure.

LCA student 3: Maurice

It is not uncommon for students with special educational needs to be placed in the lowest stream class within secondary education, particularly if there are no ‘special classes’ available (Ware et al. 2009). Moreover, research shows that students with special learning needs or difficulties disproportionately attend the LCA programme (Banks et al. 2010). We use Maurice as an example of this profile of student. He is 24, has Asperger syndrome and is an only child who lives with his parents in a middle-class suburb of Dublin. Maurice went to his local coeducational community school and completed the LCA in 2004. As an example of an LCA student, his story is interesting in that he is middle class and has been assigned to the LCA as a result of his special educational needs and experiences of severe bullying in lower secondary school. He describes his educational trajectory as ‘stressful’ and relates these problems to the people in school rather than schoolwork:

At Junior Cert [lower secondary] level, what was school like?

Stressful enough because I went there and didn’t really know anybody so like, a few idiots in my class so, you know.

Bullying is a significant feature of his school experience. He did not have ‘any friends’ in lower secondary level but instead was picked on by other students and made fun of:

They’d be throwing things at you and calling you names for no reason, laughing at you for like, something that they thought they got in their head, you know, yeah. I don’t like being a subject of fun for people I don’t even know.

These experiences were traumatic and had a lasting impact on Maurice who on leaving school suffered a psychological breakdown and spent two years in a rehabilitative programme. Like Thomas, Maurice knew very little about the LCA but instead of wanting to leave school early, he intended completing the traditional Leaving Certificate. His decision to enter was heavily influenced by the intervention of the school’s deputy principal who approached him on the school corridor and advised him to take the LCA based on his computer skills:

I was going to do the ordinary Leaving Cert but then I had a word with the deputy principal one day, he came up to me in the middle of the corridor and he was like, 'you're very good at computers [Maurice] and I think you should do the LCA'.

This discussion with the deputy principal was a turning point in Maurice's educational trajectory. His decision was formed at this point and he did not investigate the difference between the LCA and LCE/LCVP any further. Overall, he appears to have enjoyed LCA, but this opinion appears to be more reflective of how negative school was during lower secondary education. At the time of interview Maurice was completing a course in further education in computer maintenance.

LCA student 4: Jackie

As an example, Jackie's assignment into the LCA track is atypical in that it was not based on her academic ability which was good at lower secondary level. Throughout lower secondary, her educational trajectory was positive, and she describes herself as a good student who really enjoyed school. The classes in her school were streamed from first year and she was in the 'second highest' class. She had good relations with her teachers and friends and performed well in her Junior Certificate examinations:

I loved school, like I really did, I loved it from 1st to 3rd year, I loved it. The teachers were lovely, everything about it was great, I was learning loads ... studying and I got great points in my Junior Cert as well.

Jackie is from a large working-class family, and although she is second youngest in her family, she was the first of her siblings to have aspirations to go to college. As far back as lower secondary education cycle, Jackie was focused on completing her Leaving Certificate and going to college: 'I loved it [school], I said I can't wait now to go on and do my Leaving [Cert], you know I couldn't wait to get to college. Just mad about college'. Her decision to take LCA appears to have been primarily influenced by her peer group – other people from her local area who had taken LCA and were encouraging her to do it:

People that had been in it before like there was a 5th year that I knew and they were like 'ah yeah sure do it it's dead handy, you can get to do this, and you know it's really dead handy'. I was like 'ah lovely'.

Streaming at lower secondary level also appears to have played a role in influencing Jackie's decision. Despite being in the 'second highest' lower secondary class, most of her class took the LCA based on what she feels was misleading information given by the school about the different (and less recognised) credential in the LCA programme. Jackie's class weighed up the benefits of taking a course that offered continuous assessment instead of one final set of examinations. Jackie and her friends were, however, unaware that taking the LCA would limit their access to college:

We all thought it was just handy you know what I mean you could still get the same points, still go to college, you know, like doing assignments ... but it wasn't like that at all. We all thought the same in the class and then it was just like what! We can't even go to college with these points.

There is a notable absence of formal guidance in Jackie's decision, which appears to have been based on inaccurate second-hand knowledge. Although she sought permission from her parents to take the programme, they too were unaware of its limitations in accessing third level. When she asked her older sister's opinion of the LCA, she felt she 'didn't care' which Leaving Certificate she pursued. Reflecting back on this period, however, Jackie feels that her family did not fully recognise her ambition to go to college. Compared to her older siblings, Jackie feels she was a more dedicated student but that perhaps her parents did not distinguish between them. Although Jackie believes that the decision to enter the LCA was her own, in discussing how she made this decision she is, however, full of regret and feels she was misinformed by the school into taking the programme. The turning point for Jackie came at the end of third year when 'selected' students in her year were brought to an 'interview' by the school principal where the details of the LCA were provided:

You would be interviewed and, 'what would you like to do applied or straight' and I was like 'applied leaving'. They were like 'why' and I said just 'I think it's better to do assignments all year' ... 'that's fine Jackie we'll get back to you' and that was it. The same with everyone in my class.

These comments show that by the time Jackie went to the interview, her decision to pursue the LCA had begun to form. She feels it was at this point that the school withheld vital information about the limitations of the programme in accessing higher education. She felt that during the interview the implications of taking the LCA should have been explained further:

They just didn't say, oh wouldn't you rather do this, or explain like it's easier if you do it this way because you can get into college because I wanted to go to college. Like they didn't explain it, just said it's okay. I'll get back to you.

Like her parents, the school does not seem to have been aware of Jackie's ambition to go to college. They never discussed her decision any further, and she was never informed that she had been 'accepted'. At the time of interview, Jackie was engaged in home duties with her two children. She was looking for work and still considered going to college in the future.

LCA student 5: Barbara

Research shows that parents with higher educational qualifications are more likely to enrol their offspring in an academic track, which leads more naturally to university access (Brunello and Checchi 2007). Our final LCA student, Barbara, is 23 and from a middle-class family in a small rural town. She is the second youngest in her family and has three older sisters, all of whom had gone to college. She is an example of a middle-class student who self-selected into the LCA track despite being discouraged by both her parents and the school. Similar to John, Thomas and Maurice, Barbara's educational trajectory at lower secondary level was negative and she struggled with schoolwork throughout:

I wouldn't have been the best now in that school, I wouldn't have been the best now at all, probably, I just didn't enjoy it because like, I wasn't good at school at all ... I would have been always kind of bottom of the class, you know that kind of way, I just didn't enjoy it at all.

Her negative school experiences seem to have been influenced by inappropriate subject choices in first year, as a result of family expectations for her to succeed in science (as her older sister had done). By taking science, however, Barbara missed her opportunity to do art at school:

I suppose a lot of my family, my oldest sister, she went on and did nursing and she was extremely good at that, and when it came to choosing in first year I remember my mam was like, oh, don't do art, you'll get nothing out of that, so kind of ... I think she kind of pushed me on doing science and I didn't really want to do it.

Barbara's decision to enter the LCA seems to go against her parents' wishes and is based on her aspirations to do art as a subject. Like John and Thomas, Barbara associated the traditional Leaving Certificate with higher education and as she felt she would not be 'able' for college, she had planned to directly enter employment when she finished school:

I thought I'd go straight to work because to be honest with you I didn't think I'd be able to go to college ... I was just, I just wasn't enjoying school at the time, it was just, it was difficult like.

While she knew very little about the programme, she saw the LCA as a way of finally getting to do art: 'I knew very little about it at the time, but I just, I knew that there was a lot of work experience and ... I knew that I could go on and do art in it'. However on hearing that Barbara was considering taking the LCA, the school intervened to ensure it was the right decision for her. The principal directly approached her to make sure that she was aware of the implications of taking the LCA for accessing higher education. She now believes that he was trying to discourage her, but she was adamant that this is what she wanted to do:

Because I had two other sisters that had done their Leaving [Cert] and stuff and had done really, really well, he was like are you sure you want to do this course because you'd have to do a PLC before you go to college.

They were concerned that you were making the wrong decision?

Yeah, I think he was just, he was nearly trying to put me off it.

Was he?

Yeah, just being honest and I was like no, it's for me like.

Similarly, her parents were reluctant, but having witnessed her struggle with school at lower secondary level and gone to the LCA open night at the school, they began to think it might be the best option for her: 'My mam was like ... she was like if that's what you want to do, do it, you know because she knew I was struggling and she didn't think, you know, she knew I wasn't able'. At the time of interview, Barbara had completed a further education course in interior design and was employed by an interior design company.

Conclusions

This paper has examined the factors influencing student entry into a pre-vocational track using five young people's personal reflections on school. Our analysis adds to existing international research on tracking and curriculum differentiation providing an example outside the US educational context where much of this literature is based (Lucas 1999; Oakes 1985, 2005). Although only a small proportion of the student cohort in Ireland take the prevocational LCA programme, their experiences echo accounts from other tracked systems, in particular in the way in which tracking systems reinforce initial differences by social class (Gamoran 2010). Our use of students' life histories has, however, provided a unique insight into the interplay between individual and school processes in shaping track placement. In exploring the nature of student choice, our findings point to the need for an alternative conceptualisation of tracking 'that takes into account the increased complexity and multi-dimensionality' (Gamoran 1989) of schools and the schooling process. A number of factors emerged from the data analysis.

For the majority of students, the transition from lower secondary to upper secondary education would not represent a 'turning point' in their lives; however, for LCA students their entry into the programme could be seen to be the product of a choice to enter the programme, avoidance or rejection of their current educational pathway (to take the traditional Leaving certificate), or a school-level process where they drift into a 'default' pathway based on their prior school experiences and, in many cases, difficulties.

Early educational difficulties and previous educational experience at lower secondary level are important determinants of track location within upper secondary education; however, there is some evidence that schools have the power to reinforce social class background effects in terms of how they intervene (or not) and inform students through counselling and advice around student choices. John and Thomas, for example, represent typical targeted working-class students intended for the LCA programme. However, their selection by the school to take LCA is set against the backdrop of negative learning careers in lower secondary education which resulted in an outward intention to leave school early or enter a trade. The decisions were certainly context related and cannot be separated from their family background, working-class culture and life histories. However, it could also be argued that both John and Thomas made pragmatic or rational decisions within this context. In many ways, their decision to enter the LCA was motivated by the perceived opportunity to remove themselves from their negative educational experiences (Hodkinson and Sparkes 1997) in junior cycle. The programme allowed them to distance themselves from the dominant academic school culture and allow them to develop counter-culture which favoured labour market participation over academic attainment (Willis 1977).

However, even between these two case studies, some differences emerge. Thomas appears to have gained most from taking the LCA in that he completed school and raised his educational expectations. For John, however, the issue of 'framed choice' is evident in terms of the lack of access he had to information (guidance) at the lower secondary level. Using the notion of 'curricular location' by Heck et al. (2004), John appears to have been aware of his social and academic position within the school and entry into LCA simply affirmed his doubts about his academic ability. As a working-class student in a middle-class school, in many ways choosing LCA was situated within the context of 'choosing respect' (Yonezawa, Wells, and Serna 2002) and in particular choosing a classroom where he was not isolated and his cultural background was valued.

Maurice's decision to enter LCA seems to have been partly rational but also based on feelings and emotions. Being bullied throughout lower secondary school appears to have influenced his decision to reject his current situation and accept the suggestion of LCA as a separate and alternative programme. This choice is somewhat framed by the school who specifically target Maurice for entry into LCA. In terms of his background characteristics, Maurice, however, is atypical in the sense of being middle class, but his special educational needs appear to override social class influences in influencing his LCA entry. His school appears to have had clear selection criteria based, in this case, on ability and by directly approaching Maurice, it essentially established a set of parameters within which he could make a decision (Kerckhoff 1976, 369).

Choice and decision making can involve choosing a particular direction, avoiding certain options or drifting into 'default' pathways (White 2007). Relatively chance encounters or interactions can result in turning points (or 'critical moments') in young people's trajectories (Thomson et al. 2002). These turning points can be structural and determined by outside forces or self-initiated, where the person is instrumental in precipitating a transformation in response to a range of factors. In our case study of Jackie, however, it seems that non-academic factors may also reduce the parameters of student choice. Her decision to enter LCA is context related and dependent on partial (mis)information from known and familiar sources. In many ways this decision is rational, based on the information she had access to and informed by personal experiences and advice from a friend who knew about LCA. The school also played a role in Jackie's entry to the LCA, however, and in many ways her teachers' and counsellors' *perceptions* of her ability without proper regard for her *actual* ability led to her taking the programme (Van Houtte 2004). Jackie therefore represents a misdirected working-class student but is atypical as an LCA student in that she had enjoyed lower secondary education and performed well academically. Although she was not targeted by the school to take the programme, she does seem to have 'slipped through the net' by not articulating her educational ambitions to go to college to her principal (nor is she asked). She is the first in her family to have college-level ambitions, something which is not fully recognised in school or at home. Her lack of access to cultural capital (Bourdieu 1986) appears to limit her knowledge and familiarity with the dominant school culture and educational pathways.

Our final student Barbara appears to have actively controlled the decision to enter the LCA by calculating the likely costs and benefits before making the decision. She entered the LCA and rejected the option of the traditional Leaving Certificate based on her learning career at lower secondary level. What is interesting about Barbara is that despite having struggled with schoolwork at lower secondary level, showing low academic performance and displaying low academic aspirations, the school intervened in an attempt to dissuade her from pursuing LCA and heighten her academic aspirations. The impression is that, unlike Jackie, she was less likely to 'slip through the net' as school staff intervened in her decision. Like John, Barbara wished for a 'safe place' (Hooks 1990) where she would feel secure and in some ways, liberated. However, her insecurities did not solely stem from her social class but instead her poor academic ability. By choosing LCA, Barbara could restore her dignity both in school and at home and move from being 'bottom of the class' to 'teacher's pet'.

Throughout their learning careers students develop coping strategies and their identity and status is developed and shaped through their classroom experiences. The case studies in this paper highlight the varied ways in which young people and their families make

decisions and access and process relevant information. Although pathways into LCA appear to reflect a number of different overlapping processes, the trend for students within lower streamed classes to enter LCA runs contrary to the promotion of social mobility and freedom of choice. If student choice and thus equality of opportunity were operating in these schools, why did LCA choice mirror family and community stratification? The answer appears to lie in the linkages between home environment, expectations, school structures and student choice. This paper shows that schools advantage some and provide barriers to the educational success and social mobility of others.

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