



**National Office for Equity of Access to Higher Education: Discussion Paper
Targeted Initiatives to Improve Access: Mapping The Present and Directions for
the Future 2004**

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(ii) Barriers to success:

- BARRIER 1. Availability of Leaving Cert. Subjects in secondary schools

Anecdotal evidence suggests that in some designated disadvantaged secondary schools students may be neither encouraged nor given the choice whether to pursue honours level in key subjects as entry requirements for third level courses e.g., Irish, Maths. Issues of cost may arise where only a small minority of students wish to avail of classes at honours level in a given subject. Moreover, key subjects such as science for Junior Cert., needed for nursing, are not always available. The need for more cooperation across schools to share teachers in ‘minority’ subjects/subject levels is evident at least in some areas. The availability of such classes is a right of the student, not simply a favour to be given to them if resources are available

- BARRIER 2. The Irish requirement for entry to Colleges of Education

The National Forum Report (2003) concluded that ‘one of the central factors giving rise to exclusion from teaching of students from disadvantaged, working class and minority backgrounds is the entry requirement of proficiency in Irish’ (p.170). The continued requirement for a minimum of HC3 in Irish before admission to the Access Programme has presented us with some difficulties in acquiring a large enough pool of applicants. We would suggest that there are three possible approaches we may take to remedy this:

- (i) The National Forum Report Action Plan ‘proposes that it is more important that student teachers graduate with satisfactory competency levels in Irish than it is for them to enter Colleges of Education with satisfactory competency levels’ (Recommendation 3.5.1)

- (ii) a concentration of resources be focused on Irish in both primary and secondary school,
- (iii) the introduction of an Access Course whereby students would have the opportunity to achieve the required Leaving Cert. grades alongside other introductory courses in subjects available to the B.Ed. degree, before they begin the degree course. Alongside the academic subjects offered in such a course there would be an opportunity to engage in activities that would expand the students understanding of higher education in general and facilitate their ability to make reflexive decisions/observations on their place in the higher education system. The progression rates from the Access Course to the degree course would be estimated at 100%, in contrast to some other foundation courses currently in existence that would appear to ‘cherry-pick’ only the most intellectually talented. Our holistic educationalist ethos at St. Patricks College: would challenge this utilitarian model of focusing *not on the needs of the individual student* but only on the majority (‘greatest good for the greatest number’). While selection is necessary with regard to those who participate in the foundation courses, once the student is brought on to such a course it is essential that they do not be given a failure identity through the possibility (except in extreme circumstances) of being rejected subsequently by the university. A plethora of educational theorists and educational psychologists recognise the danger of labelling students as failures (e.g. Merrett 1986; Glasser 1969; Warnock 1977; Handy & Aitken 1990; Casby 1997; Kellaghan et al 1995; MacDevitt 1998; Kelly 1999).
- **BARRIER 3. The suppression of students’ cultural identity as people from working class areas.** *There is a need to facilitate expression of cultural identity through entry of sufficient numbers of students from working class areas.* A critical mass of students from working class areas is essential to move beyond a model of access where the students are to simply be assimilated into the culture of the college institution. Incidence of class ethnocentrism (Bourdieu 1996) is part of the fabric of third level institutions¹. Given a critical mass of Access students there is scope for a programme of workshops/seminars to promote working class culture in terms of difference rather than deficit, thereby providing a truly inclusive atmosphere of learning throughout the college rather than purely among the Access students. *At St. Patrick’s College, we would suggest that our exceptionally large intake of mature students provides one example of a critical mass of people which has helped to transform the college culture*
- **BARRIER 4. Prejudice from other students and college staff**
There is a need to provide more awareness for access students of College procedures to remedy prejudice from other students. Access students are under no

¹ “In secondary and higher education, it is taken for granted that the language of ideas elaborated by the academic and scientific tradition and also the second-order language of allusions and cultural complications are second nature to intelligent and gifted individuals; or better, the ability to understand and to manipulate these learned languages- artificial languages, par excellence. Where we see the natural language of human intelligence at work immediately distinguishes intelligent students from all the rest- not equitable- they consecrate cultural privilege.”
(Bourdieu et al, 1994:8)

obligation to identify themselves as such to students or members of staff not directly involved in the Access Project, it is a choice they must make themselves. In the case of Access students experiencing prejudice from non-Access students we are collaborating with the student's union to provide a procedure for resolution of complaints of a minor nature. By broadening the profile of the student body in sufficient numbers we hope to ensure a critical mass of Access students who are confident in disseminating their own form of cultural capital.

(iv) What further work is still required ?

A holistic strategy² for continuity from primary to secondary school and planning for access to third level:

- **extracurricular activities**
- **emotional expression and development**
- **a relational and contextual approach to motivation for future education**
- **a long-term strategy to develop leaders from the community**

(For further discussion of these points see below for extract from a recent report on the needs of primary school girls in Ballyfermot 'Voices of Children: St. Raphael's Primary School, Ballyfermot' Commissioned Report for URBAN Ballyfermot (Downes, P. April 2004))

Extracurricular activities

The disruption to the social environment of the pupil during transfer to post-primary is well recognised (see also Fingleton 2003 for early school leavers' accounts of loss of friendship due to this transfer in the Canal Communities Area)

As extracurricular activities offer opportunities for:

- responsibility and success,
- decision-making and social skills,
- protecting against early school leaving

it is extremely important that any such supports at primary level are sustained at secondary level

The Educational Disadvantage Subcommittee (2003) has recommended that School Plans address 'key areas' such as:

- extracurricular programmes and connection to youth service provision within the local area
- transition from primary to post-primary

Yet it is arguable that these two elements need to be firmly connected to each other so that a plan would exist for continuity between those extracurricular activities at primary level and at secondary level (see also Downes 2004).

- 5th/6th class and first/second year post-primary need to be targeted regarding

² While all of these points are being raised in the context of a primary girls school in Ballyfermot, it is being suggested that they all have equal validity for other designated disadvantaged schools and areas

extracurricular activities with a focus on how to develop continuity within these activities from primary to post-primary. There is a need to develop bridges with local organisations and secondary schools to implement this strategy

Emotional expression and development

- A strategy of continuity between St. Raphaels and the local secondary schools needs to also focus on a continuity of implementation in practice of Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE) – where primary teachers could provide feedback to secondary school teachers (and vice-versa) about:
 - a) what has and has not worked in creating a supportive climate of trust for pupils in Ballyfermot,
 - b) pupil needs and expectations within such a supportive climate which need to be sustained at secondary level to minimise the culture ‘shock’ of acclimatisation to second level

- The openness of the primary school environment may create expectations in young girls of an emotionally communicative and supportive environment at second level which could lead to a heightened sense of disillusionment if this atmosphere is not sustained across the transition to second level. There is a real onus on primary and secondary level schools to work together to sustain a continuity in approaches to SPHE in practice, as well as through provision of social and emotional supports.

- It is recommended that procedures of communication be clarified between primary and secondary teachers regarding SPHE approaches that work in the Ballyfermot context and pupil expectations carried over from primary to secondary

- Gilligan et al’s (1990) research on adolescent and pre-adolescent girls has highlighted the loss of ‘voice’, loss of ‘connection’ and relation that occurs between ‘the twelve year old’s knowing’ and the older girl’s ‘remembering’. In other words, girls may lose the capacity to be aware of and to articulate their emotional needs - both privately and to others. Gilligan et al argue that many girls lose the confidence to connect with their inner world at the onset of the teen years. Such a view would further imply that there is a heightened danger of disconnection if the girls are to move from a highly supportive primary school environment to a more remote impersonal secondary school atmosphere.

- In order to anticipate the real dangers of ‘loss of connection’ and disillusionment if there is not a continuity of approach from primary to secondary level, a proactive whole-school policy at St. Raphael’s regarding the teacher as social and emotional support needs to be extended to become part of a ‘between-school’ policy with local secondary schools.

- This focus on transition is not simply at the level of the individual pupil but is at a systemic level regarding the transition in ‘atmospheres’ between St. Raphaels and the local secondary schools (see also Fingleton 2003 on loss of friends and the difficulties of forming bonds with a variety of teachers at secondary as opposed to the stability of one class teacher at primary)

A relational and contextual approach to motivation for future education:
The bridge to third level, pathways from primary school

- Four key guiding principles need to inform future pathways from primary education towards third level - and to help sustain and foster the high levels of interest in schoolwork and enthusiasm to stay on until Leaving Certificate through focused strategies

The four key guiding principles underlying this holistic long-term strategy to enable pupils gain access to third level are as follows:

- i) Movement away from conceptions of choice and third level education where the pupil's choice regarding the future is founded on *only an abstract knowledge* of what third level is supposed to be like³
- ii) Emphasis on a *relational* dimension to choice and third level – this attempt to move away from abstract motivational goals for the pupils future to concretise and immerse the pupils' experience in relations with identifiable role models⁴ i.e. people they can relate to
- iii) Emphasis on a *contextual* dimension to choice and third level – particular places for study at 3rd level, particular subjects and jobs to be given information about
- iv) Issues of academic motivation cannot be separated from developing expression of young girls social and emotional needs. Recognising this need to overcome rigid divisions between reason and emotion involves adopting a strategy that embraces both dimensions as vital to sustaining the momentum clearly evident at primary level for many pupils at St. Raphaels to aspire to third level education.

Beyond third-level as an abstraction to third-level access strategies with a relational and contextual focus

- Identify their interests in fifth/sixth class, *as part of long-term strategy to involve local Ballyfermot people in leadership roles in the community e.g., as teachers, youth workers, childcare workers, psychologists and lawyers.* This strategy would involve:
 - a) information about the jobs themselves through arranging meetings with people working in those areas,
 - b) visits to the relevant institutions providing these courses; though visits alone are insufficient as the pupils need to meet people whom they can identify with and sense an 'assumed connection' (Gilligan 1982) with, such as college students from broadly similar backgrounds to themselves,
 - c) involvement of parents in these meetings and visits where possible,
 - d) clarification of the necessary subjects at Leaving Certificate to gain access to the third level courses and examination of the availability of such subjects in the secondary school e.g., whether honours Irish is available as an option at second

³ Cf. Downes (2003b) on the contrast between choice based on abstraction and choice as a relational contextual process

⁴ Cf. Gilligan (1982;1990) on an association of contextual relational thinking with female experience and Bandura (1977) on role modelling

level as it is necessary for entry to the Colleges of Education. Some of the information relevant for such careers could also be made part of projects in the school as part of what could be called, for example, a 'follow your dreams project'.

- This dual focus on transition includes not only transition to post-primary but also to third level. As it must be acknowledged that the teenage years is a time of changing identity with some strongly arguing for discontinuities between childhood and adulthood (Clarke & Clarke 1984), the goal of such project must include a large degree of flexibility and choice. Even if pupils change their views over time regarding specific careers, the opportunity to reflect on the costs and benefits of varying careers as well as clarification of important features of careers e.g., opportunity to help others, chance for choice and initiative in the workplace, variety within the work, salary levels, opportunity for travel, could help student motivation in the future.
- A long-term strategy needs to be adopted to facilitate access for young people from Ballyfermot to third level - with particular strategic priority to be given to the areas of teaching, law, social policy, social work, youth work, childcare, sociology, psychology. Implementation of such a strategy would facilitate increased participation of local people in leadership roles in their own community
- This strategy would be aided by access policies at third level institutions (including Ballyfermot College) where there are reserved places for designated disadvantaged schools outside the Leaving Certificate points requirement (though with a minimum requirement) analogous to schemes already operating with regard to mature students. St. Patrick's College, Drumcondra, has, for example, recently established a system of reserved places for students from designated disadvantaged schools in Dublin (see also National Forum on Primary Education: Ending Disadvantage 2003 on recommendations regarding 'direct entry' programmes)

Integration of development regarding social and emotional needs with academic and career/vocational needs

The need to integrate strategies to meet vocational and emotional needs is highlighted by the following conclusions from interviews with 'at risk' adolescent girls in the U.S context:

The choices and paths taken at adolescence have the potential to be pivotal, setting a course for the educational and vocational direction – and the psychological and relational character – of adulthood. The conventional paths set for many young girls, often 'fraught with danger', make adolescence a complex and consequential journey. It is not a journey that should be undertaken alone' (Taylor, Gilligan & Sullivan 1995).

- It is recommended that an integration of strategies be developed to connect:
 - a) relational and contextual approaches for choice and third level with
 - b) a programme to develop continuity in practice from primary to secondary level regarding self-esteem, sex and relationship education, SPHE

(i) Examples of best practice – A preliminary view

[Open Doors Project](#) – visits to St. Patrick's College by students from schools linked to the access project. The aim is to introduce and de-mystify the third level environment for these second level students, and to forge links between St. Patrick's College and secondary schools in communities adjacent to the College. A total of 59 secondary school students from O'Connell's school, and Colaiste Dulaigh were given tours of the college in February and March 2004 with the assistance of over 40 B.Ed and B.A student volunteers. It is hoped that with financial support we can extend this project to primary schools.

We want to show *these visiting students* that college is an attainable goal and that not all students are 'swotty' or 'posh'. We also have the welfare the *St. Patrick's students* in mind. We want to de-mystify the urban Dublin school and give the B. Ed students the chance to hone their teaching skills on students that often have an undeserved reputation for being 'difficult' among student teachers. By taking this interaction out of a TP situation they will be more relaxed and without a specific lesson plan to follow they get the opportunity to discuss life, the universe and anything else they fancy with the first years. The trainee teachers discover the rewards to be found in talking with students about what its like to be in college, what its like to live in a disadvantaged area and best of all what the first years really thought of their years in primary school. The students are offered a plan to structure their time with the students if they so wish.

The OPEN DOORS Project recognises that:

i) *visits alone to third level institutions are often insufficient* as the pupils need to meet people whom they can identify with and sense an 'assumed connection' (Gilligan 1982) with, such as college students *from broadly similar backgrounds to themselves*.

ii) *access is a right not a favour*

In the case of B. Ed. Students helping with tours of the college for access students we introduce the notion of reciprocity in that the linked schools participants, through their interaction with the B. Ed. Students, not only benefit from contact with possible role models but also have a role to play themselves in the formation and training of future primary school teachers through that interaction. For example, the access students are planned to be actively consulted regarding their views on what makes a 'good' and 'not so good' teacher and is a useful point of feedback for the B.Ed student volunteers (this approach of consulting the secondary students on their views of teachers has been employed with success for the past three years on the elective courses for third year B.Ed students on teaching in disadvantaged schools).

This measure will recognize and accommodate the need for mutual benefit in the interaction between potential Access B. Ed. Students and the current cohort. This reciprocity of needs will help the move to move to a rights based approach regarding access to third level for disadvantaged groups rather than viewing access students as having received a 'favour' to enter

iii) *crucial to avoiding drop-out is a feeling of 'belongingness' to an institution*

Other key access issues:

- a) involvement of parents in these meetings and visits where possible, also a short seminar to assist parents in understanding the third level process and what will it will demand of their children. Topics covered will include explanation of terminology (such as the grading system) and coursework requirements. It is hoped that this will encourage greater parental involvement and support for students.
- b) clarification of the necessary subjects at Leaving Certificate to gain access to the third level courses and examination of the availability of such subjects in the secondary school e.g., whether honours Irish is available as an option at second level as it is necessary for entry to the Colleges of Education.

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