

*Staging Transformations: What Role Does Learner Identity
Play in Further Education Students' Decisions About
Progression to Higher Education?*

An Interpretive Phenomenological Inquiry

Paul McConnell

x21222983

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Name: Paul McConnell

Student Number: x21222983

Degree for which thesis is submitted: Master of Arts in Educational Practice

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Abstract

The aim of this study was to investigate how learner identity factors into the decisions of Further Education (FE) graduates as to whether or not to progress to Higher Education. Broad literature suggests that the learner identity plays a significant role in academic trajectories. However, little to date has been written on how a student's learner identity informs the decisions around academic progression post FE. The study, rooted in Interpretivist Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), involved semi-structured interviews with six participants, all of whom had attended FE on the island of Ireland in the last seven years. In addition to the primary research question, several branching questions emerged, specifically around how the learner identity affects the progression decision, and the factors informing it. These questions were: 1) *How do previous educational experiences influence the learner identity?* 2) *How do the contextual factors of one's life affect the learner identity?* The research identified three superordinate themes. These were the impact of previous educational experiences on the learner identity, the role of educational transitions in the learner identity, and the contextual factors informing the learner identity. Among these, several subordinate themes emerged. These included the influence of social relationships, the fluidity of the learner identity and the role of meaning making and interpretation in informing the learner identity.

Keywords: Learner identity; Educational transitions; Higher Education progression; Further Education; Educational decision making

List of Abbreviations

BTEC: Business and Technology Education Council

DOES: Department of Education and Skills

ETB: Education and Training Board

FE: Further Education

FET: Further Education and Training

HE: Higher Education

HEA: Higher Education Authority

LGBTQ+: Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer / Questioning

MAXQDA: MAX Qualitative Data Analysis

NFQ: National Framework of Qualifications

QQI: Quality and Qualifications Ireland

SEN: Special Educational Needs

SOLAS: An tSeirbhís Oideachais Leanúnaigh agus Scileanna (Further Education and Skills Service)

SNA: Special Needs Assistant

SUSI: Student Universal Support Ireland

Irish Language Words

An Garda Síochána: Irish Police Force

1. Introduction

1.1 Introduction

This research explores how the learner identities of Further Education (FE) graduates impact their decisions around whether or not to progress to Higher Education (HE). It is the aim of this study, which is grounded in Interpretivist Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), to hear the lived experiences of students who have graduated from Further Education programmes on the island of Ireland, and understand the factors motivating their decisions around progression to HE. It is hoped that this analysis will provide an understanding of how the learner identity factors into this decision by listening to rich, detailed accounts of those who have navigated educational progression decisions post FE.

Chapter 1 provides an overview of the issue, examining first the context of the Further Education sector, exploring the background of the issue, and the rationale behind my decision to research this topic. It outlines the primary research question, and explains the branching questions that arise from this. Then, it explores the purpose and significance of each question, at a personal and professional level. From here, it provides an overview of the methodological design and implementation, exploring the reasoning behind decisions made in that regard. Finally, it explains the structure of the dissertation, and provides an overview of the decisions made regarding the dissemination methods.

1.2 Background

Often, learning has disproportionately been associated with age (Erikson, 1950; Van Praag et al, 2018; Vygotsky, 1998). Schoolchildren learn to read and write (Erikson, 1950; Vygotsky, 1998). Teenagers sit their Leaving Certificate, and third level institutions are places for young adults, who will choose the field in which they will work until retirement. In recent decades, these misconceptions have been challenged, with a growing recognition that learning is a lifelong process (DOES, 2000; Gleeson, 2023; Merriam & Caffarella, 2007). The educational journey is largely unique, and there is no incorrect or superior route (Satori et al, 2023). Gone are the days when teenagers choose the occupation to which they will dedicate their working lives. Gone too is the notion that success in one examination will determine one's entire future trajectories, and capacity to engage with post compulsory education (English, 2024). Many now return to education later

in life, and find pathways to Higher Education and enhanced employment opportunities through Further Education and Training (FET) programmes. Plenty arrive in Ireland after attaining significant educational success, and being eager to perfect their English, similarly choose FET. And yet more choose FET after graduating from Higher Education, in order to retrain in different fields.

The Further Education sector attracts a wide array of students from a diverse collection of backgrounds (Satori et al, 2023). Some arrive optimistic for the future beyond Further Education, excited for the opportunities that will await them upon graduation, either in the world of work or as they progress to Higher Education. Some find their way to FE fresh from thoroughly negative experiences of compulsory education, memories of school uniforms, homework and the Leaving Certificate fresh in their minds. Others arrive with little experience of formal education, seeking to further their literacy, numeracy, communicative and IT skills. Yet more arrive with thoroughly horrific memories of the Irish education system from a bygone time, taking tentative steps back into the world of academia (O'Donoghue, 2017). Although not every student arrives in FE with altogether negative experiences of education, it has been my experience as a teacher in the field that many students arriving in the sector have low opinions of themselves as learners. In the next section, I will outline how my experiences of such informed my decision to pursue this research topic.

1.3 Rationale

As a teacher in the Further Educations sector, I have often encountered students who find the prospect of progressing to Higher Education simply beyond their capabilities. Higher Education is not for everyone, and it is not up to me as a teacher to compel students to attend university. With that said, it is my hope that any students in my classroom who opt against the endeavour, do so as a result of their personal preference, and not because they feel themselves incapable of progression. It has not been my experience, though, that this is always the case. Frequently, I have heard the phrases "I'm not smart enough", "it would be too difficult" or even "I'm too stupid for university" from students in my classroom. Finding these statements jarring, in particular from students who were fairing particularly well during their FE programme, I began to investigate, and found several publications discussing the phenomena (Astin, 2023; Haier et al,

2023). Some research has been conducted on the progression of FE graduates to HE in Ireland. Much of this research has been quantitative, seeking to explore the facts and figures behind Further Education and progression to Higher Education (SOLAS, 2023b). Little research has touched on the lived experiences of students as they navigate the progression decisions, and explored the factors motivating the decisions around this.

Satori et al's, (2023) study is in contrast to this. Satori et al (2023) sought to explore the barriers affecting Further Education graduates in their progression to Higher Education, through hearing the experiences of FE graduates during focus groups. This study explored the structural barriers, such as the primary, secondary and tertiary cost of education, along with the dispositional barriers, such as the fear of failing, imposter syndrome, and a lack of confidence in one's academic ability. These dispositional barriers struck me as extremely relevant to my own research, and I began to conduct much reading into the idea of educational barriers between Further and Higher Education.

It is not alone, though, the barriers that students experience that inform their decision around progression (Gray & Purpuri, 2024). The challenges that students have encountered during their time in education can leave them feeling that perhaps they are not suited for success within academia (Lin, 2014). Negative experiences with teachers, peers, assessments and learning difficulties can leave students with a low opinion of their capabilities in the classroom (Walker, 2010). This can dissuade them from the possibility of progressing to Higher Education (Satori et al, 2023).

In contrast to this, positive interactions with education can leave students more optimistic about their progression prospects, and make them more open to the idea of progressing to Higher Education (Whitaker, 2019). Students who have had more positive experiences with education may feel better able to progress to Higher Education (Satori et al, 2023). This is particularly true around educational successes that they have achieved, such as obtaining a high grade on an assessment (Whitaker, 2019). These successes, challenges, and barriers that students face culminate in a belief regarding themselves and their abilities as learners: the learner identity (Lamb, 2011; MacFarlane, 2017). The learner identity encompasses how students feel about their abilities as learners (MacFarlane, 2017), with students who hold more positive

perceptions of themselves as learners performing better academically, and being more open to the progression to Higher Education (Kolb & Kolb, 2009; Satori et al, 2023).

The learner identity, though, is not a static concept, but develops as individuals accumulate experiences within academia (Nakkula & Toshalis, 2014). The experiencing of barriers and challenges within education can negatively impact a student's perception of themselves as a learner, and lead to an unhealthy learner identity (Kolb & Kolb, 2009). In contrast to this, successes and accomplishments within education can facilitate a more positive learner identity (Wallace, 2008; Whitaker, 2019). This research will explore how this learner identity factors into the progression decisions of Further Education graduates, and what aspects inform it.

1.3 Positionality

In a similar manner to my students, my own identity, as a Further Education teacher and a researcher, has been influenced by my lived experiences, on both sides of the classroom. Positionality refers to how one's identity locates them within the context of their research (Giametta, 2018). This is not something that is easily interpreted, drawing upon all aspects of a person's identity, including, but not limited to, their race, sexual orientation, social class and gender identity, along with the lived experiences that arise around these (Bowl, 2001). Often, one's positionality is not only about those aspects of our identities that we hold, but those that we do not (Centre for Postgraduate Research, 2021). Therefore, it is important to establish who I am as a researcher.

I am a white, Irish, man. I was born to working class parents, and am the first person in my family to attend Higher Education. After finishing secondary school, I received an offer to study law at university. Being reluctant to commit to such a thing at 17 years of age, I opted instead to study Performing Arts at Further Education, a decision which raised many an eyebrow at the time. I spent four years in FE, and then attended university, obtaining first a BA in Performing Arts, then an MA in Contemporary Performance. I cannot overstate how much I enjoyed my time in FE, and it has been a driving factor in my decision to train as an FE teacher.

These experiences, though, carry with them a certain implicit bias that I have remained cognisant of, and attempted to minimise through my quality assurance methods. I have attempted at all times, to contest the notion that there is one route to success following Further Education, and acknowledge the validity of choice and preference in the progression decisions of FE graduates. Many argue that only certain people have the necessary “gaze or identity” to tackle certain research topics (RU, 2021). While this view can be problematic, as oversubscription to it can lead to the ostracization of certain underrepresented groups within the research community, it is one that I broadly believe to be beneficial. I believe that I am well situated to tackle this particular research topic, as my time as a student in the sector has afforded me the opportunity to reflect upon the factors that affected my own progression decisions, along with those of my peers. My being a teacher in the FE sector has allowed me to observe students as they navigate the progression decisions, and the role played by their learner identities in informing these.

1.4 Research Question and Objectives

The question at the heart of this research study is *What Role Does Learner Identity Play in Further Education Students’ Decisions About Progressing to Higher Education?* This study aims to explore how students’ perceptions of themselves as learners – their learner identities – factor into their decisions around progression to Higher Education post FE. While much quantitative data has been gathered relating to progression to Higher Education, little research to date has focussed on the lived experiences of students, and how the decision-making process is navigated. What is evident from existing research, however, is that Further Education graduates face additional dispositional challenges in their progression to HE (Burton et al, 2011; DCU, 2023; Satori et al, 2023). These dispositional challenges often arise as a result of previous interactions with education (Lin, 2016). Therefore, a branching question from this research is *How do previous educational experiences influence the learner identity?*

It is not alone, though, lived experiences that will inform the learner identity (Ní Dhuinn & Keane, 2021; Pearce et al, 2008). The contextual factors of one’s life, including race, social class, gender identity and sexual orientation can also play a significant role in determining how a person feels about themselves as a

learner (Burns, 2016; Dumas, 2010; Reay, 2021). Thus, another branching question relating to the research is *How do the contextual factors of one's life affect the learner identity?*

1.5 Significance

Not every student enters the Further Education sector with the aim of progressing to Higher Education. It is my broad goal to encourage and empower every student to follow their dreams, whether that be moving into the world of work, continuing to another Further Education programme, or progressing to Higher Education. The decision of what comes next following Further Education is a deeply personal one, and I would encourage all students to fully reflect upon it, and decide what is best for them. But it is crucial to me that this decision be just that. A choice made by them around what they feel is in their best interests. Not a decision arrived at after concluding that they lack the intelligence to continue to Higher Education, or that university is simply beyond their capabilities. At a personal level, it is my hope that this research influences my teaching practice by challenging me to encourage students towards healthier learning identities, and empowering them to pursue the post FE outcome that they desire.

At present, much has been written around the idea of the learner identity. However, there are significant gaps in existing literature relating to the effect of one's learner identity on the progression decisions of students. Similarly, there exists a large amount of information relating to student progression post FE, but little considering what role the student's learner identity has played in this decision, and less again that seeks to explore this topic through hearing the lived experiences and interpretations of the students themselves. It is my hope that this research can bridge these gaps in existing literature, and aid with the understanding of how the learner identity factors into the decisions around progression to Higher Education. I am also interested in outlining actionable steps to aid in the development of healthier learner identities of students in the FE sector, at a personal and wider level. It is also my hope that future research in this regard affords greater consideration to the testimonies of students in the FE sector, as I have in this research, and listens to their lived experiences. At an institutional level, I would like to see a greater deal of thought afforded to the unique identity of learners. This would mean training and understanding around the level of diversity in classrooms, specifically around students with differing levels of English, and learning

difficulties, in order to ensure that such disadvantages do not negatively impact how they view themselves as learners.

1.6 Methodological Approach

This study was grounded in Interpretivist Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). It was interested in hearing the student's interpretations of their own lived experiences, and of understanding the factors informing their decisions regarding HE progression. The learner identity is fundamentally connected to lived experience (Lamb, 2011). As students accumulate these experiences, they engage in an interpretive process, making meaning around them (Lamb, 2011; Kolb & Kolb, 2009; Whitaker, 2010). This inherent relationship between learner identity and the interpretation of lived experience necessitated a research methodology that was complimentary. The double hermeneutic process of IPA acknowledges both the interpretations of the participants as they experience the phenomena, and my interpretations of this as the researcher (Smith et al, 2009). Thus, it made an extremely fitting choice for this particular research.

The study involved a semi-structured interview with each of the six participants, all of whom graduated from Further Education in the last seven years. Some of the participants progressed to Higher Education, while others did not. Participants were asked questions on a range of topics, including what factors motivated them to progress / not progress to university, how their identity as a learner factored into these decisions, and the role of transformative learning in their educational journey. A list of sample questions, along with example extracts of the interview transcripts, are available in the appendices. There were three male and two female participants, along with one non-binary participant, encompassing four distinct nationalities. The sampling strategy was purposive.

1.7 Structure of the dissertation

This dissertation contains five chapters, beginning with this, the introduction. Following on from this is chapter two, the literature review, which will outline the existing literature, and the research underpinning this research question. The Literature Review ties these concepts together, highlighting their relevance with relation to this dissertation. Chapter Three, the Methodology, will outline all of the steps undertaken in the design and implementation of the research methodology. This includes the reasoning behind why the study

is rooted in interpretivism, including the ontological and epistemological underpinnings, and why IPA was the most relevant analytical tool for the research. It will then explain why semi-structured interviews were chosen to collect data over other methods relevant to IPA. Chapter Three also introduces the participants, providing an overview of who they are, and what their experiences with education have been. Finally, it presents the methods employed to ensure rigor, and that ethical considerations were met, along with providing a brief overview of the reasoning behind the dissemination methods. Chapter Four presents the final findings from the analysis of the semi-structured interviews, separating them into themes, and bringing the findings into discussion with existing literature. Chapter Five provides a conclusion to the research, summing up the findings and explaining how each research question has been addressed. It will consider the limitations of the study, along with the implications of the research and a personal, institutional and policy level.

1.8 Dissemination

It is important to me that the research be disseminated in a manner that is equitable, accessible, and memorable (Belliveau, 2009; Lapum et al, 2014; Mueller, 2008; Meyer et al, 2012). Therefore, in addition to the findings of this research being explored in this writing, I have created a short performance piece inspired by the testimony of the research participants (see, McConnell, 2024). Given my own background in performing arts, I believe that I am uniquely situated to present the findings in such a manner. My goal with the performance was to recreate the authenticity of the interview process, by combining elements of each of the testimonies of the participants into a short monologue. A link to the performance is available in Appendix 1.

1.9 Conclusion

This chapter has provided an overview of the research, introducing the central and branching questions, along with providing the personal and professional rationale for choosing this research topic. It has provided an overview of the questions significance, and introduced the methodological underpinnings. The following chapter explores the existing literature relevant to this research, defining key concepts and theories relating to this research.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Introduction

This chapter seeks to explore the existing literature relating to the research question *What Role Does Learner Identity Play in Further Education Students' Decisions About Progressing to Higher Education?* This question sits at the intersection of several distinct but interconnected topics; the factors informing these decisions, such as the barriers, challenges, and successes that they encountered during their educational journey; how these factors both inform, and are themselves informed by, the students' learner identities; the dynamic nature of the learner identity, and the role of the Further Education sector in the development of new and healthier identities as learners. While much is written on each of these areas, little exists directly on how they converge in the progression decisions of FE graduates.

In this chapter, I will outline the literature that exists in relation to the context of Further Education, and the factors affecting progression decisions for FE graduates. From here, this chapter will focus on the often-contradictory literature that exists relating to the concept of learner identity (Lamb, 2011), defining the key terms, and differentiating it from similar concepts, along with demonstrating its relation to the progression decisions of FE graduates. Following that, this writing will explore the literature around transformative learning, its relationship with learner identity (Illeris, 2014), and its significance in the Further Education setting (Duckworth & Smith, 2022).

2.2 Further Education and progression decisions

What is Further Education and who chooses it?

While Further Education and training programmes have naturally existed across Ireland for over a century (McGuinness, 2014), it is the latter decade that has seen it emerge as the "Fourth Pillar of the Irish Education system" (O'Sullivan, 2017, p 2). With the long-term goal of creating a "world-class system" around Further Education in Ireland (SOLAS, 2020a, p 32), the period post 2014 has seen a sizeable growth in the number of programmes available in NFQ Levels 1 through 6, and the number of students enrolled therein (SOLAS, 2020b). In addition to this, recent decades have seen a warming of public attitude towards the

sector (DCU, 2023), with the idea that Further Education is synonymous with “less academic students” (McGuinness et al, 2014, p 10) becoming less prevalent (Gleeson, 2023; Mulvey, 2019; Thompson, 2009).

Despite, though, the waning of this entrenched myth, it remains true that many students find their way to FE after particularly negative experiences within traditional academia (DCU, 2023). For some, historical abuses that were once doled out as punishments still haunt their memories of education (O'Donoghue et al, 2017), and the decision to return to it was not something taken lightly. Others have indeed arrived after struggling with the Leaving Certificate, unsure of how they will fare in this new phase of their educational journey (DCU, 2023; Satori et al 2023). And yet others choose Further Education, because they feel that it is the best fit for them, and liable to aid them in their progression, whether that be to Higher Education, or directly into work (Gleeson, 2023).

The sector is tasked with providing accessible education to around 200,000 individuals across the country, from all manner of backgrounds (SOLAS, 2023). As a result, a wide range of programmes are offered at FE level in all manner of subject areas, such as science, business administration, early years, and arts and humanities. Courses are available on a full and part time basis, acknowledging the particular need for flexibility at this level – many students in the FE sector are balancing education with work, caregiving responsibilities and other demands. Programmes are divided broadly into three areas: Foundational Skills, incorporating NFQ Levels 1 and 2, Bridging Skills, including NFQ Levels 3 and 4, and Vocational Skills, NFQ Levels 5 and 6 (SOLAS, 2020a).

Many students in the sector find their way to FE fresh from secondary school, with those under 25 being the largest age demographic in the sector (SOLAS, 2023a). Many of these students are at a time of particular transition in their lives, as they progress from compulsory education, and begin to develop and hone skills relating to personal responsibility, and self-motivation (Duckworth & Smith, 2019, 2022; Satori et al, 2023). The FE sector also attracts a large number of mature and adult learners, who, similarly find themselves in a transformative period, returning to education to gain and refine skills, further personal development, or seek pathways to Higher Education (SOLAS, 2020a, 2023a; Duckworth & Smith, 2018).

In addition, FE often attracts a certain level of socio-economic diversity (SOLAS, 2023b; Gleeson, 2023). With students at this level entitled to similar funding as those in Higher Education (SUSI, 2024), and many FE programmes having recently abolished contribution fees (Gleeson, 2023), many students from lower income backgrounds find the prospect of FE more appealing than HE (Satori et al, 2023). This is particularly true when one remembers the secondary and tertiary cost associated with attending Higher Education, such as accommodation, school supplies and loss of earnings, which can further encourage students to undertake learning that is local and convenient (Breslin, 2022; Satori et al, 2023). This convenience also makes the prospect of Further Education appealing to those with care giving duties, work obligations and other responsibilities (Satori et al, 2023). The rollout of FE programmes in institutions across the country, many of them in rural areas, has facilitated and enabled those living in such locales to attend them. FE also appeals to those with disabilities, and differing educational needs (O’Sullivan, 2022), with almost 7% of learners in the sector living with disabilities (SOLAS, 2023b).

It is fair to say that the role of Further Education and Training in Ireland is multifaceted. Some students in the sector are seeking to further their basic literacy, numeracy and IT abilities (SOLAS, 2020a, 2023b). Many are seeking to develop skills and trades that will allow them to find stable employment upon graduation, while many more regard it as a pathway that facilitates entry into Higher Education (SOLAS, 2020a). Whatever factors motivate the decision of students to pursue FE, there is no denying that the sector is one of particular diversity (O’Sullivan, 2023). Thus, the exploration of student profiles can be challenging. There is no “typical” FE student, with the sector appealing to people from a diverse range of backgrounds (SOLAS, 2020b, 2023a, 2023b; Satori et al, 2023). Particularly involved in FE, though, are non-traditional students, including adult learners, people from disadvantaged backgrounds, and those seeking a change in career.

Further Education and the progression to Higher Education

It is not the goal of every Further Education graduate to pursue Higher Education. Some enter the sector with the goal of honing their knowledge around subjects about which they are passionate, while others are seeking to re/upskill, and improve their employment opportunities (SOLAS, 2020b). Some also

arrive in FE with the goal of “getting out of the house”, and are primarily interested in taking up a new hobby, or socialising with their peers while learning (Mooney, 2012, p 2). But many do enter the sector, either fresh from the Leaving Certificate, or later in life, with the aim of progressing to Higher Education. Many also graduate from FE open to the idea of progressing to university, but are unsure of how to action these intentions, or whether the choice is right for them. Others, though open to the idea, approach it with trepidation, being unsure as to whether or not the environment will be accessible to them (O’Shea, 2021a), representative of them (O’Shea, 2023), or whether they will be “smart enough” for the undertaking (Astin, 2023; Haier, 2023).

Over the last two decades, progression to Higher Education post FE has greatly improved, with progression having increased by up to 700% between 2001 and 2018 (SOLAS, 2020a), and progression rates as high as 90% in some parts of the country (McGuire, 2023). However, Satori et al (2023) states that FE students face additional barriers on their progression to HE. Many of these barriers are structural; the primary, secondary and tertiary cost of Higher Education are a dissuading factor for many (Lin, 2014). Similarly, work and caregiving responsibilities deter others from progression (Bowl, 2001; Lin, 2014). Others cite psychological and dispositional barriers as among the factors discouraging them from progression (Lin, 2014; Satori et al, 2023). The feeling that they would be “imposters” in the university setting (Breeze et al, 2021), or that they have “reached their potential” academically after FE (Satori et al, 2023, p 10), leave many wondering whether indeed they are suited for the endeavour.

The perception of the increased workload, and the feeling of being “overwhelmed”, that would arise from continuing to university is another frequently highlighted issue (McSweeney, 2013; Satori et al. 2023). Some feel that they would not be capable of tackling the more difficult work, and that they would struggle to keep up with their peers. A particular quote of note from one of Satori et al’s (2023) participants was “would I be good enough to succeed?”, highlighting the role of such barriers in influencing the progression decision.

While we have largely moved away from the idea that attendance of FE is indicative of a lack of capacity for educational success, many students do, as previously stated arrive in the sector after struggling

with traditional academia (McGuinness et al, 2014). The lived experiences of the challenges that they have faced during their time in education are, naturally, a factor that informs their perception of themselves as learners, which itself informs the dispositional barriers that they will face (Whitaker, 2019).

In a similar vein, the successes that students have accumulated during their time in education, both prior to and during FE, can bolster their feelings around progression, and aid the navigation of dispositional barriers (Satori et al, 2023). Further Education itself can play a significant role in providing positive interactions with education, and thus aid with the navigation of dispositional barriers (Duckworth & Smith, 2022; Gleeson, 2023). Its position between compulsory and Higher Education can bolster the confidence of students, and encourage those who otherwise may not have progressed to HE to do so (Duckworth & Smith, 2019, 2022; McGuire, 2022).

Overall, the dispositional factors which deter FE graduates from progressing to HE are largely informed by the contextual factors of a student's life, and the lived experiences of students with education that arise around these (Wodlinger, 2010). These experiences can be negative, as students navigate challenges and difficulties during their time in education, which can leave them doubting their capacity to progress to Higher Education (Asten, 2023; Lin, 2014). Similarly, successful interactions with education can leave students more optimistic about their ability to engage with Higher Education, and aid with the navigation of progression decisions (Duckworth & Smith, 2019). As students accumulate such experiences with education, they curate a perception of themselves as a learner (Nakkula & Toshalis, 2014). While the successes, challenges, and dispositional barriers that students face are a major factor in their decision around whether or not to progress, such dispositions are largely informed by how they view themselves as a learner – their learner identity.

2.3 Learner Identity

What is identity?

Norton (2000) tells us that a person's identity relates to "how a person understands his or her relationship to the world, how that relationship is constructed across time and space, and how the person understands possibilities for the future". Much is written on the concept of identity, with entire philosophical

treaties revolving around how it forms and develops (Perry, 2002). Ericsson's (1950) theories of development through the lifespan highlight what he believed to be the progressive nature of identity, insisting that one's identity developed in several key stages throughout life. Vygotsky's (1998) zone of proximal development pushed at the boundaries of these musings, pointing out that, with sufficient tutoring, a person could progress past what may be expected of their capabilities at a particular point in their lives.

Ericsson's teachings on the matter are largely outdated though, and do not afford due regard to the nuances of identity (Enright, 2021). Many point to the fundamental connection between identity and lived experience as proof that one's identity does not always necessarily develop in a linear fashion, and that it is nurture that plays a more significant role than nature in the formation of one's identity (Nakkula & Toshalis, 2014; Schachter, 2009). As a general rule though, regardless of which of the countless philosophical definitions of the concept of identity one finds most applicable, it is regarded as something that is dynamic, fluid, and subject to change as an individual grows, develops, and obtains new lived experiences (Koay, 2012; Nakkula & Toshalis, 2009).

What do we mean by "learner identity"?

Learner identity is one aspect of a person's identity (Kolb & Kolb, 2009; Whitaker, 2010). A person's learner identity can be loosely defined as "how an individual feels about himself/herself as a learner" (Lawson, 2014, p2). MacFarlane (2017) conceptualises learner identity as relating to both the academic and social context of the learner's life, along with their sense of belonging in, and capacity to engage with, education.

Among the contextual factors contributing to one's learner identity are one's ethnic background (Ní Dhuinn & Keane, 2021), gender identity (Bowl, 2001; Burns, 2016) social class (Pearce et al, 2008; Reay, 2021), relationships (Teng, 2018), and sexual orientation (Dumas, 2010). Teng (2018), alongside Kolb & Kolb (2009), point out that lived educational experiences, such as relationships with peers and teachers, encompass another aspect of one's learner identity. One's future trajectories and aspirations in life account for another share (Mukherjee, 2017). Thus, it can be said that an individual's learner identity is extensively complex, ever changing, and the product of their ongoing lived experiences (Nakkula & Toshalis, 2014).

In short, one's learner identity can be thought of as a culmination of how the contextual aspects of our life have informed the educational experiences we have had to date, and how these experiences will shape our perception of ourselves as learners. A healthy learner identity is one that embraces challenges (Kolb & Kolb, 2009), and accepts its own fluidity (Molden & Dweck, 2006). Some publications conceptualise the "learner identity" as being wholly positive, and hold it in juxtaposition to the idea of the "fixed mindset" (CAEL, 2009). This is something that is problematic, as some students often hold entirely negative perceptions of themselves as learners (Lamb, 2011). Lamb, (2011) highlights that this concept of a "learning identity" is distinct from one's "learner identity". This is again demonstrated by Kolb and Kolb (2009, 2012), who maintain that a learner identity is not an "either or" proposition, and acknowledge that one's learner identity develops throughout the educational journey. This adds greater validity to the direction of this research, as it acknowledges the idea that one can possess a negative learner identity, something reiterated in the work of Illeris (2014), who insists that transformations with regard to identity are not always positive.

In reality, the phrases "learner identity" and "learning identity" can be interchangeable. Lamb (2011) posits that the learning identity should be thought of as the state of being when one holds a positive learner identity, and that they are equipped for learning effectively. The phrase "learning identity" does, though, highlight the fluidity and dynamic nature of the concept, while "learner identity" suggests something that is more fixed. On the other hand, "learner identity" suggests that it is something unique to them as learners. Thus, while the phrases could be used interchangeably, the phrase "learner identity" has been employed in this research.

Another phrase often associated with the concept of learner identity is "learning style". It is a commonly held belief that people are in possession of their own unique "learning style", with people frequently repeating mantras such as "this isn't how I learn", and "I can't learn that way" (Sun et al, 2023). Often these learning styles are given as "visual", "auditory", "kinaesthetic", and "reading / writing", with many adamantly maintaining that they fall into one of the four categories (Carroll, 2022). In reality however, the existence of individual learning styles is not reflected in literature or scientific evidence, and regarded by many to be a massively prevailing and often detrimental myth (Nancekivell et al, 2019). It is contended by

Reiner & Willingham (2010) that, while students may have a preference as to how they engage with learning, “no evidence suggests that catering to those preferences will lead to better learning.”

With that said, while students do not possess individual learning styles, they do hold unique learner identities. The learner identity can be thought of as distinct from the myth of a “learning style”, for two main reasons. The first is that a learner identity is inherently fluid, and subject to change and development (Nakkula & Toshalis, 2016), whereas the concept of a “learning style” implies that it is something that one is almost genetically predisposed toward. And the second is that one’s learner identity will be informed by their contextual and educational background, which is itself informed by a student’s lived experience. Learner identity both shapes and is shaped by our lived experiences of navigating barriers during our educational journey.

The Relationship Between Learner Identity, Capital and Habitus

It is in the process of differentiating the learner identity from the myth of a “learning style” that we raise an interesting question around the factors that culminate in one’s learner identity. Lawson (2014), along with Nakkula & Toshalis (2014) and Illeris, (2014) tell us that lived experiences play a large role in one’s learner identity. Moran (2005) tells us that many contextual factors, such as one’s race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, and social class play a role in the formation of one’s identity as a learner. While this is true, it begs the question, is it these factors that shape one’s learner identity, or the lived experiences that arise as a result? This question can be examined through Bourdieu’s (1977) concept of habitus, in which we observe the role of the socialisation of one’s contextual factors in the shaping of the habits, skills and dispositions that they will acquire. While there is much debate surrounding the “use and misuse” (Tan, 2022 p1411) of habitus in educational research (Reay, 2004), it nevertheless highlights the fact that a comprehensive understanding of learner identity must account for both the contextual factors and lived experiences that students bring to the classroom.

Habitus can be thought of as the deeply ingrained habits and dispositions that an individual will acquire from their lived experiences (Lizardo, 2004). It determines how individuals will perceive the world around them, and shapes the meaning-making processes in which they will engage (Ambrasat et al, 2016).

Thus, the role of habitus in the formation of the learner identity cannot be understated. It is habitus that will determine how they navigate the educational landscape, and partly inform decision around their academic future. Habitus plays an integral role in shaping the learner identity in several ways. Firstly, it is habitus that will determine the internalised dispositions, or the general attitudes, beliefs and behaviours, of students with regard to education (Lizardo, 2004). These dispositions can be affected by a large number of contextual factors (Ní Dhuinn & Keane, 2021; Bowl, 2001), such as one's race, religion, social class or gender identity, and the lived experiences that emerge around these (Moran, 2005). It can also be affected by formative experiences with, and familial attitudes toward, education. These factors can have a significant effect on the learner's general outlook on education, and their motivation to learn.

Habitus also determines the meaning making processes in which a student will engage (Ambrasat et al, 2016), influencing how students will interpret the lived experiences that they acquire. Students who have struggled throughout their formative interactions with education often view themselves as simply incapable of engaging with academic challenges as they arise, formulating the view that they are "not smart enough". Conversely, students who have successfully navigated academic challenges often engage in healthier meaning making processes, regarding challenges as something to be tackled, rather than insurmountable obstacles.

Kundu (2020) also argues that access to resources is another manner in which habitus affects the learner identity. Bourdieu (1977) and Kundu (2020) posit that there are two factors that must be considered when examining how students foster a healthy learner identity; social capital, which includes one's networking abilities, access to mentors, and capacity to seek help; and cultural capital, referring to the affirmation, acceptance and normalisation of the knowledge and skills held by the student. Plainly, social capital refers to the availability of social resources to a student. This can range from things such as a student's capacity to rely on family, friends, community organisations such as clubs or religious groups, and professional networks for support, advice, collaboration, and a sense of belonging. Cultural capital, on the other hand, refers to the resources, education and skills that arise through being socialised and educated

within a particular culture. Educational background, cultural knowledge, language / linguistic proficiency, and understanding of social norms and etiquette are factors that encompass cultural capital.

Bourdieu (1979), alongside DiMaggio (1982) and Lareu (2003) inform us, in no uncertain terms, that cultural capital is not equally or equitably divided among society. All three of these publications highlight the inconsistencies in cultural capital between working class students and their middle-class counterparts, pointing out that greater financial resources massively aid with accessibility of social and cultural capital.

Though, while these publications are primarily concerned with this particular inconsistency, it is not the only disparity that exists. Racial and ethnic minorities often face systemic and institutional barriers preventing them from attaining cultural and social capital (Hero, 2003). LGBTQ+ identifying individuals may similarly find that stigma, prejudice and discrimination can prevent them from accessing cultural and social resources which will provide opportunities for development (Amnesty, 2023; Dumas, 2010; Littman, 2022).

Learner identity, as we have established, is a complex and fairly abstract concept (Briggs et al, 2012; Brennan, 2020; Illeris, 2014; MacFarlane, 2018). It is fair to say though, that, through effectively utilising Kundu (2020) and Bourdieu's (1984) theories around social and cultural capital, we can effectively operationalise learner identity, helping to ground it less in the abstract, and more in the quantifiable (James et al, 2012). The social and cultural capital available to an individual plays a sizable role in shaping their identity (Enyedy & Fields, 2006; James et al, 2012), which, as we have established, is similarly a significant factor in the progression decisions of FE graduates (Campbell, 2018; MacFarlane, 2018; Satori et al, 2023).

The coding of cultural and social capital in the lives of the participants will provide insight into the effect of intersectionality in the formation of their learner identities (James et al, 2012), and allow for the exploration of how access to social networks and cultural capital can aid their navigation of challenges they will face around progression (Pérez, 2016).

Learner Identity and Academic Progression

It is fair to say that the factors affecting progression from FE to HE are multifaceted, and differ from student to student (Bowl, 2001). Bowl (2001) highlights the institutional barriers faced by women of colour

on their educational journey, and the effect that these have on their sense of identity as a learner. Lin (2016) discusses the challenges faced by mature female learners in HE, and Burns et al (2016) highlights the barriers faced by transgender students in their interactions with education. All of these papers highlight unique challenges faced by different demographics. Thus, it is fair to say that one's learner identity has an effect on the dispositional barriers that a student will face (Walker, 2014), and inform the decisions around progressing to HE (Satori et al, 2023).

This is compounded by the idea of intersectionality. Aspects of a person's learner identity are not independent, but interact with each other, meaning that attempting to analyse them as distinct from other aspects of a person's identity would be incorrect (Varsik & Gorochovskij, 2023). Instead, we must accept that the concept of one's learner identity is extensively nuanced, meaning that the barriers that they face during their educational journey will be similarly so. This is something that is deeply relevant to this research, as it dictates that any attempt to extract and elicit findings must cater to those nuances.

This research posits that the learner identity – how students feel about themselves as learners – plays a role in shaping the dispositional elements that effect progression from FE to HE. Many students are unsure whether they are “smart enough” or “capable of” progressing to Higher Education (Astin, 2023; Haier, 2023; Satori et al, 2023). Such a conclusion is indicative of a poor identity as a learner (MacFarlane, 2018), and it is the focus of this research to explore the lived experiences of students in this regard.

Satori et al (2023) insists that dispositional barriers impacting the progression from FE to HE are lessened by positive interactions with academia, something similarly discussed in the works of MacFarlane (2018) and Bowl (2001). This research seeks to explore how the dispositional barriers, challenges, and success of students have impacted their decision as to whether or not to progress to Higher Education. As students accumulate experiences within academia, they interpret and engage in meaning making around these (Brennan, 2020). It is these interpretations that this research is seeking to explore, with relation to how they inform, and are themselves informed by, the learner identity.

Alongside the role of learner identity in the decision as to whether or not to progress to HE, is the interpretation that students hold of Higher Education itself, which is largely influenced by learner identity (Archer et al, 2002). It is well documented that how students understand and make sense of the construct of university will play a role in the progression decisions of students (Archer et al, 2003; Reay, 2004). Archer (2005, 2011) insists that a students' broader and learner identity will culminate in an interpretation of Higher Education that will play a significant role in the progression decisions of students. Among the factors that affect this interpretation are social class (Archer et al, 2003; Archer & Leathwood, 2005; Reay, 2004), gender identity (Drew & Work, 1998) and race (Altback et al, 2002). The perception that students have of Higher Education is itself a complex topic, and one deeply rooted in how students perceive their own abilities and capacity to engage with education. Many students feel that the sizeable increase in academic demand from the transition – that HE is “too difficult” (O’Shea, 2021b) – would leave them struggling to keep up with their peers. Others feel that issues around the inclusion of their particular demographics would leave them feeling isolated, and that the endeavour is thus not for them (Perna, 2020).

What do we mean by transformative learning?

Transformative learning refers to the facilitation of a deep, meaningful shift in the perspective of a learner (Mezirow, 2000). It goes beyond the simple acquiring of information, and consists of a fundamental transformation in meaning schemes, the sense an individual makes of the world around them (Mezirow, 2000). Transformative learning was conceptualised by Jack Mezirow in 1978, and is regarded as occurring in ten distinct stages, beginning with a disorienting dilemma that forces an individual to accept that their current meaning scheme is incompatible with newly acquired information (Cranton, 1994; Mezirow, 2000).

From here, an individual begins a process of self-examination, and tackles a sense of alienation (Mezirow, 2000). Then, the learner begins to relate their discontent to others, exploring and trying on new behaviours, slowly building up confidence in their new meaning schemes (Cranton, 2006). Following this, the individual begins planning a new course of action, obtaining knowledge, and experimenting with their new roles, before finally reintegrating their new meaning schemes (Imel, 1998; Mezirow, 2000).

That is not to say that developing one's learner identity is a ten-step process, that will always begin with a specific disorienting dilemma, and culminate in them emerging with a new and healthier learner identity. By Mezirow's (2000) own admission, transformative learning occurs infrequently in an individual's life, and even then, the steps outlined should be thought of more as a guide, and less as something written in stone. However, while not every instance of development around one's learner identity could be considered "transformative learning", there is something of a transformative process around it.

2.4 The Learner Identity: A Dynamic Concept

One's learner identity is, as we have established, largely informed by their experiences, both positive and negative, with education and learning (Lamb, 2011; MacFarlane, 2018). With that said, the learner identity is not something static, but changes and evolves as individuals interpret their experiences (Nakkula & Toshalis, 2014). Thus, one should not think of the learner identity as something that is fixed, but as the product of ongoing lived experience. It is with the transformative nature of the learner identity in mind that we move on to the next underpinning theory of the research: The dynamic nature of learner identity.

How does transformative learning impact learner identity?

Illeris (2013, p. 2), acknowledges that there is an inherent "relationship and connection" between transformative learning and identity. One's learner identity, as highlighted by Nakkula and Toshalis (2014), is something that is in a constant state of development, and is, by its very nature, subject to transformation (Illeris, 2013; Kolb & Kolb, 2012). Thus, it could be said that striving to implement transformative teaching and learning in our classrooms can afford students the opportunity to develop their sense of identity as a learner. It can perhaps aid them in moving away from self-perceptions that they are incapable of attending university, to establishing the "view of themselves as successful learners" (Lamb 2011). In short, one's learner identity is something that is in a constant state of transformation (Nakkula & Toshalis, 2014).

Dynamic learner identities, the Further Education sector, and progression to Higher Education

While it is easy to discuss the transformative nature of learner identity, how feasible is it to facilitate healthy and positive growth in that regard? And how can this aid students in their decisions around

academic progression, if that is something that they aspire to? The solution to this lies in the implications of the research of Duckworth & Smith (2019, 2022), who believe that the FE sector is synonymous with transformation. Duckworth & Smith (2019, p. 2) claim that the further education classroom is inherently a “space for transformative learning”, and put forward the argument that many students in FE are at a transformative period in their lives. Many of our students are moving through the sector after compulsory education, and grappling with their new identities as adult learners. Many others are returning to education after a significant gap, and coming to grips with their identity as a learner. Thus, it could be said that, given the frequency with which students in the sector are faced with disorienting dilemmas, there exists significant potential for transformation (Duckworth & Smith, 2022).

However, one must not regard this as wholly positive. The presence of disorienting dilemmas can facilitate transformation in an altogether negative direction, as demonstrated by Illeris (2014) in his assertion that transformative learning is not always progressive. Roberts (2006) points out that the negative emotions that are often evoked through disorienting dilemmas, such as the sense of shame, alienation (Mezirow, 2000), or anger (Robertson, 1996) can lead to stress and anxiety, which can compel students to not finish their course (National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning, 2016).

Thus, the facilitation of transformative learning through the presentation of disorienting dilemmas requires a significant degree of discretion. One must be careful that the facilitation of disorienting dilemmas does not enable the opposite of what is desired. Presenting students with, for example academic challenges, or challenging firmly held beliefs, can be counterproductive. Transformative learning is, at its core, a dispositional change (Mezirow, 1997). Thus, it could be said that, facilitating transformative processes in our classrooms can aid students with their navigation of the dispositional barriers identified by Satori et al (2023), Lin (2014) and Wodlinger (2010), as they journey from Further to Higher education. It is not necessarily the case that each of the transformations in learner identity that occurs is itself equitable to full, ten-step transformative learning, but there is certainly a transformative process around the development a healthier learner identity. Helping students to a more positive identity can equip them with the tools to

navigate dispositional barriers, academic challenges, and educational successes as they emerge (Pike & Hopkins, 2019).

2.5 Conclusion

This chapter has outlined the existing literature around the context of the FE sector, and the factors affecting progression decision of FE graduates to HE. It has introduced the concept of the learner identity, and has explored the literature on the connection between the learner identity and progression decision of FE graduates. It has also examined the dynamic nature of learner identity (Nakkula & Toshalis, 2014) and the transformative nature of the FE sector (Duckworth & Smith, 2019). The following chapter will outline the methodological design and implementation of the research.

3. Methodology

3.1 Introduction

It is the focus of this chapter to provide an overview of the methodological approaches to the research, from design to realisation. The goal of this research is to explore how Further Education students navigate the meaning making processes around the decision to progress to Higher Education. This chapter explains the reasoning behind decisions made as to how the research was carried out. This includes decisions around the research paradigm and design, the participant recruitment process, and the participants themselves. It also explains how data was collected and analysed, along with the efforts made to ensure that quality and ethical standards were met.

3.2 Research Paradigm

At the core of this research is the question of how students navigate the meaning making processes around academic progression decisions post FE. The question is deeply rooted in the philosophy that one's identity as a learner plays a significant role in these decisions (Walker, 2014). As students experience challenges and successes within education, they engage in a meaning making process, which both informs, and is itself informed by, how they feel about themselves as a learner. Of the students who decide not to progress, some will decide that they are not interested in Higher Education. Others will feel that they are unsuited for, or unable for the endeavour. This research is interested in better understanding the factors

motivating progression decisions, and understanding what can be done to aid the progression of students who wish to progress to Higher Education, but feel themselves incapable. With this in mind, choosing a research paradigm that is complementary and authentic to the question, and the philosophy that underpins it, is an important step in addressing it (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011).

A core tenet of this research is that one's learner identity is unique, and a product of one's perceptions of, and interactions with, education (Lamb, 2011). Given the nuanced nature of this, the positivist paradigm, which contests that reality is something that can be measured (Park et al, 2020; Ryan 2018), is not one altogether suited to this research.

Another relevant approach is the critical paradigm. Rooted in the belief that reality is socially constructed, and heavily influenced by the power structures that surround lived experiences (Ashgar, 2013), the critical paradigm touches on a key point of the research; that social structures, cultural capital, and power inequalities play a sizable role in the formation of one's learner identity and meaning making processes, and thus are a major factor in the progression decisions made post FE (Bourdieu, 1984; Bowl, 2001; Kundu, 2020; Reay, 2021; Walker, 2014). This initially drew me toward the critical paradigm as the most fitting approach to my own research.

Though, while I acknowledge the strengths of the critical paradigms, I decided upon the interpretivist paradigm as the main philosophical underpinning of the research. The interpretivist paradigm holds the ontological position that reality is created by individuals in groups (Crotty, 1998). Thus, its epistemological position is that reality needs to be interpreted, and it is through this interpretation that meaning arises (Myers, 2008). This research was underpinned by the belief that the lived experiences of students are subjective, and that there exists little uniformity when it comes to lived experience (Given, 2008).

It became evident as I moved on with the interviews, and the analysis of them, that my choice of the interpretivist paradigm was indeed the most fitting. The deeply personal nature of both learner identity, and the experiences that inform it, along with the subjectivity around this, necessitates a research paradigm that

is complimentary. The acknowledgement of this subjectivity, and the focus on navigating lived experiences, made the interpretivist paradigm the best choice.

3.3 Research Design

While the paradigmatic position asserts a theoretical foundation upon which the research is based, it is the research design that oversees its implementation (Mengual, 2023). It is fair to say that the research design and methodology are inherently guided by the paradigmatic position of the research (Carter & Little, 2007). With this in mind, I have included a table, adapted from Crotty (1998), providing an overview of the guiding principles of the research.

Table 1

An overview of the paradigm, ontology, epistemology, methodology and method

Paradigm	Ontology <i>What is reality?</i>	Epistemology <i>How do we know reality?</i>	Methodology <i>How did I find out?</i>	Method <i>What techniques did I employ?</i>
Interpretivist. Allows for an exploration of the lived experiences and meaning making processes of students as they navigate progression decisions from Further to Higher Education.	Reality does not exist as a single entity, but is created by individuals. Each individual student's perception of their experiences is unique and shaped by their social context.	As a result of this ontological position, reality must be interpreted. Students interpret experiences as they occur, and there is a co-creation of knowledge between the participant and the researcher (Carter & Little, 2007)	Interpretivist Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) allows for a detailed examination of lived experience (Smith et al, 2009).	Six semi-structured interviews, presented as "research conversations", to facilitate informality (Satori et al, 2023), allowed me to hear first-hand the lived experiences of students than informed their decisions about whether or not to progress to HE.

With the focus on lived experience at the core of the research, and following the decision to ground the work in the interpretivist paradigm, phenomenology presented itself as the natural choice of methodological approach with which to conduct the research. Phenomenology, itself underpinned by the philosophy that it is lived experience that is the "ultimate source of all meaning and value" (Armstrong, 2005), would allow for a focus on in depth exploration of lived experiences, and facilitate the hearing of narrative accounts. There is an inherent focus on the interpretation of experiences, acknowledging the

subjectivity around such (Gallagher, 2012). Phenomenology is primarily interested in how the participant makes meaning around their experiences, and how the world “appears to the person experiencing” it (Moran, 2002). Phenomenology can be broadly divided into two main branches, transcendental and hermeneutic. Transcendental phenomenology seeks to explore the essence of phenomenon, and describe the structures of consciousness therein. Hermeneutic phenomenology seeks to interpret and understand phenomena, and is primarily interested in how individuals make meaning from the world (Friesen et al, 2012). Thus, given the nature of the research, I felt hermeneutic phenomenology to be the optimal choice.

From here, I made the decision to employ Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) as the main methodological tool with which to conduct the research. Its idiographic focus facilitated the exploration of the lived experiences so integral to the research, and provides rich, detailed accounts of the emotional geographies navigated by students through first-hand accounts (Smith et al, 2009). I believe that IPA was a more fitting choice for this particular research because of the double hermeneutic process, which acknowledges that, as the researcher, I am interpreting the interpretations of the research participants. This affords me the opportunity to reflect upon their interpretations of their experiences within education, and explore with them their interpretative and meaning making processes. The progression decisions made by students post FE are multifaceted, and largely influenced by their learner identities, which are themselves informed by lived experiences within education (Walker, 2014). IPA places a significant emphasis on personal meaning making, and acknowledges the subjectivity of lived experiences, upon which learner identity is based (Nakkula & Toshalis, 2014).

3.4 Research Participants

The study featured six participants, in order to allow for diversity among them, while keeping the number of participants at a practicable level. While all participants were Further Education graduates, some had progressed to Higher Education following the completion of their FE programme, although attendance of HE was not itself part of the inclusion criteria.

The inclusion criteria were as follows:

- i) Participants have completed Further Education in the past 7 years. This deadline has been set to ensure that participants are still capable of reflecting accurately on their time in Further Education.
- ii) Participants were currently not enrolled in education, similarly, to facilitate maximum reflection on their time in education as a whole.
- iii) Participation was open to anyone who had completed Further Education in Ireland or the United Kingdom.
- iv) Participants were at least 18 years of age.

The strategy around participant selection was criterion-I, purposive (Palinkas et al, 2015). This was to ensure that all participants had experiences pertinent to the research, and enhance the depth and relevance of information collected (Patton, 2002). I sought out participants who were known to me in a professional context, whom I knew to meet the inclusion criteria. This strategy was most beneficial as it allowed for me to contact only people who met the criteria (Cresswell & Plato-Clark, 2011). This sampling strategy also provided a degree of convenience, allowing me to access participants who were readily available and willing to engage with the research, thereby facilitating the collection of data within a given timeframe.

In addition to the six active participants in the research, I conducted a pilot interview with another participant, whose research conversation, while not directly featured in this writing, helped me to draft questions, and obtain experience in the interview process. During this interview, we talked of the significance of formative experiences on the learner identity, the factors that motivated his decision to not progress to university, and his experience of studying a subject about which he was extremely passionate during Further Education.

Who were the Participants?

Aoife (She / Her):

After graduating from secondary school, Aoife completed a BTEC Diploma in Performing Arts, before continuing to an HND / Tertiary Degree in Performing Arts. She also holds a certificate in Special Effects

Make-up, and another in Nail Design. From here, she progressed to a BA through the Open University. She has worked in a wide range of retail and office roles, and is currently employed by the NHS. Aoife encountered some challenges during her time in education, due largely to undiagnosed learning difficulties, but by the end of her undergraduate programme, she had been receiving support for dyslexia and ADHD. Aoife found the flexibility of the Open University to be one of the major factors which facilitated her success in education, and managed to balance the endeavour with working full-time.

Arthur (He / Him):

Arthur moved to Ireland at age 14. He felt a considerable difference between the secondary schooling in his country of origin and Ireland. While he felt that there were more opportunities for educational advancement in Ireland, he also found his time in secondary school fairly restrictive with relation to what subjects were available. He repeated his Leaving Certificate, with the goal of obtaining sufficient results for entry into An Garda Síochána, but found himself drawn to Further Education upon graduation. He spent two years completing a BTEC Extended Diploma in Performing Arts, and still thoroughly enjoys staging theatrical productions. Since graduation, he has worked in a variety of jobs, and is currently employed as a delivery driver. While he would like to return to university one day and obtain a degree, he loves being a delivery driver, and would be reluctant to leave his job.

Bee (They / Them):

Bee attended primary school abroad, and talked of extremely negative experiences of such. They encountered problems with teachers and bullying throughout their time in primary school, and moved to Northern Ireland at the age of 11, where they began secondary school. Bee has much more positive memories of their time in secondary school, and found the availability of more subjects to be a big improvement. They felt that this allowed them to focus on the subjects that they were more interested in. Following this, Bee attended Further Education to study counselling, and found the experience to be not altogether a positive one. They clashed with tutors frequently, and felt that transphobia and homophobia may have played a significant factor in the challenges they faced during their time in education. Bee completed a QQI Level 6

Diploma in Finance, during which they were awarded the Apprentice of the Year, an experience that they describe as being *“transformative to who I am as a learner”*.

Darren (He / Him):

Darren talked of nothing but negative experiences of his time in education, which he has described as “nothing short of traumatic”. He experienced homophobia, and found that competition with his twin sister led to him developing an unhealthy opinion of himself as a learner. He does not feel that he will ever return to education in any capacity. He currently works as a support worker with children in Northern Ireland, something which he finds “rewarding”. He has recently been referred to specialists around the possibility of an autism diagnosis.

Lily (She / Her):

Lily completed secondary school in 2014, where she struggled academically due to then undiagnosed learning difficulties. She is currently in the process of an autism diagnoses. She had worked in various retail jobs since finishing secondary school. Following this, she completed a Level 6 Diploma in Supporting Teaching and Learning, and currently works as a Special Needs Assistant (SNA) in a Senior Infants class in a rural primary school. Lily had stated in her interview that she feels that she “is not smart enough” for university, though has since informed me that she is affording the move greater consideration, and has identified a Higher Education programme that she thinks may be suited for her

Luke (He / Him):

Luke attended an integrated secondary school, and had generally positive experiences of his time in primary school. He struggled with the increased workload during secondary school, and graduated unsure of what to do next. He attended Further Education part time, taking night classes in order to facilitate his goal of attending university. He found that his time in FE reshaped how he thought of himself as a learner, and progressed to HE, obtaining first a BSc, then an MSc, in Psychology, making him the only participant with a

QQI Level 9 award. Luke had intended to pursue HE from the outset, and largely used FE as a “transitional period” between secondary school and university. He currently works as a counsellor for the NHS.

3.5 Data Collection

With the research being rooted in IPA, and the navigation of lived experiences, the method of data collection must be complimentary to this (Smith et al, 2009). Naturally, there exists a “cohesion” between IPA and qualitative methods, so any data collection would need to be considerate of this relationship (Tanh & Tanh, 2015 p25). The research necessitated methods that would allow me to hear the context, in rich detail, behind the experiences of the participants (Thomas, 2003; Willis, 2007). With this in mind, I initially considered several methods of qualitative data collection that were relevant to IPA.

A method that I considered was the use of focus groups, which would allow me to converse with all research participants at once, and afford them the opportunity to speak with each other. Satori et al (2023) employed the focus group to significant effect during their own research, allowing participants to interact with each other, and flag any common factors around progression decisions, the role of the learner identity with relation to these. It would have afforded me the opportunity to enhance trustworthiness by allowing for the co-generation of data by the participants (Redman-MacLaren et al, 2014). Also, the focus group allows for a certain level of diversity of opinion, and in theory, can create an environment where participants feel that their research forms a discussion, rather than a formal interview (Morgan, 1996).

This, however, is not always the case. Often in focus groups, certain participants can lead the conversation, while others will contribute significantly less (Acocella, 2014). Further, participants may feel less comfortable discussing particular experiences that they feel may not be shared by others (Krueger & Casey, 2000). Given this deeply personal nature of the research, focus groups would not have allowed me to maximise the personal experiences of individuals, and would chiefly focus on the shared experiences.

Satori et al (2023) suggests that informality is an important part of eliciting authenticity during research interviews, and thus posits that “conversations” is a more inclusive, accessible, and less daunting phrase than the word “interview”. Thus, it has been my preference that participants think of our

interactions, less as interviews, and more as conversations. It is my belief that the use of in-depth research conversations was the most fitting choice for several main reasons. Perhaps most notable of these was the depth of insight afforded from them (Smith et al, 2009). They allowed me to explore in detail the participants lived experiences, and to elicit rich descriptions, with a focus on personal reflection (Satori et al, 2023). I believe that this level of nuance would have been much harder to replicate using other methods, such as case studies or focus groups. The conversations lasted between forty-five minutes to one hour, in line with IPA guidance (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). They were conducted face-to-face, in order to allow the maximum connection and rapport building between the participants and I (Connaway & Radford, 2021).

The one-to-one nature of the research conversations afforded a safe space where participants could reflect on their personal successes, struggles, learner identity and journey through education, and share their feelings in a confidential manner (Satori et al, 2023). This is another triumph of the one-to-one interview over the focus group, and provided the possibility for participants to share their experiences more readily. It also facilitated a greater rapport between myself and the participants, which can help participants open up and provide richer descriptions (Smith et al, 2009).

Another major boon of the research conversation was the flexibility they afforded (Horton et al, 2004). I was able to adapt the questions and conversations as necessary, and in line with the direction that the participants moved in. This meant that I was not forced to stick to my pre-drafted questions, and was able to adjust both the questions themselves, and the order in which they arose, in line with the direction of the conversation. This allowed for the maximum amount of authenticity in the participants' testimonies.

Remaining adaptable in this regard also served to minimise the capacity for participants being led in certain directions, and helped to reduce any subconscious bias on my own part (Smith et al 2009). My questioning strategies revolved less around quizzing them directly on the subject matter, and more on adaptive probing. Adaptive probing meant that questions were open ended, and designed to elicit information, without speaking for the participants. Examples of such are available in the appendices.

Another major reason behind my decision around the use of one-to-one interviews, in addition to their efficacy, was their practicability. Conducting one single interview with each participant, and then engaging in member checking throughout, was much more workable in the time frame of the research than conducting something like participant observation. The timeframe would also have made difficult the possibility of undertaking multiple data collection methods, such as combining the interviews with focus groups. Rather, the research conversations allowed for an efficient and feasible data collection method, without sacrificing efficacy in any regard.

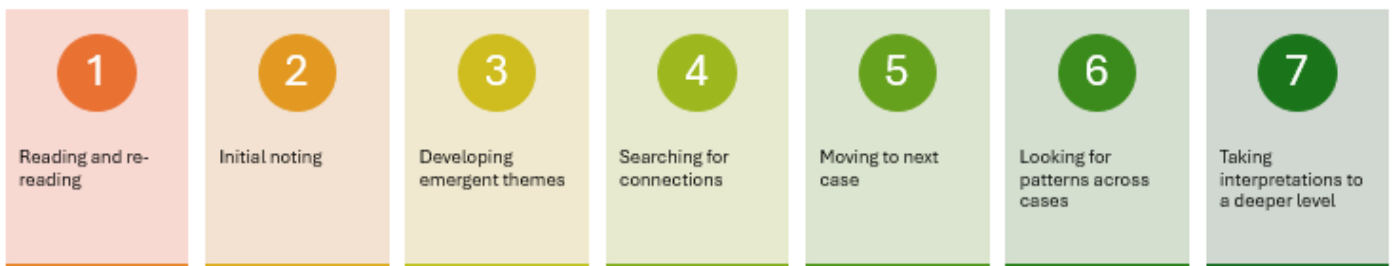
3.6 Data Analysis

All data gathered throughout the research conversations was analysed through the use of Interpretivist Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). Gibbs (2018 p2) describes the analysis phase of research as the “transformation” of data into “clear, understandable, insightful and trustworthy” information. While this may be correct in a broad sense, Tuffour (2017) and Lavery (2003) insist that IPA is a cyclical process, and thus does not lend itself to such a generalised taxonomy. Nevertheless, there must be actionable steps followed in order to conduct IPA (Tomkins, 2017). First, the data was recorded, transcribed and naturalised. Once these preparation steps were complete, the IPA began, following a seven-step process, as outlined by Pietkiewicz & Smith (2012), alongside Tomkins (2017) and Charlick et al (2016).

Initially, there was a period data preparation, which saw the interviews recorded and a verbatim transcript generated, which participants were afforded the opportunity to review. Following this, the transcript was edited to ensure accuracy, and then naturalised, in order to remove unnecessary phrases, such as token responses, without altering the meaning of what was being said. Participants were asked to read and sign the transcript following this, in order to ensure that it remained accurate. Further details of this process are available in the appendices. Following this, the IPA process began. An overview of this is included in *Appendices X*.

Figure 1

An overview of how the IPA process was implemented.



Reading and Re-reading

During this stage, I endeavoured to fully “immerse” myself in the data (Finlay, 2011, p142). I listened through to all interviews one final time before each was destroyed, and read through each of the transcripts multiple times. Afterwards, I took some time to reflect on them individually, making notes while actively and passively reflecting upon it. In line with Laverly’s (2003) statement that IPA is a cyclical process, this was not necessarily a phase which ended, but an ongoing process throughout the research.

Initial Noting

During this phase, the focus was around exploring the use of semantics and the choice of language. It is crucial that, at this stage, we are attempting to understand what the participant is saying, rather than furthering any agenda on our own end (Tomkins, 2017). At each line in the transcript, I made notes on three areas, in line with advice from Pietkiewicz & Smith (2012). First the descriptive comments, relating to what the participant was directly attempting to tell me. Then the linguistic comments – what the chosen language could tell me, and finally the conceptual comments, the meaning, and implications of the participant’s account. Examples of this process are available in the appendices.

Developing Emergent Themes

During this phase, the central undertaking is the conversion of preliminary notes into grounded themes. These should be clearly traceable back to the raw data (Tomkins, 2017). I began by organising the themes into clusters based on their conceptual similarity. Then, I strived to identify superordinate themes that capture the essence of each cluster.

Searching for Connections

Once the data had been solidified into themes, I moved on to a chronological ordering of them as they arose in each interview. This allowed me to separate the themes into lists of the most significant to each participant.

Moving to Next Case

Since this research, like most IPA studies, analysed several interviews, I then repeated stages *i* through *iv* for each individual interview. An important aspect of this step is to ensure that each participant's data is grounded within its own dataset, and not influenced the findings of previous interviews.

Looking for Patterns Across Cases

From here, I cross analysed the emergent theme from each interview, looking for patterns amid the group as a whole. Tomkins (2017) insists that, at this stage, the researcher is looking to ascertain both similarities and differences between the participants.

Taking Interpretations to Deeper Level

During this stage, this focus was on deepening the analysis by using other theories "as a lens" to help me to understand and contextualise information. An example of a theory relevant in this regard to the research was Bourdieu's concept of cultural and social capital, and how it related to the learner identity of students.

Numerous publications advocate for the use of software, such as MAXQDA or NVivo to assist with coding (Creswell, 2009; MAXQDA, 2023). While there are certainly advantages of doing so – the use of such software is easier and more time effective than coding by hand – I opted against their employment. Given the nature of IPA, and the importance of immersing oneself in the information, it felt more authentic to take a hands-on approach to the coding process.

3.7 Rigor

Guba and Lincoln (1985) insist upon four major criteria that must be met with regard to qualitative research, in order to ensure its trustworthiness: Credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability.

These criteria are a key component of the rigor and quality assurance of the research, and I have endeavoured to cater to them using the following mechanisms:

Pilot Interview:

The pilot interview provided me with valuable insight as to how such an interview would happen. Despite being unrecorded, it was conducted in line with all other relevant procedures, including the signing of consent forms and the opportunity to ask questions, and was treated in every other capacity as if it were a formal part of the research process. This process was undertaken to ensure my own credibility. It also aided the dependability of the study by bolstering my skills as a researcher.

Reflexive Journal

I maintained a reflexive journal throughout the process, which afforded me the opportunity to reflect critically on my own preconceptions and subjectivity, bolstering the credibility. (Darawsheh, 2014). It also allowed me to remain transparent around my conclusions, by helping to understand how I arrived at them, thus aiding transferability (Ortlipp, 2018). It helped add greater dependability to the research by allowing me to illustrate how conclusions were arrived at (Ortlipp, 2018).

Peer Debriefing

Peer debriefing helped me to bolster credibility and dependability, by discussing my methodological approaches, and research philosophy with individuals who possessed more research experience than myself. It also afforded me a greater capacity to reflect upon the research. One peer whose insight I sought was an individual employed as a course completion officer in a Further Education institute.

Member Checking

Birt et al (2016) highlights the importance of maintaining a process of member checking in ensuring that research is dependable and confirmable. Thus, it was an important aspect of ensuring dependability and confirmability in my own research. I engaged in member-checking throughout the process, at various stages (Schultz et al, 2015). Participants were offered the opportunity to listen to their recording once finished, and were asked to read through their transcripts later in the process to confirm their accuracy.

Triangulation

The triangulation of all data collected, which saw me endeavour at all times to verify data through multiple sources, also aided with the confirmability, and afforded me the opportunity to examine more closely outlying experiences. Triangulation was also an important aspect of ensuring dependability. It allowed me to consolidate my information, and seek out multiple sources confirming any findings.

Audit Trail

The maintenance of an audit trail was also beneficial in aiding confirmability, dependability, and transferability. It allowed me the opportunity to maintain an accurate account of all information gathered.

Maintaining Diversity

Participant selection is an important method of ensuring transferability, and a difficult aspect to cater to in a study of this size. While there were only six participants, every effort was made to ensure that the group was diverse, and consisted of people of various nationalities. Maintaining diversity within the participant group allows a broader exploration of the research (Slevin & Sains, 1999).

Thick Description

Thick description is also something that has aided the transferability and confirmability of the research. It has afforded me the opportunity to provide understanding to the reader on the specific characteristics of the work, and to outline the lived experiences of participants in a manner that is authentic.

3.8 Ethical Considerations

NCI Research Ethics Committee granted ethical approval for the research on 31st January 2024. NCI Research Ethics Committee (2018) highlights guiding principles that must underpin educational research. Details of how these have been addressed in full is available in the appendices. Alele & Malau-Aduli (2023) highlight a set of general principles that must underpin the ethical considerations of academic research. These have been addressed as follows:

Respectful interactions

Participants were treated in a respectful manner, before, during and after the interview.

Participants were encouraged to think of the interviews less as a formal process, and more of a “research conversation”, in line with guidance from Satori et al (2023).

Justice

During the research, I strived at all times to ensure equitable practice. While not every research conversation occurred in the same manner, the subject matter was largely similar, and permission was sought during the interview before exploring more personal issues. All participants’ information was treated equally.

Research merit and integrity

A detailed literature review was conducted to fully understand existing academic scholarship around the decisions motivating progression post FE, learner identity and transformative learning. It is the goal of this research to explore the intersection of these areas, itself a topic little explored in existing research. All information that has made a substantive contribution to this research has been cited, in line with APA 7th edition.

3.9 Conclusion

This chapter has sought to outline the steps undertaken during the research, and to justify the motivations around these steps. Given the deeply personal nature of the research, and the importance of lived experience in the curation of one’s learner identity, the interpretivist paradigm was chosen as the philosophical framework. From here, six participants were purposively selected, and data was collected through a series of semi-structured interviews, one with each participant. IPA was employed in the analysis of findings, which will be fully unpacked in the next chapter.

4. Analysis and Discussion

4.1 Introduction

This chapter explores the themes which emerged from the analysis of the research conversations. It features dialogue from the interviews themselves, and explores the interpretations of both the participant, and myself as the researcher, in line with IPA's double hermeneutic process (Charlick et al, 2016; Lavery, 2003; Smith et al, 2009; Tuffour, 2017). Every effort has been made to present these findings in an equitable manner, and give an equal voice to all participants. Care has also been made in affording due consideration to the unique experiences and interpretations of each participant, while also striving to identify similarities, differences, and patterns that emerge between them (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2012; Tomkins, 2017).

The primary research question being explored is *What Role Does Learner Identity Play in Further Education Students' Decisions About Progressing to Higher Education?* Branching from this are several other sub-questions that are deeply connected to the primary question. These are: 1: *How do previous educational experiences influence the learner identity?* 2: *How do contextual factors affect the learner identity?*

During the analysis, the analysis three distinct but heavily interconnected superordinate themes emerged, each with its own subordinate themes within it. This chapter will explore each of these emergent themes, providing a detailed analysis of the transcript, and connecting the findings to existing literature. An overview of these themes is available in Table 4.

Table 2:

An outline of the superordinate and subordinate themes that emerged from the semi-structured interviews

Superordinate Theme	Subordinate Themes	Overview
Impact of Compulsory Education on the Learner Identity	Influences of primary school on learner identity; Influences of relationships with peers / teachers on learner identity;	All participants felt that their learner identity was rooted in the experiences accumulated during compulsory education. All participants identified formative experiences, in particular primary school, as integral to their current learner identity.
Educational Transitions, and Mutual Relationship with Learner Identity	Effects of primary / secondary school transitions on the learner identity; Transition to FE and its effect on Learner Identity; Influence of FE / HE transition on Learner Identity	All participants regarded educational transitions as being highly impactful upon their learner identities. Some felt that these transitions to be something largely positive. Others felt that the stress around transitions, such as the difficulty making new friends, hindered their learner identity.
Influence of Background Circumstances on Learner Identity and Progression Decisions	Effects of Learning Difficulties on Learner Identity; Effects of sexual orientation and gender identity on learner identity; Influence of Social Class on Learner Identity; Effect of Familial Relationships on Learner Identity	Participants highlighted the contextual factors of their lives among the factors informing both their learner identities, and their decisions regarding HE attendance.

Note: A full version of this table is available in the appendices.

4.2 Theme One: Impact of Formative Educational Experiences on the Learner Identity

When discussing their learner identities, its contributing factors and the effect that it has had on academic progression, all participants were keen to begin their discussion around compulsory education, in particular primary school. Participants felt that these formative experiences had a profound effect on their outlook on education, and that their interpretations of these experiences largely informed how they feel about themselves as learners.

For Bee, their time in primary school was difficult, as they frequently clashed with teachers, and had altogether negative interactions with peers. Bee described their time in primary school as “terrible”, and insisted that it had a lasting effect on how they felt about themselves as a learner. Bee talked at length of the severely detrimental effect of negative experiences with teachers, and the effect that this has had on their learner identity, insisting that, although they now hold a more positive learner identity, their negative experiences during this time are something upon which they frequently reflect.

I had this teacher, and she wouldn't let the class leave until we answered, like, a maths equation. She'd always pick me last, and ask me a harder one, and I'd never be able to do it. Then she'd keep asking me, keep asking me, and no one could leave until I got the question right... I think about that quite a lot.

The anxiety and pressure felt as a result of the perhaps excessively authoritative methods employed by this teacher had a significant and lasting effect on Bee's learner identity. Arthur similarly highlights negative experiences with teachers, particularly in primary school, as being foundational to his learner identity. He insists that negative interactions with teachers during this part of his academic journey “put a dampener on education for me”. In a similar manner to Bee, he provides a detailed, narrative account of his experiences in primary school, and the effect that these have had on his learner identity. “She [teacher] would always be on at me. She used to tear the paper out of my notebook if I got the question wrong.... I still think about her often. She made [me] feel stupid.” In a similar fashion to Bee, Arthur draws on particularly strong words to convey his experience. He also highlights the feelings of inadequacy invoked by punitive teaching practices, and the detrimental effect that these have had on his learner identity. Both participants also use phrases that imply the lasting nature of the negative experiences.

In contrast to the thoroughly negative experiences of Bee and Arthur, Luke talks of having altogether positive experiences of his time in primary school, and of the effect that this has had on his learner identity, at least during his formative educational experiences. Luke talked of achieving significant academic success during his time in primary school, and holding an altogether more positive view of himself as a learner: “I have nothing but good memories of primary school.”

Darren, in a similar manner to Bee and Arthur, talked of much more negative experiences during primary school. Similar to their testimonies, Darren described primary school as being “the beginning” of what he described as “nothing short of traumatic” experiences of education. Darren talked extensively of his experiences “competing” with his twin sister during his time in primary school, feeling that he was incapable of “keeping up” with her, and frequently, the rest of his class also. This is something that continued on throughout compulsory education for Darren. He talked of his reflecting upon his sister’s successes and his own challenges, and how the juvenile meaning schemes that he formulated around these lived experiences were that his sister was “smart”, while he was “not smart”.

Aoife and Lily had mixed experiences of their time in primary school. Both received academic support for learning difficulties during that time, an experience about which they had mixed feelings. Lily can scarcely recall her time in primary school, but insists that the capacity for curating social relationships with her peers was something that she enjoyed. “I’m an only child, so being in school was good. I got to meet people and make friends, that’s something that I enjoyed about primary school.”

Naturally, formative educational experiences will have a foundational effect on one’s learner identity (Brennan, 2020). Primary school plays a significant role in the early development of students (Austin, 2016; Strelitz, 2023, UNICEF, 2023) often being the environment where children are first exposed to socialisation outside of immediate and extended family (Sylva et al, 2010). The routines and expectations adopted at this stage of the child’s development largely informs the habitus (Smith & Banks, 2012). The experiences accumulated during compulsory education, and, more specifically, primary school, have had a lasting impact on the learner identities of participants, in line with existing literature (Gleasure & Parkinson, 2023). These experiences influenced, for better or worse, the confidence, motivation, and general approaches to learning of all of the participants.

Similarly, educational expectations placed upon children at this stage of their academic journey can also affect how students perceive their own potential (Brennan, 2020). As demonstrated by the testimonies of Arthur and Bee, the excessive expectations placed upon them, and the negative relationships that they curated with teachers, had a lasting impact upon their learner identities (Donnelly, 2004). Darren similarly

found that parental expectations, and the negative experiences that he accumulated as a result of failing to meet those expectations, adversely affected how he felt about himself as a learner, and lead to the fixed mindset approach that he was “not smart” (Lamb, 2011).

The impact of social capital is something that emerges at this stage of the academic journey also (Darmody et al, 2012). Luke felt that his capacity to make friends during his time in primary school was a contributing factor to his enjoyment of the experience; “I think I was well-liked, I got on with everybody”. Lily and Arthur similarly talked of the positive effects of curating relationships with their peers, while Bee highlighted the lack of social support available to them during primary school as a factor that negatively impacted their learner identity. This relationship between learner identity and social capital is something discussed by Tet & Maclachan (2016), who contest that greater access to social resources directly contributes to a more positive learner identity. Disparities in social capital can lead to different outcomes with relation to how students feel about their capacity for learning (Kundu, 2020). Those with greater access to the academic support and resources that social capital provides interact more successfully with the educational environment (Reay, 1999). The cumulative experiences of learners in primary school, influenced by habitus and social capital, plays a foundational role in the formation of their learner identity (Brennan, 2020; Lareau, 2011).

We observe within this theme also the vital role of meaning making, and the formation of meaning schemes, in the formation and development of the learner identity (Ignelzi, 2000; Lea, 2011). Ignelzi (2000) tells us that, as learners accumulate lived experiences, they engage in a reflective process, during which they assign meaning to the occurrences. This period of reflection, during which meaning is constructed by the learner (King & Kitchner, 1994), can be thought of as “the place where the event is privately composed, made sense of, the place where it actually becomes an event for that person” (Kegan, 1982 p 2). Examples of such during the research include Darren’s experiences around comparing his own academic performance to that of his sister. He engaged in a rudimentary meaning making process, insisting that the differences in academic performance occurred as a result of disparities in their intelligence. Similarly, Luke, who excels academically in primary school, progresses to secondary school with the view of himself as “gifted”, and

confident that natural ability will facilitate his continued educational success, a problematic position also, as will explore in his further testimony. For Bee, their failure to produce correct mental calculations, as demanded by their teacher, led them to a similar “zone of mediation” (Kegan, 1982, p 2), after which they concluded themselves “not capable academically”.

4.3 Theme Two: Educational Transitions and Mutual Relationship with Learner Identity

The second major theme to emerge from the analysis was that of educational transitions, and the effect that these have on learner identity (Choi, 2015). Numerous types of educational transitions were discussed by the participants. Educational transitions, often provide disorienting dilemmas to learners, which results in a challenge to existing meaning schemes, and reinterrogation of how students feel about themselves as learners (Harris & Nowland, 2021).

For Darren, Arthur and Bee, the transition to secondary school was, to varying extents, a positive one. Bee points to “escaping” from the teachers with whom they had negative interactions, and moving to a setting that allowed them to focus to a greater extent on “what I was good at”. Bee found that their time in secondary school was “100% more positive than primary school”. They also felt that the capacity to forge relationships with more people left them feeling more optimistic about themselves as a learner. “Having more than one teacher meant that things were like, separate. You could be bad at one thing, and that didn’t carry over to everything else.”

Arthur similarly found the move to secondary school, which also saw him move to Ireland, to be a positive one. Arthur talked of holding a largely apathetic opinion towards education after his experiences in primary school, insisting that he considered “just not going back” on numerous occasions. After moving to Ireland during his teenage years, his opinion of himself as a learner improved, though he talked of being largely disinterested in academia: “You wouldn’t have caught me studying or anything!” He insisted though, that the social relationships he formed during secondary school were his main motivation for continuing with the endeavour.

Arthur also found the transition to FE to be a positive one. Having the capacity to study something in which he had a profound interest was a welcome change for Arthur. He claimed to have little interest in traditional subjects, and found it difficult to focus and study upon things in secondary school. In comparison, he found working towards projects in Further Education to be a much more positive and achievable undertaking. “There were no more exams, that was the main thing for me. In secondary school, everything is “Leaving Cert” this and “Leaving Cert” that. But [FE] was different. It was practical things that we were being graded on.” This realisation, that learning need not be something that is assessed through exams, or even written assessments, played a significant role in bolstering Arthur’s view of himself as a learner. Arthur, Bee, Darren and Lily all insisted that the opportunity to undertake assessment methods that were authentic, and indicative of real world expectations, were hugely beneficial to how they perceived their ability to engage with the coursework.

Not all participants talked of successful transitions between primary and secondary school. Luke spoke at length of the difficulties he had during this period of his academic journey. After attaining a significant degree of educational success during his time in primary school, Luke talked of struggling to keep up with the workload, and of the detrimental effect that his prior success had on his learner identity, insisting “that first year in secondary school was awful”. Luke’s learner identity plummeted on the move to secondary school, in contrast to the experiences of Bee, Darren and Arthur in particular. Despite Luke’s positive opinion of himself as a learner, he describes his time in secondary school as being very different. During this time, his perception of his ability to engage with work fell dramatically, as the increasing difficulty and workload became a significant challenge for him.

I thought I was good at [schoolwork]. I thought I would be able to do it naturally, like it was in primary school. People had always said that I was smart or that I was gifted. And that’s what I thought. I would just be able for it.

Luke here highlights the toxicity around his perception of his academic abilities (Zhao et al, 2022). Although his experiences of primary school differed in many ways from the wholly negative experiences discussed by many of the other participants, the meaning making process that he engaged in was not

dissimilar. Luke had lived educational experiences, his positive, and engaged as a child in primary school in a process in meaning making (Ignelzi, 2000; Kegan, 1982). In a similar manner to Darren (albeit at the opposite end of the spectrum), Luke concluded that his successes in that regard were the result of innate ability, and that he is capable academically as a result of this. However, as both workload and difficulty increase, he experiences a disorienting dilemma – that he is not “top of the class” in secondary school. Thus, he engages in a new meaning making process, concluding that he had never been particularly intelligent, and that he had only attained prior success due to being in a smaller class; “...maybe I was just a big fish in a small pond”.

Luke cites the poor learner identity he had developed during his time in secondary school as being the major factor that drew him to Further Education. Unsure initially if he would achieve sufficient success in exams for entry to university, he entered FE with the goal of using it as a “stepping stone”. He talks though, of the significant personal growth and development of his learner identity that occurred during the transition to FE. “The main thing I learned in [FE] was that it’s not about being smart, it never was...It’s about the effort that you put in. I’d love to go back and tell myself that when I was in secondary school!”

In Luke’s experience, what began as a success, his academic accomplishments, and the meaning making around this, became a challenge as he progressed through compulsory education. For Darren, after competing relentlessly with his twin sister during his time in primary school, the move to secondary school saw the two largely separated, and allowed him a greater deal of freedom. Like Bee, he seized upon the opportunity to focus on subjects in which he was interested in, finding significant success in music, and more practical subjects. After having developed an unhealthy learner identity during his time in primary school, one centred on the idea that his sister was “smart”, and he was “not smart”, he found that observing his own successes in a subject about which he was particularly passionate was something which left him feeling more optimistic about himself as a learner.

For Aoife, much of her time in compulsory education was hampered by learning difficulties, both diagnosed and then undiagnosed. It was upon the transition to FE that she found herself better able to seek out support around these. Aoife feels that the support she received from peers and staff during her time in

both FE and HE was a major contributing factor to her success. She talked of the support that she received after her transition to FE as being something that motivated her in her decision around progression to university.

...when you do have that [positive] relationship with people, it makes the experience so much better. Obviously, it's less stressful, if you have other people you can talk to on the course, and you're able to help each other with coursework.

For Lily, the transition to secondary school was a difficult one, and one which saw the academic supports she had received in primary school largely curtailed. She no longer had access to an SNA, and thus found it difficult to keep up with her peers. Upon completing secondary school, she had no significant interest in continuing with academia, and chose instead to move directly to work, feeling that, with regard to education, she was "done with the whole thing". Possessing a deep desire to work with children though, she returned to education after several years, in order to pursue her goal of becoming an SNA. It was upon her transition to FE to study Supporting Teaching and Learning that she found, in a similar manner to Arthur, the authenticity of assessments aided her greatly. "I went in to my first day [of work placement] thinking that it would be terrible... But I came out of that first day and I'd gotten on well. The practical side of it, I did brilliantly on."

Participants felt that authentic assessment methods, directly relating to their subjects, were extremely beneficial to their learner identities, allowing them to demonstrate skills in a practical manner (Care & Kim, 2018; Palmer, 2004). Lily, in particular, found that the maintenance of reflective accounts during her work placement module allowed her to observe her own growth and development as she progressed (Kim, 2013). Similarly, Arthur found that having the opportunity to display his knowledge through practical assessments was a welcome change from exam-based assessment, after finding his way to FE straight from his second sitting of the Leaving Certificate. Wiewiora & Kowalkiewicz (2018) insist that authentic assessment is vital for developing competencies, and that, as students observe their own competency in a particular field, their sense of themselves as a learner improves (Nieminen, 2024).

Again, the impact of social capital emerged as an important feature of this theme. Learning is, inherently, a social process (Dewey, 1916; Kress et al, 2021; Lave, 2019; Vygotsky, 1998), and the role of social relationships were a significant factor in the participants perceptions of educational transitions. Bee talks of the importance of forming positive social relationships with their peers as something integral to their improving view of themselves as a learner, and insists that the transition from primary to secondary school allowed them to do this. Similarly, Arthur maintains that it was the social relationships that he formed after his transition to secondary school that encouraged him to continue with education, while Luke insists that his struggles in that regard lead to the stark deterioration in his view of himself as a learner.

The move from primary to secondary school can be a jarring one (Brennan, 2020). The increased academic demands (Shum, 2024) left Luke and Lily in particular struggling to think positively on themselves as learners. In contrast to this, Arthur and Bee found the opportunity of moving to secondary school enabled them to form new social relationships, which enabled them to view the experience of education in a more positive light (DeMoor et al, 2023; Wall, 2013). The diversity of teachers and teaching styles that learners will encounter during the move from primary to secondary school is also something that will factor into the development of the learner identity (DeMoor, 2023), as highlighted in the testimonies of Arthur and Bee.

The transition from secondary school to Further Education affords students a great deal of specialisation and choice (Duckworth & Smaith, 2019; Satori et al, 2023). Participants, particularly Lily and Arthur found that having the capacity for this specialisation helped them to develop a healthier view of themselves as learners (Maloney, 2021). The increased sense of autonomy that emerges with the progression to post-compulsory education plays a significant role in the development of the sense of identity as a learner (Cullen & Oppenheimer, 2024), and often boosts students' confidence (Greenbank, 2010). As with the transition from primary to secondary school, the transition to FE offers the opportunity for new social relationships, something which Aoife in particular found beneficial to her view of herself as a learner.

4.4 Theme Three: The Influence of Background Circumstances on Learner Identity and Progression Decisions

The third theme to emerge from the analysis of the interview transcripts was the effect of background circumstances on the learner identity, and the knock-on effect that this has on the decision to continue to Higher Education. This theme differs from the previous in that it explores the aspects of a learner's identity that cannot be changed. For some, coming from working-class backgrounds meant that financial considerations played a large role in informing their decision around progressing to Higher Education (Bins, 2019; Crew, 2020; Pearce et al, 2008; Reay, 2019; 2023). Others felt that supports and diagnostic pathways around learning difficulties would leave them at a disadvantage when it came to accessing the learning as it was being offered (Boxall et al, 2004; Ryan, 2010).

For Aoife, Lily, Bee, Arthur and Luke, financing upfront cost of university, along with the accompanying costs of accommodation and school supplies was the most major consideration around the prospect of Higher Education. This was further exasperated by the loss of income from having to give up or cut back on working hours, Arthur, in particular, points to finance as chief among the factors motivating his decision-making process; "...I definitely would have gone straight to university if it wasn't for [finance]." Arthur also found the prospect of understanding exactly what funding he was entitled to, to be difficult, and insists that he could not have made major commitments to Higher Education without being told in advance whether he would be able to receive financial support, such as the SUSI grant, "The information around [financial support] isn't very easy or accessible... You have to apply, and God knows when you'll find out. And then there's the pressure around not knowing either."

For Arthur, it was not alone the question of what funding he was entitled to, but also the emotional geography that exists around this. He found the process of not knowing precisely what funding he was entitled to "nerve-racking", and would be reluctant to make any decisions that would negatively impact his employment. Bee also cites finance as the most significant, though not the sole, impediment to their academic progression. Despite also expressing a desire to return to education and pursue a university degree, Bee insists that they would be extremely hesitant to make the financial commitment, in particular

the prospect of taking out student loans: “I didn’t want to be in debt... We didn’t have much money when I was growing up, so I was always conscious of it.”

Again, as with Arthur, Bee felt that it was not alone the upfront cost of university, but the worry around the notion of placing themselves “in debt” as a result of student loans, and the uncertainty that they felt around this prospect, that amounted to a deterring factor. Bee also maintained that balancing university with work presented a significant challenge, and would be extremely reluctant to sacrifice their career in finance to pursue university. They feel that the additional time constraints arising from HE attendance would add to the difficulty around the process. Aoife also identified the time requirements of Higher Education as being a significant challenge to her, and shared Bee’s reluctance to reduce her work hours. Aoife did, though, progress to university, and cites balancing the endeavour with her work schedule as an area of which she is particularly proud. She attributes her success in this regard to effective time management, which allowed her to schedule study around her other commitments.

Another challenge that Aoife discussed facing during her progression to university was the management of learning difficulties. Having struggled with learning difficulties throughout her time in education, she feels that the support she received while in Further Education left her feeling generally more optimistic about her capacity to engage with Higher Education than she had been upon leaving secondary school.

Aoife’s experiences of support systems around her learning difficulties are something that she has mixed feelings around though. While she benefitted from peer-to-peer support, and the employment of individualised learning plans available during Further Education, she also insisted that many of the supports offered to her during her time in compulsory education were generic and superfluous, did not make a meaningful contribution to supporting her learning. Aoife discussed how, during primary school, being part of a “remedial” class, in which she was taken out of her regular classes to receive intensive support, was detrimental, both to her overall academic performance, and how she perceived herself as a learner.

They'd take me out of class, then I'd miss what was being covered in my [regular] class...so then, the next time I was in the remedial class, we'd be covering the stuff I missed from being in the remedial class the time before. It was just a cycle.

Lily also points to her experience of studying with undiagnosed learning difficulties as being one of the primary motivations behind her decision to not attend university. She cites the difficulty around obtaining these diagnoses, and the lack of transparent and accessible pathways around such, as being stressful, and severely detrimental to her view of herself as a learner.

It's still not clear, even now, what the process is. I was referred [for an ADHD diagnosis] by my doctor, and then referred somewhere else.... In the end, they recommended that I go private. That's all well and good if you can afford it.

Despite her issue around learning difficulties, Lily obtained high results during her time in Further Education, and talked of the importance of support systems in facilitating her academic journey this far. Lily pointed to relationships in her personal life as being integral to her success in Further Education, and insists that her support systems have aided her greatly in her academic success.

My Partner helped a lot. Both emotionally and with the actual coursework. Like, having someone to read over things and make sure that the spelling is right and I'm actually making sense was a big help. But then having someone to talk to about the stress and everything like that.

The importance of support systems in navigating the decision-making process around progression to HE is something similarly echoed in Luke's testimony. Luke talks of the role of support from staff in facilitating his move, and having the capacity to speak with career advisers on the opportunities and pathways available to him greatly aided him in his progression to HE. "You need to have support, I think. I don't think I'd have been able to do any of it if it hadn't been for the people around me."

Darren theorises that it was perhaps a lack of support from teaching staff and peers that led to his own tumultuous relationship with education. He was the only participant whose parents had attended Higher Education, and, though he felt that he was able to access support with schoolwork as a result, he

claimed that he also felt a greater deal of pressure around succeeding academically. Undiagnosed learning difficulties also posed a considerable challenge for him throughout his educational journey, but he felt compelled to continue to university following FE as a result of familial pressure. In a similar fashion to Lily, he struggled with access to diagnosis around learning difficulties, and found that to be a considerable challenge throughout his time in education.

He also found that a lack of support from friends during his time in compulsory education played a role in the challenges he faced with progression to university. Interactions with peers left him reluctant to seek support that he may have been eligible for, fearing social ostracization as a result, something which arose during his formative experiences within education.

All the other boys were pushing me for an answer, like “why did you get extra time and we didn’t?”

... I’d been diagnosed with Generalised Anxiety Disorder, but I didn’t want to explain that.

As one would imagine, the effect of these contextual factors on the learner identity is significant and highly intersectional (Dumas, 2010; Wodlinger, 2007). Finance, naturally, was an obstacle that many of the participants, particularly those from working-class backgrounds identified as a barrier in their progression. Callender & Jackson (2005 p 5) affirm that the “fear of debt” can be a discouraging factor in the progression of students to university. This fear is typically greater in learners who identify as working class (Archer et al, 2005; Callender & Jackson, 2005, 2008; Hurt, 2019), and can serve as a major factor in the progression decisions of students (Satori et al, 2023).

Many of the participants, in line with existing research, feared that learning difficulties would impede their capacity to engage with learning as it is offered in the HE classroom (Boxall et al, 2010; Lin, 2014). Negative experiences of seeking diagnosis and support through their academic journey, coupled with memories of ineffectual provisions being made around their learning difficulties in the past, leave many students feeling uneasy at the prospect of continuing to HE (Hurst, 1998; Lenhard & Lenhard, 2013). The lived experiences that students with learning difficulties have accumulated of needing to put in, as Aoife describes it, “more work” than their peers, can leave many more reluctant at the prospect of progressing to

HE (Skinner, 2004). Aoife and Lily found that many of the supports offered for their learning difficulties throughout their academic journey were superfluous, and not sufficient to aiding their personal needs as a learner. Hirano (2008 p 33) points to the existence of a “symbiotic relationship” between learning difficulties and the learner identity, with Gross (1997) arguing that students with learning difficulties often face greater complications with establishing a sense of identity as a learner. They must contend with contradictory interpretations of the phenomena they experience in the classroom, for example, being good at English, but a slow reader, which Gross (1997) argues can lead to them becoming overwhelmed, and concluding that they are a “bad learner”.

Once again, the role of social capital and relationships emerged as a key aspect of this theme. Darren found that a lack of support during his time in education led to him holding an altogether negative view of himself as a learner. Conversely, other participants felt that effective support systems enabled them to hold a more positive view of themselves as a learner, and to navigate the decision-making process with greater ease.

4.5 Discussion: Learner Identity, Positive Transformations, and Progression Decisions

This section aims to unpackage the intersectional and dynamic relationship between challenges, support systems, and personal growth that helps inform learner identity, and the effect that this has on decisions around progression, both as it emerged from the interviews and as it arises in existing literature. All participants talked of changes and developments in their learner identities. Darren insisted that, after moving to secondary school, and finding himself distanced from the competition with his sister that defined most of his educational experiences to that point, he was better able to view himself as someone who was capable of learning. Bee found that having the capacity to compartmentalise subjects, and specialise in those that interested them allowed them to transition away from the view that they were “not capable academically”. Arthur found that authentic assessments allowed him to better observe his own successes academically, while Lily and Aoife found that maintaining support systems aided their navigation of academic challenges, and allowed them to better understand themselves as learners. Luke talked of leaving primary school with the toxic belief that he was “gifted”, only to leave it with a very poor learner identity.

He talked of the process of developing his learner identity through Further Education, and the journey of improving and advancing his view of himself as a learner thereafter.

In this, we observe first hand perhaps the most important aspect of the learner identity, as is often outlined in literature; it is not a fixed position, but something that is fluid, and inherently subject to change (Illeris, 2014; Kolb & Kolb, 2009, 2012; Nakkula & Toshalis, 2014, Wodlinger, 2019). All participants identified, if not specific instances of change, then periods during which their learner identity developed in some capacity. These periods of change, which usually arose in the aftermath of a disorienting dilemma, resulted in either a progression to a healthier learner identity, or a regression to a more negative one (Illeris, 2014; Carr & Lee, 2011; Claxton, 2018). A positive learner identity is something that can be developed through positive interactions with education (Hedges, 2018; Wodlinger, 2019). The fact that all participants highlighted their sense of identity as a learner as being paramount in their progression decisions implies that we must at all times strive to foster learning environments that are centred around the development of a healthy learning environment.

4.6 Conclusion

This chapter has analysed the transcripts of the interviews, examining the superordinate and subordinate themes that have emerged. The first theme to emerge from the analysis was the impact of compulsory education on the learner identity. This was followed by the role of educational transitions, such as that between primary and secondary school, on the learner identity. Then, this section examined the role of background circumstances, such as social class and learning disability, on the learner identity, and the role of transformative learning in aiding the progression from FE to HE. Finally, this section discussed the nuances and intersectionality of the emergent themes. The next chapter will conclude this writing, and will feature implications and recommendations for future practice, as well as indicating how the research questions were addressed.

5. Conclusion

5.1 Introduction

This chapter provides an overall conclusion to the research. It begins by ascertaining how the primary research question, and each branching question identified in Chapter 1 have been addressed. From here, this chapter explores the implications of this research at a policy and classroom level, making recommendations for future practice. Chapter 5 will then outline how the research has affected my personal teaching practices, and the effect that this undertaking has had on my teaching philosophies. From here, it will explore the limitations of the study. Finally, this chapter will provide my closing remarks upon the research.

This research identified three main themes that arise within the research question “What Role Does Learner Identity Play in Further Education Students’ Decisions About Progression to Higher Education?” These themes were: 1) The role of previous educational experiences on learner identity. 2) The role of educational transitions on the learner identity. 3) The influences of background circumstances on the learner identity. Beyond this, the research highlighted several subordinate themes within these, such as the influence of social capital, and the role of meaning making, on the learner identity.

5.2 Addressing the Research Question

Primary Research Question: What Role Does Learner Identity Play in Further Education Students' Decisions About Progression to Higher Education?

All participants felt that their thoughts about themselves as learners factored into their decision to progress to university. Lily in particular asserts that she does not feel herself “smart enough” to attend university, while Luke, Darren and Aoife attest to having had similar thoughts at various points during their time in education. Arthur insisted that he wasn't sure that HE is “for him”, and maintains that thoughts of returning are often deflated when he thinks of examinations and excess amounts of time in lecture halls. Arthur admits though, after attending FE, that his perception of education as something solely classroom based was challenged, and that, after completing practical assessments and scoring highly, his feeling about himself as a learner drastically improved. Aoife felt that, following her time in FE, the support she received and the skills that she developed around the management of her learning difficulties, her feelings about herself as a learner improved dramatically, and she felt herself much more open to the prospect of university after graduating from FE. Luke talked of similar experiences of his time in FE, claiming that it was during his time here that he developed the adequate understanding of himself as a learner to progress to university. As earlier discussed, Duckworth & Smith (2019; 2022) insist that FE provides a space for learning that is inherently transformative. Participants discussed in their testimonies instances of encountering disorienting dilemmas, such as Arthur and Lily coming to understand that assessment and academic success need not be based solely on examinations,

Branching Question 1: How do previous educational experiences influence the learner identity?

Carr & Lee (2012) insist that the development of the learner begins at an early age, and that, by their formative years of primary school, children will already have feelings about themselves as learners (Brennan, 2020). These formative experiences often provide a foundation upon which the learner identity is based (Brennan, 2020). Positive experiences often result in the student forming a more positive outlook on themselves as learners, while negative experiences can result in students holding a poor opinion of their academic capabilities (Carr & Lee, 2012; Roeser, 2015). During secondary school, and the transition there to,

students' perceptions of themselves as learners often change, as they are afforded greater autonomy, experience a wider variety of teaching methods, and explore new social settings and roles (Wall, 2013). This change can be positive, as in the case of Bee, Arthur and Darren, or distinctly negative, in the case of Luke. The transition to, and experiences of FE can also have a profound effect on the learner identity of students, as the role of self-discipline and self-directed learning increases (Duckworth & Smith, 2019). Cumulatively, the lived experiences of academia that students have amassed through their time in education, and the interpretations that students have of these phenomena, are paramount in informing their sense of self as a learner

Branching Question 2: How do contextual factors affect the learner identity?

The lived experiences that students obtain in the classroom, though a vital aspect of how the learner identity is formed, are themselves often informed by the context of an individual's life (Lamb, 2011). While the lived experiences that inform part of the learner identity arise as a result of interaction and interpretation, the contextual factors behind these are not negotiated (Bowl, 2001; Burns, 2016; Pearce et al, 2008). All participants identified contextual factors as being a significant factor in informing their learner identities. Darren felt that the emphasis placed on education by his family, and the formative experiences of needing to "compete" with his sister, had a lasting effect on how he felt about himself as a learner. Aoife and Lily felt that their learning difficulties shaped a significant amount of their learner identity, while Arthur believed that his negative formative experiences in part occurred because he attended primary school in his country of origin, and not Ireland.

5.3 Implications for policy and practice

All participants felt that their sense of identity as learners had an impact on their decisions around progressing to Higher Education. Thus, striving to remember the significance of the learner identity in how students interact with education is a vital aspect of an effective teaching environment (Steele & Cohn-Vargas, 2013; Tucker, 2020). Claxton (2018) insists that teachers must design the learning offered in their classroom in a way that prioritises "resilience, curiosity, independence, and a positive disposition toward learning" over knowledge transfer. Claxton (2018) likens the learning process to a "flowing river". On the

surface is the knowledge and information that we wish to transfer, the subjects deemed to be of significance within a particular society. Below the surface are the expertise and skills required to comprehend and master the information at the surface. Finally, at the depths of the river, driving the current forward, is the learner identity, which informs the habits and attitudes around learning (Claxton, 2018; Whitaker, 2019). Carr & Lee (2011) tell us that challenges are inevitable in the academic setting, and, as a result, educators must strive to aid students towards a learner identity that allows them to “tackle and persist” with difficulties. This is perhaps most evident in the testimony of Luke, who left primary school with what one may perceive to be a healthy opinion of himself as a learner, only to then struggle a great deal when facing new problems. Thus, the first broad implication of this research is that we must strive to aid our students in the development of learner identities that reject the notion of inherent ability, and foster learning environments that encourage experimentation, and embrace failure not as an impediment, but as an opportunity for growth and development (Lynch, 2021; Whitaker, 2019).

The role of social relationships and capital emerged as an important consideration from the research. Lan & Lan (2022) point to the vital role of group learning in the development of the learner identity. Chen & Lei (2022) believe that educators can aid students towards healthier learner identities by encouraging collaboration, and ensuring that group work features into lesson and assessment plans. Helping to foster positive relationships within the classroom can enhance the learner identities of students, and provide the learners with peer support, and the opportunity for peer-to-peer learning (Topping et al, 2017). At a policy level, greater effort could be made around ensuring teacher awareness of the concepts underpinning the learner identity, and the effect that it has on educational outcomes (Reeves, 2009).

Support for learning difficulties must be made readily available in classrooms, and as is evident from the negative experiences of Aoife and Lily, should prioritise the learner’s distinct needs. This can be done with the development of individualised learning plans, something which Lily felt would have aided her a great deal during her own time in education. Hamilton (2009) refers to the process of applying general support systems as “putting words in their mouths”, and insists that the best practice for aligning learner identities with system goals is the use of individualised learning plans. All of the participants who highlighted

the role of learning difficulties in the development of their decision around the progression to HE pointed to the arduous process that they went through in obtaining a diagnosis as being problematic (Gregg et al, 2006; Kenyon et al, 2013). Thus, more could be done at a policy level to ensure transparency and consistency around the pathways to obtaining diagnosis, particularly among adult learners.

Many of the participants pointed to authentic assessments as being a factor that improved their learner identities. Having the opportunities to observe their successes in a practical manner can afford students the opportunity to develop a better and more accurate opinion of themselves as learners (Wiewiora & Kowalkiewicz, 2018). At policy level, we must strive to ensure that assessments align with the real-world learning outcomes, and, where possible, allow for multiple means of engagement, representation and expression, in line with Universal Design for Learning (UDL) (Ahead, 2023).

Bee and Arthur felt that a greater deal of transparency around the funding and finance available to them would have better encouraged them around the prospect of attending Higher Education. Finance, naturally, emerged as one of the largest barriers to Higher Education (Reay, 2010, 2021) To that end, Satori et al (2023) discusses the importance of maintaining a “culture of welcome” around available finance, providing greater awareness on the range of supports already available, in order to better enable students to make their own choices regarding their educational trajectories.

5.4 Implications for my personal practice

I stated in Chapter 4 that learning is inherently a social process, and did so with the backing of some of the fields most prolific theorists. I recall an instance when, after only having been teaching for a handful of months, I stumbled upon the works of John Dewey (1916), and set about reading his seminal text, *Democracy in Education*. His theories around constructing understanding, and empowering learners to be in control of the acquisition of knowledge, resonated with me. I was, at that time, teaching *Communications*, and *Safety and Health at Work* at QQI Level 5. My classroom often consisted of a handful of students who did not manage to think up a sufficient excuse on that day to avoid those often tedious but mandatory modules, and welcomed anything that would brighten up the learning environment, and capture the active attention of my students.

I found that these theories had a profound effect on my teaching, and, as weeks passed, the number of students turning up to these often-neglected modules increased sharply. Soon, I was striving to put the individual at the centre of their learning, taking up the role of facilitator, rather than lecturer. I encouraged students to incorporate their interests and hobbies into the modules, and kept active participation at the forefront of every lesson. Indeed, I found myself agreeing with all but one of Dewey's assertions around learning: That of students learning best in "natural, social settings" (Dewey, 1916; Williams, 2017 p 91).

This assertion did not synchronise with my own lived experiences as a learner. I was adamant, and remained so until fairly recently, that learning is not necessarily a social process. Having, during my BA in Performing Arts, been cast in the role of Hamlet, and tasked with learning obscene amounts of text, I would frequently close myself in a room with nothing but the script, and spend hours repeating it endlessly. This is a process that I repeated, to great efficacy, for countless roles in numerous productions. Me and the script, in a room, alone. So, was my response to Dewey (1916), and Vygotsky (1998), and every other great theorist who insisted otherwise, learning cannot be a social process, for I do not learn socially. Thus, my meaning scheme formed.

It was never the case that I outright rejected the assertions that learning was a social process, rather, I did not think it as significant an issue as countless theorists and educational researchers seemed to feel it was. I found it something of a surprise, though, when, during the interview process of this research, each participant, totally unprompted, pointed to the role of socialisation in their sense of identity as a learner. During my analysis of the interview transcripts, I further identified the subordinate theme of social capital and relationships within each of the superordinate themes. Thus, I found my own meaning scheme challenged. Had they not heard that I close myself in a room when learning lines, and, as a result, could safely conclude that learning is not a social process?

Observing here first hand my own disorienting dilemma, I was forced to revisit the significance of social relationships in the learning process. Did I really *learn* my lines in a room, alone, or was it perhaps during the hours spent in rehearsal, where I could "bounce back and forth" (as Aoife described it) with others that I came to understand my part? Indeed, upon reflection, I cannot think of a time during my own

educational journey where I was far from friends who could offer me support and guidance. I think it therefore likely that I overlooked the significance of social relationships in the learning process, because I have always been fortunate to have social relationships while learning. Therefore, the biggest implication for my own practice that I shall carry forward from the research is the importance of social relationships, and the role of the educator in facilitating interpersonal relationships within the classroom.

I have, in section 5.3, outlined the implications of the findings of this research on teachers. And moving forward, I shall attempt to the best of my ability to incorporate these recommendations into my own teaching process. I shall strive where possible to ensure that assessments remain as authentic as is practicable, in line with the advice of Lily and Arthur. I will ensure to the best of my ability, that the learner identities of students remain at the forefront of my lesson plans. I shall do so, though, with special consideration for the role of socialisation in the learning process, something so vital which, until this research, I had largely underestimated the importance of.

5.5 Limitations

The primary limitation of this study, as with many IPA studies, is that smaller sample sizes may not always be indicative of the experiences of wider society. Oxley (2016 p55) states though, that, despite this limitation, by “metaphorically shining a light on a small area”, we can ascertain a greater understanding of the problem in its entirety. This limitation has been further tackled in as far as practicable by ensuring a commitment to diversity with my selection of research participants (Smith & Schonfield, 2000), and the inclusion of different nationalities, gender identities and sexual orientations strived to hear as many voices as was possible.

Another limitation, particularly prevalent in IPA, where the researcher’s interpretation plays a significant role in the research, is that personal bias can influence the findings (Delve & Limpaecher, 2023). To that end, I have endeavoured to ensure my own objectivity at all times. I have maintained a reflexive journal and have sought to employ member checking and triangulation to ensure that the findings are not influenced by my own preconceptions.

This research was conducted in partial fulfilment of the MA in Educational Practice at NCI, and therefore had certain time limitations placed upon it. Had time constraints not been a factor, I would have liked to return to participants, and interview them further, after allowing myself a period of reflection on and analysis of their first interview. This prolonged engagement would have let me explore their experiences with greater depth (Dado et al,2023), and added an extra measure of quality (Laverty, 2003).

5.6 Conclusion

This research aimed to address the question *What Role Does Learner Identity Play in Further Education Students' Decisions About Progressing to Higher Education?* The decision was made to route the work in IPA, which provided a flexible approach. The double hermeneutic approach offered by IPA allowed the acknowledgement of the role of meaning making in the lived experiences of the participants, with their interpretation being an integral part of the research.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with six active participants, and one additional pilot participant. The participants were asked to share experiences of their academic journey, and the role that their learner identity played in their decision around whether or not to attend university. Following this, emergent themes were established from each individual transcript. Connections were then established between these, and this cyclical process was repeated for each of the transcripts. Once this process was complete, superordinate and subordinate themes were identified. This study found that all six participants felt that their learner identity impacted greatly upon their decisions around progression to HE. Participants felt that their learner identities were themselves informed by two major factors, the contextual aspects of their lives, and the lived experiences of education. Recommendations were then made at a classroom and policy level, as to how learner identity can be improved.

If I may leave the reader on a personal note, then let it be this; the learner identity is of paramount importance when navigating the decision-making process around one's academic trajectory. Thus, to my student who believed herself "not smart enough" to pursue nursing, to the young man who thought himself "too stupid" for engineering, to the mature learner who felt himself "too old" for university, and to the teacher who hears all too frequently that Higher Education "just isn't for me", I would say that the learner

identity is not a fixed position, but something that is inherently dynamic, and subject to change. Think less on the difficulties that you or your students will encounter as obstacles indicative of a lack of intelligence or ability, and embrace the opportunity for growth that they can present, and trust in your potential to thrive in the Higher Education environment. Your educational journey, much like your learner identity, is unique, and perseverance through the challenges that you will encounter will pave the way for success.

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Appendix

Appendix i: Link to performance & script

<https://youtu.be/M164bifUCiw>

Performance Script

To be honest, I hated school. I remember, back in primary school, I suppose I got off to a bad start. In playschool, things were fine. After that though, things changed a bit. In playschool, things were practical. But once primary school started, things got a lot more complicated. More reading. More writing. I found out that I was dyslexic, and at that stage, there wasn't much understanding around stuff like that. People thought that it was bad, or that it meant you were misbehaving. I lost a lot of interest in education around that time. I suppose that was an early age to lose interest. As I say, I did well up until then. But by the time primary school came around, I'd lost a lot of interest. My sister was in the same class as me, the whole way through primary school. She was doing well. She was top of the class. Her and some of the others, there was a table of them – four maybe five - they would sit up by the teacher's desk. Of course I was put down the back. Down with the people who were disruptive, misbehaving. It made me feel like I was one of them, that I wasn't getting the work done either. I suppose that's going back a while now, the late 90s, so things will have changed now. There's a lot more support now.

I don't know of that would have helped me a lot. It might have helped. I remember always wondering though, how come there was so much difference between her and I. How come she's able to do the work so well. How come she's able to behave? Not that I wasn't behaving. Don't get me wrong I wasn't always the best behaved, but being down the back of the classroom, you'd sometimes get the blame. I never thought of myself as someone who actually misbehaved in school. The term dyslexic was thrown around quite a bit. It was almost, in those days, like you were stupid, you know. It seemed like that was how they thought of you. I suppose they didn't want to deal with you. On the other hand, there was less focus on learning difficulties in those days. There was no diagnosis, no pathways. You were threatened with being held back. I was threatened with being expelled at one point. I remember one time, this teacher, she hated me, we didn't get on. She told my parents, because of my behaviour, they should take everything out of my room and leave only the bed. They said it might help me focus more. My parents told me about that afterwards. I hadn't heard about that at the time.

Moving to secondary school though, things changed a lot for the better. I only did two years in Scotland, then I moved to Ireland. That's when things really started to improve, when I moved to Ireland. I had a bit more of an idea of how to learn. I was able to pick my classes, and study more practical subjects. Woodwork, metal work, Art. Of course, I still had to do English and Maths. I struggled with both of those. Reading, writing and spelling, that's where I would struggle. I think I communicate ok. But not reading.

It was in college though, that I realised my love for Drama. I went on to study theatre and film. It was a lot more practical. I couldn't sit at a computer, or do something like that. Don't get me wrong, I don't act full time. I work as a delivery driver as well; I love doing that as well. I love talking to people, I think that's what I enjoy the most. But my sister, she's doing well for herself, don't get me wrong, but the difference is she's not happy. I might not be as successful as she is, I don't really care about that though. She's kind of stuck, where she is. She's not happy in her job, don't get me wrong, she doesn't hate it, but she doesn't like it either. Not as much as I love delivering. But she's earning too much to give it up. Whereas I'm happy at least. I might not be earning as much, but I'm a lot happier. And I don't feel stuck in it. I could do something else. She's settled. I couldn't do that. I know not everybody is the same.

I could never go back or anything like that. I couldn't do school again. Maybe I'd do things a bit different, but I don't know what I'd change. I don't know.

Appendix ii: Ethics Approval Forms

National College of Ireland

Educational Research Study Proposal/Ethics Form

All parts of the below form must be completed. **Please note parts of the form will move down as you complete the varying fields.**

Part A: Contact Information

Name: Paul McConnell

Student Number: x21222983

Email: x21222983@student.ncirl.ie

Supervisor: Dr Yvonne Emmett

Part B: Research Rationale, Question(s) and Objectives

1. Background and Rationale for the research (c. 250 words).

Further Education graduates face additional barriers in their pursuit of Higher Education (Satori et al, 2023). These barriers are often categorised into situational, institutional, and dispositional, each making difficult the progression to Higher Education and university (Lin, 2016; Wodlinger, 2010). Many students feel that situational barriers – financial constraints, familial obligations, or increased workloads – would be excessively challenging (HEA, 2021; O’Shea, 2021). Many others feel that issues around their inclusion and representation – institutional barriers – would leave them feeling isolated (Perna, 2020). Alongside these, there also exist dispositional barriers: students’ perception of the afore mentioned obstacles (Lin, 2016), the perceived limitations on their own capabilities (NALA, 2010), and the idea of imposter syndrome, the view that they do not belong and are “imposters” in the university setting (Breeze et al, 2022). These barriers do not exist independently, but frequently overlap, and feed into each other (Lin, 2016; Satori, 2023).

Naturally, these barriers vary from person to person (Lin, 2016). A single parent charged with the responsibility of providing care for a child will face different barriers than a person who may be the first in their family to attend university (Bowl, 2001). Thus, it is fair to say, that the specific barriers faced by students will be underpinned by their learner identity (Flynn, et al, 2011), which is itself informed by their circumstances, both inside and outside of the classroom, and their lived experiences (Nakkula & Toshalis, 2009). Learner identity can be thought of as how an individual “feels about himself/herself as a learner” (Lawson, 2014, p343).

As a Further Education teacher, I have often heard these barriers highlighted in my classroom. Many of my students do not feel themselves capable of attending university, or feel that other responsibilities would

prevent them from continuing their educational journey. In this research, I would like to explore these barriers, highlighting the lived experiences of the participants, discuss how barriers manifested to them on their educational journey, and how they were able to navigate them.

I am also interested in easing the transition, through facilitating transformative learning – a deep, meaningful change to the student’s disposition (Illeris, 2014; Mezirow, 2000). I intend to explore this indirectly through the narratives of my participants, seeing if transformative elements naturally arise from their experiences, and by reflecting upon instances where the potential for transformative learning may have altered certain outcomes.

2. *Provisional research question(s):*

Staging Transformations: How do Further Education graduates navigate barriers on their journey to Higher Education?

Potential branching questions:

What are the commonly emerging themes from research participants?

Which barriers are participants most commonly identifying?

What is the effect of learner identity on barriers that emerge?

How does intersectionality with regard to identity affect these barriers?

How do research participants perceive the transformative potential regarding barriers?

What actionable steps do participants feel helped them / could have helped in the navigation of barriers during this section of their educational journey?

3. *Provisional aims and objectives:*

Aims:

It is the aim of this research to explore the barriers faced by Further Education graduates in their progression to Higher Education, and, through hearing the lived experiences of students, understand how they navigated them. I am interested in hearing how, in participants’ experiences, these barriers were lessened / could have been lessened. I will also explore, using the testimony of the research participants and existing literature, the relationship between learner identity and these barriers, and the role of transformative learning as a tool to aid with their navigation. I would then like to broadcast the findings through drama, by creating short performance pieces inspired by the testimonies of research participants, with the belief that this will facilitate an engaging, accessible, and memorable method of dissemination (Lapum.2014).

Objectives:

Identify Barriers

Identify and quantify barriers in progression, in line with existing research. Outline which categorisations of barriers are most relevant, and practicable to the research at hand. Explore literature relating this specifically to the Further Education sector.

Unpackage the concept of learner identity

Learner identity, broadly speaking, refers to the circumstances, attitudes, opinions, and lived experiences that shape an individual’s perception of themselves as a learner (Lawson, 2014). I intend to examine the concept of learner identity, self-perception, and its influence on educational barriers using existing research. I will then examine the influence of lived educational experiences on learner identity.

Examine lived experience through phenomenological research

I will conduct phenomenological research through semi-structured interviews, in order to hear first-hand the lived experiences of students. This will allow the nuances of students' experiences to be discussed in a manner that is authentic, and allows for direct input from the participants. These semi-structured interviews will then be transcribed, with audio recording being deleted. From here, they will be coded, in order to highlight the emergence of barriers, and highlight instances of transformative learning.

Explore transformative practice with research participants

Some of the participants have completed Higher Education following their time in Further Education. It would be interesting to hear their experiences of overcoming barriers directly. It would also be interesting to hear the input in that regard from those who did not continue to HE, and discuss with them what they feel could have been done in order to aid them in navigating these barriers.

Assess potential for transformative practice

From here, I will assess, with reference to the interview transcripts and existing literature, the capacity for transformative practice in easing the transition and navigating the barriers. I will look at instances in the transcripts where participants may have identified the disorienting dilemmas associated with transformative learning (Mezirow, 2000), and what occurrences led to perspective shifts, aiding them in their navigation of barriers.

Create dramatic performance pieces

This research will incorporate elements of drama-based research in the dissemination process. These will be inspired by the semi-structured interviews, and aim to encapsulate the lived experiences of students in relation to their learner identities and the barriers they have faced in their educational journeys. Before the commencement of rehearsal, I will consult again with participants, in order to confirm that their experiences are accurately reflected. I will collaborate with professional actors to ensure then maximum degree of authenticity.

Rehearsal and performance:

Work on rehearsing these monologues with actors, ensuring the maximum degree of authenticity.

Disseminate through performance:

Direct and record the performance elements, then disseminate, with the goal of enhancing engagement through this unique medium.

Actionable recommendations for educators and policy makers

I will recommend actionable steps for educators to facilitate transformative learning in the context of assisting students in navigating the barriers that they face in the transition from Further to Higher Education. From here, I intent to explore potential policy implications, should any emerge.

Reflective analysis of drama-based elements:

Conduct a reflective analysis on the dissemination method, considering the strengths, challenges, and considerations for future practice.

Part C: Research Design Outline (Provisional)

1. Now give a detailed account of your proposed research design. Justify why this is appropriate and compare and contrast with other possible approaches. Include details on the methodological approach, data collection methods, participant selection, analysis process, and issues of quality/rigour. (c. 1200 words).

Paradigm and Methodology

This research will employ a qualitative approach, to allow for maximum input from participants, and with the belief that the barriers that students will face are underpinned by their learner identity (Bowl, 2001). This concept of learner identity, how a student views themselves as a learner, is itself informed by the lived experiences that are unique to them (Iileris, 2014, Lawson, 2014; Parkinson, et al 2021). Given the nuances of these lived experiences, the barriers will vary from person to person. Thus, I feel that, integral to the research, will be eliciting the lived experiences of students who have observed the barriers first hand. For this reason, the research will take a deep, phenomenological approach, with the goal of hearing those lived experiences of students as they navigate the barriers and emotional landscapes of the journey from Further to Higher education. This will be done through a series of semi-structured interviews, fuelled by open ended questions, in order to allow maximum input from participants, and to create a relaxed atmosphere (Satori, 2023).

The nuances of these lived experiences perhaps transcend our comprehension as outsiders to them (Subramaniam, 2021). For that reason, I believe that it is not a question of understanding the experiences themselves, but what we can infer and learn from them. For that reason, I am proposing that the research be approached from the interpretivist paradigm, with the epistemological position being that, while lived experiences may defy our understanding, they can be interpreted, patterns can be observed, and perhaps actionable steps outlined (Blaikie & Priest, 2017). This is in line with the ontological position of the interpretivist paradigm, that there is no single truth to be understood.

Participants

Participants must have completed Further Education in Ireland or Northern Ireland in the past 7 years. I had considered a shorter timeframe, however, given that the Covid-19 pandemic may have played a significant role in the decision to pursue / not pursue Higher Education, I decided that such a timeframe would allow for a more diverse set of participants. Beyond this, there are no further criteria for participation. The sample will consist of around 7 or 8 participants. I will recruit them independently, outside of institutions, as they must have finished their FE programme, in order to allow for effective reflection.

Methods

The study will revolve around a series of semi-structured interviews, which will be conducted with the participants. These will be loosely structured, and encourage a dialogue between researcher and participant (Satori et al, 2023). Participants are encouraged to ask questions when necessary, and are advised that there are no incorrect answers.

Similarly, there is no hard time limit on the conversations. It is estimated that they will range from 45-60 mins. Should a participant require some time to think about a certain question, they need only say. Additionally, should a participant require a break during the session, this can also be catered to. Questions will be open ended, in order to provide for rich and detailed conversation.

I had also considered conducting a focus group with all of the participants being present and discussing their feelings simultaneously, however, I elected not to, feeling that some people may not be comfortable sharing personal experiences in a group scenario. This may also lead to certain people dominating the conversation, while others may contribute less to the discussion.

Analysis

Given the small sample size of the study, I believe that interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA) will be the key to unpacking the lived experiences of participants. This will allow for a deep analysis, and will be beneficial, given the research methods employed. It will allow me to make sense of the nuances of the lived experiences of the participants.

In addition to this, after conducting an initial IPA analysis, I will evaluate whether there is a need for an additional analysis method, such as thematic inquiry. This would allow me to explore the themes patterns and commonalities shared by the participants, and provide analytical pluralism (Speirs, 2018). Given the smaller sample size, however, I feel that IPA will be the superior option, as it will provide greater depth (Smith & Osbourne, 2018).

Dissemination

It is important to me that the findings of this study be disseminated in a manner that is not alone authentic, but equitable and accessible to all. In addition to research findings appearing in the body of the report, drama-based dissemination methods will also feature in the work. This will aid me to present findings in a manner that is “valid, meaningful and authentic” (Lapum et al, 2014, p2).

Crucially, though, it will also provide a certain equitability to the dissemination of the research findings, by making them available in a format that is accessible to all, not alone those who are capable of and interested in reading a research dissertation (Colantonio, 2008; Hall et al, 2019; Marjanovic, 2021). Drama based research will allow me to disseminate information in a way that can reach the largest stakeholders – those navigating the barriers faced by Further Education graduates on their journey to Higher Education. It can engage a broader audience than the dissertation alone, and combining the two can provide both plurality of, and multiple means of engaging with, the research findings (Meyer et al, 2012; Meuller, 2008).

Drama-based dissemination methods can also allow us to witness the feelings behind the experiences highlighted in the interviews, and help us to observe how students navigate, not alone the barriers, but the emotional geographies that they contain. Further, such a dissemination tool can be highly memorable, and an effective method of transferring knowledge (Colantonio, 2008).

Rigor

Guba and Lincoln (1985) highlight four major criteria that must be accounted for in order to establish trustworthiness: i) Credibility. ii) dependability. iii) Confirmability. iv) transferability.

To meet these criteria, I propose the use of three rigor methods, in order to ensure plurality. These methods are reflexive journaling, the creation and maintenance of an audit trail, and member checking.

- i) **Credibility:** A reflexive journal will allow me to document personal reflections on the work, highlighting any preconceptions, and enhancing subjectivity (Darawsheh, 2014). It will allow me to approach the work in a manner that is transparent. Member checking in this regard will allow me to ensure that interpretations of accounts are accurate, and in line with participants feelings (Birt et al, 2016). An audit trail will allow others to trace research decisions in a manner that is transparent (Carcary, 2009).
- ii) **Dependability:** A reflexive journal can allow for consistency in my research (Ortlipp, 2008). Member checking will allow participants to confirm or correct information as the research progresses, ensuring that it is dependable. A systemic audit trail will also enhance dependability (Schultz et al, 2015).
- iii) **Confirmability:** A reflexive journal will acknowledge the effect that I, as the researcher, will have on the research (Olmos-Vega, 2023). This will aid me in addressing any instances of bias. Member checking will allow participants to confirm in a direct manner that my interpretations regarding them are correct and in line with their own feelings on the matter.
- iv) **Transferability:** A reflexive journal will allow me to document my own thoughts and feelings as the research progresses. An audit trail provides a comprehensive overview of the study's findings (Carcary, 2020).

Once the performance piece has been written, prior to the commencement of rehearsing, member checking will be used to ensure that it aligns correctly with the views of each participant.

Part D: Ethics

1. Have you read the NCI Educational Research Ethical Guidelines for Research?

Yes

No

2. Participant Selection and Consent

How will the participants be selected, approached and recruited? From where will participants be recruited? If recruiting via an institution or organisation other than NCI please attach a letter of agreement from the host institution agreeing to host the study and circulate recruitment advertisements/email etc.

Participants will not be recruited via an institution, as they must have already completed Further Education. This is to allow maximum potential for reflection on their time in FE as a lived experience. Instead, I will reach out independently to individuals who have already completed their time in FE, providing them with a copy of the plain language statement and consent letter, and allow them the opportunity to ask any questions they may have.

What inclusion or exclusion criteria will be used?

All participants must have completed Further Education in Ireland or Northern Ireland, within the last 7 years. While I considered a shorter time frame, I feel that seven years will allow for a more diverse range of reflections. All participants must have already completed their study, to ensure that they are able to fully reflect on their experiences. Some students will also have completed Higher Education, in order to aid with understanding how barriers can be navigated.

How will participants be informed of the nature of the study and participation?

A plain language statement will be provided to all participants. Participants will be given the opportunity to raise any questions and seek clarification around any aspect of the research in person prior to and during their interview. Participants will also have the opportunity to contact the researcher via email before and after their interview.

What procedures will be used to document the research/study participants' consent to participate?

Participants will sign a consent form in person prior to their interview. This document will then be scanned and stored on the National College of Ireland's student account cloud storage.

If vulnerable groups are participating, what special arrangements will be made to deal with issues of informed consent/assent?

No vulnerable groups are participating.

NB: Please include copies of any information letters, debriefing sheets, and consent forms with the application.

3. Confidentiality and Storage

Please indicate the form in which the Information/Data will be collected.

Identified Potentially Identifiable De-Identified

What arrangements are in place to ensure that the identity of participants is protected?

Research interviews will be recorded on Microsoft Teams. These will be stored on NCI's cloud storage. Transcripts of the interviews will be created within one week of the interview, after which time, the recordings will be destroyed. These transcripts will be anonymised, with participants being assigned a pseudonym. Participants will then only be referred to by their pseudonym throughout the report.

Please indicate any recording devices being used to collect information/data and how it will be used (e.g. audio/video).

The interviews will be recorded via Microsoft Teams. These recordings will be audio only, and be destroyed once a transcript is created.

Please describe the procedures for securing specific permission for the use of these recording devices in advance.

All participants will sign the consent letter.

Please indicate the form in which the data will be stored.

Identified Potentially Identifiable De-Identified

Who will have responsibility for the information/data generated by the research?

Paul McConnell

Will the information be stored for 5 years and then destroyed, in accordance with NCI policy?

Yes No

4. Dissemination and Reporting

Please describe how the participants will be informed of dissemination and reporting of research/study findings (e.g. submission for examination, reporting, publications, presentations)?

Participants will be made aware of this in the consent form and the plain language statement.

If any dissemination entails the use of audio, video and/or photographic records (including direct quotes), please describe how participants will be informed of this in advance.

No dissemination will entail audio / video elements that feature the participants. Participants may be directly quoted in the body of the report, and their discussion during the interview stage will be used to inspire the performance-based elements, during which they may also be directly quoted, but participants will not take part in this directly.

5. Guiding Principles

Using the description of the guiding principles, please provide a brief description (1-2 sentences) on how you will each of these below:

Principle	How will you address this? (1-2 sentences)
Democratic values	Participants' information will be treated equally, with no participant's information being given priority. Participants will have the right to withdraw their consent at any time during the research.
Justice and equality	Equitable practice will be ensured at all times, and due regard will be afforded to issues raised by all participants. Participants will be encouraged to report any illegal activity discussed during the interview to the relevant authorities. The use of drama-based dissemination methods will ensure an added layer of equitability and accessibility to the work.
The child the family and Society	No party will be excluded from participating in the research, where they meet the requirements of the study.
Integrity, transparency and respectful interactions	All information regarding the research will be made available in full and in plain language. Participants will have the opportunity to flag any questions.
Knowing from multiple perspectives	Due regard will be afforded to the diversity of experiences and opinions expressed in the research.
Quality and rigour	A thorough literature review will be conducted, consistent coding and analysis. An audit trail will be maintained. A reflexive journal will be kept, and member checking will be carried out, in order to ensure information has been understood and interpreted correctly.
Academic Scholarship	All sources employed in the research will be thoroughly referenced, in line with APA 7th edition.
Social Contribution	The goal of this research is to better understand the experiences of students in navigating the barriers between further and higher education. It is hoped that we will be able to learn from these experiences, and that this research may provide some actionable steps, as highlighted by the experiences of the participants.

Part E: Signed Declaration

I confirm that I have read the NCI Educational Research Ethical Guidelines and agree to abide by them in conducting this research. I also confirm that the information provided on this form is correct (Electronic signature is acceptable).

Signature of Applicant:

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Paul Mc Connell". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large initial 'P' and 'M'.

Date: 11/01/2024

Part F: References

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Appendix iii: Plain Language Statement

This statement was provided to all participants ahead of their participation in the research. Participants were offered the opportunity to review it again prior to the interview.

Plain Language Statement

Introduction

- This research project has been given the working title “Staging Transformations: How do Further Education graduates navigate barriers on their journey to Higher Education?”
- The research is being conducted by Paul McConnell, a student on the MA in Educational Practice at NCI.

Who can participate?

- Anyone who has completed Further Education in Ireland or Northern Ireland in the last 7 years is eligible.

Details of involvement

- Participants must be available for a one-to-one interview with the researcher.
- This interview will be approximately 45-60 minutes in length.
- During the interview, your audio will be recorded.
- We will discuss your own experiences of Further Education, and the barriers you may have faced in your progression to Higher Education.
- Some of the information you provide may be used in the creation of a performance piece, as well as featuring in the body of the research, which will be available publicly on NCI’s repository, NORMA

Potential Risks

- It is not envisioned that any risks will arise from your participation.

Benefits

- Your insights on the topic at hand will inform much of the research being conducted. Thus, you may be helping others who are in a similar position.

Confidentiality

- Once a transcript of your interview is complete, your recording will be destroyed. This will occur within one week of the interview.

- Following this, you will be assigned a pseudonym.
- The transcript of the interview will be stored on NCI's cloud storage, and will be destroyed after 5 years.

Voluntary Participation

- Your participation is entirely voluntary.
- You may withdraw from the study at any time, even after your interview has been conducted.

Contact

- If you have any additional questions, you can contact Paul McConnell at x21222983@student.ncirl.ie

Appendix iv: Consent Form

All participants signed the consent form prior to their interview.

Consent Form**Research study title**

The research in which you are being requested to participate in is titled “Staging Transformations: Navigating the barriers affecting progression from Further to Higher Education through transformative learning”. It is being carried out by Paul McConnell, in partial fulfilment of the MA in Educational Practice at the National College of Ireland.

Purpose of research

The research is interested in understanding the lived experiences of students who have faced barriers in their progression from Further to Higher Education, to explore the extent that learner identity has on these barriers, and the capacity for transformative learning as a tool to ease the progression. The research is interested in disseminating these lived experiences through dramatic performance, and will use the semi-structured interviews to provide inspiration in order to create several dramatic performance pieces, which will be performed by professional actors.

Confirmation of requirements

I have read / had read to me the plain language statement

I have understood the information contained therein

I have completed Further Education in Ireland / Northern Ireland in the past 7 years

I have had the opportunity to raise any questions that I have

I understand that any information that I give may be used and / or directly quoted in the body of the research

I understand that my interview may be used to inspire a performance piece

I understand that my conversation will be recorded, as outlined in the plain language statement

Arrangements of confidentiality

Every effort will be made to ensure confidentiality. All information will be stored as outlined in the plain language statement.

I have read and understand the information outlined in the plain language statement and consent form. I consent to participate in the research, as outlined in these documents.

Signature

Date

Name in block capitals _____

Appendix v: Schedule of interviews

Although an initial schedule was drawn up, it did not materialise. Several of the interviews had to be rescheduled at the request of the participants.

Initial Schedule:

Interview 1 (Lily)	11/03
Interview 2 (Arthur)	25/03
Interview 3 (Aoife)	08/04
Interview 4 (Bee)	12/04
Interview 5 (Darren)	19/04
Interview 6 (Luke)	22/04

Appendix vi: Sample of transcripts

00:17:09 Lily
I'm not smart enough, I'd definitely need a lot of support again to be able to proceed.

00:17:10 Interviewer
And do you think you might deal with that if you were to progress to university?

00:17:18 Lily
Yeah, sadly that is the downside. I don't know how I'd go about getting support. They need evidence of all of that, I'd need to get all that sorted. More stress!

00:17:33 Interviewer
So, you think maybe it's more a lack of support available around learning difficulties?

00:17:40 Lily

again

Paul McConnell
Telling herself that she isn't capable, again indicative of a poor learner identity

Reply

Paul McConnell
Returning to the idea of support as being paramount; Social Capital available to her

Reply

Paul McConnell
Hope I didn't lead her to an answer with this question: will attempt to refrain from such direct

00:12:23 Aoife
I did pretty well, mostly, I got mostly A's and B's, a couple of C's, so I did quite well in them. I got extra time as well for those of.

00:12:39 Interviewer
How was that?

00:12:45 Aoife
But I barely used it because, I don't know why, I was trying to be competitive and finish it before the extra time started. I would barely use the extra time if I could avoid it at all. Music, drama, ICT, science. They were the ones that I enjoyed most anyway. Especially the ones I chose myself, I really enjoyed them a lot of. The what do you call them? Elective! Elective modules. Mostly I think because they didn't have exams per se. It was mostly practical. I didn't really enjoy doing exams.

00:13:33 Interviewer
And how did you find those other assessment methods, the ones that weren't exams?

00:13:40 Aoife
Far better. Far better, I hate exams, even the thought of them! Thank God I didn't have any in tech or in Uni.

upon supports

Reply

Paul McConnell
Practical subjects

Reply

Paul McConnell
Impact of choice; capacity to study elective modules
31 July 2024, 16:37

Reply

Paul McConnell
Authentic and more practical assessment methods

Reply

Paul McConnell
Linguistic Comment: Use of repetition to

00:33:12 Interviewer
And how was that experience?

00:33:26 Arthur
You know, in one way like, I was looking forward to going back. Like, getting back into things. Getting a bit of a routine going again. But the idea of going back to school, I remember thinking about it, thinking about just not going back. But I'm glad I did not even just for the education, but the people I've met through school. School here in Ireland that it is, I don't think I'd have even stayed in secondary school if we'd stayed in [country of origin]. But I was glad to be back in school once I was. Not that I was too into it mind. You wouldn't have caught me studying or anything! But I enjoyed meeting people, talking to people. That was the thing that they were always giving out to me about. Talking. Talking in class, talking in the corridor after the bell had rang. Chatting too much now I suppose as well!

00:36:02 Interviewer

reply

Paul McConnell
Again, returning to his social relationships as being paramount

Reply

Paul McConnell
Again, draws on comparison between Ireland and country of origin
31 July 2024, 17:01

Reply

Appendix vii: Sample Questions

How do you feel about yourself as a learner?

Can you think of any memorable experiences that may have played a part in how you feel about yourself as a learner?

How did your time in primary school affect your learner identity?

What about secondary school?

Do you think your socio-economic factors played a role in your learner identity?

What about family background?

Are you the first in your family to attend FE / HE?

How do you think your ethnic culture affected your learner identity?

What factors motivated your decisions around attending FE / HE?

How did you navigate the decision-making process around that?

Can you tell me about your educational history to date?

Did you experience any particular challenges? Successes?

Are there any instances that challenged your perception of yourself as a learner?

How did support factor in to your educational journey

Appendix viii: Sample of Interview Notes

"Lily"

Interview Notes:

Immediately asserts a low opinion
of herself as a learner
Straight to discussion around
primary school

This is in spite of doing
extremely well in
her GCSE programmes

Difficulties
learning Difficulties

"Darren"

Interview Notes:

Very upfront about difficulties
Primary school - "Beginning
"Nothing of school" | it's all
traumatic" | all

Role of competition
Expectations of success

Found great (Enjoyment of
difficulty in his
passions

Appendix ix: Sample of Reflexive Journal

15/05/2022

It again strikes me how profoundly connected the role of meaning-making is to the research. I've revolved around my interpretation of the participant interpretation of the event. I have been reflecting of late on the significance of that though. Participants interpret the experience of the events as they occur. Thus, it is that interpretation - that meaning-making - that is so vital to the process that interpretive process that both informs, and is itself informed by, the learner identity. This, I believe, is evidenced in the manner in which students interpret their success and failures. Many will simply believe that success in a particular field is beyond them. They are not good at something, or it doesn't align with my learning style. Of course, I believe that it is largely from something of a defence mechanism. Rather than saying "I failed", it is easier to say "It's no good at", I said, also remain cognizant of that. It reduces culpability and responsibility.

Appendix x: Emergent themes

Superordinate Theme	Subordinate Themes	Overview
Impact of Compulsory Education on the Learner Identity	Influences of primary school on learner identity; Influences of relationships with peers / teachers on learner identity; Role of meaning making on learner identity;	All participants felt that their learner identity was rooted in the experiences accumulated during compulsory education. When asked about how they feel about themselves as a learner (MacFarlane, 2018), all participants identified formative experiences, in particular primary school, as integral to their current learner identity. For Bee and Arthur, poor relationships with teachers at primary school had a severely detrimental impact on how they feel about themselves as learners. Lily and Aoife felt that formative educational experiences of finding it difficult to access learning as it was offered in the classroom had a negative impact on their learner identities. Luke talked of extremely positive experiences in primary school bolstering his learner identity, but in an altogether unhealthy fashion. He progressed to secondary school with the belief that he would carry with him the same educational success he had attained in primary school, only to struggle significantly with the progression, something which had a severely negative effect on his learner identity.
Educational Transitions, and their Effect on Learner Identity	Effects of primary / secondary school transitions on the learner identity; Transition to FE and its effect on Learner Identity; Influence of FE / HE transition on Learner Identity	All participants regarded educational transitions as being highly impactful upon their learner identities. Luke talked at length of the extremely negative experiences around his transition to secondary school, and the detrimental effect that this had on his learner identity. He talked then of the positive experiences around his move to FE, followed again by somewhat negative experiences around his transition to HE, all of which he felt largely shaped his learner identity. Bee, Arthur and Darren all talked of much more positive experiences around the transition to secondary school, with Arthur in particular feeling that the move to secondary school, which also saw him move to Ireland, was a very positive experience. Aoife and Arthur felt that the move to FE was also something that greatly improved their learner identities, while Bee and Darren found the move stressful, and believe that it negatively impacted their learner identities.

<p>Influence of Background Circumstances on Learner Identity</p>	<p>Effects of Learning Difficulties on Learner Identity; Effects of sexual orientation and gender identity on learner identity; Influence of Social Class on Learner Identity; Effect of Familial Relationships on Learner Identity</p>	<p>Aoife, Lily and Darren discussed the negative impact of learning difficulties on their learner identity, and the often transformative, but sometimes detrimental, nature of the support that they received. They talked at length of the emotional geographies navigated in the process of receiving a diagnosis. Lily and Bee discussed the experience of coming out as bisexual during education, while Bee also discussed their experiences of being non-binary. Darren talked of his experiences of coming out as gay during secondary school, and the effect that this had on his relationships with peers. Darren also talked at length of the effect of familial expectations on his learner identity. Aoife, Lily, Bee and Arthur and Luke highlighted their experiences of coming from working-class backgrounds on their learner identity.</p>
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Appendix xi: AI Declaration

AI Acknowledgement Supplement

Your Name/Student Number	Course	Date
Paul McConnell	MA in Educational Practice Year 2	20/07/2024

This section is a supplement to the main assignment, to be used if AI was used in any capacity in the creation of your assignment; if you have queries about how to do this, please contact your lecturer. For an example of how to fill these sections out, please click [here](#).

AI Acknowledgment

This section acknowledges the AI tools that were utilized in the process of completing this assignment.

Tool Name	Brief Description	Link to tool
ChatGPT	Occasional clarification around proper citation of sources not included on the library website or online; Asked to provide a list of sources relevant to a very early draft of the research question (None were included in the final research).	https://chat.openai.com/

Description of AI Usage

This section provides a more detailed description of how the AI tools were used in the assignment. It includes information about the prompts given to the AI tool, the responses received, and how these responses were utilized or modified in the assignment. **One table should be used for each tool used.**

ChatGPT	
<p>ChatGPT was asked to recommend some sources relevant to a very early draft of the research question. While it recommended seven different papers, two seemed to be fictional, or at least no record of them existed online. While I read the remaining five, a few featured in early drafts of work, but became less relevant as the research progressed, and were not included in the final thesis.</p> <p>ChatGPT was asked for clarification around several intricacies involving citations, specifically how to cite multiple works by the same author published in the same year. It was also used for clarification around the correct citation method for work that was published a considerable time after the death of its writer.</p>	
<p>Sample prompt:</p> <p>1) "I want to cite a Lev Vygotsky article that was written in the year of his death in 1934. The article though, was unpublished at the time of his death, and was not published until 1998. Which year do I cite?"</p> <p>2) "In an APA reference list, how do I include multiple publications by the same author in the same year?"</p>	<p>Sample response from ChatGPT:</p> <p>1) "In APA style, when citing a work that was published posthumously, you should use the publication date of the work rather than the date it was written. The publication date is the year in which the work became publicly available. Therefore, for the Vygotsky article that was written in 1934 but not published until 1998, you should cite the year 1998."</p>

2) "When you have multiple publications by the same author in the same year, you distinguish them by assigning letters (a, b, c, etc.) after the year in both the in-text citations and the reference list."

Evidence of AI Usage

This section includes evidence of significant prompts and responses used or generated through the AI tool. It should provide a clear understanding of the extent to which the AI tool was used in the assignment. Evidence may be attached via screenshots or text.

ChatGPT ▾

I have another question I want to cite a Lev Vygotsky article that was written in the year of his death in 1934. The article though, was unpublished at the time of his death, and was not published until 1998. Which year do I cite? Will it look silly to cite a date that's over 60 years after a person's death?



In APA style, when citing a work that was published posthumously, you should use the publication date of the work rather than the date it was written. The publication date is the year in which the work became publicly available. Therefore, for the Vygotsky article that was written in 1934 but not published until 1998, you should cite the year 1998.

Here is how you should format the reference:

In-text citation:
(Vygotsky, 1998)

Additional Evidence A:

ChatGPT ▾

Hi chat, can you help me with a quick referencing question? In an APA reference list, how do I include multiple publications by the same author in the same year? I have assigned them letters in the in text citation - eg (Thompson, 2020a), but how do I convey that in the reference list?



Certainly! When you have multiple publications by the same author in the same year, you distinguish them by assigning letters (a, b, c, etc.) after the year in both the in-text citations and the reference list. Here's how you do it in the reference list:

1. **Order the references alphabetically by title** (ignoring any articles like "A," "An," or "The" at the beginning of the title).
2. **Assign letters to the years** in the order they appear alphabetically.