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A School Completion Initiative in a Primary School in Ireland

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Students who grow up in disadvantaged areas face more challenges and are less likely to complete their education than peers from non-disadvantaged areas. In response to this inequality, the Irish Department of Education and Skills implemented an intervention called Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS) to address it. Before the introduction of DEIS in 2005, the Department of Education and Skills had initiated a pilot project in 2002 called the School Completion Programme (SCP) which aimed to improve the retention of young people at risk of early school leaving. Due to the perceived effectiveness of this intervention, it was incorporated into the DEIS scheme in 2005. This qualitative study examines the effectiveness of the School Completion Programme (SCP) in one Irish primary school situated in an area of low socioeconomic status. This paper reports findings from 13 interviews conducted with a Principal, four teachers, three SCP staff, and five parents of students accessing the programme. Findings indicate that the SCP is perceived as a valuable and effective service for the students and teachers in this school, and parents really benefit having the project workers present in the school and liaising with the community. Some potential improvements to the programme are identified and discussed.

Introduction

Enrolment in pre-primary, primary and secondary education is currently at its highest level across the globe, though it is estimated that 617 million children and adolescents are unable to reach minimum proficiency levels in reading and mathematics, despite

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two-thirds of them being in school (UNESCO Institute for statistics, 2017). UNICEF's Global Out of School Children Initiative (2015) estimated that children from the 20% poorest households are four times more likely to not attend school and five times as likely to not complete primary school compared to children from the 20% richest households. Cobb-Clark (2019) reports that increasing inequality in society, represented by a lengthening socioeconomic ladder, renders it difficult for children from disadvantaged communities to avoid becoming disadvantaged adults. According to recent data from the Australian Bureau of Statistics (2019) on average net worth from 2003-4 to 2017-18, the middle and top 20% of Australian households experienced a real increase, on the other hand, the bottom 20% did not experience an increase during this period. The disheartening fact is that there is an established correlation between low socioeconomic status and early school leaving amongst children and adolescents in Australia (Williams, Long, Carpenter & Hayden, 1993; Batten, Withers & Russell, 1996). Early school leaving is defined as a long-term and multi-dimensional process of disengagement and not a result of a single event (Dale, 2010; Ferguson et al, 2005).

Research from the 2010 Longitudinal Study of Australian Youth (LSAY) found that out of the 22-year-olds who were not in full-time employment or ongoing education, 11.3% had left school in Year 11 (16-17 years old), 16.5% left in Year 10 (15-16 years old) and one-third had left school in Year 9 (14-15 years old) (Robison & Lamb, 2012). Curtis & McMillan (2008) report that Aboriginal young people are over-represented within early school leaver figures by three times that of non-Aboriginal young people due to factors such as the cost of schooling, cultural discrimination and geographical location (Helme & Lamb, 2011). Furthermore, students from low-income families are academically disadvantaged compared to their more advantaged peers when starting school and this gap widens as the students progress through school (Lee & Burkam 2002; Ready, 2010; Downey, Von Hippel & Broh, 2004). A positive response to the inequality in education in Australia was the introduction of the Vocational Educational and Training (VET) programmes in schools that offer alternative pathways to

mainstream high school education. The Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW) (2019) recorded that retention rates for both sexes had increased since 2008, from 83.2% to 88.8% in 2019.

In Ireland, there has also been an increase in retention rates stabilising at 92%, however, students in disadvantaged schools in Ireland are 9% more likely to drop out before completion of the Leaving Certificate examination, which is the terminal examination at the end of post-primary education, compared to their peers in non-disadvantaged schools. Hennessy et al (2018) stressed that students' chances of participating in higher education are directly related to the students' community of origin. The reason why it is so important to tackle educational disadvantage is that educational attainment is linked to quality of life and well-being and offers a route out of poverty and social exclusion (Hennessy et al, 2018). Although, there is an increase in student retentions rates in both Australia and Ireland, there is still a significant gap between students from low socioeconomic backgrounds and their non-disadvantaged peers.

The Irish government introduced positive discrimination policies by providing schools with additional resources that have a high number of individuals with low socioeconomic status (Weir, 2016). The most significant Irish initiative to bridge the gap is the Delivering Equality of Opportunity (DEIS) scheme. The DEIS scheme provides a range of evidence-based supports to target educational disadvantage (Weir, Kavanagh, Kelleher & Moran, 2017). The Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS) intervention originated from the definition of educational disadvantage described in the Education Act (1998), section 32(9), identifying education as a pathway that provides better opportunities for communities at risk of disadvantage and social exclusion (Department of Education & Skills, 2020). According to the revised DEIS plan in 2017, it aims to break down barriers and stem the cycle of inter-generational disadvantage, by providing learners with the opportunity to succeed, participate in, and contribute to, society (DEIS Plan 2017, P.6). A target set out in the DEIS 2017 plan was to increase the rates of progression of students

to further and higher education, including the number of students from the Irish Travelling Community (separate ethnic group in Ireland) attending higher education by 2019. A recent report from the Department of Education and Skills (2019) indicates that there was significant progress in increasing participation in third-level education for people with disabilities and people from disadvantaged backgrounds, but for Traveller students there is still a considerable gap, as there were only 41 students from the Travelling Community in higher education, out of a total of 250,000 students (Department of Education & Skills, 2019).

During the 2019/20 academic year, there were 891 DEIS schools in Ireland, 693 primary schools (ages 4-12) and 198 post-primary schools (ages 13-18) (Department of Education & Skills, 2020). However, it must be noted that the 891 DEIS schools that are targeted towards students in disadvantaged areas do not enrol all of the 110,000 children, who are reported by the Children's Rights Alliance (2020) and Social Justice Ireland (2019) to be living in consistent poverty. These agencies further report that 230,000 children are living in families where family income is below the poverty line. The original categorisation of schools for inclusion in the DEIS scheme was based on a survey carried out in 2005, which examined socio-economic variables including; unemployment, local authority accommodation, lone parenthood, membership of Travelling Community, large families (5 or more children), and pupil eligibility for free books.

Issues of school completion and school attendance are inextricably intertwined, with inconsistent school attendance frequently predicting early school leaving. Incidents of students not attending school create a welfare issue, and school absenteeism is often the first indication of a problem going on for the student or family at home. In Ireland, it incumbent on schools to notify the Education Welfare Board (EWB) if a student has missed 20 days or more in one school year. The national Child and Family Agency, TUSLA, reported that, on average, 59,900 students missed school each day, of whom 32,600 were primary school students, while 27,300 were post-primary school students (TUSLA, 2016). Also, 12.3% of

primary school and 14.9% of post-primary school students were absent for more than 20 days (TUSLA, 2016).

The risk factors associated with poor primary school attendance include living in an overcrowded home, sharing a bed, having an unemployed father or no father in the home, living in council-rented accommodation, having fewer friends, negative parental attitudes to education, overdependence on the mother and having undue worry at the age of eleven (Carroll, 2015; 2011; 1986; Attwood &Carroll 2006). Also, students from disadvantaged communities are more likely to change schools during the school year, especially when students become homeless and consequently reside in short-term unstable housing (De La Torre & Gwynne, 2009; Ready, 2010). The issue of poor attendance by students from disadvantaged communities is further exacerbated by the effects associated with children's health and home conditions, as they often suffer high rates of heart and kidney disease, asthma, digestive problems, epilepsy, as well as dental, hearing and vision deficits. That in turn often leads to missing a significant number of days off school (Ready, 2010; Bloom, Dey & Freeman, 2006; Moonie, Sterling, Figgs & Castro 2006). Another risk factor noted in the literature is the correlation between school non-attendance and self-esteem, as it has been widely observed that students who are absent from school often present with lower self-esteem (Dahl 2016; Huizinga, Loever, Thornberry, & Cothern 2000; Egger, Costello & Angold, 2003). Also, girls are equally as likely as boys to be truant from school, though, for girls it occurs due to relationship-based issues, whereas, for boys, it is because of issues with following rules (Puzzanchera, Stahl, Finnegan, Tierney, & Snyder, 2003; Weden & Zabin, 2005).

The School Completion Programme (SCP) is an intervention that aims to tackle school non-attendance in Ireland. It operates in all DEIS schools and in some non-DEIS primary schools that are aligned with DEIS post-primary schools. The School Completion Programme (SCP) was piloted in 2002 and has been evolving ever since. It is a bottom-up approach that aims to target three key areas: school attendance, student participation, and school retention.

There are currently 124 SCP clusters across Ireland, including 470 primary schools and 224 second-level schools. Students referred to SCP are students deemed to be at risk of early school leaving based on correlating factors of poor school attendance, behavioural issues and low levels of participation within school. The SCP is organised in clusters of schools, two primary and one post-primary school, and consists of project workers and a co-ordinator deployed in the schools. SCP projects tend to operate differently in different schools, despite all having the same aims. These aims include retaining young people in the education system to the completion of post-primary education (age 18); improving the quality of participation and educational attainment of the targeted students; offering supports in both primary and post-primary schools in order to address educational disadvantage, bringing together all relevant stakeholders to tackle early school leaving; encouraging young people who have left mainstream education to return to school, and influencing policies in relation to preventing early school leaving in the education system. Each project worker delivers different initiatives, such as breakfast clubs, homework clubs, sports activities, well-being initiatives, social skills development programmes and anger management groups, as well as skill development in areas such as cooking, and computers. Sometimes the SCP workers attend training in therapeutic programmes such as Roots of Empathy and Nurture Groups. The project workers also organise holiday supports and transition programmes. The SCP model represents a Freirean type of pedagogy, as the SCP works towards overcoming the barrier of educational disadvantage instead of passively accepting it (McKenna, 2015). The SCP provides students with a sense of agency to empower them to pursue their goals. Nonetheless, McKenna (2015) also stresses that unless there are changes to external factors, the school reform efforts will be unsuccessful. The School Completion Programme also aims to promote parental involvement, as parents are students' first teachers in life, and this encouragement of parental involvement can influence students' success (Ellis, 2009). Furthermore, SCP staff also aim to integrate themselves into the local community and liaise with local services, and the relationships that SCP project staff have with these services and the community are often positive, as the

project worker can refer students on to the appropriate service that best meets the needs of students and the family if required. To become a project worker for the SCP, a candidate needs to hold a third-level qualification in Social Care/Social Science, Youth/Community Work, Education or a related discipline and have experience of working with children. Newly appointed project workers must attend five CPD training days within the first 12 months of assuming the role.

This paper will present an overview of a School Completion Programme in a non-DEIS primary school in Dublin, Ireland. Although it is a non-DEIs school, it is educating students from a very disadvantaged community. A report on the local community was commissioned in 2016 to identify the level of marginalisation in the area and to provide an indication of infrastructure and services deficits. The researchers found that 95% of the local community were living in local authority rental accommodation, 28% of the population defined themselves as being of non-Irish ethnic background, and 11.6% of the population did not speak English well or at all. Unemployment rates were very high at 31.82%, while the national rate at the time of the publication of the report in 2016 was 6.3%, and 11% had left school before the age of 15.

The disadvantage rating of the community has been getting worse over the years; poverty in the area was measured at -11.3 in 2006, then decreased to -15.2 in 2011 and to -15.8 in 2016. The School Completion Programme is the only DEIS-related intervention that the school currently receives. It is important to highlight that in 2007 there was a significant re-development of the council estate in the local community in question which was not included in the survey used in the DEIS categorisation process in 2005. This highlights an issue with the categorisation of schools under the DEIS scheme as there needs to be a review of the local community status of non-DEIS schools, where there has been a development of social housing and direct provision centres and levels of homelessness may have significantly increased since 2005. Although, the revised DEIS plan published in 2017 aimed to

produce a robust assessment framework for identifying schools and for allocating resources, there are still gaps in the system and there are many students who live in poverty that do not attend a DEIS school.

The research project about to be reported set out to investigate the overall effectiveness of the School Completion Programme (SCP) in a primary school that does not fall under the Delivering Equality of Opportunity in School (DEIS) programme. The major aim was to better understand service users' needs and inform recommendations for improvement of the programme and the categorisation of schools under the DEIS programme. While the School Completion Programme is a DEIS funded programme, some non-DEIS schools avail of the service due to their involvement in a cluster group with schools that do fall under the DEIS programme. The school that is the focus of this study is one such school. The researchers investigated the effectiveness of the school completion programme in the school which is situated in an urban disadvantaged area in Ireland. By obtaining an in-depth perspective of the various stakeholders on the specific SCP service through qualitative data collection, the study aims to identify aspects of the programme that the stakeholders feel are beneficial and where they feel improvements may be needed. It was conducted in 2020 at the time of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Methodology

The study was based on a qualitative design using semi-structured interviews to understand participants' experiences. Qualitative interviews yield data that can be analysed in-depth. They allow for openness and ensure that many unexpected insights can be explored. That can strengthens the validity of the findings (Merriam & Grenier, 2019). Due to government recommendations regarding social distancing that were in place at the time the study was conducted, the semi-structured interviews were carried out using computer-mediated communication (CMC) through the Zoom software and phone calls (for participants who did not have access to the software). The interviews involved asking open-ended

questions to allow for flexibility and rich in-depth experiential accounts to be offered by individuals. Some questions took into account the cohort to which the individual belonged (teacher, SCP staff, parent) and all were asked in the same sequence for all participants in a specific cohort. The interview questions were designed to determine the perceived effectiveness of the SCP by SCP staff, teachers (including a principal) and parents.

This study included a total of 13 participants consisting of teachers (N=4), a principal (N=1), parents of students referred to the SCP (N=5), SCP project workers (N=2) and an SCP co-ordinator (N=1). The recruitment of the participants was purposive with the 13 participants selected from different cohorts to provide a wide variety of perspectives. Permission to conduct the research was requested from the Board of Management of the school. Participants were assured that any decision not to participate in the research would not have an impact in any way on the service or support they or their students received from the school or the SCP. Ethical approval was given in March 2020.

Invitation letters were distributed to all teachers in the school, to all SCP staff and to the parents of students referred to the SCP. All participants signed a consent form and were reminded that they had the right to withdraw from the study at any point. The data were analysed through a thematic analysis approach (Braun & Clarke, 2019). That involved examining the data to identify patterns, designating codes to the data, and building themes and subthemes from the codes (Braun & Clarke 2006). An early coding template was compiled using the interview topic guide (Saldana 2014). It was refined as further themes were generated during data analysis. Data saturation was reached when no further themes or sub-themes were generated (Fusch & Ness 2015).

Results

Results are summarised below under seven themes: SCP targets; SCP bridging the gap; Students' experiences of SCP; Experiences

of Parents; SCP staff experiences; Benefits, disadvantages and future development of SCP; and Covid-19 pandemic impact.

SCP targets

The School Completion Programme has three core targets. They relate to increasing attendance, participation, and retention rates. The interview questions sought participants' views on the levels of participation of the targeted students and their perceived school experiences. Teachers, SCP staff and parents all contended that the students had developed a positive school experience due to the SCP.

> I would see them in school looking excited and happy and laughing their heads off, it's fantastic to see that and it gives students a fresh and positive attitude to school and that feeling that there's a trusted adult in the school that they can talk to. It gives them a sense of belonging, feeling of being part of something, they become more confident to approach different teachers in the school and talk about the activity they've done and show off what they've made. (Teacher 7)

> Huge hugely positive, you see they're happier… and I would always have said, Maslow's needs before Bloom's, the children are having all of those needs met first. They are going to perform better, so it has a very positive knock-on effect. (Teacher 2).

> She enjoys it taking part in the cooking, being able to work alongside others, she wanted to do more when she came home, she really put her heart and soul into it,and she was doing it because she was enjoying it so much, and she never wanted to miss it and always looked forward to going to it, every week. It opened her up to wanting to do more. (Parent 1)

The second target the SCP aims to improve is the student's attendance rates. SCP staff reported that there was an increase in the students' attendance and the staff felt that their work had a direct impact on them:

> I think it definitely has an impact on attendance because we do a lot of work on attendance, and there will be lots of anecdotal

> evidence of students who come in for specific groups or students who come in because they have literally been walked from their house by school completion programme staff (SCP staff 5)

Teachers and parents also reported that the SCP was having an impact on the students' attendance:

> It is definitely improved the attendance rates majorly and it makes them realise school isn't such an awful place and, for some kids, they have a bad outlook of school because they feel they are not achieving much as other people academically. (Teacher 4)

> Yeah, definitely, they look forward to those days most of all when they have the clubs. (Parent 5)

Teachers stated too that that the SCP contributes to students' retention rates and that it has long-term positive effects on a student's educational journey:

> The SCP children are coming in, and they have a positive experience a couple of days, the school doesn't become a big issue or a big no and if you get them young enough and kind of encourage them, then you can build on that and then if there's a continuation of support for them later on in secondary school that makes all the difference. (Teacher 2)

SCP bridging the gap

Another theme is that the project worker is valuable and key to providing a link between the teachers and parents within the school. This is evidenced by that fact that the school does not have a home school liaison teacher. That results in the project worker taking on the role in order to provide a holistic approach to helping the students.

Teachers stated that some parents' levels of communication with the school are limited and SCP staff provide a link between these two stakeholders:

> Our relationship does not exist with the family unless SCP is involved, as they are the parents who don't engage with us (Teacher 3)

> Having the project worker on the ground is very important, they are the face of the school that can go out and talk and make an engagement and encourage parents to come up and it is that sharing of information between what is happening at home and in school. (Teacher 2)

The parents all reported that having the project worker helped their relationship with the school and that, prior to their involvement with the school, their relationship with the school was poor:

> Having the worker has 100% helped (child's name) integrate, helped her feel safe and secure, keeping me in the loop with what was going on and having somebody there to listen to her if she was having a bad day (Parent 4).

It was highlighted also that having a project worker based in the school on a daily basis takes the pressure off teachers and the students have one key adult in their life that they work with throughout their primary school experience:

> The children have an adult human who's in their corner and it's just so so useful" (Teacher 4)

> Working with the students on a daily basis means we are more likely to pick up on issues in school and at home and if it's something we cannot help with, then we can help the parents make the referral to the correct organisation if needed (SCP staff 3)

The SCP project worker role was only introduced in the school three years ago. Prior to that the teachers were running the SCP clubs. All the school personnel agree that having a separate project worker is most valuable:

> Since a project worker has come to work in the school it has changed massively and it's very important the project worker is

> from a neutral ground as the student would be turned off attending a club if they've been in trouble on the yard with the teacher who is running the club. (Teacher 7)

However, the fact that the SCP varies from cluster to cluster means that not every project is the same.

Relatedly, the school personnel only found out about the project when they started working at the current school and it was only through a staff presentation, teachers said, that they came to feel that they fully understood what the School Completion Programme involves:

> I didn't hear about it in college or anything before, it was when I started working in the school and, back then, it was just the teachers doing the clubs and it didn't really show the full benefits because when we got the project worker, it was a whole new experience (Teacher 4)

> The day we had the presentation on SCP was extremely informative and explains the rationale behind it and a lot of teachers said; 'SCP has been in the school for 7/8 years and I never knew fully what it was about. (Teacher 6)

Students' experience of SCP

Another theme is that teachers were able to identify the students who attend SCP as being the students that were not fully equipped for school and had difficulties at home:

> The children that you notice don't have their copies or lunches in their bags, who come to school hungry, and they're very obviously missed breakfast and breakfast is not something that happens in their house. (Teacher 8)

> They're not coming to school, pressures at home and that child is just coming in and out of school, and look unkempt.(Teacher 2)

The SCP workers reported that the SCP students frequently have difficulties in school and with the education system as a whole:

> I suppose a lot of the students that we'd work with would have difficulties with teachers or difficulties with the education system itself.(SCP staff 5)

All held the view that the SCP interventions and programmes are effective and provide students with a positive school experience and they love being part of a club, as most of the SCP students would not do any extracurricular activities or attend clubs outside of school:

> Teachers have reported that the anger management programmes have worked really well and the students' anger outbursts have decreased a lot (SCP staff 1)

> The breakfast club is just fantastic. That is a huge success, and it has been made for them, that they feel they're in, at home, like a little community within a community, they get themselves up to come in for that at 8 am (Teacher 2)

> And doing things with them that they like doing, things they wouldn't have time to do at home or maybe they can't afford it. (Parent 1)

Parents' experiences

Parents stated that they trust the project worker in their child's school. They added when they first met the project worker, they felt as follows:

> I felt fine although a bit weary and anxious as I didn't know what it was about but once I knew what it was about and you were there to help because I had a key worker in (Name of school) for my other child and that's the sort of way I look at you and that you're there to help and you're not there to hurt us you know. You aren't there out to get us or anything like that, you know. I welcome anything like that (Parent 3)

> I put a lot of trust with you and I've told you things I haven't even spoken to my family about. I really feel safe when you are there you know and I know that (child's name) and (child's name) are

safe when they are in with you. So I have no problems with the school completion programme. (Parent 4)

Parents also felt that they had a choice as to whether their child participated in the SCP and remembered signing the consent form:

Yeah, I did yeah, because you asked me to sign papers for it (Parent 2)

Yes, most parents want their kids in school doing stuff like that anyway and make friends and that. Then you have those parents that are very proud and don't want their kids in groups like that, I mean most of them are going to say 'yes' anyway, you know they will want to join it. Why would you not want your child in it? I don't understand you know. (Parent 1)

I was very happy, and find out what kind of different clubs and things that were going to happen in the school and that for (name of child) to be in. (Parent 4)

SCP staff experiences

A theme that emerged in the data was in relation to the SCP workers' experiences and one issue that occurred for the coordinators is that they do not receive any supervision, yet the coordinators provide supervision to the project workers:

Some coordinators have left the job for that very reason and I know we work within TUSLA as grant aid and TUSLA themselves have a very strong policy on staff supervision ...but no we don't have it. (SCP staff 5)

Also, the SCP workers highlighted that there is a high chance of burn out for both coordinators and project workers and because every role is different depending on the project, there are inconsistencies:

I know coordinators who would say, this is one of the most stressful jobs in the world (SCP staff 5)

> The roles are quite different from project to project and things are undefined, you have to mind yourself from doing extra work that isn't your role. (SCP staff 1).

Benefits, disadvantages and future development of SCP

Participants identified several advantages and disadvantages of the SCP and the changes that could be undertaken. One advantage mentioned regularly by the teachers was that there was always an immediate response to an issue:

> You can refer kids on if you are worried about them and it is an immediate response, you're not waiting to go through departments. (Teacher 4)

The SCP workers voiced that the advantages of the bottom-up approach was the ability to tailor the programmes offered for all the SCP students, which is a very effective approach:

> Building the programmes around students works well because you are giving a direct response to what the young person needs. (SCP staff 1)

Another advantage highlighted by the school personnel was the changes in the Local Management Committee (LMC) that has allowed for a less school-based programme:

> The service is more structured. I think we have a better Local Management Committee because it has been extended out into the wider community. Initially it was all very school-based and the schools were calling the shots. (Teacher 2)

Parents stated also that the school completion programme helped their children:

> I find it gives them the confidence to do things. (Parent 2)

> It helps them, I notice a difference. I think it is brilliant you know it encourages them. A brilliant thing to do for the kids, a great opportunity like. (Parent 4)

> In the area, it keeps kids out of trouble, gets them more involved, because it's good for them, keeps them away from social media, and you know, something for them to do. Sometimes there would be food and that there for them and for the kids they would look forward to that bit of food, I think it works well and a very good idea. (Parent 1)

On the other hand, the SCP workers all reported that the image of SCP could be improved:

> The governance of school completion programme is very unclear and there is a lot of ambiguity for all the stakeholders involved as to who we are, our identity is slowly being eroded. (SCP staff 5)

Additionally, an SCP worker felt that there should be more consistency across the SCP projects in Ireland, as every project is different and, in some cases, the SCP project only offers one type of intervention:

> We have very little mandatory training, unless you find courses yourself or manuals online to work from, there is no consistency across the projects and this sometimes gives SCP a bad reputation of not doing enough. (SCP staff 3)

Teachers stated that they would like to have more consistent communication from the SCP workers about the students:

> Communication of any statistics would be valuable, and staff presentations as every year we have a lot of new staff each year. (Teacher 7)

Another common suggestion was the need for a consistent long-term intervention, as there is a cohort of students who stop receiving SCP intervention when they transfer to a secondary school that is not a DEIS school and, having had SCP staff support throughout

their educational experience, it can be hard to adapt to this loss of support:

> The issues with when you work with students in primary school but then they go to a non-DEIS secondary school, there is a big gap there. (SCP staff 5)

The majority of the parents did not state any disadvantages but one parent hoped that the project worker would work with their child more:

> I would love you down more in school. She has a sort on a chip of her shoulder and I know you can't have someone always watching her, but she is going through the years where she will face all these crossroads, and I am a bit afraid of that. (Parent 3)

Covid-19 pandemic impacts

The final theme relates to the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on SCP students, as it was developing during the time the interviews were conducted. All highlighted that covid-19 further exacerbated the SCP students' disadvantages and also commented on how other negative circumstances tend to have a larger impact on SCP students:

> They are the ones that were not engaging online, they have limited or no internet access or their phones can't take the data to download the school work. (Teacher 2)

The parents all stated that their children struggled with Covid-19:

> She didn't, she didn't cope at all, she was very frustrated, got bored very easily and was very unhappy when she didn't get to see any of her friends. (Parent 1)

> They had been off for so long, I found it hard to get them focused. (Parent 5)

> Big-time, she was just up in her room a lot. (Parent 4)

Also, parents found it difficult to help their children with their school work:

> Well, they did get homework and I did try my best with it you know and with the TV there was the RTE school hub and I tried to give them a little maths and sentences for them to do, but I then I got some books dropped by SCP to the house, but it came to the point where I did not know how to answer the questions on it and because I wasn't knowledgeable enough on it, I wasn't able to answer them and I found it difficult and I couldn't explain the question to them. I would call the older guys who are in secondary school to come help and most times they were able to help, but there were little difficulties like that you know, so I was kinda alright but not alright. (Parent 2)

Participants claimed too that SCP provided a significant support in helping the students during the difficult period of the lockdown due to the pandemic:

> The reach of SCP down into the community really was powerful, it's hard enough to address the educational side of things when you're reliant on technology for these students, but knowing the project worker was calling into houses, touching base, delivering work, was very powerful experience to have that outreach element. (Teacher 8)

> Absolutely oh my God yeah, our most vulnerable children have all been contacted, are all engaged, so I am very confident about what SCP have done. (Teacher 2)

Parents also agreed that SCP was a great help to them during the Covid-19 pandemic:

> Yeah, you helped me get in touch with the school and providing emails at the start of lockdown. (Parent 2)

> Yeah you did bring games and food out to the house, so yeah I got support yeah (Parent 3)

It was great that you visited weekly, they really looked forward to Wednesdays. (Parent 5)

Discussion and Conclusion

The research project reported here investigated how the school completion programme that has been considered supports children from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds in attending, participating in, and remaining within, the education system. This section will discuss the findings in relation to the reviewed literature and propose implications for further development of the programme. Having a consistent project worker based within the school and the community was mentioned as being important for the SCP students. Previously, Dooley and Fitzgerald's (2012) My world survey: National study of youth mental health in Ireland reported that one good adult was a positive influence in the lives of young people. The survey reported that 70% of young people growing up in Ireland receive high or very high support from one good adult and the benefits of this meant these young people were more connected to others, more self-confident and better able to cope with difficulties compared to the young people who reported that they did not have one good adult (Dooley & Fitzgerald 2012). For the SCP students in the school, a project worker is a key example of 'one good adult'. On that, the participants reported that the SCP students were more confident in school, as they had an adult they could trust, talk to and interact with on a daily basis and this continued throughout the school holidays on summer and Easter camps and outreach work throughout the year and during the pandemic in the current year.

Having SCP based in the school also provided a sense of community and enabled SCP students to feel a sense of belonging. Relatedly, Battistich, Solomon, Kim, Watson and Schaps (1995) stated that the concept of community or sense of community describes the psychological aspects of social settings that satisfy group members' needs for belonging and meaning. Durkheim (1951) stresses that when such community needs are not fulfilled people get a feeling of alienation and can become unconnected to a

larger whole. Battistich, Solomon, Kim, Watson and Schaps (1995) also contended that the best means of addressing the feeling of alienation is to create a school community in which students feel accepted and valued and where they feel they are making important contributions. Similarly, Brophy and Good (1984) found that warm and supportive relations are beneficial and motivating for low socioeconomic status students.

Having a bottom-up approach towards the design and implementation of the SCP in the schools was also considered valuable. On that, participants stated that it is important to have more statutory and voluntary representatives from other organisations within the community as members of the Local Management Committee, instead of only the principals of the schools in the cluster. The fact that the interventions and programmes were tailored to the SCP students' needs also allowed for an effective bottom-up approach. That brings to mind research by Turner (2009) suggests that a nurturing bottom-up approach allows for a reconnection with a community-defined purpose.

Another important aspect of the SCP being actively pursued within the school is the link it provides between parents and the school. The relationships encourages parental involvement, empowers parents to become engaged in their children's education and motivates them to become familiar with the school environment. This supports Hango (2007)point on the need for parental involvement in children's lives to have a lasting impact on well-being, as the child feels that their future is more valued. For students from a high socioeconomic status background, their parents are more involved in their education due to greater comfort and familiarity with the education system (Sui-Chu & Willms 1996). In the community in which the school is located, 11.6% of the population did not speak English well or at all and unemployment rates were very high at 31.82%, and 11% had left school before the age of 15. These statistics highlight how the community has a low level of involvement within the education system. Having a project worker based in the school over recent years has helped to bridge this gap and has eased parents' fears by empowering them.

On the other hand, teachers in the study reported here all argued that they would welcome more communication on statistics that measure the achievement of the three SCP targets of attendance, retention and participation within school. Furthermore, it was suggested that new teachers should be educated on what SCP involves, how they can get the most out of the service and, in particular, the key links that the SCP project workers have with the youth workers based within the same community. Such a link, it was held, would help to take pressure off of teachers, as schools have increasingly been targeted as appropriate places for mental health promotion and for identifying issues concerning students' social and emotional well-being (Graham, Phelps, Maddison & Fitzgerald, 2011). On that, Graham, Phelps, Maddison and Fitzgerald (2011) reported that teachers receive little education to prepare them for such responsibility. The SCP project workers in this school are the teachers' first point of call if they have a concern about a student's 'soft care' needs or possible issues at home, yet SCP workers do not receive any training regarding outreach work.

The study highlighted that the co-ordinators did not receive supervision and that this was a problem, in particular for new coordinators. Runcan, Goian and Laurentiu (2012) stress that supervision is an efficient method of learning and facilitates continuous training of professionals and 94.5% of psychologists and social workers in their study appreciated the role of supervision. It is essential that SCP co-ordinators receive supervision for their own learning, because they are the supervisors for the project workers themselves and thus reduce the risk of burnout and the numbers of SCP workers resigning. Therefore, SCP project workers, and especially those who do not have a home school liaison in the school, should receive appropriate training. This further highlights the need for the school at the centre of this research to be considered for DEIS status, as only having the SCP intervention places extra demands on the project worker to do the job of a home school liaison. The researchers highly recommend the adoption of a more individualised review of DEIS allocation to each school that would hopefully support more students that are

living in poverty, as there are more students living in poverty than there are DEIS school places.

The Covid-19 pandemic has caused 80% of school closures worldwide (Van Lancker & Parolin, 2020). School closure for a long period of time is known to have a detrimental social and health consequences for children living in poverty and this exacerbates their existing inequalities (Van Lancker & Parolin, 2020). That was very prominent in the findings from the interviews reported in the main body of this paper, as all participants stressed how the SCP students were negatively affected by the school closure and SCP responded to this shut-down by delivering food packages, printing materials and delivering schoolwork set by teachers, checking in with the students and parents on a weekly basis, and organising an alternative summer camp by delivering different activities to do at home each week.

In conclusion, the analysis of the findings has emphasised the key changes that need to be addressed in order to improve the School Completion Programme to continue to support children and give them a quality educational experience throughout. It is obvious how valuable and effective the SCP is for schools when the programmes are designed with the students' best interests as their core, although not all school completion programmes possess this vision. SCP staff play a crucial role in supporting the most vulnerable students within the education system and provide essential links between schools and local communities. However, the role is ill-defined and a related career structure is practically non-existent, thus militating against career progression and staff retention. SCP staff receive inadequate training and insufficient supervision. These issues need to be addressed in order for optimum benefits to be derived from an initiative that has the potential to bring about significant change in the lives of the most challenged students. It is hoped that the reported research will provide the impetus for a review of the operation of the School Completion Programme.

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