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'A fertile functioning or corrosive disadvantage'

Adult reflections on placement in low 'ability' groups in non-selective post-primary schools in Northern Ireland

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'A Fertile Functioning or Corrosive Disadvantage?

Adult reflections on placement in low 'ability' groups in non-selective post-primary schools in
Northern Ireland.

by

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Abstract

Despite rich and broad literature highlighting the negative impact of ability grouping on those placed in low 'ability' groups, the practice persists across OECD systems and is adopted more frequently in Northern Ireland than in other OECD countries. Drawing on qualitative interview data with eleven adults who were placed in a low ability group in non-selective post-primary schools in Northern Ireland, this study builds on current literature by exploring the lived experience of placement from an adult perspective.

Three aspects of placement in a low ability group are considered: adult recollections of the experience of placement in a low ability group; adult reflections on the practice; and the use of Nussbaum's Capabilities Approach as an evaluative framework to develop understanding of the impact of placement. The overarching aim of the thesis is to explore the extent to which placement in a low 'ability' group acts as a 'fertile functioning', or a 'corrosive disadvantage', reaching into adult life.

The qualitative study was conducted using online face-to-face interviews with a purposively selected sample of eleven adults. An interpretative phenomenological approach (IPA) was adopted in order to focus directly on the lived experience of adults affected by placement in a low ability group. The interview data suggest that placement in a low 'ability' group was remembered as an overwhelmingly negative experience. Grouping practices, arguably intended to support pupil learning needs, in reality acted as further barriers to pupil achievement for participants in low ability groups.

Four key themes were generated from adult recollections of their school experience. First, placement in a low ability group was a practice over which participants had no control, despite the significant consequences accruing from it. Secondly, placement identified pupils as inferior, engendering feelings of shame and stigma, and hindering the development of positive relationships with teachers and peers. Thirdly, placement created low teacher expectations and diminished participants' learning experiences. Lastly, grouping practices

were shown to create restrictions on GCSE subject choice, and the examination policy of entering pupils for Foundation Tier at GCSE effectively capped their achievement, something which has had far-reaching consequences for participants. Almost all participants now reflect on the experience of placement with feelings of anger, regret, and a sense of abandonment by a system which they feel treated them unfairly.

Using Nussbaum's Capabilities Approach to interpret the data, this thesis argues that placement in a low ability group is a 'corrosive disadvantage' which serves to mutilate pupils' functionings and stunt their capabilities into adult life, affecting both self-concept and life chances. The findings suggest that serious educational inequities are created by allocation to a low ability group, an allocation over which, as adolescents, they had little or no control.

'Ever tried. Ever failed. No matter. Try again. Fail Better.'

Samuel Beckett, Worstward Ho

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Chapter 1 INTRODUCTION

1.1. Introduction

The practice of ability grouping within non-selective post-primary schools in Northern Ireland has received scant attention. This thesis contributes to knowledge by considering adult recollections of, and reflections on, their placement in a low ability group while at a non-selective post-primary school in Northern Ireland (NI). Their experiences of placement are explored further using Nussbaum's Capabilities Approach (CA) as a theoretical lens, to assess the extent to which placement represented a 'fertile functioning' or a 'corrosive disadvantage'. The Capabilities Approach is defined as 'an approach to comparative quality-of-life assessment and to theorising about basic social justice' (Nussbaum, 2011, p18). Wolff and de Shalit (2007) define a 'corrosive disadvantage', as a disadvantage in one domain which is likely to spread its negative effects to other areas, while a 'fertile functioning', represents an achievement in one area which is likely to have benefits elsewhere.

Termed 'tracking' in the USA, ability grouping is an umbrella term covering a range of practices, including streaming, banding and setting, which will be explored further in Chapter 2. The concept of human 'ability' is contested, although it is often conflated with 'intelligence' by practitioners and policymakers (Gillborn and Youdell, 2001). The notion of human 'ability' speaks to an outdated theory of innate intelligence dating back to the work of Binet (1905). However, there has been little nuanced debate among policymakers about the nature of intelligence and its socio-cultural, historical, and perhaps biological construction. Instead, as found by Rix and Ingham (2021), there appears to be an almost uncritical acceptance of current views on human ability as 'fixed'.

I align myself with recent biopsychosocial theories of learning, such as those of Vygotsky (1978) and Bandura (1977):

Learning awakens a variety of internal developmental processes that are able to operate only when the child is interacting with people in his environment and in cooperation with his peers. (Vygotsky, 1978, p90).

Adolescents, if afforded the opportunity in school, can imitate a variety of actions that go beyond the limits of their current capabilities, reflected by Vygotsky's theory of 'zone of proximal development', which he defines as

The distance between the actual developmental level...and the level of potential development under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers. (Vygotsky, 1978, p86)

Bandura (1977) suggests that learning includes three components: the biological and psychological characteristics of the person, the person's behaviour, and the environment. These three factors are highly interdependent, with each factor influencing, and being influenced by each of the others, termed the 'triadic reciprocal causation' model. Although the quest to improve educational outcomes, especially for the most socially disadvantaged has become something of a 'holy grail', there appears to be little political acknowledgement in Northern Ireland of the possible relation between young people, their school environment and their achievement. It is against this backdrop that the exploration of the impact of placement in a low ability group is set.

1.2 The Research

This study aims to contribute to knowledge by considering adult recollections of, and reflections on, their placement in a low ability group while at a non-selective post-primary school in Northern Ireland (NI). Theoretically, it aims to contribute to the existing body of research by using the Capabilities Approach (Nussbaum, 2011) to assess whether placement in a low ability group represented a 'fertile functioning' or a 'corrosive disadvantage' for participants. This research adopts an interpretivist underpinned by a constructivist epistemology which holds that 'realities are social constructions of the mind, and that there exist as many such constructions as there are individuals' (Guba & Lincoln, 1989, p 43). To gain a deep insight into the experience of placement in a low ability group at post-primary school in NI, I decided to employ research methods which would allow me to

both see things through the eyes of participants, and to give voice to the ‘multiple realities constructed by participants’ (Tracy, 2010, pxi). Whilst there is a wealth of literature on ability grouping, ‘little consideration has been given to longitudinal impact of selection practices, including a paucity of life history approaches’ (Rix and Ingham, 2021, p1). As there is little research on the impact of placement beyond school, it is timely therefore to explore how adults recollect and reflect on placement.

1.2.1 Research aims

This study aims to provide insight both into the lived experience of placement in a low ability group and its possible long-term effects. By exploring adult recollections of and reflections on placement, this study seeks to generate a deeper knowledge about the impact of placement. Nussbaum’s Capabilities Approach is used as an evaluative framework to conceptualise participants’ experiences. The CA was chosen as it is an approach that begins close to the ground and sees freedom in terms of the real opportunities open to each person. It provides a framework which can uncover deep-rooted ‘inequalities and social injustices that result from discrimination and marginalisation’ (Nussbaum, 2011, p. 19).

The following research questions have ‘therefore’ guided the direction of this study:

1. How do adults recollect their experience of placement in a low ability group in post-primary school?
2. How do participants now understand and make sense of their experiences of placement in a low ability group?
3. How can Nussbaum’s Capabilities Approach be used to conceptualise participants’ experiences of placement in a low ability group?

1.3 The Education System in Northern Ireland

A devolved policy area, the responsibility for education lies with the Northern Ireland Assembly, with the Department of Education (NI) charged with its implementation (Perry, 2016b). The system currently serves approximately 352,364 pupils in 1,496 schools (Department of Education, 2020-2021). The post-primary sector consists of 193 post-primary schools, including 127 non-grammar schools serving 84,520 pupils and 66 grammar schools serving 64,398 pupils. The complex fragmentation of the education sector is also reflected in a range of school management structures, described as 'a structural morass' (Boorah and Knox, 2017, p318). Controlled (largely Protestant non-selective) schools are under the management of boards of governors and the Education Authority (EA). Maintained (Catholic non-selective) schools are managed by boards of governors and the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools (CCMS). The voluntary (selective) grammar schools and the integrated schools are under the management of their own boards of governors, who act also as the employing authorities.

One of the most significant features of the education system in NI is its continued commitment to academic selection (Birrell and Heenan, 2015). Despite being phased out in most of the UK, academic selection is endorsed strongly by the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) and the Ulster Unionist Party (UUP) while Sinn Fein, the Social Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP) and Alliance are strongly opposed to it (Gallagher, 2015). Northern Ireland is a 'society in which national, political and religious identity coalesce' (Gallagher, 2016, p362), where education can become a political battleground', with different groups seeking to protect their interests (Donnelly et al, 2021).

Attempts made to reform the system have been largely unsuccessful. Following the election of the Labour government in 1997, research into the impact of academic selection was commissioned which produced a wealth of evidence (Gallagher and Smith, 2000). A review body on post-primary education concluded that the academic selection at age 11 should cease (Burns' Report, 2000). Although the then education minister, Martin McGuinness,

announced the end of academic selection in 2002, during negotiations for the St Andrew's power-sharing agreement in 2006, academic selection became a political bargaining tool; and the DUP secured a clause that it could only be abolished with cross-party agreement, thereby assuring its continuation.

Although the Department of Education published guidance and policy for transfer to post-primary school without academic selection in 2009 and 2010, in 2008 grammar schools were using their own unregulated entrance examinations. Unsurprisingly for NI, separate Protestant (Association for Quality Education (AQE) and Catholic (Post Primary Transfer Consortium GL assessment) entrance examinations were created. In 2016, the Minister for Education, Peter Weir (Democratic Unionist Party), revised the guidance on transfer, reversing the previous policy on preventing primary schools from facilitating unregulated tests. The guidance now states that it 'supports the right of those schools wishing to use academic selection as the basis for admission' (DENI, 2016, p4). Northern Ireland grammar schools are now set to run a single common transfer test from November 2023.

1.3.1 The Attainment Gap

There are few things more important for a country than improving the well-being and life chances of its children and young people. (NI Executive, 2021, Children and Young People's Strategy 2020-2030, pi)

Despite policy makers' rhetoric over decades, a gap in educational achievement between socially advantaged and disadvantaged pupils in Northern Ireland has been a persistent feature of the educational landscape. Numerous policies have attempted to reduce the wide attainment gap. According to the Northern Ireland Audit Office (NIAO) (2021), despite an allocation to the Department of Education of £913 million to address the gap, it has continued to increase as pupils progress through compulsory education in NI. The failure to narrow the gap is even more concerning in a society still emerging from conflict, given the association between low attainment, poverty and involvement in sectarian conflict (Nolan, 2012).

The 'New Decade New Approach' political deal (2020, p44) holds that the 'educational experience and outcomes for children and young people are the most important factors' in the education system. However, in comparison to the rest of the United Kingdom, Northern Ireland has higher levels of unemployment, more people with no qualifications, fewer people with higher level qualifications and the percentage of 'those with no skills in NI is twice the UK average' (KPMG, 2017). In 2018, the Joseph Rowntree Foundation (JRF) found that 370,000 people in Northern Ireland were living in poverty, including 110,000 children. For the purpose of this thesis the term 'disadvantaged pupils' refers to those pupils from low-income background who are eligible for free school meals.

Concerns about the attainment gap have spanned two decades. The NIAO (2006) report 'Improving Literacy and Numeracy in Schools' concluded that none of the targets set by the Department of Education in 1998 had been met and that significant numbers of children, particularly in secondary schools, were failing to reach the appropriate level of attainment. In response, two strategies were created by the Department of Education. In 2009, 'Every School a Good School', a new policy for school improvement was launched, and in 2011, a literacy and numeracy strategy, 'Count, Read: Succeed' was published. However, in 2013 a follow-up report by the NIAO found that, despite these interventions, around 9,000 pupils were still leaving full-time education not having achieved the required standard in literacy and numeracy, with a strong correlation between low levels of academic achievement and free school meal entitlement. The NIAO (2013, p5) report on literacy and numeracy found that, by GCSE, 'two in five pupils fail to achieve the standards deemed necessary for meaningful progression to further education or employment'.

More recently, it has been shown that the Department of Education failed to meet its target to increase the proportion of young people from disadvantaged backgrounds who achieve the benchmark of at least five GCSEs at A*-C including maths and English by 7.7% (Programme for Government (PfG), 2011-2015). Instead, 'the gap in attainment between those with FSME and those without over the past seven years has remained broadly

consistent, amounting to around 33% each year, without any clear trend in terms of narrowing or widening the gap' (Perry, 2016, p18). Even though there has been a persistent attainment gap between socially advantaged and disadvantaged pupils, little attention has been given to the possible impact of ability grouping on pupils in non-selective schools. In a system arguably predicated on a belief in innate ability, suggested by its continued commitment to academic selection and, where 'existing evidence has been ignored, misrepresented or simply invented to support a particular ideological stance' (Birrell and Heenan, 2013, p773), this may not be surprising.

In 2020, the NI Executive established an expert group to propose an action plan to address the links between persistent educational underachievement and socio-economic background. Their interim report states that 'the gap between FSME and non-FSME pupils has widened since 2014, suggesting that the effects of disadvantage are having an increasing impact on attainment' (Demie, 2021, p18). Addressing the widening gap remains a challenge in NI, although the most recent Chief Inspector's report gives little cause for optimism:

Too many under-achieve, struggle to learn in under-performing schools and organisations, and find educational and vocational routes needlessly blocked by decisions about curriculum and assessment made by schools and governors who prioritise the interests of their school or organisation over the needs of the learners...even in schools which provide well for most learners, there is undue variation in the quality of provision and outcomes for particular groups of learners, such as those with special educational needs (SEN), for free school meal entitlement (FSME) pupils, newcomers, looked after children and boys. (Education and Training Inspectorate, 2018, p12).

The decades' long attainment gap between pupils is set against a society which has experienced continuing political conflict between the Protestant (Unionist) majority and the Catholic (Nationalist) minority. It is not difficult to find an association between low educational achievement, poverty and conflict. The Peace Monitoring Report (Nolan, 2012) found that the places in Northern Ireland that have suffered most from the conflict are also those with the highest levels of multiple deprivation. The first report of the Independent

Reporting Commission (IRC) found that 'social deprivation and paramilitary activity are related and that this is particularly strong in relation to Education and Skills' (IRC, 2018, p25). Responding to the challenge of paramilitarism, the IRC has proposed a concerted programme to tackle educational underachievement.

1.4 The Structure of the Thesis

This chapter set out the aims of the study and outlined the ontological and epistemological positions which underpin it. The challenging educational and political contexts against which the research into placement in a low ability group were described briefly. In the next chapter, existing literature on ability grouping will be reviewed. In Chapter Three, the CA and its application to education is explored. Chapter 4 outlines the methodological considerations and ethical issues. Chapter 5 presents the findings from the data in response to Research Questions 1 and 2. In Chapter 6, the findings are located within existing literature and interpreted using four of Nussbaum's ten central capabilities to conceptualise the findings and achieve deeper understanding of participants' experiences. In Chapter 7, the conclusions of the study are presented, positionality is discussed, limitations of the research are presented, and recommendations are made.

Chapter 2 Literature Review

2.1 Introduction

This chapter will examine literature on 'ability' grouping. Despite the widespread use of the term 'ability grouping' in the field of educational research and practice, the term is used to refer to a range of discrete practices (Dracup, 2014). These practices most frequently include streaming, banding, and setting by attainment. 'Streaming', referred to in the US as 'tracking', involves separating pupils according to perceived academic ability across all (or a majority of) subjects, so that pupils remain in the same group for all or most lessons. 'Banding' is similar: several classes are grouped together in a band. Typically, there are high, middle and low bands each including several classes. 'Setting' is premised on the same notion of academic ability, but is more flexible and can involve smaller groups, with pupils being put into different attainment sets for different subject areas.

As there is a wealth of literature dating back to the early 1960s, this review will focus primarily on research focusing explicitly on ability grouping since 2000, with the greatest emphasis placed on more recent studies. Brief reference will be made to early seminal works which, although not focused on ability grouping, uncovered previously hidden effects of grouping on pupils, laying the foundations for later research (Jackson, 1964; Lacey, 1970; Ball, 1981; Swartz, 1981). The literature on ability grouping covers a range of topics, such as the impact of grouping on pupil outcomes, the mechanisms used to allocate pupils to ability groups and the effect of placement on pupil academic self-concept and engagement with school. It should be noted that much of the literature focuses on the impact of ability grouping on learning in mathematics, rather than on learning in other aspects of the curriculum, arguably due to the overwhelming prevalence of grouping by ability in mathematics (Dunne et al, 2007; Jerrim et al, 2018; OECD, 2013).

2.2 Grouping and Educational Outcomes

For the past three decades, ability grouping has been repeatedly cited by UK policymakers as a mechanism to raise standards and narrow the socio-economic attainment gap between pupils as, it is argued, it facilitates whole class teaching and allows teachers to match educational experiences to each pupil's level of academic ability (Sukhnandan and Lee, 1998; DfES, 2006). Consequently, a wealth of quantitative research has attempted to explore the link between group placement and pupil outcomes. However, quantitative research which focuses on average outcomes is rather a blunt instrument, insensitive to contextual influences which may have influenced outcomes, such as teacher expectation and pedagogy, variation between schools in the extent and nature of ability grouping, and the allocation of resources to different groups. A further methodological challenge is present in studies where analysis of prior pupil attainment is omitted, which makes an accurate evaluation of the impact of grouping on outcomes virtually impossible, as ability-grouping effects may be temporary or accumulate over time (Ireson and Hallam, 1999).

Several studies have attempted to address such limitations, moving beyond simple comparison by using more sensitive measures of attainment, by adopting longitudinal approaches which follow pupils from KS2 to GCSE level, and by relating classroom observations to outcomes of grouping. Ireson et al (2002) conducted a large-scale longitudinal study in the UK using a stratified sample of 45 mixed comprehensive schools, to represent a range of grouping practices. Firstly, data on KS2 and KS3 outcomes were obtained from 4,480 pupils in English, 4,337 in mathematics and 4,499 in science. When pupils of similar prior attainment were allocated to different ability groups, the pupils placed in 'top' groups attained higher scores in Key Stage 3 results than those of similar prior attainment at KS2 who were placed in lower sets. For the same pupils at GCSE, Ireson et al (2005) used multilevel modelling to estimate the effect of setting on GCSE attainment. They found that, in most schools, pupils with the same prior attainment were in different sets although they explain that it was not straightforward to identify high, middle and low sets, as

schools operate a variety of setting arrangements. Their key finding was that, although ability grouping does not raise GCSE attainment in the core subjects, disadvantaged pupils are likely to do relatively worse when in low 'ability' groups.

In a longitudinal mixed methods study, Wiliam and Bartholomew (2004) focused on the impact of setting on the progress of pupils between KS3 and GCSE. To compare pupils' KS3 mathematics scores with GCSE grades, they followed 955 pupils from forty-two classes in six London schools over a four-year period. Although all pupils began school in mixed ability groups, all schools had moved to ability grouping (though at different stages) by Year 11. Using data gained through questionnaires in Years 8, 9, 10 and 11, interviews with over 100 pupils, 150 lesson observations, KS3 and GCSE outcomes, they found that, although the average progress made by pupils was similar in all six schools, the progress made during KS4 varied greatly from set to set within each school. Comparing pupils with similar prior attainment in mathematics at KS3, they found a difference of between one to three grades for pupils in the lowest and highest sets at GCSE. The most important finding was that set placement, a decision over which pupils have little or no influence, made a significant difference to outcomes, much more of a difference than the school attended. In addition, in four out of six schools, arrangements for placement were unclear and, in some schools, neither the teachers nor the pupils understood the basis of the grouping arrangements. The authors suggest that great caution is needed in drawing conclusions about what is going on in schools from self-reported assertions.

Within the literature, the scale of the gap in outcomes between groups is contested, arguably because of the statistical difficulties involved in isolating the effect of other variables from the effect of ability grouping. Although some studies argue that the impact is negligible (Steenbergen-Hu et al, 2016), there does not seem to be a reliable body of recent evidence to support that conclusion. What the literature does convey is that quantitative research is fraught with difficulties when comparing attainment between schools or within schools.

These difficulties have resulted in the equivocal nature of research conclusions, with findings varying across studies, countries, over time and between schools.

2.3 The Role of Bias in Group Placement

The mechanisms employed by schools to place pupils in groups is a frequent theme in the literature on 'ability-grouping'. The first study to highlight possible bias in placement decisions was Jackson's 1964 seminal work which involved a large-scale quantitative survey of 660 streamed and unstreamed primary schools, with reference to their grouping practices. His key finding was that 'streamed' schools used a range of, arguably discriminatory, practices to place children in groups, resulting in the disproportionate allocation of poorer children to bottom groups. His research showed that, in addition to attainment data, schools used subjective sources such as the 'experienced judgement' of the head teacher and 'teacher recommendations' to allocate children to groups, with over one-third of schools using no 'objective' test at all. In addition, his study found that, birth date affected placement at the age of 7, with older children more frequently placed in top stream. Jackson's (1964) finding that 'ability' grouping may exacerbate, rather than reduce existing educational inequalities (1964) exerted a considerable influence on subsequent studies.

Several researchers have since built on Jackson's work to explore how and why certain pupils are more likely to be allocated to the lowest groups. Several quantitative research studies have made a significant contribution to the field by conducting large-scale surveys to identify the processes used by schools. A study by Ireson et al (2002) used a purposive and stratified sample of 45 English comprehensive schools to explore how ability groups were formed at Key Stage 3 (KS3) and how frequently pupils moved between groups. Analysing the responses to open-ended questions in a survey completed by 123 heads of English, maths and science and data collected from interviews with forty-five curriculum managers, the authors found that schools reported a range of factors influenced placement. After internal tests and examinations, Key Stage tests were most frequently cited as influencing allocation to groups. Teacher opinion on pupils' potential, behaviour, attitude, self-esteem

and motivation was mentioned by about a third of respondents as influential in placement. Although schools reported that movement between sets occurred quite frequently, the authors could not verify this as most schools did not keep records. They found that pupils' social relationships, gender, race and special educational needs influenced placement. Thus, although commonly referred to as 'ability' groups, they found that 'ability' was not the only factor influencing a pupil's placement. The study is marked by procedural rigour, although the analysis is based solely on self-reported data, rather than from any direct observation in schools. Ireson et al (2002) suggest that allocation to groups has the potential to be affected by unconscious teacher bias, representing a form of indirect discrimination. Ireson's conclusion is supported by Wiliam and Bartholomew (2004) who found that schools used subjective indicators when placing pupils, with a significant proportion of working-class pupils placed in lower sets than would be indicated by KS3 scores.

The use of teacher judgements is a cause for concern, especially given the findings of two recent studies. The first by Campbell (2015) tested the hypothesis that stereotyping plays a part in teacher judgements. Using 2008 data for almost 5000 pupils from the Millennium Cohort Study in England, the authors explored whether there are biases in teacher judgements of pupils which correspond to each of the key pupil characteristics underpinning recorded primary-age attainment gaps (family income-level, gender, SEN, ethnicity, English as an Additional Language) and whether any characteristics appear to dominate and drive any apparent biases. They found that perceptions of primary school children can be systematically biased. To investigate more explicitly whether teacher-level stereotyping may relate to pupil characteristics, they used a measure of teacher judgement which is not part of, nor required by assessment. Confidential responses provided by teachers participating in the Millennium Cohort Study (MCS) to questions about their pupils' 'ability and attainment' (at age seven) were used as a proxy for the teachers' perceptions of each pupil. These were then compared to pupil scores on independent, MCS administered, cognitive tests. The authors found that children from low-income families, boys, children with a diagnosis of SEN,

and children whose first language was not English were found less likely to be judged 'above average' at reading by their teacher, despite scoring equivalently in the reading test to those judged 'above average'. The second study by Timmermans (2015) investigated teacher differences in their expectations regarding pupils' ability. The sample consisted of 500 teachers who recorded their expectations of 7,550 12-year-old pupils in the final grade of Dutch primary school. Multilevel analysis showed teacher expectation bias to be related to gender and socio-ethnic background of pupils, after controlling for pupil performance. Among pupils with equal performance records, higher teacher expectations were observed for pupils from more affluent families.

Muijs and Dunne's (2010) study used a large-scale survey of 100 English schools, randomly sampled from twelve purposively sampled local authorities, to represent areas of ethnic diversity and social disadvantage to explore whether factors other than 'prior achievement' affect pupil placement in sets. Data from these questionnaires were then linked to data from National Pupil database, although the authors advise that generalisations should 'proceed with caution', due to the 'biased nature of sample' and a relatively low response rate of 44%. Pupil outcomes in Key Stage 2 National Curriculum Tests (Year 6) were operationalised as a proxy for prior attainment. Their influential study developed understanding by showing that, although mentioned by schools as being the main factor in their decisions regarding group placement, prior attainment was a relatively poor predictor, with social background and SEN found to be significant predictors of placement.

Significant recent work has been generated by a large-scale longitudinal study 'Best Practice in Grouping' (BPG) (Francis et al, 2016-2021) involving 139 secondary schools across England. This mixed-methods study, one of the largest ever conducted in the UK, combines data from randomised controlled trials (RCTs), with evidence from qualitative methods to explore the complex range of factors associated with the use of what the authors term 'attainment' grouping, (as they problematise the concept of 'ability'). Sixth-four schools were in the intervention group; they were instructed to allocate pupils to English and mathematics

sets according to best practice principles, including allocation by KS2 test results only and regular movement between groups according to internal assessment results only, while sixty-two schools in the control group were invited to continue with their usual grouping practices.

Using data from the BPG study, Taylor et al (2019) attempted to explore why schools find it difficult to establish more equitable practices in allocating pupils to groups, using a large-scale mixed methods research design. They used data from the baseline teacher survey in the BPG, conducted in autumn 2015, and interviews with teachers in intervention and control schools, conducted in the second year of the study. Participating schools were invited to complete an online survey that asked teachers to identify which sources of information were used to allocate Year 7 groups, although the authors estimate a relatively low response rate of approximately 37%, with responses from 597 English and 82 mathematics teachers.

Thirty-four teachers were interviewed from ten schools: five from the intervention group and five from the control group. As part of the 'best practice' intervention group, schools were encouraged to allocate pupils and move them between groups according to equitable principles, but the authors found that the majority of schools continued to use subjective and potentially biased information to group pupils.

The research provided substantial evidence that teachers make use of a range of information when grouping pupils, including KS2 tests, but also using sources such as teacher judgements. The authors found that even in the intervention group only 18% of English teachers and 28% of mathematics teachers reported that KS2 test results were the sole data source. They found that it was more frequent for teachers to report combining KS2 data with other sources. In addition, several other concerning findings emerged. Some schools appeared to be streaming, despite describing their grouping practice as 'setting', with pupils in the same group for everything. The researchers found that some teachers seemed very unclear about the actual grouping processes being used in their school and that there was a high degree of disagreement between staff about how groups were

structured with contradictory information provided to such an extent that the authors sought to clarify the grouping practice at a second visit to the school.

Quantitative research emerging from the Best Practice in Grouping project by Connolly et al (2019) attempt to compare pupils' actual set allocations in maths with allocation to sets based solely on their prior attainment, using their Key Stage 2 (KS2) scores in maths. It is difficult to determine the extent to which these patterns of allocation simply reflect the prior differences in educational attainment across social class, ethnicity and gender, compared to the role that the secondary schools may play in exacerbating these differences. The study tried to address this issue by drawing on data collected from 9,301 Year 7 pupils from forty-six English secondary schools. The sample was taken from the BPG control group who were continuing with existing grouping practices. The data draws on the pupils' KS2 maths scores achieved in the final year of their primary school, derived from the National Pupil Database (NPD), and pupils' subsequent allocation to maths sets, as reported by the participating schools. The authors found that nearly a third of pupils (31.2%) had been misallocated to lower or higher sets than their KS2 results would have warranted. The likelihood of Black pupils being misallocated to lower sets was 2.4 times higher than for White pupils, whilst the odds of Asian pupils being misallocated to lower maths sets was 1.7 times higher than for White pupils. The authors argue that there is clear evidence of an association between set allocation and a pupil's social class and ethnic background. The study has added to knowledge in the field by providing confirmatory evidence of potentially discriminatory grouping practices, but also by showing the possible extent of misallocation. International research supports the findings outlined in this section. Evidence from the Programme for International Pupil Assessment (PISA, 2013), organised by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), found that, in systems where pupils are grouped by ability, the poorest pupils tend to be placed in the lowest groups, while more recently, PISA (2018) report that misallocation to groups is especially true for pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds.

2.4 Grouping, Pupil Attitude and Self-concept

Seminal ethnographic research in the UK found that ability grouping polarised pupils into adopting 'pro'- and 'anti'-school attitudes (Hargreaves, 1967; Lacey, 1970; Ball, 1981). These findings were supported by a significant US study by Swartz' (1981) which focused on four different US High Schools to explore the impact of 'tracking' on pupils' interactions. Linked with a large, applied research project in Philadelphia, the study compared findings from high and low tracks in four inner city schools. Data were collected through intensive observation of pupil-pupil and teacher–pupil interactions several times a week for six months, through interviews with parents and pupils and the examination of pupil records. The use of direct observation was highly effective in illuminating pupils' different lived experiences in different 'tracks'. Swartz found that for pupils in low 'tracks' their experience was one of increasing curricular and social exclusion. Less was expected of these pupils in terms of work or behaviour, which served to communicate to them their perceived low value in the eyes of the teachers. The author suggests that the experience of being in a bottom group serves to discourage pupils from taking themselves or their work seriously, setting them up for failure.

A more recent UK study by Ireson and Hallam (2009) tested the hypothesis that ability grouping has a negative effect on pupils' academic, but not general self-concept, when prior attainment and corresponding measures of prior self-concept are controlled. In the large-scale longitudinal quantitative study, the authors define 'self-concept' broadly to include cognitive, affective and behavioural aspects and cite the 'Big-Fish-Little-Pond' theory to argue that academic self-concept is formed through a process of social comparison (Marsh and Parker, 1984). Using Marsh's multi-dimensional model of self-concept, the Self-Description Questionnaire II (Marsh, 1990a) taken by a representative stratified sample of over 1600 pupils aged 14-15 years and again two years later, the authors confirmed the hypothesis that ability grouping had a negative effect on pupils' academic self-concept, but

not on their general self-concept. Although theoretically underpinned and procedurally robust, the results would have been enriched by the inclusion of complementary qualitative data, with the authors themselves suggesting that it is possible that school and classroom practices may influence pupils' frames of reference. The authors also acknowledge that the findings contradict those of their large-scale study in 2001, which found that both academic and general self-concept were lowered across subjects in secondary schools. This earlier study aimed to explore year group differences in pupils' self-concept and attitudes towards school, as influenced by ability grouping, by measuring attitudes of 234 pupils in Years 7 to 10 towards school and mathematics. The contradictory findings from the 2001 study may be the result of the cross-sectional approach used, while in the 2009 study, the authors surveyed the same pupils at the end of KS3 and again at the end of KS4.

Also drawing on the BPG data, Archer et al (2018) employ a Bourdieusian lens through which to view the effects of grouping on socially disadvantaged and low-attaining pupils in English post-primary schools. The authors draw on data from the pre-intervention online survey of 12,164 Year 7 pupils which focused on pupils' negative views on setting (10,888 from Best Practice in Setting cohort and 1,276 from Best Practice Mixed-Ability cohort) and data collected through individual interviews (11 girls and 5 boys) and discussion groups involving 18 pupils of similar attainment levels. The authors found that pupils in bottom groups do not like being there, with boys and those entitled to FSM expressing significantly more negative views than other pupils. Qualitative data supported quantitative findings, with both sets of data suggesting first that feelings of embarrassment and inferiority are associated with placement in low groups, and secondly, that pupils were confused over placement processes. Supporting one aspect of Ireson and Hallam's work (2006, 2007), the authors found that pupils largely accepted the legitimacy of the practice although, viewed through a Bourdieusian lens, Archer et al (2018) arrive at a different interpretation. They suggest rather that this finding reflects 'pedagogic work', a misrecognition that reflects the

interests of the privileged to naturalise the legitimacy of differential attainment and resource entitlement.

An important contribution to the literature has been made by the work of Boaler (1997) starting with a mixed methods study, not focused on ability grouping, but on the mathematical learning of pupils who experienced 'traditional' methods in ability groups in Amber Hill School, and 'progressive' teaching approaches in mixed-ability classes in Phoenix Park school. Following pupils from Year 9 to Year 11 (13-16 years), Boaler collected data from 40 pupil interviews, 100 lesson observations and questionnaires completed by 310 pupils. In Amber Hill what Boaler observed was that in Year 9, when pupils were placed into ability groups for mathematics, 'traditional' teaching approaches were adopted, involving an emphasis on textbook work, teacher talk, and repetitive practice. In contrast, in Phoenix Park School, mixed ability classes were taught to learn independently, solving open-ended mathematical problems. Ability grouping emerged as a major theme for pupils. Boaler found that those in lower groups complained about restricted learning opportunities and gave up on maths when they realised that they had no chance of passing. An interesting follow-up to this study was conducted by Boaler in 2005, an approach which has influenced this present study. Questionnaires were sent to 288 former pupils of Amber Hill and Phoenix Park, who were by then approximately 24 years old. Although there was a low response rate, with 63 questionnaires returned, the author ensured that they were a representative sample. After conducting 20 pupil interviews, 10 from each school, the author found that those in low groups in Amber Hill experienced long-term effects and that their experience of school could not be separated from the experience of being placed there. She found that pupils placed in low groups suffered from broken ambition and felt that they were set up for low attainment in life, with one interviewee comparing the experience to being trapped in a psychological prison. Although there was not a specific question about grouping in the adult interviews, seven of the adults chose to talk about the experience, suggesting that it had had a significant impact on them.

Boaler et al (2000) built on previous work by focusing explicitly on how ability grouping affected attitudes and achievement in mathematics in a four-year longitudinal study of six schools within Greater London. The authors established a Year 9 pupil focus group, providing a useful starting point. The sample reflected a range of learning environments and contexts with a large cohort of 1000 pupils. Evidence from 120 hours of lesson observation was combined with data from almost 2000 questionnaires administered to pupils in Years 8 and 9, (aged 13-14 years), and evidence from in-depth interviews with 72 pupils. An impressive study due to its scale, the combination of methods added rigour and breadth and enabled triangulation of data. The authors found that ability grouping was a significant factor influencing pupil attitudes. The data suggested that pupils in bottom groups experienced low teacher expectations and reduced opportunities to learn, later endorsed by evidence from lesson observations. The authors found that pupils' opportunity to learn was diminished due to the frequent changes of teacher, the allocation of non-specialist teachers, a continuous diet of low-level work, more prescriptive pedagogy, and teachers ignoring pleas for more challenge. Interview data also revealed pupils' feelings of worthlessness and helplessness, captured typically by the comment 'they don't have to bother with us'. The authors reported that pupil attitudes about group placement emerged, not as minor feelings or peripheral details, but as issues at the heart of pupil experiences which had a profound impact on attitude and achievement. Another important finding was that, as pupils were entered for GCSE tiers based on their set allocation, the highest grade possible was a 'D' for pupils in bottom groups, with pupils often unaware of the implications of tier entry until their final year of GCSE. This finding will be discussed in more detail below with reference to the work of Barrance and Elwood (2018). The authors found that the negative experiences of pupils in bottom groups were widespread, pervasive and difficult to avoid (a finding supported by Archer et al, 2019).

Two mixed methods research projects from the BPG study focus explicitly on the impact of ability grouping on pupil (and teacher) attitudes. Francis et al (2017) set out to explore

whether grouping impacts pupil self-confidence, precipitating a 'self-fulfilling prophecy'. Using survey data from 11,546 pupils in 96 English secondary schools, combined with data from interviews with individual teachers, pupils and 66 pupil focus groups, the authors found that pupils internalised labels of low ability, reducing both academic and general self-concept. The study benefits from a large sample, robust analytical procedures, and triangulation of data; direct classroom observation would add even greater authority to this study. The second piece of research builds on the work of Francis et al (2017) and offers an original perspective by exploring teacher constructions of learners in low 'attainment' groups (Mazenod et al, 2019). Using evidence from 597 teacher surveys in 82 schools and 34 teachers interviewed in 10 schools, the authors found that low-attaining pupils were constructed as learners in need of 'nurturing and protection', rather than as learners capable of independent thinking. The authors posit that this deficit view leads teachers to constrain low group pupils' learning opportunities. Although procedurally rigorous, its reliance on teacher-reported data and the lack of pupil involvement are arguably limitations, as interpretations of what actually happens in classrooms may vary, depending on perspective (Hargreaves, 1970; Boaler et al, 2000).

Although not focused on grouping practices, Barrance and Elwood (2018) offer valuable insights into the lived experiences of pupils in low ability groups. The research explicitly adopts a children's rights' approach while drawing on data from two research projects on pupils' perspectives of GCSEs in Northern Ireland and Wales. The first piece of research is a mixed-methods project undertaken at Queen's University Belfast (QUB), for which data collection was undertaken between 2014 and 2015. The second project is the WISERD Education multi-cohort study (Wales Institute for Social and Economic Research, Data and Methods) which included questions on tiering in its annual WISERD Education survey for 14–15-year-old GCSE pupils in 2017. In total, 38 schools participated: 20 in Northern Ireland and 18 in Wales. Ten focus groups were conducted in each region, with between 5 and 10 pupils in each group. In addition, 1600 pupils across Northern Ireland (n = 699) and Wales (n

= 901) aged 15–16 years completed a survey. Barrance and Elwood (2018) explore pupils' views on choice and fairness through their experiences of curriculum as examination specifications at GCSE. Drawing on qualitative data from the 38 focus groups and from three open-ended questions on the survey completed by 1600 pupils (Northern Ireland n=699; Wales n=901), the authors identify the themes of consequences, fairness and choice. In addition, young people's advisory groups chose fairness as a key theme, identifying issues relating to subject option selections, and practices such as tiering as most influential on pupils' experience.

Tiering emerged as a significant issue for pupils. For most subjects that are tiered at GCSE level in Northern Ireland and Wales, there are two tiers of exam paper: the foundation tier and the higher tier. A*–D grades are available for pupils entered for higher tier and C–G grades for those entered for foundation tier. The authors found that tier entry was often synonymous with ability group placement, with tier entry often decided by teachers several years before pupils sit GCSE (Barrance and Elwood, 2018). The study found that school practices limited pupil freedom in two ways. Firstly, pupil choices were constrained passively through subject selection procedures and secondly pupils were pressured to take certain subjects or navigated away from others, especially true for pupils perceived to be of 'low ability'. The study identified that there were significant levels of pupil misconception, not just a lack of awareness, around grade boundaries attached to tiers. The authors suggest that pupils experience curriculum inequalities even among their peers in the same school.

In the second article, combining data from the first study Barrance (2020), considers the extent to which the use of tiering in GCSE qualifications in the UK is compatible with the principles outlined in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), to which the UK is a signatory. Barrance (2020) draws on pupils' views and experiences of tiering in Northern Ireland and Wales to assess systematically the extent to which tiering fulfils the rights to education, best interests, non-discrimination, and participation under the Convention on the Rights of the Child. This study draws on data gathered through surveys

and focus groups to elicit young people's views and experiences of GCSEs and their reform. Impressive aspects of the study included: the use of young persons' advisory groups, comprising eight pupils from each country to ensure that the research was focused on issues of importance to them; the capacity-building training they received; and the incorporation of their suggestions. Barrance (2020, p9) found that placement in low group, resulting in entry for foundation tier at GCSE created a lived experience of feeling 'depressed and stupid'. For pupils, the consequences of tiering were extensive, not only affecting the grades available to them, but also the ways that other pupils viewed and treated them.

2.5. Ability Grouping in Northern Ireland

There has been relatively little focus in Northern Ireland, in policy or research, on the extent of, or possible impact of, ability grouping in non-selective schools, despite a wealth of UK and International literature describing its detrimental effects. Although evidence on the extent of ability grouping in NI is not readily available, it can be gleaned from various sources. For example, while examining systemic factors affecting school improvement in NI schools, Byrne and Gallagher (2004), found that 'ability' grouping occurred without exception in non-selective schools, with 'tighter streaming designed to narrow the range of 'ability' that teachers had to cope with' (Byrne and Gallagher, 2004, pp176-177). The Northern Ireland Council for Integrated Education's (NICIE) commitment to streaming is described as a response to parental demand:

(Integrated schools) ...have responded to parents who believe their children to be academically gifted, by providing access to a grammar stream. These schools are simply responding to parental wishes for reassurance that their academically able child will be given an appropriate education to reach their full potential.

(<https://www.nicie.org/2016/02/integrated-schools-are-all-'ability'-schools/ICIE>, 2021).

There is a range of other research which includes reference to the practice of 'ability' grouping in non-selective secondary schools in Northern Ireland. A study focused on attitudes of disadvantaged pupils towards education in Northern Ireland includes frequent references to ability grouping (Sutherland and Purdy, 2006, p181), with the authors reporting

'name-calling of lower-stream children'. The negative impacts of 'ability' grouping were also recorded in a study by Harland et al (2012) who found that boys in lower groups felt that they didn't get the same educational opportunities, and that their aspirations were lowered as a result. In a recent report by Purdy et al (2021) views of grouping were highlighted by young people's focus groups. Pupils reported that ability grouping was very divisive, often left those in lower groups feeling less capable than their peers and restricted their options due to being offered lower qualifications. These issues will be discussed as part of the Findings and Discussion Sections of Chapter 5 as they are also identified by participants in this study.

Evidence from PISA provides a useful insight into the practice of ability grouping in NI. The PISA schools' questionnaire, completed by principals or senior staff, collected information on the management and organisation of schools. Sizmur et al (2019) found that it was more common in Northern Ireland than the OECD average for principals to report grouping pupils by 'ability' within schools, either by grouping them into different classes or by grouping within classes, with '82% of Principals reporting that pupils are grouped together for some subjects, compared to an OECD average of 46%' (Ibid., pp113-114).

2.6 Conclusion

This chapter has examined literature on 'ability' grouping. Although there is a strong quantitative focus on exploring the possible link between placement and outcomes, significant methodological challenges were identified in research which tries to compare effects which may differ across schools, across time, across subject domains or even between teachers. Quantitative studies have made a valuable contribution to knowledge showing clear evidence that certain groups of pupils, especially pupils from socially disadvantaged or ethnic backgrounds, are disproportionately represented in low ability groups, raising concerns for social justice. Early ethnographic studies, by including insights generated from classroom observation, have provided insights into how placement in a low group affects both pedagogical approaches and classroom relationships. More recent research, including a large scale mixed-methods project, has begun to unravel the complex

interplay of psychological and sociological factors associated with placement in a low ability group. Evidence from the literature on the possible extent to which ability grouping is practised in Northern Ireland was also presented.

The next chapter will outline Nussbaum's Capabilities Approach and explore why it may be viewed as superior to other evaluative frameworks. The perceived limitations of the Capabilities Approach will be evaluated, and the chapter will conclude with a discussion of why it is particularly useful as a mechanism to evaluate educational provision.

Chapter 3 Nussbaum's Capabilities Approach

3.1 Introduction: What is the Capabilities Approach?

The Capabilities Approach, also known as the Human Development approach, is a normative evaluative approach which recognises that 'all individuals possess an inalienable human dignity that must be respected by laws and institutions' (Nussbaum, 2012, p24).

Developed by Amartya Sen in the 1980s as a response to the inadequacies of the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) as a metric of human development and the dominance of utilitarian approaches to policy decisions and resource allocations, the Capabilities Approach (CA) emphasises what individuals are actually able to do and to be, through an evaluation of what Sen (2009) terms 'functionings and capabilities'. This core focus on what people are effectively able to do and to be, that is, on their capabilities, contrasts with other philosophical approaches which focus on people's happiness, or on income, expenditure or consumption, for example, or utilitarian and welfarist approaches.

Sen's work has been developed significantly by Martha Nussbaum, although Nussbaum's version differs from Sen's as

'she enters the Capabilities Approach from a perspective of moral-legal philosophy, with the specific aim of arguing for political principles that a government should guarantee to all its citizens through its constitution' (Robeyns, 2005, p103).

Following Aristotle, Kant and Marx in her formulation of the CA, Nussbaum's idea of the person is as an end in themselves, who should never be treated as a means to the achievement of another's goals. Her conception of the good, following Aristotle, holds that the good life consists in the possession, over the course of a lifetime, of all those things that are good for us. With an emphasis on human flourishing, Nussbaum's CA is concerned with social injustice and inequality, 'especially capability failures that are the result of discrimination or marginalisation' (Nussbaum, 2011, p19).

A comprehensive theory of justice specifies in detail all values and virtues within a single system of justice (as in, for example, Rawls' Theory of Justice, 1972). However, Nussbaum (2011) describes her CA as the foundation of 'a partial theory of justice', by which she means that, at a political level, governments should ensure that people's fundamental entitlements, such as the right to education and to freedom from discrimination, are fulfilled to at least a basic level of functioning, which she terms 'thresholds'. It is also general and abstract so that different governments and institutions can specify the capabilities and their thresholds according to custom and level of development. Nussbaum's CA also holds that the political goal is to aim for the achievement of an ample threshold on each capability, rather than the achievement of equality in all of the capabilities. As Robeyns (2012) asserts, although focused on thresholds, Nussbaum does not imply that reaching these thresholds is all that matters for social justice, rather her theory of justice is partial as it leaves unaddressed the question of what social justice requires when the thresholds are met.

According to the CA, the ends of well-being, justice and development should be conceptualised in terms of people's capabilities to function. What is ultimately important for justice is that every person is afforded the freedom to develop a conception of the good life and then choose those options they value most. Expressed succinctly by Qizilbash (2011, p27), 'quality of life is seen as the freedom to choose between lives'. In this way people are free to lead the kind of lives they want to lead, to do what they want to do and be the person they want to be. Both Nussbaum and Sen define 'capability' as the real opportunity to achieve plans and goals a person has reason to value. Therefore, capability does not merely mean access to resources, but what a person is actually able to do with these resources to choose and to act. For Alkire (2005, p121) the 'good life is partly a life of genuine choice, not one in which a person is forced or coerced into a particular life, no matter how rich it may be in other respects'. Capability may thus be understood as a kind of freedom, representing not just the abilities residing in a person, but also the freedoms or

opportunities created by a combination of personal abilities and the political, social and economic environment (Nussbaum, 2011, p20).

Nussbaum defines 'basic capabilities' as the 'innate faculties of the person that make later development and training possible' (2011, p23) such as being able to see and hear. She also distinguishes 'basic' from 'internal' and 'combined' capabilities. 'Internal capabilities' are 'states of the person (not fixed, but fluid and dynamic) for example, personality traits, intellectual and emotional capacities and states of fitness and health, which develop in most cases, in interaction with the social, economic, familial and political environment', by for example learning to read at school. By contrast, what Nussbaum defines as 'combined capabilities', represent the totality of the opportunities a person has for choice in her specific political, social and economic situation' or what she terms 'substantive freedoms' (2011, p21). Whereas a capability is the opportunity to achieve plans and goals a person has reason to value, a functioning is 'an active realisation of one or more capabilities' (Nussbaum, 2011, pp 24-25) which might be regarded as the end-point of a capability or combined capabilities.

Although endorsing the freedom aspect of choice, Nussbaum argues that it is sometimes necessary to evaluate functioning (the doings and the beings) rather than capability.

Adaptive preferences can emerge, not just due to a lack of information, but because of a person's entire upbringing in society. For example, where a pupil placed in a low ability group in school simply accepts the identity assigned and are entered for Foundation Tier in all subjects at GCSE because they just 'don't do Higher tests'. Therefore, an evaluation of pupils' achieved functionings may be a more effective approach to undertake, rather than to evaluate adolescent satisfaction with school, which may be influenced by their lack of power and knowledge of alternatives. The CA, sensitive to context, encourages a questioning of the extent to which people have genuine access to all the capabilities in their capability set, given that people's views of what constitutes good life are influenced by social contexts.

Robeyns (2009) identifies three groups of conversion factors personal, social, and environmental which influence how a person can convert resources into a functioning (2009, p99). A pupil's undiagnosed difficulties in literacy (personal) may result in subsequent failure at school, as they are unable to convert educational experience into effective functioning. Gendered and classed social norms or power relations may be seen in the example of a pupil whose family knows how to navigate the educational system and can then afford to pay for extra tuition (social). In line with Robeyns' conversion factors, this pupil is more likely to develop one of the ten capabilities the capability for Senses, Imagination and Thought (which will be discussed later) than the pupil from a poor family lacking this social and economic capital. The last group cited by Robeyns may be evidenced, for example, in the experience of a pupil living in a remote rural location which has poor internet connectivity. This pupil will have experienced much greater difficulty in converting online education into an effective functioning during the Covid 19 pandemic (environmental).

Although they have much in common, Sen does not specify thresholds or a list of capabilities, although he does believe in the central importance of capabilities of health and education (Nussbaum, 2011). Nussbaum's CA specifies ten capabilities which focus on the protection of areas of freedom so central that 'their removal makes a life not worthy of human dignity', (2011, p31). The ten capabilities are non-fungible, one may not be traded off against another although Nussbaum accepts that some may take priority if, following from concepts identified by Wolff and de-Shalit (2007), the capability is particularly 'fertile', that is, one that tends to promote other related capabilities or has a tendency to remove a corrosive disadvantage' which is defined as 'a deprivation that has particularly larger effects on other areas of life' (Nussbaum, 2011, p45). Nussbaum's ten central capabilities are loosely-articulated and she does not state precisely how these capabilities are to be achieved, or to what extent. However, they represent a social minimum below which no society seeking to guarantee human dignity should fall (Broderick, 2018).

1. Life. Being able to live to the end of a human life of normal length and not having one's life ended prematurely, or before one's life is so reduced as not to be worth living.
2. Bodily health. Being able to have good health, including reproductive health; to be adequately nourished; to have adequate shelter.
3. Bodily Integrity. Being able to move freely; to be secure against violent assault; having opportunities for sexual satisfaction and choice in matters of reproduction.
4. Senses, imagination and thought. Being able to use the senses, to imagine, think and reason- and to do these things in a truly human way, a way informed and cultivated by an adequate education, having freedom of expression including political, artistic and religious liberties and being able to have pleasurable experiences.
5. Emotions. Being able to have attachments to things and people outside ourselves; being able to love, to grieve, to experience longing, gratitude, and justified anger. Not having one's emotional development blighted by fear and anxiety.
6. Practical reasoning. Being able to form a conception of the good and to engage in critical reflection about the planning of one's life.
7. Affiliation. (A) Being able to live with and toward others, to recognise and show concern for other human beings, to engage in various forms of social interaction; to be able to imagine the situation of another. (B) Having the social bases of self-respect and non-humiliation; being able to be treated as a dignified being whose worth is equal to that of others.
8. Other species. Being able to live with concern for and in relation to nature.
9. Play. Being able to laugh, play and to enjoy recreational activities.
10. Control over one's political and material environment. To be able to participate in political choices and have one's free speech protected; to be able to hold property and have property rights and seek employment on an equal basis with others, exercise practical reasoning and enter into meaningful relationships with others (Nussbaum, 2011, p45).

Although Nussbaum's CA does not advocate equalising all the capabilities for everyone (2009), she holds that equal dignity for all human beings must be protected and promoted.

The next section will explore why the CA is superior to other approaches and why it offers a particularly effective mechanism by which to evaluate the quality and effectiveness of the education system, as Robeyns suggests, the CA is a 'a paradigm, loosely defined-that can be used for a wide range of evaluative purposes' (2005, p96).

3.3 Why the Capabilities Approach?

As the CA argues that human beings and their flourishing should be the end of human development, rather than economic growth, it 'proposes an alternative space in which to conceptualise both poverty reduction and justice' (Alkire, 2005, p117). Gross Domestic Product (GDP) is the best-recognised measure of economic performance in the world. Because of the implicit link between economic growth and elements of well-being, GDP has often been regarded as a proxy indicator of human development and well-being. However, the use of GDP as a metric for human welfare has been widely criticised. As Robert Kennedy said in Kansas in 1968 'Gross National Product measures everything, except that which makes life worthwhile'. This view was earlier advanced by economists such as Kuznets (1934), who emphasised that it is a measure of economic activity, not well-being and he cautioned against the possible misuse of measurements of national income, which may be subject to the illusory precision given by quantitative methodology, 'especially since they deal with matters that are the centre of conflict of opposing social groups, where the effectiveness of an argument is often contingent upon oversimplification' (Kuznets, 1934, pp5–6). Although described as the world's most powerful statistical indicator of national development and progress (Lepenies, 2016), GDP measures are flawed as metrics of human development because the monetary value of all goods and services produced in a country makes no reference to social well-being or inequality (Masnood, 2021).

Alternative metrics have attempted to evaluate well-being at the aggregate (economy-wide) level, emphasising that policies should be evaluated on the basis of their consequences on people. The philosopher Jeremy Bentham (1748—1832) introduced the concept of utility, identifying the good with pleasure, with the aim of bringing about 'the greatest amount of good for the greatest number' (cited in Stanton, 2007, p4). Utilitarianism claims that the satisfaction of personal preferences is the most important objective when evaluating justice, although it is interested in maximising total welfare, rather than on the quality of each person's life. The issue of utility (or pleasure) has also been addressed in Nussbaum's work where, following Aristotle, she arrives at a conception of the good life characterised, not by

mere utilitarian pleasure, but by the achievement of happiness. In *Nicomachean Ethics* (2004), Aristotle dismisses the claim that pleasure is identical with happiness, saying that living for pleasure only would be 'to choose the life of dumb grazing animals' and that happiness depends on the cultivation of virtue. Nussbaum (2004, p64) supports this, arguing that 'as happiness is constitutive of a flourishing human life, it cannot include evil pleasures'. The CA is a rival to utility as it 'specifies a space within which comparisons of life quality (how well people are doing) are most revealingly made among nations' (Nussbaum, 2000, p6). Thus, the Capabilities Approach shifts the analysis of human well-being and development towards functionings and capabilities.

Egalitarian approaches aim to identify more effective determinants of welfare in order to achieve a more comprehensive view of development, where the goal of development is the creation of a more just and equitable society (Kapoor and Debroy, 2019). The resource-oriented approach developed by John Rawls and Donald Dworkin, contains a fundamental debate over what should be distributed. Resourcists base their choice of valuable resources on some account of human needs. Rawls (1999, pp83-84) excludes people with severe physical or mental disabilities from the scope of justice as fairness. Rawls justifies this by putting forward that a theory of justice should apply for 'normal cases' and if the theory is inconsistent for the normal cases, then it will certainly not be a sound theory for the more difficult cases, such as people with disabilities. This approach is insensitive to individual variations, unlike the CA which accommodates human diversity. While Rawls and Dworkin claim that resources that people need should be distributed, Nussbaum (2006) in response to Rawls, holds that societies should direct their policies toward an equalisation of people's capabilities. In contrast to resourcists, Nussbaum argues that justice should be conceptualised in terms of people's capabilities to function, rather than merely have access to resources, as not everyone is able to avail of the opportunities arising from distributed goods, or to convert them into functioning, for example educational resources.

The CA represents an egalitarian approach to social justice, and, instead of looking at people's access to resources, the CA focuses on what kinds of functionings people are able to achieve. Resource distribution approaches fail to take account of the many factors that may affect the ability of different individuals to convert resources into well-being; utility is too dependent on psychological features of individuals, such as adaptive preferences. Although an approach which evaluates the distribution of resources may be regarded as a more egalitarian version of GDP, equal income and wealth does not adequately capture what people are able to do and to be. Some people will need additional resources, not merely equally divided resources, to attain a similar level of functioning to others, and others have differing abilities to turn resources into functionings. However, this metric is problematic as a person's command over commodities can be a poor indicator of quality of life, since the factors which affect the conversion of goods, conversion of goods and services into functionings and capabilities are affected by the social contours of each person's environment. Nussbaum (1999, p29) argues that it is 'the capability to achieve valuable functionings that should be the focus of distributive justice'. She has elaborated Sen's account of capabilities to function and developed a version of capability justice according to which justice involves helping all persons reach the point where they have 'a realistic option of exercising the most valuable functions' (Nussbaum, 1999, p46).

Crucially, as Broderick (2018, p2) has noted, the 'CA acknowledges that society is made up of individuals with unequal abilities and needs'. Thus, the CA recognises that there will be differences in people's ability to convert resources into real opportunities and freedom. Take the example of two pupils, John and Brian. John comes from a working-class family living in a small house on an estate in Belfast, an area which has experienced some of the most intense conflict of the 'Troubles'. Violence continues to be a part of life in this disadvantaged community and John has become involved in late night street protests, frequently missing school as a result. John's parents have comparatively low levels of educational attainment and are not able to advocate on his behalf in school. Brian lives in an affluent area of Belfast,

largely immune to the influence of paramilitaries. His parents were successful in school, and both have well-paid jobs and are able to challenge the educational system when necessary. Brian's literacy difficulties were identified at an early stage; his parents paid for an initial assessment and for ongoing extra tuition in any subject he finds difficult at GCSE. They also ensure that the school provides him with appropriate access arrangements when taking examinations.

Nussbaum uses the CA to characterize a person's entitlements in a just society (Nussbaum 2006) and, by prioritising an assessment of what people are actually able to do and to be, it can uncover previously 'hidden' injustice and discrimination. Due to its focus on ends rather than means, and its recognition of human diversity, the CA can uncover the significant differences in people's ability to convert resources into functionings (Robeyns, 2019). According to Gasper and van Staveren (2003), the CA's universalistic approach, which is closer to traditions in the humanities than to economics, engages more with the power of narrative and poetry, and is thus better able to empathise with the realities of individual lives and offer more potential to understand human actions and motivations. Nussbaum's 'broader definition of capabilities, distinguishing between opportunities and skills, makes her approach less abstract than Sen's and closer to the texture of daily life' (Gasper and van Staveren, 2003, p19).

Attempting to address the flaws in equating GDP with human development, drawing on the work of Sen and Nussbaum, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) has published annual Human Development Reports (HDR) since 1990, using the Human Development Index (HDI) encompassing statistics such as life expectancy at birth, an education index (calculated using mean years of schooling and expected years of schooling), and gross national income. The most recent report asserts that the HDR concept emerged 'precisely as a counterpoint to myopic definitions of development' with the aim of 'empowering people to identify and pursue their own paths for a meaningful life, one anchored in expanding freedoms' (Human Development Report, 2020, p6).

By specifying ten Central Capabilities, a minimum threshold is established against which an individual's opportunities can be assessed. Clark (2009, p22) posits that the capability approach 'has revitalized much of contemporary development studies by providing the conceptual foundations for the human development movement'. The Capabilities Approach is a general framework that specifies a space for interpersonal comparisons of individual well-being. As such, it remains underspecified in the issue of selecting, aggregating, and quantifying its dimensions. Approaches focused on the metric of utility are embedded solely in the discipline of economics, whereas the capability approach, in contrast, may be used by a wide range of disciplines, including sociology, economics, philosophy and it may be used for a variety of purposes. It has proved both versatile and useful when considering macro issues such as human development, quality of life and social justice, but also in relatively smaller contexts, such as education policy (Claassen, 2020). Capturing the issues raised by the use of each metric eloquently, Sumner (2020, p62) argues that

utility is too internal to our lives, too shifting and capricious, to serve as the basis of an adequate theory, while commodities are too external to our lives, too merely instrumental, to be determinative of well-being.

The focus on human diversity is a key feature of the Capabilities approach.

The Capabilities Approach takes account of human diversity in two ways: by its focus on the plurality of functionings and capabilities as the evaluative space, and by the explicit focus on personal and socio-environmental conversion factors of commodities into functionings, and on the whole social and institutional context that affects conversion factors and the capability set directly. (Robeyns, 2005, p99).

Because of human diversity, the degree to which resources can be converted into capabilities differs from person to person. Hence, the CA considers capabilities to be a better space of equality than resources. As Pogge (2010, p2) concludes, the key theoretical difference between the Capabilities Approach and a resourcist approach is found in their answer to the question 'How do institutional schemes respond to natural human diversity?'

Nussbaum's Capabilities Approach is superior to the utility and GDP approaches in several ways. Rather than focus on aggregated measures such as GDP as a single development goal, which can mask distributional inequalities, the Capabilities Approach provides a 'moral

and humanly rich set of goals for development', focusing on individual capabilities and freedoms which are worthy of a life of human dignity (2011, p23). It is not simply about the ability to determine and act on what we value, rather, the Capabilities Approach recognises that a conception of the good, is created, or restricted, by personal abilities in combination with the political, social, and economic environment (Nussbaum, 2011). Nussbaum's CA gives a strong emphasis to the problem of adaptive preference and shifts the analysis of human well-being and development towards functioning and capability. The Capabilities Approach characterises a person's entitlements in a just society (Nussbaum, 2006) and, by prioritising an assessment of what people are actually able to do and to be, it can uncover previously 'hidden' injustice and discrimination and can uncover the significant differences in people's ability to convert resources into functionings (Robeyns, 2019).

3.4 Limitations of the CA

Ironically, some of the very aspects of the CA which are regarded as strengths by some are viewed as weaknesses by others. This section will examine some of the key criticisms of the CA and how they may be refuted, including: whether capabilities can be, or even should be, specified; accusations that the liberal egalitarian theory has moved towards paternalism, that it ignores power relations, that the CA is difficult to operationalise, and its terminology is contested and even confusing.

Nussbaum argues against Sen's position not to specify capabilities and holds that a theory of justice needs to take a stance on this issue (Nussbaum 2003). Nussbaum's decision to specify a list of ten capabilities is supported by Claassen (2020, p242), who argues that 'it is more respectful of democratic deliberation to offer a concrete list as a proposal, which is up for deliberation and adoption in a political community'. Nussbaum's decision to select capabilities was followed by criticism of how these capabilities were chosen. Claassen (2020, p188) speaks of the initial challenge of selecting a list of capabilities, referring to the

process as the CA's 'Achille's heel'. In response to Clark's criticism of paternalism in her creation of a list, Nussbaum (2000, p155) defends her decision, arguing that the central human capabilities are designed to represent universal values:

I believe, however, that the human personality has a structure that is at least to some extent independent of culture, powerfully though culture shapes it at every stage. Desires for food, for mobility, for security, for health, and for the use of reason – these seem to be relatively permanent features of our makeup as human, which culture can blunt, but cannot altogether remove.

Nussbaum asserts that the list leaves 'a lot of room for pluralism with regard to comprehensive conceptions of the good' (2000, p103). She responds to criticisms of the list by pointing out that it is open-ended and subject to on-going revision. Nussbaum contends that the list is a free-standing 'partial moral conception', explicitly introduced for political purposes only, free from metaphysical ideas which may divide people on the grounds of culture or religion (Nussbaum, 2003) This view is supported by Gasper (2004, p187) who suggests that the list 'should be viewed as a hypothesis about what would become acceptable starting points for discussions in each society', while Qizilbash (2011, p44) suggests that the 'list is seen as vague so that it can be multiply specified by people with different views and in different contexts'. Nussbaum (2003) stresses that people may accept the CA as the moral core of a political conception, without having to accept any particular metaphysical, ethical or religious view of the world.

The loosely articulated nature of Nussbaum's list has led to the suggestion that it lacks a degree of operationalisation and the voicing of doubt about how it could be put to work (Robeyns, 2005; Gasper and van Streven, 2003). While accepting that the operationalisation of the CA is a demanding task, it offers a rich, comprehensive and innovative way to analyse well-being. The intrinsic complexity and multi-layered structure of the Capabilities Approach acknowledges that freedoms are created by personal abilities in conjunction with the political, social and economic environment, that it is 'sensitive to the contours of the society in which individuals reside' (Hedge and MacKenzie, 2012, p330).

Therefore, when operationalising the CA for research purposes, there is a need to describe society's contours in concrete terms and explain how they relate to creation or limitation of freedoms. Alkire (2005, p129) agrees that the CA can be operationalised in different cultures, at different levels with respect to different problems, and offers researchers many degrees of freedom, and that this calls for reflexivity and methodological sensitivity, which is 'more art than science'. Nussbaum (2000, p7) argues that it is 'possible to be sensitive to local particularity, and to the ways in which circumstances shape not only options but also beliefs and preferences'.

3.5 The Key Role of Education in the Capabilities Approach

Although education is not included as one of the ten central capabilities, it underpins and pervades each one of them. Nussbaum (2011) holds that education is particularly central to human dignity, equality, and opportunity. Education, Nussbaum believes, justifies an aggressive approach as it is such a pivotal factor in opening up a wide range of adult capabilities' with potential 'capability destruction' where young people are given the freedom to withdraw from education (2011, p27). Access to quality education acts as a fertile functioning, leading to the development of combined capabilities and although committed to freedom, Nussbaum (2011) believes that education is too important to be left to choice as it opens up a wide range of adult capabilities. The CA recognises that young people's basic capabilities develop through freedoms and opportunities created by a combination of personal abilities and the political, social and economic environment (Nussbaum, 2011). For example, financial hardship may mean that parents are unable to afford private tuition, contributing to pupil failure. The focus on what people are actually able to do and to be enables educational policies and practices to be evaluated on issues of equality and justice, rather than on aggregates or access to resources.

With its emphasis on the Kantian principle that every person is an end in themselves, the CA challenges the utilitarian discourse in education which diminishes individual worth by suggesting that people are educated simply to contribute to economic growth. Because literacy and numeracy are considered measurable outcomes, it is this understanding of education and human capability that has been most widely and powerfully used in

comparative studies across countries and regions. However, the fourth of Nussbaum's 10 central capabilities, Senses, Imagination, and Thought, suggests a much more expansive view of what it is to be educated, including an appreciation of literature and creative arts: Being able to use the senses, to imagine, think, and reason – and to do these things in a truly human way, a way informed and cultivated by an adequate education, including, but by no means limited to, literacy and basic mathematical and scientific training (Nussbaum, 2011, p33).

Education contributes not only to individual well-being but also to developing a conception of the good life – the life that one has reason to value – together with promoting effective forms of participation in society. The sixth central capability, Practical Reason, focuses on: 'Being able to form a conception of the good and to engage in critical reflection about the planning of one's life' (Nussbaum, 2011, p34). Indeed, the role of education is broadly recognised within the Capabilities approach as crucial, both for the individual and for society, since it develops essential functionings that are important intrinsically, and for the enhancement and expansion of other capabilities as well as the general enhancement of social arrangements (Robeyns, 2006). These capabilities emphasise the intrinsic value of education for human development, rather than merely on its economic value.

The Capabilities Approach thus offers a rich and plural evaluative framework which attempts to achieve greater evaluative precision by collecting data at the level of the individual and paying attention to each person's functionings. Wolff (2020,p520) argues that viewing education through the capability-based lens demands attention to four aspects of educational processes and outcomes: the opportunity aspect – the opportunity to be educated; the functionings dimension for what this reveals about how pupils are faring in education and how secure their achievements are; the agency aspect (how capabilities are expanded), including processes, agents (teachers and others) and actions through which pupils are educated (pedagogy, curriculum and so on); and quality in operationalizing the first three aspects.

Two capabilities are identified by Nussbaum as playing an architectonic role, as they organise and pervade the others. The first mentioned above is Practical Reason which includes the ability to have a 'conception of the good' and the ability to plan one's own life.

Nussbaum's second architectonic capability, Affiliation includes having social bases of self-respect and non-humiliation and being able to engage in various forms of social interaction. Affiliation acknowledges the complex interplay between individuals and their environments which influence whether other capabilities are developed or deformed and provides an especially useful lens through which to view a pupil's educational experiences, discussed more fully in Chapter 6. Walker (2020) argues that the CA provides a rich approach to investigate advantage and disadvantage in education as either capability expansion or capability deprivation.

Unterhalter (2003) challenges the assumption that education always be beneficial, an enhancement of freedom and capability. She asks whether the CA allows a consideration of how deficiencies in the quality of schooling have a bearing on capabilities, arguing that, if educational opportunities enjoyed are to be truly genuine, they must be not only effectively available, but also of equal quality. This is perhaps illustrated by the example of pupils placed in low ability groups who may, for instance, receive a diluted curriculum and fewer opportunities to engage in higher order thinking. Thus, although they apparently have the same access to education, the reality is that their experiences are of an inferior quality which serves to stunt capability development, an issue which be explored more fully in Chapter 5.

As the Capabilities Approach emphasises the dignity of each pupil, a key question for the any education system is 'What would it take to get each person up to an acceptable threshold on all capabilities?' For Nussbaum (2009, pp342-343), a central goal is to ensure that all children are afforded 'not just adequacy, but equal concern and equal protection' and that they 'are equally placed in the education process and equally supported'. Although there may be an economic argument that educational entitlements should be proportional to each pupil's innate intelligence, the Capabilities Approach argues that the goal is for all human beings to get above a threshold of capability and therefore, those who need more help to get above the threshold should get it, (Nussbaum, 2011). Its acknowledgement of conversion factors attends to interpersonal diversity, accepting that people may need differing amounts

of resources in order to transform these into the functioning of being educated (Walker, 2020). Thus, the CA, with its absolute insistence that dignity must be accorded to all, affords an opportunity to achieve more socially just education policies and practices. This emphasis on the CA's contribution to achieving social justice has been highlighted by several commentators, including Hedge and MacKenzie (2012, p341) who suggest that the CA 'offers a valuable framework by which to imagine more richly the future of a just education for all'.

Summary

In this chapter Nussbaum's CA was outlined, followed by an exploration of why the CA may be viewed as superior to other evaluative frameworks. The perceived limitations of the CA were evaluated, and the chapter concluded with a discussion of why it is particularly useful when evaluating educational provision. The next chapter will outline the purpose of the study and the research questions and explore the considerations which informed the selection of Nussbaum's Capabilities Approach. The rationale for choosing a qualitative design will be discussed and an overview of the ethical considerations will be given. Finally, the procedures employed in carrying out the research and data analysis will be detailed.

Chapter 4: Methodology

4.1 Introduction

This chapter discusses the interpretative phenomenological analytic (IPA) methodology and research methods employed in this study. Section 4.2 outlines the purpose of the study and the research questions. An overview of the considerations which informed the selection of Nussbaum's Capabilities Approach and a qualitative design are discussed in section 4.3.

The research design is outlined in section 4.4, and an overview of the ethical considerations is given. In Section 4.5 the procedures employed in carrying out the research are detailed, and the data analysis which explores both the lived experience of ability grouping as recollected by participants, and any long-term impact on these young adults is outlined. The purpose is to describe clearly how the research was designed and carried out. An evaluation of the research methods is provided in section 4.6 and a reflection on researcher positionality in section 4.7. The chapter concludes with an outline of the data presentation in section 4.8.

4.2 Purpose of the study

The primary purpose of the research is to address a gap in knowledge relating to the impact on adults of placement in a low ability group while at post-primary schools in Northern Ireland. Nussbaum's Capabilities Approach is used to conceptualise and achieve deeper understanding of the impact of the experience on adult participants, who both recollect their experiences and reflect on them, up to ten years after leaving school. This study, informed by an interpretivist epistemology and methodology aims to uncover experiences invisible to quantitative research methods. Following Braun and Clarke's (2013, p20) position on qualitative research, the study purports to tell 'one story among many that could be told about the data'. The research questions could only be effectively answered using qualitative methods to capture the necessary multiple, complex and context-bound perspectives of participants. Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis was chosen due to its theoretical

foundations in phenomenology, with its focus on lived experience, in hermeneutics which focuses on interpretation and acknowledges researcher subjectivity, and in idiography with its focus on the particular and commitment to detail. I decided that this approach would best meet the goal of arriving at an understanding of the impact of placement in a low ability group. IPA recognises, even embraces, the subjectivity of the data and the analysis produced, what Kvale (1996, p212) terms 'perspectival subjectivity'.

Research questions

The research questions guide the research in three key areas: to capture the views of adults on their experience of being placed in a low group; to identify the impact this had on them at school and afterwards; to arrive at a deeper understanding of their experience of ability grouping using Nussbaum's CA as an interpretative framework to see 'what we would otherwise miss...and make sense of events' (Thornton, 1993, p68).

The questions to be considered in each of the three sections are outlined below.

1. How do adults recollect their experience of placement in a low ability group in post-primary school?
2. How do participants now understand and make sense of their experiences of placement in a 'low' ability group?
3. How can I use Nussbaum's Capabilities Approach to conceptualise participants' experiences of placement in a low ability group?

4.3 Methodological considerations

The study is informed by an ontological perspective which invokes a real and knowable world which sits behind the subjective and socially located knowledge. The philosophical approach and epistemological belief underpinning this study are grounded in interpretivism. This research holds that the social world should be interpreted from the perspective of the

participants and consequently adopts an experiential qualitative approach, prioritising the participants when reporting themes generated in the interpretative analysis. The interpretivist approach is also underpinned by a constructivist epistemology which holds that there are many knowledges, constructed through the interaction of individuals with specific social and cultural contexts. These positions are shown clearly through the decision to see things through the eyes of the people placed in low ability groups as adolescents and to give voice to the 'multiple realities constructed by participants' (Tracy, 2010, pxi). Furthermore, this research is underpinned by a belief that these 'realities' are not simply imprinted on individuals but are formed through interaction with others and through structural forces that influence people's lives (Creswell, 2013).

Methodological decisions were taken with the imperative of effectively addressing the research questions, while taking the impact of the pandemic into account. The focus in this study is on achieving rich description of the impact of placement in a low ability group, achieved from data gained from the use of semi-structured interviews. The emphasis was on generating themes from the remembered experiences of ability grouping by capturing the recollections and reflections of adults. IPA is concerned with the meaning of experience to people, although understanding is only achieved properly through a process of researcher interpretation, thus linking phenomenology with hermeneutics (Heidegger, 1962). The process of examining experience in this study is therefore a 'double hermeneutic, because the researcher is trying to make sense of the participant trying to make sense of what is happening to them' (Smith et al, 2009, p3). No claims of objectivity are made; instead following Gadamer (1960), I believe that no person trying to understand the experience of another can be wholly neutral, and that all research is an inherently interpretative activity. I will make clear my position and attempt to achieve transparency through a clear and detailed explanation of the research process and a declaration of positionality.

The approach draws on literature on retrospective interviewing which suggests that autobiographical memory is a uniquely human form of memory, socially and culturally

mediated, that goes beyond recalling who, what, where, and when of an experience, to include memory of how this event occurred as it did, what it means, and why it is important (Fivush, 2010; Ricouer, 1991; Fivush et al, 2011). Concerns over whether participants would be able to recall events and emotions that were a decade old were unfounded. The experiences were recalled very easily, perhaps because of the powerful emotional effect of placement on each person. This has been described in the literature as the 'reminiscence bump' by Janssen et al (2011) who found that, when autobiographical memories are elicited with word cues, personal events from middle childhood to early adulthood are overrepresented compared to events from other periods. This is supported by Demiray et al (2009, pp708-723):

Individuals recall memories from adolescence and young adulthood not simply because such memories were encoded when a self-narrative was first being formed, but because they feel these events have had an important influence on who they have become today.

Nussbaum's CA, as I discussed in the previous chapter, was chosen as a sensitising framework because it holds that 'all individuals possess an inalienable human dignity that must be respected by laws and institutions' (Nussbaum, 2012, p24). In addition, rooted in Aristotle's (350BC) philosophy with its emphasis on the principle of each person as an end in themselves, the CA was chosen due to its concern with social injustice and inequality, 'especially capability failures that are the result of discrimination or marginalisation' (Nussbaum, 2011, p19). As suggested by Hedge and MacKenzie (2012, p328),

'the Capabilities Approach offers a useful theoretical platform from which to consider issues around equality, rights and entitlements.'

The CA recognises that people are shaped by the social contours of their environment, and, as such, Nussbaum's CA lends itself well to use within IPA research focused on the lived experience of individuals in context.

4.4 Research design

The purpose of this section is to describe clearly how the research was designed and carried out. Although the choice of methods is inevitably driven by the research questions, a

researcher's ontological and epistemological beliefs must also influence the choice of area of enquiry and the development of research questions. The decision to employ IPA was influenced by the need to answer research questions that focus on an in-depth exploration of lived experience and its acknowledgement of researcher subjectivity (Smith et al, 2012). It was particularly important for this study to hear the perspective of adults who may have been voiceless and marginalised in school as a result of being placed in low ability groups. The research questions are broad and open: the first question is descriptive; the second question encourages the participants to reflect on and make sense of the experience; the third question encourages the researcher to interpret participants' experiences. In order to answer the research questions, interviewing was chosen as the most appropriate research method, as the 'purpose of interviewing is to enter into the other person's perspective' (Patton, 2015, p246).

The research design was inevitably affected by COVID 19, with the original intention of conducting one-to-one face to face interviews, replaced with a decision to conduct online interviews using Microsoft Teams, chosen as the next best way to facilitate the development of researcher empathy and to probe beneath surface appearances. As observed by Teti et al (2020, p1), 'Covid is not just an epidemic, but a social event disrupting our social order'. The decision to employ interviews was influenced by the desire to capture, as accurately as possible, the recollections of people who experienced placement in a low ability group. This decision follows Cohen et al (2018, p394) who posit that 'face to face interaction is the fullest condition of participating in the mind of another human being' even though, in this case, the faces were on a computer screen. An online interview takes on a different character from a face-to-face interview and, has its own advantages, limitations, and ethical considerations (Jowett et al, 2011), which will be discussed in 4.5.

4.4.1. Sampling

The rationale for participant choice was to achieve the best data in response to the research questions. In line with the theoretical foundations of IPA, participants were selected

purposively because they could offer a particular perspective on the phenomena (Pietkiewicz and Smith, 2014). As an idiographic approach, IPA is especially concerned with the particular experience of individuals and consequently, this study focuses on a sample of eleven cases, with patterns identified across the data. It was therefore a deliberate aim to achieve a fairly homogenous sample of participants all of whom had experience of placement in a low ability group in a non-selective post-primary school in Northern Ireland. The size of the sample was thus informed both by its 'fitness for purpose' (Marshall and Rossman, 2016, p108) and by the need to gain 'rich and relevant information' (Flick, 2009, p123). As noted by Valdez and Gubrium (2020), the movement to online interviewing, as a result of COVID 19, permitted wider social and geographical involvement with the inclusion in the sample of a participant living in another continent and a participant interviewed at the side of a road in rural NI.

Given the sensitive nature of the topic, and the research focus on gaining adult perspectives, there were difficulties associated with accessing participants. It proved difficult to recruit adults who had been placed in a low ability group, without reference to former pupils of my school. The sample therefore consists of eight participants who were in low ability groups when I became principal of their Catholic Maintained school in 2011, and whom I had interviewed at the time about their experiences (as part of a whole-school review of pupil groupings in the school). I contacted three of these former pupils to invite them to participate. Thereafter, six further participants were recruited through snowball sampling and two participants, known to my adult children, were invited to participate. Thus, social networks and personal contacts were used to gain access to those who have experience of grouping. Although Sirianni et al (2021) suggest that peer-recruitment-based samples may be biased because they reflect the patterns of social ties, the research questions' focus on placement in a low ability group meant that it was necessary to recruit only those who had experience of such placement.

The sample consisted of eleven adults who each had experience of placement in a low ability group in a non-selective post-primary school in Northern Ireland. All participants were aged between twenty- three and twenty-five years old at the time of the interview and have been assigned pseudonyms (Appendix Four). I acknowledge that my position does raise issues around objectivity and that, as the primary instrument for data collection, my positionality and reflexivity is of vital importance. This is discussed in Section 4.6.

4.4.2 Overview of the ethical considerations

This research was carried out following detailed consideration of the ethical impact of each element of the study and in accordance with the appropriate guidelines published by BERA (2011) concerning responsibilities to participants with regard to voluntary informed consent, privacy, and respect. Ethical approval was sought and granted by the School of Education Ethics Committee, in accordance with the university's ethical guidelines (Queen's University Belfast, 2014) (Appendix 1). All aspects of the research have been carried out as described in the procedures outlined in the ethics application and as detailed in the information provided to participants.

The study considered fully all necessary procedural, situational and relational ethical issues, (Tracy, 2010). Particular ethical issues relevant to this study included voluntary informed consent; right to withdraw; entitlement to privacy and anonymity of participants; legal compliance; minimal bureaucratic or emotional burden. The following section considers specific ethical issues and outlines how these were addressed in the course of the study.

4.4.3 Voluntary informed consent

Ethical research requires voluntary informed consent (BERA, 2011) as a condition of the involvement of human participants. Informed consent, as the term suggests, relies both on participants being adequately informed as to the nature of the research and their proposed involvement and being willing participants who are not under duress to be involved. All participants were provided with project information sheets and consent forms (Appendices

Two and Three) which outlined: the aims of the study; the processes involved in carrying out the research; the limitations of the research; the freedom to withdraw; and the consequences of being a participant. The research activities were carefully considered in terms of the potential harm which might be caused. Ability grouping can be a sensitive issue for those who are living through, or reflecting on, these experiences. The possible embarrassment or shame that adults may feel as they reflect on their lower position in the school hierarchy was acknowledged.

The informed consent process was slightly different given the move to online interview. As interviews were being recorded verbal consent was sought from each participant before recording started. Participants were also informed of their right to stop the interview for any reason at any time during the interview, and I reminded them of this right during the interview if they showed any sign of distress. Great care was taken to minimise risk to participant well-being and following each interview, participants were contacted and provided with information on how to access sources of support, if painful memories were caused. Whilst it was important to gather data which is a fair reflection of experiences it remained equally important to safeguard the well-being of participants (Appendix Three).

4.4.4 Privacy and confidentiality

A key aspect of ethical research is an obligation to safeguard participants' 'rights to confidentiality and anonymity' (BERA, 2011, p7). The information leaflet provided to participants prior to their becoming involved in the study gave assurances that all personal data would be anonymised to protect their identity and stored securely. The data management plan, for the storage, retention and disposal of the data, was designed to safeguard the confidentiality and anonymity of all individuals and institutions who were involved in the study. The reporting of data pertaining to individuals and institutions uses anonymous labelling and pseudonyms (Appendix Four) in order to protect participants' identities (Creswell, 2014). All data was handled in accordance with the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) and Data Protection Act 2018 and the Queen's University

Belfast data retention and storage regulations (2015). All data files were stored securely.

This arrangement ensured that information could not be accessed by individuals other than the researcher and supervisor(s). Upon graduation all data, including passwords for encrypted files, will be transferred to the Supervisor in accordance with the Queen's University Research Data Management Policy.

I used Queen's University's Microsoft TEAMS online platform, which afforded greater security than other platforms. Microsoft 365 and Office 365 traffic takes place over TLS/HTTPS encrypted channels, meaning that certificates are used for encryption of all traffic. I addressed issues around privacy and anonymity for participants' online by creating a separate channel for each participant's interview on Teams, so that their data was protected. Teams' data is encrypted in transit and at rest in Microsoft datacentres. This includes messages, files, meetings, and other content (Microsoft, 2020). A key advantage of Teams is its ability to securely record and store sessions without recourse to third-party software. This feature is particularly important in research where the protection of highly sensitive data is required. Other important security features include user-specific authentication, real-time encryption of meetings, and the ability to backup recordings to online remote server networks ('the cloud') or local drives (Microsoft Teams Inc., 2021).

I attended reflexively to the social context in which the research took place and by showing respect for participants by spending time on informal conversation before the start of the interview, the use of open-ended questions to encourage greater scope for participant reflection and by following up each interview with an email thanking each person for their time and insights. I have followed up the interviews by sending details of how to access Open University courses to four participants, and I have offered to help complete applications if required.

4.5 Research Process

This section outlines the methods of data collection and procedures for analysis.

4.5.1. Data Collection

The primary concern was to elicit rich, detailed, first-person accounts of the experience of placement in a low ability group. From the outset the aim was to create an informal online environment which would encourage participant engagement and collaboration in the process. As an experienced former teacher, I was confident in managing the interviews to achieve an accepting and non-threatening atmosphere which encouraged participants to be open and willing to talk about their views. However, I was extremely aware of not adopting a 'teacher persona' during the interview and began by acknowledging that participants were adults with an existing level of knowledge, and accrued life experience since leaving school. The passage of time enabled me to gauge how participants' attitudes may have changed since leaving school and explore how life experience and time to reflect afforded them the opportunity to understand and clearly describe the various ways in which they were impacted by ability grouping.

Eleven in-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted during three weeks in June and July 2021, at times convenient to participants, with each one lasting approximately 45 minutes. The decision to employ the method of semi-structured in-depth interview was due to its potential for human interaction between participant and the researcher, and to achieve depth and quality of data through 'probing' questions if required (Tracy, 2013). Semi-structured in-depth interviews were an important dimension of the research design, since this research set out to explore the complex dynamics of social realities within low ability groups (Denzin and Lincoln, 2011), affording space and flexibility for unexpected issues to be explored.

A variety of questions were created to prompt both the recollection of specific school experiences and adult reflection on the impact of these on participants' lives. Open-ended questions were chosen to yield descriptive data. For example, 'Tell me about the time you

realised you were in a lower group', 'Give me an example of how this was made clear to you', 'Tell me more about that', 'What was it like for you when you were...?' (Appendix Five). Due to the potential for the discussion of sensitive issues, specific measures were employed, including provision of participant information on what to do if they were upset by issues raised, reminders during each interview about the right to withdraw or not speak of certain experiences. During the interviews, I monitored how participants were affected by the dialogue, especially when participants appeared to become emotional and intervened to reassure, support and query whether the participant wished to proceed. In this regard, the online interview may be regarded as advantageous as it afforded participants the ability to withdraw from the interview process in uncomfortable situations, just by clicking a button, although no participants availed of this (to the best of my knowledge).

The interview structure was created using Patton's (2015) framework to include questions on: experience and behaviour; opinions and values; feelings; knowledge; background demographic questions and questions which called for hypothetical or ideal thinking (Patton, 2015). Probes were used with follow-up questions to achieve greater depth and clarity about the lived experience. Each one ended with the following question 'Is there anything else you would like to say about the experience?' to enable participants to include any additional recollections or thoughts. The questions were used flexibly and, although specific data was required from all participants, the approach to the interview reflects the belief that each participant may define the experience of being in a low group in unique ways. Synchronous online interviews were employed which involved the researcher and the participant using the Internet simultaneously to engage in a 'real time' conversation, suited to achieving research goals that 'investigate a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context' (Yin, 1984, p23).

Interviews were recorded on Teams with each participant's explicit permission. Although voice recognition technology was enabled, it proved to be problematic, given the variety of different accents included, with some interesting transcriptions which bore no relation to

what was actually said. It was much more effective for the interviews to be transcribed carefully by the researcher, which also aided researcher familiarisation with the data. Recorded data were therefore transcribed verbatim, leading to a greater depth of familiarity with both verbal and non-verbal data.

4.5.2. Data analysis

This study acknowledges that qualitative research is about meaning and meaning-making, and viewing these as always context-bound, positioned and situated. Qualitative data analysis is about telling 'stories', about interpreting, and creating, not discovering and finding the 'truth' that is either 'out there' and findable from, or buried deep within, the data...themes do not passively emerge from data but are generated by the researcher (Braun and Clarke, 2019). The study attempts to make sense of participants' experiences by moving from the particular to the shared, and from the descriptive to the interpretative (Smith et al, 2012). Data were explored in an inductive and iterative cycle to arrive at the researcher's interpretation of the participants' lived experience, i.e., 'the double hermeneutic' (Smith et al, 2012, p3). The initial stage focused on becoming immersed in the data through a repeated close reading of transcribed data and the process of cross-referencing transcripts with recordings to check for accuracy. Coding, referred to as noting or commenting in IPA (Smith, 2009), was conducted at three levels: descriptive comments which focused on the lived experiences of participants; linguistic comments which focus on the language used by participants to communicate their experiences; and abstract or conceptual comments, which were created after the superordinate themes had been generated. This third level of analysis, informed by Nussbaum's CA, as discussed in 4.4., provided 'a new context for new associations and meanings to be formed from data' (Dresswell, 2008, p64.)

Each interview was first transcribed verbatim (Appendix Six) and then checked against the recording on Teams to ensure accuracy and fidelity to participants' accounts. I initially examined each transcript in detail looking for evidence in answer to research question one, making notes in the margin and using highlighters to identify and colour-code patterns in

each participant's recollection. I repeated the same process for each transcript, using the same colour coding to generate codes representing different aspects of participants' experiences (Appendix Seven). I searched for quotes which best illustrated the codes, physically cut them out and placed them into clusters on the wall. The process was repeated when addressing the second research question. Using the clusters of participants' verbatim quotations, I generated four superordinate themes in response to the first and then the second research question. Secondly, I analysed language use employed in each theme, returning repeatedly to the transcripts to look for patterns, in order to develop a richer account of the meaning of their experiences. These linguistic patterns were analysed, looking at patterns of pronoun use, pauses, laughter and repetition. For example, I interpreted the repeated use the pronouns 'them' and 'us' as evidence of participants' awareness of their separation from peers. Pauses were very powerful in the interviews, representing moments of epiphany for participants who began to unpick the cluster of consequences of placement during the interview. In several interviews pauses were reflective and poignant, where participants' descriptions of abandoned aspirations were punctuated by frequent silences. Repetition to convey a range of emotions including anger and sadness was a key feature in all interviews. There were numerous examples of metaphor and simile evoking a sense of abandonment, imprisonment, impotence, typified by Marian's contribution 'You're put in a box and labelled'.

The third level of annotation and analysis was more interpretative. The linguistic analysis opened up the potential for discussion of a range or more conceptual meanings. Following Heidegger (1962), who endorsed the hermeneutic circle, understanding and interpretation of placement was gained through returning to the shared knowledge and shared experiences of participants. Operationalising the CA meant viewing the findings through the lens of how each of the ten capabilities may have been affected by placement. This served to highlight the social contours created by placement and uncovered where participant experiences had resulted in a 'corrosive disadvantage, the presence of which yielded other disadvantages

(Wolff and DeShalit, 2007). This involved asking further questions inspired by Nussbaum's CA and led to a movement away from particular experiences to an account of what may have been common to all participants.

The third research question focuses on how Nussbaum's CA could be used to assess the extent to which placement represented a 'fertile functioning' leading to other benefits, or a 'corrosive disadvantage' which stunted the development of capabilities? To conceptualise participants' experiences, I began with the question: 'What were participants actually able to do and to be as a result of their placement?' Four of Nussbaum's ten central capabilities were chosen as most relevant to the superordinate themes, although all ten central capabilities could have yielded rich insights, had I not been constrained by the word limit. Each of the superordinate themes (Lack of Control; Stigma; Impact on Learning; Restricted Opportunities) were viewed again through the lens of whether they contributed to or hindered the development of Control over one's Environment (10), Senses, Imagination and Thought (4), Practical Reason (6) and Affiliation (7).

For example, the description of not wearing a uniform which was repeated by several participants led to a more detailed examination of the language used in participants' recollections. I generated a subordinate theme of stigma, caused by the visual signifier of inferiority. Using Nussbaum's CA as a conceptual framework, I looked again at the experience using Nussbaum's definitions of Affiliation and Control over one's Environment. Using these definitions, I was able to see their experience as a corrosion of the capabilities of Affiliation (7) and Control (10). A lack of control over placement led to participants being denied 'the social bases of self-respect and non-humiliation and were not treated as dignified beings whose worth is equal to that of others' (Nussbaum, 2011, p 34).

4.5.3 Evaluation of the research methods

The evaluation of methods used in research relates to the extent to which approaches adopted are valid and reliable (Cohen, et al, 2011). Validity addresses how accurately the research represents the phenomenon under investigation, however, what constitutes validity is contested and context-bound in the qualitative research tradition (Freeman, et al, 2007). The following paragraphs examine particular strengths and limitations of the research, especially when conducting research during a pandemic.

In-person interviewing has been described as the 'gold standard' of qualitative research as 'it is said to afford 'thicker information, body talk and communication efficiency' (Deakin and Wakefield, 2014, p614). I therefore found the change from my original intention to interview participants in person, to online interviews a source of apprehension. I had to reflect on the implications of interviewing participants online and plan appropriately, because as Thurnberg and Arnell (2021, p1) have observed, 'digital interviews are something different than in-person interviews, with their own logic and rules'.

Although it has been suggested that being able to maintain research relationships at a distance presents a challenge for recruitment and retention and the building of trust (O'Sullivan et al, 2020), this did not present particular difficulties due to my previous relationship with the majority of participants. Despite having initial concerns about not interviewing participants in person, on reflection I did not feel that my ability to interact with participants was reduced by the online medium. My experience was that I was able to maintain rapport with participants and check for interpretation or probe unexpected responses. Challenging those who see the online interview as an inferior research method, Weller (2017, p623) argues that 'internet video calls are a valuable tool for one-off interviews and should not be viewed as second rate to physical co-present encounters.' The ability to video record online interviews using Microsoft Teams, with participants' explicit permission, enabled the expansion of my understanding through the analysis of non-verbal communication following the interview. Thus, recording enabled my iterative approach to

analysis, as insights could be checked and correlated with tone and pace of voice, gestures, laughter and even silences to arrive at greater understanding of the lived experience.

Several commentators have argued that online interviewing can make it difficult to read visual cues, as the camera only captures the participants' upper body (James, 2014), and that 'head -shot' provided by a webcam creates obstacles in observing the participant's body language (Cater, 2011). I therefore prepared to achieve maximum rapport with participants, aware of possible constraints posed by the online medium, ensuring the optimum position of camera so that it was centred and at eye-level, so that I was not looking up or down at the interviewee. I tried to maintain eye contact throughout the discussion and stay in participants' range of sight for throughout the conversation. I consciously managed the microphone, aware of how small sounds like rustling papers or rocking in a chair could be amplified. I tried to converse just like I would in person and, although I would do this naturally, I reminded myself to sit up straight or lean forward slightly to help increase eye contact and show that I was interested and listening.

I attempted to minimise potential disruptions by checking the background which appears on the computer screen, because, as suggested by Nehls et al (2015) what the webcam picks up behind researchers can be a source of distraction for participants. Working from home necessitated completing the interview in a closed room where children, dogs, and other potential disruptions could be avoided. However, we did not have complete control over distractions in the environment, and there were occasions when drilling outside and doorbells interrupted our train of thought. These actually proved to be a source of humour and served to reinforce rapport and, as participants were very keen to share their experiences, it was not difficult to regain focus and ensure that the focus of the interview was on the questions and responses. It was important to me that following each interview, I sent an email thanking each interviewee for their time and participation and provided some with information on educational opportunities.

Although concerns are expressed in the literature over the richness of the data gained in online interviews (Dodds and Hess, 2020; Ellis and Rawicki, 2020; Ndhlovu, 2020; Snow, 2020), I found several benefits accrued from conducting interviews online. It was surprising that, as Boyd (2007) suggested, the physical separation between participants and myself actually afforded some participants a degree of anonymity which seemed to facilitate a greater freedom to share deeply personal experiences and considered. As interviews occurred in convenient conditions for participants, most often in their own homes, the sense of ease with their setting may have resulted in less inhibited responses when discussing sensitive issues related to their placement (Evans, et al, 2010). For example, intensely personal responses to their placement were shared by some of the participants, all of whom were very open about their negative feelings towards former teachers and school. Despite initial misgivings I found that, despite some, largely technical, limitations, the online interview was able to generate rich and deep data on experiences and perceptions (Cuevas-Parra, 2020).

Although online interviews have been found to be technically challenging for older interviewees (Ellis and Rawicki, 2020), they have been found to be effective with younger adults (Ndhlovu, 2020), which was certainly my experience. As participants were all adults in their twenties, being online was natural for them. Indeed, being interviewed online was perhaps even more natural for them than a face-to-face encounter with me. I was more technologically vulnerable, a fact that I acknowledged with participants who, on several occasions, provided technological support to me for which I was grateful. This was a source of humour, helped to address any possible power imbalances and created greater rapport between us.

It was because of the capacity for moving online that some participants were able to be included in the sample. I was able to interview participants in a variety of locations and at times convenient to them, overcoming barriers such as geographical distance and the time and cost involved in travelling to meet participants, highlighted in the literature by Mann and

Stewart (2000) and James and Busher (2009). It was essential to be aware of different time zones (one participant was in Australia) and personal schedules and I was flexible to accommodate participants' schedules. In one example, a participant was able to use her smartphone to speak to me from a different continent. She was so keen to participate she made time to be interviewed between finishing work at her first job and before she started her second job on the night shift as a care worker. It was lovely to see her relaxed and in her 'natural' setting, yet still in a different time zone and location, with neither of us having to travel to do so. In another online interview, a participant was interviewed while he was taking a break from his work as a painter and decorator. He talked from his van which was parked at the side of the road in a rural location. He said that he would have been less likely to participate in an interview had he not been able to set it up so easily in his own space and at his convenience.

Going online meant that the participants and I had to be technically prepared for the interview, including installing the software, testing the equipment and trying out the software before the interview to address any issues or glitches. Broadband connectivity and the speed of the internet did hinder some interviews creating lengthy pauses or uneven breaks in the conversation. The need for participants to have good internet access (Voida et al, 2004) was illustrated when the technology failed during the interview on two occasions due to poor connectivity. This resulted in participants' time being wasted, with one interview being cut short, and one interview conducted over the telephone instead. To adapt to the situation, I built in additional time to allow for technical delays, and I used an audio recorder as a backup. I also wrote notes immediately after each interview and checked these against the recordings.

4.6 Reflexivity

This research employs what Roulston (2010, p58) terms 'romantic' conceptions of interviewing where the researcher 'makes no claim to be objective', but rather reveals subjectivities and strives to 'generate the kind of conversation that is intimate and self-

revealing' (Ibid. p56). However, Bryman (2016, p393) argues that if social research is going to be beneficial then researchers must also consider and acknowledge 'the implications of their methods, values, biases and decisions for the knowledge of the social world they generate'. This ability to be reflexive is deemed to be central to ensuring the integrity and dependability of research (Lichtman, 2013). My aspiration for reflexivity is acknowledged by foregrounding my ontological position in section 4.3 of this chapter and by addressing my personal and professional positionality in the conclusion to this thesis.

In addition to attempting to accommodate individual experiences, a particular example of how this epistemological position impacted the research relates to the approach to data analysis and interpretation which aimed to respect the uniqueness of each adult's recollections and reflections on placement in a low ability group. My deliberate choice to use IPA acknowledges that I am not separate from participants, but that my perspective is a key to understanding their lived experiences and that all research is an 'interpretations of interpretations' (Geertz, 1973), the double hermeneutic of IPA.

The responses of some participants were likely to have been affected by my former position, although I believe that any potential influence is reduced due to fact that the participants are now adults. I also acknowledge that the interpretation of data is influenced by my own experiences, but every effort was made to ensure that participants' views were accurately reported. Indeed, I argue that, although there is inevitably an element of personal reflection to conceptual coding, one of the main strengths of the research is my absolute fidelity to participants' recollections in the Findings' Section (5.1), shown by the extensive use of verbatim extracts to illustrate the themes I generated.

The Discussion in Chapter 6 outlines the interpretation of findings using four of Nussbaum's ten central capabilities and, although IPA is interpretative, the interpretation 'was inspired by and arose from close attention to participants' words rather than being imported from outside' (Smith et al, 2012, p90). Drawing on Nussbaum's CA and on my professional knowledge and experience gained over thirty-four years as a teacher, an Inspector of

schools, and a Principal, I engaged in what is termed a 'Gadamerian dialogue' (Gadamer, 1960), which involves movement my between my existing understandings and newly emerging understandings of the findings when viewed through the lens of the CA. The tradition in which an interpreter stands establishes 'prejudices' that affect how they will make interpretations. For Gadamer (1960), these prejudices are not something that hinders our ability to make interpretations but are instead integral to the reality of being. I tried to deepen understanding of participants' experiences Nussbaum's central capabilities as interpretative resources. This dual analytic process required that I stay close to participants' accounts of experience and represent these faithfully, adopting an 'insider stance', followed by viewing the data through the critical lens of Nussbaum's CA and adopting an 'outsider stance', what is termed a 'hermeneutics of suspicion' (Ricoeur, 1965).

On reflection, a few insights generated from the data were surprising. This was particularly so given the extent of the research evidence which demonstrates significant adverse effects of placement in a low ability group. Two participants, despite describing in detail the negative consequences of their placement, arrived at a position where they endorsed the practice of grouping. For example, one participant felt that his experiences in a low ability group made him a stronger person because he had to fight to overcome the barriers erected by his placement. He has become defiantly independent, refusing literacy support at university. Now working as a teacher, he was highly critical of his own profession, many of whom he dismisses as lazy. Another articulated the negative consequences of placement while also demonstrating an unquestioning acceptance of the label assigned, suggesting her belief in fixed or innate intelligence. Both participants have overcome the negative consequences of their placement with the help of substantial social and financial capital.

I made every effort to represent the perspectives of all participants and to give a balanced account of the findings, although I acknowledge that the codes attached to any given data are influenced by researcher subjectivity. Therefore, whilst the coding was not undertaken from a neutral position, every effort was taken to be reflective in the process of analysis in

order to give a balanced account of participants' views and experiences. I am explicit in discussing methodology, personal context and ideology and aim to present an honest expression of the challenges faced during the research. Methodological decisions, such as the use of Nussbaum's Capabilities Approach, were strongly associated with a perspective which emphasises the intrinsic value of every person. Such positioning, whilst not always made explicit, is nonetheless strongly implicit in the writing of this thesis which is underpinned by the view that each pupil is worthy of dignity.

4.6.1 Methodological Limitations

I accept that this research offers only an imperfect approximation to the truth or essence of ability grouping, qualitative enquiry is not a neutral activity. Sword (1999, p 277) suggests, 'no research is free of the biases, assumptions, and personality of the researcher and we cannot separate self from those activities in which we are intimately involved'. However, a possible limitation of the study is my previous relationship with most of the participants. I therefore consciously reflected on how my position may have affected every aspect of the research process. Specifically, I repeatedly considered how my own experiences as a former teacher, inspector and principal allowed me to approach the study with specific knowledge, insight and 'cultural intuition' (Berger, 2015), but also influenced the creation of interview questions, the nature of the research interviews and the analysis of the findings. My former role as principal facilitated the recruitment of participants, as former pupils were very receptive and cooperative, and also meant that there was an existing level of trust and rapport. I also had a head start in knowing about the topic and understanding nuanced reactions of participants (Padgett, 2008; Kacem and Chaitin, 2006).

In contrast, familiarity with most of the participants carried the danger of taking aspects of their experience for granted, or of overlooking certain aspects of participants' experience (Berger, 2015). It also carried the risks of blurring boundaries between researcher and

participants, that I would impose my own beliefs, or project biases (Drake, 2010). I had to be alert to the dangers and engage in rigorous self-reflection as to how I may have shaped the conversations I had with participants. Engaging in regular reflective communication about my research with my supervisors enabled me to challenge my interpretations therefore going some way to mitigate my personal impact on the research.

A further limitation involves the scope of the study. Due to my concern with investigating the views of adults who had experience of placement in a low ability group, I employed a purposive sampling strategy to access 'knowledgeable people' who were proficient and well-informed in providing an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon. However, purposive sampling has potential limitations. The non-probability-based nature of purposive sampling means that it can be difficult to defend the representativeness of the sample. In this research, the sample was limited to focusing on eleven adults who had experience of placement in a low ability group. The majority of participants had attended schools from the Catholic Maintained sector, while two went to Integrated schools. The inability to recruit participants from Controlled (Protestant) schools is a limitation which could be addressed in future research. Although I agree that 'qualitative research seeks to explore the particular group under study, not to generalize' (Cohen et al, 2018, p223), and that my study therefore captures only the experience of eleven particular people at a particular time, it would be beneficial to conduct a much larger study to gauge the extent of ability grouping in non-selective Controlled (Protestant) schools. Lastly, my failure to include a research question on the relationship between placement in a low ability group and social disadvantage was a limitation, something which could be fruitfully explored in future research.

Summary

This chapter aimed to describe clearly how the research was designed and carried out, including a description of methods of data collection and analysis and ethical considerations. An evaluation of the research methods and a discussion of issues around researcher reflexivity were also presented. In the next chapter the findings in response to the first and second research questions are presented.

Reflecting the typical structure in IPA studies, the findings section is discrete from the discussion (Smith et al, 2012, p112). In the next chapter, the findings in response to the first and second research questions are presented in a full narrative account, taking the superordinate themes in order and illustrating how it applies to participants with verbatim extracts from the interviews.

Chapter 5 Findings

5.1 Introduction

This chapter presents findings in the order of the superordinate themes generated from the data in response to the first and second research questions. Grouping arrangements in non-selective post-primary schools in Northern Ireland lack transparency and are under-researched, as discussed in Chapter 1. This research aims to begin to address a gap in the research by considering the impact of placement from the perspective of adults' recollection of their lived experience. Four themes were generated from participants' recollections of placement in response to the first research question: Lack of control over placement; Stigma created by an imposed identity as a low ability pupil; The impact of placement on learning; Restricted opportunities in terms of GCSE subject choice and tier of GCSE examination entry. The second research question focused on participants' reflections on their experience. Four themes were generated: Anger; Abandonment; Unfairness; Long-term effects.

Nussbaum's CA was selected for its potential to place the concerns of individuals at the heart of the research. This was considered important for two main reasons. Firstly, the possible implications of ability grouping in non-selective post-primary schools in NI have not been explored. Secondly, since little was known about the wider landscape of ability grouping, beyond academic selection at age 11, it was important to listen to the experiences of those who had been placed in ability groups in secondary school. This enabled the research to identify key issues of importance to adults and ensure that the research addressed these issues effectively and in light of authentic adult perspectives, who had gained life experience, and benefitted from time to reflect. The research used qualitative methods, intended to access and document the views and experiences of individuals who experienced placement in low ability groups. Answers to the first and second research

questions are presented through detailed analysis which incorporates descriptive and linguistic comments.

5.2 Research Question 1

The first research question explored adult recollections of their experience of placement in a low ability group in post-primary school. The interview data suggest that placement in a low ability group was remembered as an overwhelmingly negative experience. As discussed above, four superordinate themes were generated from the interview data in relation to the first research question.

5.2.1 Lack of Control

The first theme was the lack of control over the process, accompanied by a lack of awareness about why they were placed. In the interviews the adults talked about the sense of bewilderment at discovering their placement. The feelings of shock emerged more quickly for some participants, with Jane describing her feelings of shock on the first day of Year 8:

I heard nothing until the first day of High School...I didn't know how I'd got there...my assumption was that I did well in Primary School...never any question that I couldn't keep up with the rest. I don't know the name of the group I was in...I just knew I was at the bottom...we just knew that we were in the bottom class...and that feeling of sitting in the Assembly Hall waiting to be called...

So profound was the experience that, as an adult, Jane and her friends frequently recall that day:

We still talk about it now...every time I meet up with two of my friends from school...every couple of weeks...it always comes up in conversation.

Marian described a vivid memory which shows her immediate reaction to her placement in the academic (and subsequently social) hierarchy:

I watched as the classes were called...mine was the last group. I watched...I looked...I realised that I was in one of the lowest groups.

Marian associates the hierarchy of groups with a lack of social prestige. Like Jane, she is unclear about the rationale for her placement and reflects on her lack of awareness on the significance of the High School test she had completed:

I didn't know how significant...nobody tells you that...I never thought we were doing such an important exam in P7.

Malachy's recollection focused on his sense of confusion:

I knew I was in a low group from my very first day in Year 8... I was in one of the last classes called out...and I think someone in the class asked the Form Teacher 'Miss, are we in the low group?' I didn't even know what that meant. I remember that as clear as day...and I had a conversation with a teacher in school recently about that...about this memory.

His use of the simile 'as clear as day', and the fact that, like Jane, he still thinks and speaks of this experience suggests the powerful impact it had on Malachy as a child. In the interview he found it difficult to express exactly how he felt on that day,

It's hard to say how I felt, because I didn't understand...I just felt confused...you know, I felt that I was stupid straight away.

Malachy's response illustrates his acceptance of a diminished learner identity, something which overshadowed his entire experience of post-primary school.

Like her peers, Danielle's experience was characterised by a lack of information about why she was placed, and by a lack of control over it:

I think I was placed because of our results in Primary 7...I didn't look into it...I didn't know I had a right to look into it...nobody ever told me.

Most participants were unclear about the rationale for their placement, with the majority complaining that, despite any effort during Key Stage 3, upward movement rarely occurred.

5.2.2 Stigma

The second theme, generated from powerful and frequently repeated recollections, was the stigma attached to being assigned an identity as a low 'ability' pupil. In the data, a key recollection for all participants was the intensification of embarrassment and shame as they

progressed through Key Stage 3. Participants spoke repeatedly about how it felt to be at the bottom of an academic and social hierarchy, where the lowest groups are associated with inferiority.

The awareness of separation from peers is captured powerfully by Danielle:

My friends went into different classes and the ones that were in a higher group looked down on you...that's just how it went...you were seen as lower...they wouldn't give you the time of day.

Danielle's language ('they' and 'you') suggests the social separation which followed the academic separation.

Sean's use of an emotive simile suggests the social impact of being placed in a low group:

Our class stuck with our own class...all the rest of the classes mixed among each other. You know we stayed in the same class, we only mixed amongst each other... and then... you were kinda like lepers. You know... you're really identified.

These feelings were echoed by Jane who described her experience of separation and powerlessness on several occasions during the interview:

You were split off. We knew what was going on and we just got on with it. I was very much aware, but I just had to get on with it, as you know, you weren't being heard...it was easier just to put your head down and keep going...so that was my experience of school.

Her powerful summative statement suggests that her placement in a low group defined her school experience.

The stigma became more pronounced through Key Stage 3, with participants describing being teased due to their allocation to a low ability group. Danielle's experience was typical as she recounted memories of the verbal abuse she received:

Jokes were made about being in lower groups, made by those in higher groups, that were smarter...smarter ones would slag us...slagging like 'retards'.

Although the repetition of 'smarter' may suggest that Danielle accepted the designation assigned by the school at that time, this is something she now challenges as an adult which is discussed below.

Unlike most of his peers, Malachy had some protection from abuse from his own year group, due to his status as a footballer. However, he was not immune, and he also recalled a time when he felt vulnerable to verbal abuse due the stigma of his placement:

I remember walking to Form class one day and a group of boys in the year above me were roaring and laughing that I was wearing my own clothes and they were shouting, you know "Look at the Tech-tard"...a Tech-tard...Yeah. That was the theme in the school at the time...Tech-tard.

The quote 'the theme in the school' captures the negative school culture created by grouping, where verbal abuse of those in low groups was common. During the interview, Malachy became upset by memories of what he (and especially others) experienced, with the repetition of 'definitely' suggesting the entrenched nature of the hierarchy:

Now, I didn't get it as bad...I was Captain of the football team...so I didn't really get it, but I've seen other people get it really bad...I'm getting a wee bit annoyed thinking about it...you were definitely looked down on by your peers, definitely. My blood is boiling away thinking about it...it's memories like that that stick in my head.

When asked whether Malachy would prefer not to recall this memory, he was quite adamant that he wanted to continue:

'I want to talk about it...it does anger me...'

The reaction to being stigmatised was typified by Marian, expressing sympathy for her younger self who was a powerless victim of a grouping system:

It was like bullying, but at the time you are nearly numb to the situation because you've been so used to it from first year. They just walk over the top of you...You're in your box and they are in theirs and that's it. The grouping created such a divide, so you just get numb to the treatment.

Of all participants, the feelings of stigma are arguably articulated most painfully by Marcus, who described the impact of being labelled on the development of his adolescent identity:

I'm thrown away with the rest of these R-words and there's no point in even trying. It was a very bad stigma and it made me aggressive. Badness. Poison. I started noticing that...I noticed that people treated me differently and that's where the inferiority complex started...the "R" word that was given to me, that I would have given to myself and I would have given to others.

The pattern of negative language conveys Marcus' depth of feeling, conveying the effect of labelling on the adolescent, where a learner identity is internalised and perpetuated.

Marcus' emotive language suggests the consequence of placement on his developing adolescent identity, which did not only poison his view of himself, but made him aggressive towards others.

For most participants the feelings of segregation and stigma, which increased through KS3, culminated in much more obvious differences between the groups at KS4. Participants repeatedly described, in some detail, vivid negative memories of the visible separation between groups at KS4, especially obvious when pupils in the bottom groups attended the local technical college in their own clothes. This was by far the most frequently recalled memory by participants and was a source of unhappiness for all.

Malachy's description of the experience is typical:

It probably wasn't that bad until we got up to GCSE level. By that time that was different because...you started to notice the groups more because one day a week we had to go to the Tech in our own clothes...In assemblies, you know, Tech class was at the back and before the assembly was over...the Year Head said, "Right Tech classes, away you go to the bus...and you have to go out through the back door of the Assembly Hall and hop on the bus"...and then they carried on with their assembly.

Malachy's description captures the feelings of stigma associated with labelling. His speech is illustrative of a visible 'them and us' culture in the school, with pupils in the lower groups at the bottom of the academic (and social) hierarchy. Jane's recollection is similarly evocative:

I remember you went into school in your own clothes, so it was showing that you were the ones going to the Tech and I used to hear people at our assembly in the morning...we had to get up from the assembly and go outside to get the bus...I just HATED it! I had sport after school and I would have to walk to the team in my black trousers and white shirt, so everyone knew...It was one of the BIGGEST things for me. I look back and I just don't have any good memories, or any good thoughts about me having to do that.

The black and white outfit marked Jane out visibly as a Tech pupil, as did the sequenced exit from the assembly in front of other pupils in her year group. The aural memory of hearing people comment on her has persisted into adulthood. The emotional tone and increased volume of voice combine with the powerful language to capture the long-term effect on Jane's memories of school.

For Danielle, the verbal abuse experienced at KS3 intensified:

That's how we were seen as lower as well...making sly comments about us going to the Tech...belittling us...This brings me back...wearing your own clothes marked you out as different...so embarrassing...it highlighted that person.

Danielle sees the wearing of her own clothes as a visual symbol of her low position in the school's academic and social hierarchy.

Marian's adult perspective enables her to critique the system rather than judge the pupils' response to it:

God I hated it. I remember walking out to get the bus to the Tech in your ordinary clothes...people are so silly, but they were laughing at you as you weren't in uniform...the abuse would start "Techtards, what are you doing today?" We were always back a few minutes early from Tech to be there for the bus...so we were waiting and people walked out laughing at us. You felt so inferior and so small. Made you feel like nothing. We all felt so embarrassed. My friends would say "This is awful, everybody is laughing at us".

The stigma and separation experienced at KS4 had implications for Malachy in sixth form, where he felt vulnerable, clinging to his team-mates and adopting what he thought was the expected persona, a 'messenger'. Malachy carried the inferior identity with him into Sixth Form and despite returning to study A Levels, he was aware that others still saw him as a 'Tech' pupil:

When I went to do 'A' levels I didn't know anyone in the form class...and I clung to the boys I played football with...I ended up being a bit of a class clown because I came from a low group...Yeah, they said "I think you went to the Tech didn't you"...You know that's always in the back of their head...and then you just end up...yeah, I ended up a bit of a class clown.

Although also feeling vulnerable, Sean reacted differently to Malachy. His lack of confidence and low academic self-concept persisted into sixth-form, creating a sense of fear:

I remember...you know thinking... "I'm going to give A Levels a rattle here"...and I remember throwing myself into A Levels because I was afraid of the people around me and whether I would get the standard...I worked so much harder...and I know it's a cliché, but hard work beats talent. I think there was a fire lit in me by sixth form...an awful fire in me.

His use of language suggests that the label assigned to him has created a sense of apprehension and feelings of inferiority. The repeated use of the metaphor of a 'fire' in him conveys his absolute determination to overcome the assigned identity.

Despite his significant difficulties with literacy, Ronan also came back into sixth form to do A Levels, GCSE maths and English. However, he found it more difficult to change and admits that:

'When I got to A Levels, I messed about a lot...I dropped in and out of school, especially when I learned to drive'.

The freedom bestowed by driving and his challenge to the system by messing about reflect his new-found sense of agency and control over his environment. In addition, Ronan had the financial capital to escape his situation.

Elaine found the transition to sixth form challenging as a result of her segregation from others until that point:

That's probably when I found it quite difficult because I had not only to engage with all those different classes, but try and make friends as well...as it was only a couple of us from the lower group. We wouldn't have known the people very well, but they had already got their little, I wouldn't say cliques, but friendship groups...naturally, as they've gone through school together. Then you come in and you haven't been able to mix with them.

As described by other participants, entry into Sixth Form gave Jane the opportunity to experience greater equality, with increased respect from teachers, less stigma due to the dissolution of ability groups, and relatively more control (although some constraints remained as a result of restricted subject choice at KS4). The accompanying reduction in social stigma meant that, for Jane:

It was probably the two years of school I actually enjoyed the most...because our form class had basically dissolved at that stage, I felt like as if, you know, I just have an equal chance to everyone else...I wished I was doing a science, but I knew I had no control over that, so I decided that I was just going to get on.

Her increased sense of agency is captured in the pattern of active verbs:

I was just going to get on...I had Health and Social Care to focus on and UCAS...I was able to work through that...I thought I'm going to plough on and do my own thing.

When given the same respect as other pupils ('doing UCAS') and the opportunity, Jane was able to flourish in school, emerging as a confident and self-reliant young woman:

As soon as you hit Sixth Form, you are doing UCAS and I thought 'If I don't try myself, no one else is going to encourage or influence me'.

5.2.3 The impact of placement on learning

The third theme generated was the impact of placement on learning. The majority of the interviewees spoke of how their learning was hindered by the poor teacher-pupil relationships which characterised their low 'ability' groups. Marian's reflection was revealing about how her placement affected the development of positive teacher-pupil relationships:

The teachers treated us differently, they expected our class to be badly behaved...and it's nearly like the default. There might have been a couple of ones who caused uproar, but like, nobody was that bad, there were no bad children.

Although Marian expressed delight at getting into sixth form 'to get the chance to do A Levels', she described the 'strangeness' of the transition from outsider to 'insider', especially obvious in the change in teacher-pupil relationships.

It was the treatment of the teachers that I found the strangest...you just didn't have that...they were very defensive towards our class, or a wee bit guarded...as if they were expecting us to behave badly...nearly on edge. Now they were much more relaxed, more easy. We were able to have relaxed conversations with them, whereas before it was "Be quiet!", or you were getting scolded. You were never able to have a normal relaxed conversation with them...so then you were afraid to ask for help...you were afraid of getting shouted at...like there are so many...you could unpick this all day.

Once again, the adult perspective affords Marian the opportunity to view her experiences at school more clearly and evaluate the impact of placement in a low group. Her experience suggests that the poor classroom relationships prevented those most in need of teacher support from receiving it, something that was reinforced by Paul:

I didn't get on with the teachers...ah I was a messer in first year you see, so I think they thought "There's no controlling him"...I'm alright now...but I would have liked a bit more help...don't want to say anything bad about the school, but I asked for help at the Tech and got help...not a problem...a woman really helped me...made it a bit simpler and a bit of craic with her.

When Paul felt comfortable to ask for help from a woman at the Tech with whom he could have 'a bit of craic', he was able to learn more effectively. This is in contrast to his experience at school, where the relationships with his teachers were poor.

The impact of his relationships with teachers was also a key theme in Conor's interview.

Although he initially accepts personal responsibility for the difficulties he faced at school, as

he continues, his speech suggests the lack of control he felt as a child over how the teachers viewed him. These low expectations, captured in the phrase 'already written me off', led to a loss of motivation, creating a spiral of negativity:

Maybe it was just me personally, I was a...to be fair I could have achieved a lot more. I messed about a lot and I felt that if you got a bad name early on, a lot of the teachers just...took other people's opinions, rather than waiting to formulate their own. I struggled to create a good relationship with the teachers 'cos they had already written me off. Once that happened, I thought...what's the point? No point in trying...

Louise's description of the atmosphere in her low ability group evokes a detrimental learning environment. Her comments suggest that her teachers struggled to create a relaxed atmosphere, found it difficult to keep boys focused on learning and that pupils' social and emotional needs were actually exacerbated by placement:

There was lots of behaviour issues in my class. There was one girl who would like, throw chairs and tables. Yeah, she was really bad like...shouldn't say that word 'bad'. I'm not allowed to say that in school now. She wouldn't follow the school rules...and she was actually very smart, but there were lots of social issues in her family. She had a lot of things going on. There was one girl pregnant in my class...like, that wouldn't happen in a grammar stream...and the boys too. The boys didn't mix well. We were the only class where the teachers had to tell you where to sit. I was always put beside a boy to keep them on task.

The data provided by participants in this study suggests that the creation of low ability groups hindered the development of positive learning environments and had an especially pronounced effect on male participants' attitudes to learning.

Participants discussed distinct pedagogical approaches for their group, with repeated descriptions of teachers not taking the time, the completion of unchallenging tasks and low expectations. Marcus captures powerfully the emotional impact of encountering low expectations, encouraging listener empathy:

Imagine if you were me and you had to do work that was so simple and basic...even the classroom itself...it didn't look like a classroom in a high school, more like a primary or even pre-school classroom. It was full of paintings, very childish things...I found the work patronising...even the way it was set out with cartoons. I saw this and thought I could do this...no bother. This created a sense of frustration and affected my concentration, so eventually I couldn't focus and get the work done. It created a spiral.

Conor describes his relationship with his maths teacher using powerful and emotive language and repetition:

He would call you "Stupid"...like "Hey Stupid, Hey Stupid"... "What are you doing Stupid?" From that, you would sit there...because I'd be sort of cautious to ask questions.

The overt use of negative labels created passivity and fear in the younger Conor, erecting additional barriers to overcome in mathematics, which he has not yet overcome. Even as a pupil, Conor recognised the teacher was failing to meet his needs, but he had no control over his placement, and no voice to challenge the system:

If I didn't get something, he would go over it and if you didn't get it, he couldn't understand why you can't get it...and I'm kind of thinking 'Your job is to help me understand how to get it and not berate me'.

Conor's feelings of shame and embarrassment led him to withdraw and get out of the class (and ultimately out of education), as he could:

I was made to look like an idiot too many times...so I just stopped trying, kept my mouth shut and tried to get the class over as soon as possible...After school I started College, stuck it out for six months and dropped out...just wasn't feeling it at the time.

Similarly, Sean's needs were not met as a result of his placement. He recounts a vivid memory of literacy support which he feels was ineffective:

I remember...I remember going to reading classes, but I hated it. I absolutely hated it because there was a stigma attached to it...it was awful because of the stigma.

The pattern of negative language employed suggests his feelings of shame and embarrassment. Reading support for Sean was not taken by a qualified specialist, rather 'a classroom assistant or something and she had a few periods set aside for that...lovely wee woman.'

Sean's description suggests that, although he was in real need of support, those allocated to were actually the least qualified to provide it. The spatial symbolism suggests a devalued experience, while being seen by others was a real source of shame for Sean:

I remember being in the store and I wished she would close the door...so that the ones down the corridor wouldn't see...I might have made more progress if the door was closed.

Marcus recalls vivid memories of his experiences in maths lessons which reinforce feelings of neglect, even abandonment:

My maths teacher took no time with me. The entire year I was with him I was left to sit at the back of the class and do no work, or do work other than maths work. He never confronted me about it, spoke to me about it or took an interest in that.

The adult perspective enables Marcus to view his experience critically, he is indignant that, as a pupil, he 'was left to sit at the back', with the teacher ignoring him completely.

A second memory is even more upsetting for Marcus where he recalls the teacher approaching him at the end of the year. This memory persists with great clarity and emotion in his consciousness. His use of language and repetition captures the intensity of the teacher's tone and the close proximity of this adult speaking into his adolescent ear:

I've a very strong memory of the end of the year, he came down to me and came next to my head and said 'You've done no work this year...that's not on me, that's on you'. He was shaming me and he was being very intense about it.

As Marcus often expresses himself using visual media, he presented his recollection of this experience visually (Appendix Eight).

Several participants equated the fact that teachers didn't take time with them as young people with a failure to care for them, captured powerfully by Danielle, with the repetition of 'they didn't' illustrating a feeling of abandonment:

When it came to maths class, they didn't care about me at all...they didn't put the time in...My day was swinging on a chair, swinging on a chair, literally swinging on a chair. If you ask me to remember maths, I remember swinging on a chair.

5.1.4 Restricted Opportunities

The fourth theme generated in response to the first research question was the experience of restricted opportunity in terms of GCSE subject choice and tier of GCSE examination entry. For all participants, the restriction on subject choice at GCSE was a vivid recollection. While some participants, such as Danielle and Paul accepted this as beyond their control, others such as Jane and Sean mobilised social capital in an attempt to challenge the school policy.

Restriction on choice was by far the biggest issue for Jane. She was only able to choose from a restricted range of subjects, including compulsory vocational studies at the local technical college:

'This makes me angry every time I think about it...'

Jane was asked if she was sure she wished to continue to speak about it.

Yeah, yeah...it's just one of those things I'm passionate about...I could only choose subjects from certain blocks...I had to pick from that block...I wasn't allowed to pick...I had to do Single Award Science...and I had to go to the Tech. I remember here, many's the night, going "buck mad", as I JUST DID NOT WANT TO GO! There was no interest in me to go...mammy was in the school...my mammy fought...BUT NO! IT WASN'T AN OPTION. Ahh...I'll never forget it...I have such hatred for it...just because I didn't want to go.

Jane's speech at this stage included a pattern of language reflecting her dismay at her lack of agency which is echoed by an exclamatory 'Ahh', an increase in the volume of her voice (capital letters) and frequent pauses, as she attempts to convey her strength of feeling.

I initially thought that I wanted to be an Occupational Therapist and I always thought "I'm going to need my sciences along the way" ...but I wasn't allowed to pick the science I wanted... it probably impacted me further going into A Level because I couldn't pick a science at GCSE...I had no foundation for A Level.

The pattern of language conveys Jane's continuing feelings of anger and frustration: 'A complete waste of time.'

Ironically, although Jane had developed a clear conception of the good (Practical Reason), she was unable to exert Control Over her placement, her GCSE subject choices or her tiers of entry, all of which combine to create barriers which she and her family had to fight hard to overcome. Although Jane's aspiration was to work in healthcare and always thought 'I'm going to need my sciences along the way', she was not allowed to pick the science she wanted and was forced instead to follow a different path.

Her dismissive tone about the irrelevance of the Tech curriculum to her aspiration is captured here:

If I thought I was going to get something out of it, I would have been fine. I remember doing hairdressing...I remember doing patisserie and making buns and I don't know what else.

The depth of her emotional reaction is illustrated with the language employed which conveys both how unpleasant the experience was to her, and her resilience and determination to succeed, despite the situation in which she found herself.

I had two years of it. I dreaded the day each week when I had to go, because I still had to get the grade at the end of it, but I just dreaded it. My mammy asked this several times and it just wasn't an option...wasn't even an option for me. You weren't given a reason...we were just told that movement wasn't an option. There was nothing I could do at that stage...

Her repetition reflects the lack of agency felt by both Jane and her mammy in challenging school structures.

Jane's comments illustrate how placement in a low ability group led to a restricted curriculum and lower tiers of entry at GCSE, which limited her career aspirations. Jane's adult perspective allows her to see the injustice of the system.

'When I look at my grades, I don't know how they would be if I was in a better group'.

The lack of opportunity to take GCSE maths and English was a key issue for all participants, a restriction with potentially long-term consequences for future life chances. As she contemplates her experience of placement, Jane's strength of feeling about being entered for Key Skills rather than GCSE English is also conveyed powerfully through a pattern of negative language:

English was a complete and utter disaster...I remember the teacher trying to convince us...she made us think this is the way to go...you know 'Do this Key Skills and it's great' ...and all the rest.

The way in which she completes the sentence suggests that she feels they were being duped.

From this point Jane and her mother take control by arranging private tuition and external entry for GCSE English, options not open to other participants interviewed:

A handful of us decided that we would do two years in one year in Year 12 and mammy got me a tutor and two other girls came here once a week.

The (gendered) restrictions are also articulated by Louise:

Some people in my class wouldn't have done typical GCSEs...they would have gone down what was called the 'B' Route...two days a week in the Tech. Girls did hairdressing or beautician work and boys did manual labour, because they wouldn't have passed GCSE...and like they didn't even do Foundation maths.

The second important restriction was the decision on the tier of GCSE entry which effectively capped achievement, a decision taken by teachers based on their assessment of pupil ability.

For most subjects at GCSE there are two tiers of exam paper: the higher tier, which provides pupils with access to A*-G grades, and the foundation tier, which allows pupils to achieve C-G grades, with no access to the higher grades. The most challenging content, knowledge and skills is omitted from the lower tier papers. Participants spoke frequently about the issues of lack of choice and unfairness around subject choice and tier of entry that were a direct consequence of allocation to a low ability group.

Sean spent a long time in the interview reflecting on what he felt was the injustice of not being given the same opportunities as the higher classes, especially entry for Higher Tier at GCSE, which would have given him access to the full range of grades:

Mammy raised it with the school...she had a conversation to see if I could do higher tier GCSE Technology as it was something I was very much interested in...I think I had the highest coursework mark in the year.

Despite his mother's efforts and his own repeated attempts Sean's language captures his feelings of futility and regret:

I mentioned it to the Year Head...I had a conversation with the Technology teacher...it was somewhat just brushed aside...it never happened. I could have done a whole lot better.

Marian described her lack of control over the process:

The expectation was that you were doing foundation and that was it. There was no opportunity to do higher...unless...there wasn't even an opportunity...unless you moved groups and that very, very rarely happened.

The language employed suggests both a lack of control over placement and the finality of outcomes once placed. Marian uses a powerful metaphor to capture her experience of being labelled and restricted:

If you're put in a low group, you're put in a box and labelled as 'Foundation'...it limits those opportunities and it limits your education. You're only given the opportunity to get a C, so your chances are minimized from the start.

As Jane considered her GCSE grades, she illustrates the impact of the limitation on achievement:

When I look at my grades...maybe that Careers' teacher looking at the grades thought that... 'No, she's not going to achieve that well'...but I knew that that was all that I could have achieved...there's nothing I could have done.

Placement in a low ability group means restricted tiers of entry at GCSE, leading to a cap on achievement, which Jane speculates may have influenced the Careers' teacher's view of her potential.

Marian's sense of frustration and feelings of impotence is captured in her comments:

I got 100% in my (GCSE) science and could only get a B...the exam board made an exception because I got full marks...I remember begging, I actually remember begging the Head of Science to please, please let me do higher tier. He said 'No, you can't, you're in for Foundation and that's it'.

Being entered for Essential Skills, rather than GCSE (maths and English) was a common complaint from participants. Danielle believes that her placement in a low group both reduced teacher expectation and placed limits on her possible achievement:

We couldn't do GCSE English or maths...we were put in for Essential Skills...the teachers did not have any expectations for me...the teachers put time and effort into certain ones...whereas for the rest of us...no...they didn't expect me to do well whatsoever.

Paul's memory of doing Essential Skills suggests he felt devalued in school:

...it ended up I didn't do maths as a GCSE...I was put into a group of four or five of us and we went up to...we were put into a teacher's storeroom.

Paul's language conveys his complete lack of control through the pattern of passivity: 'it ended up...put into a group...put into a storeroom'.

The symbolism of the location is interpreted as Paul being at the bottom of academic (and social) hierarchy. This is compounded by the nature of the work undertaken:

We did...you wouldn't even call it maths. It was like something my wee niece would be doing at school now...it was like how to book holidays and stuff like that...you could do that at any age...it wasn't very nice.

Paul's language moves beyond descriptive to evaluative and figurative language, capturing the patronising nature of the work they were given and his dislike of that experience. He develops his reflection on the emotional impact of that experience, capturing feelings of stigma and shame:

Then you know, pulled out of class...the thing I didn't like was we didn't go straight to his class...we went to maths class first and then he came to get us...if we had gone straight to him...it was almost downgrading in a way. There were boys there, although they never said anything...it probably didn't affect me.

Paul's recollection suggests he was acutely aware of being stigmatized in front of other boys.

Malachy's experience was described in similar terms:

I was taken out of my English class and I was put into Essential Skills...it was a mixture of Year 11 and Year 12 pupils...we were just bunged into one classroom and you were just told to do something...I didn't learn anything...and I think that's the way most of my classes went...you weren't actually challenged. There was no challenge. It was just 'Do this. Do that. The other classes...they were getting all this homework and they were being taught for the full length of the lesson and I might have sat there all day doing nothing. At the time we thought this was gas...the best craic.

5.3 Research Question 2

While the first research question focused on participants' memories of the day-to-day experiences of being placed in a low 'ability' group, the second focuses on adult perspectives on their placement. This was chosen deliberately to assess how their experiences have been processed with the benefit of time, distance and maturity. As already discussed, four superordinate themes were generated from the interview data concerning their adult reflections on placement: Anger; Abandonment; Unfairness; Long-term effects.

5.3.1 Anger

The majority of participants expressed anger over various aspects of their placement during the interviews. The aspect of placement about which participants were most angry was the lack of information available to them at the time and their lack of control over their situation; a placement which led to low teacher expectations, restrictions on subject choice and limitations on achievement. Although they did not have a voice as adolescents, as adults they were very keen to articulate their views on the unfairness of the grouping allocation.

The lack of choice and tier of entry associated with placement were significant issues for Malachy as he reflected on his experience in an impassioned tone of voice, with raised volume at times (capitals):

We were told "Right, you are going to the Tech..."...I remember when the GCSE options came out...Can we not do languages? Can we not do geography? Can we not do history? NO! NO! NO!...you didn't even have an option. I never got an option to do Double award science...I never got an option...it wasn't offered to you...and if you questioned it, it was always "No, it's NOT AVAILABLE", just "NOT AVAILABLE" ...languages so...French, Irish... "WASN'T AVAILABLE" and geography "WASN'T AVAILABLE" ...history "WASN'T AVAILABLE!".

Anger over lack of control was also evident in Sean's comments:

I always knew that my maths and English were important subjects...but not even getting the opportunity to do these...mammy got really annoyed about that and I think it annoyed me at the time...the thing was, you know, with Key Skills you were kind of running down alleyways.

Sean's anger was also directed to the misinformation he received at the time, being told that Key Skills carried the same weight as GCSEs

It just didn't...and I didn't want to box myself in at that age...I just didn't want to be limiting myself and I thought this would come back to haunt me.

Sean felt strongly about what he considered to be the injustice of not being given the same opportunities as the 'higher' classes, and was also angry at not being listened to:

You know the other technology class...it was even having the opportunity of doing that (i.e. Higher Tier) ...Mammy raised it with the school...she had a conversation to see if I could do higher tier GCSE Technology as I was something I was very much interested in...I think I had the highest coursework mark in the year... I mentioned it to the Year

Head...I had a conversation with the Technology teacher...it was somewhat just brushed aside...it never happened. I could have done a whole lot better.

Similarly, Jane expressed anger both at the low expectations she encountered and at not being listened to at school:

I suppose it became really clear to me when you were told that you would never get anything higher than a C (at GCSE)...I just remember being told that so many times...I think that from first to third year (I may have the school reports here) I definitely was at the top end of the class...getting As and Bs...I didn't realise...we could have been doing "tiddlywinks" tests for all I know. You thought you were doing well...you were just told "Well done and away you go. I do often wonder how well we were tested, compared to other classes...was the expectation less...we just didn't know.

The dismissive and patronising tone of 'away you go' suggests Jane felt undervalued as a pupil...she didn't matter, while her desire to authenticate her experience is shown by the desire to show her retained school reports.

Several participants expressed anger at the lack of encouragement they received from Careers' teachers, who appeared to see only their low 'ability' label, rather than their potential.

Jane recounted a vivid memory of a meeting with a Careers' advisor which proved to be a turning point for her as she realised she was not being listened to:

It will stick with me forever...and I still see the teacher now...it was when you sat down and talked about your studies, and I said that I probably wanted to get into the health field, paramedic, Occupational Therapy, or nursing...anything at all. I was told, you know, "I don't think that's the pathway for you" and I couldn't understand because the teacher didn't know me...she never taught me...and I just thought that day "I'm going to make my own choices", because no matter what influence I got it was never a positive one...never a reason why...just always "I don't think it is for you".

By this time, with the advantage of social and financial capital, Jane had learned not to simply accept the labels assigned by others with consequent low expectations; a wonderful assertion of independence, although she reflects rather wistfully on whether others had the capacity to achieve this:

I just wonder about the rest...if they went in and were told that, did they think "Ah well, sure, whatever and that's alright then?"

Malachy was also angered by the negativity he encountered from a Careers' teacher at school after achieving his A Level results:

She just said, "They are no good to you"...I said "What about clearing"? "NO!, NO!, NO!" ...I remember...you know, it was real negativity..."You're not getting into Uni...You're not getting clearing...and you're not getting back here".

Malachy recalled that, after graduating from university as a teacher with an Honours degree, he returned to his former school to teach and met the Careers' teacher (whose nonchalance appeared to Malachy to suggest that the teacher did not remember the encounter which had had such a profound impact on him at the time):

'Ah Malachy, hello, what are you doing?' They passed themselves and I passed myself...No...They probably don't even remember...but I remember.

From an adult perspective, Marcus juxtaposes what he feels should have happened with his actual experience of careers' advice:

I met a Careers' advisor at the Tech...a no-risk bureaucrat...they see someone on paper and don't take the time to get to know the person. He saw me, saw that I had no qualifications and, instead of thinking "What can this guy achieve? What can he do? How can I build him up?", he thinks "What can this guy pass at?"

5.3.2 Abandonment

The second theme generated from data in response to the second research question was participants' critique of the education system. A series of sharp and compelling testimonies suggest an adult recognition of schools' failure to listen to them or to meet their learning needs. These adults, who had no voice as adolescents, appeared to hold schools morally responsible for their experiences as adolescents.

As pupils, they were unaware of the grouping mechanisms controlling their school experiences, however from an adult perspective they see things more clearly. The adult articulation, that as children they did not have their needs met by people on whom they depended, contained normative language and employed some highly charged imagery to convey the depth of their feelings about their treatment, including feeling 'boxed in', running down 'blind alleys', being 'sabotaged', feeling 'patronised', 'thrown away' and 'inferior'.

Malachy's perspective as a teacher has given him a new position from which to view his experience at school:

I think it's crazy...like you...you did it at Key Stage 3. But when you get to choosing your GCSE options it is not available to you...what did I spend three years doing? That's like saying to a child "We're going to teach you this for three years. You might love it. You may be terrible at it, but you might love it...but we're not going to let you do it". That defeats the purpose for me...just defeats the purpose.

Malachy's words illustrate his insight as a teacher. He is now able to reflect on the purpose of education and is critical of a system that denied him the opportunity as a child to pursue a subject for the love of it. More than that, for Malachy it is the lack of control that he experienced:

Now don't get me wrong. I'm not saying that I wanted to do Irish...but I wanted to have the choice.

As an adult, Marcus views his placement and treatment of his younger self as a betrayal, an abdication of responsibility on the school's part. The use of normative and emotive language conveys the depth of his feeling about this experience and its impact on his mindset.

Imagine you are me...I already had a very negative mindset about my autism...I viewed it as a curse, as something dirty, something shameful. That should have been dealt with before, or as soon as I started, high school. So, instead of somebody, a mentor or a teacher coming to me to help me learn for myself and get better, I was allowed to deteriorate in this mindset, and honestly, that did me more harm than anything I had experienced. Dyslexia, ADHD...all those things can be improved on. The grouping structure very much encouraged my negative mindset. It made me feel "What's the point of even trying when I'm placed in this room, with these ones?" No-one made it a priority to focus on me. I didn't have the chance to explain myself at school.

For Marcus, the deployment of Classroom Assistants created a culture of dependency rather than helping him to develop an identity as an independent learner, expressed with an adult awareness:

Classroom Assistants were effective at helping me, in that I got the work out, but not effective in that I wouldn't comprehend the work. I would remember it for as long as I had to, but I would not really absorb the information or take it apart in my head. You don't develop any skills like that. I still work with CAs now and again, but the real work I do now, I do independently.

Ronan also felt that his needs were not met in school, despite his mother's attempts to get help, a literacy deficit which continues to affect his daily life:

I was diagnosed with dyslexia privately...but the school wouldn't look at it because it wasn't done through the education board...I got no help in school...my ma went in and hit the roof...but they still didn't look at it...

One of the contributions which exemplified the adult perspective most powerfully was from Danielle. She reflected on her own behaviour at school, expressing a greater understanding of the school's responsibility towards her as a pupil:

I ask myself, "What if I'd done this or that different?", but the people at school should have been helping me...like, I was only a child...I was just left to swing on a chair...They just didn't have the time.

Danielle's use of the normative 'should have', the language 'only a child', 'just left', 'just didn't', shifts awareness that most of the responsibility for her failure rests with a system which labelled her and then ignored her. Danielle expressed anger that, even though she feels that she is capable, her experience of being labelled, ignored and verbally abused meant that she just could not wait to escape 'that school'.

Like, I wasn't good at maths, and I needed that extra push...and that's the way they put us...It makes me angry and brings me back to when I thought about school. It does make me angry, because I am capable of a lot...but I just couldn't wait to get out...Looking back now...at the time I thought, 'That's how things go', but now that I can step back and reflect, I can see what the problem was, and the groups were the problem.

Danielle's adult perspective on her placement evaluates her treatment as a young person in negative terms, almost as a betrayal of trust:

When I was put into that school I believed that people were leading me in the right direction...you genuinely think that people are doing the best for you...Whoever put me there...I knew that I was capable of more, but I didn't have a voice to say that in ten years down the line where my life would be without GCSEs...I was told Essential Skills would get you from A to B... and that was it, but it has done nothing for me and it gets me absolutely nowhere...

Her childhood trust in the school is suggested by the phrases such as, "I believed" and "you genuinely think", while the passive "leading me in the right direction" and people "doing the best for you", suggests both her vulnerability and her powerlessness as she relied on others to provide her with the opportunities to succeed. From an adult perspective however,

Danielle recognises the reality of her placement at school and its consequences on her life, something she couldn't achieve as an adolescent:

'But obviously at 12, 13, 14, 15, you don't really know what's going on, do you?'

The ten years that have passed since Danielle left school have given her time to achieve perspective on her placement in a low ability group. She also has had experience of working in a variety of contexts and on different continents, albeit in mostly low-skilled jobs. She articulated feelings of betrayal by a system which labelled her at the age of eleven, a label she is still struggling to escape:

I just wish they had taken a bit more time with me and shown me the ropes better...I was a child...they were the adults looking over you...they were the responsible adults...It is hard now looking back. They didn't push me...see...some children need a bit of a push and a bit of drive and once they get that and start achieving, they might go places...but there was none of that.

Danielle was depending on the school to help her overcome the barriers to learning she faced inside and outside school. Instead, she suggests that the system erected further barriers that proved impossible to overcome, given her lack of social or financial capital. She accepts that she was a pupil who needed a lot of help but got little support. Rather than leading her in the right direction, the placement in a low ability group meant that Danielle felt that:

It was just "Go on...go on your own road".

Danielle repeatedly used imagery comparing education to a journey, expressing it succinctly in her concluding words in the interview:

If you want someone to go on a good path you need someone behind you to support you, especially at that age...and there just wasn't any of that in my group.

5.3.3 Unfairness

The third theme generated from the data was the unfairness attached to the grouping structures. Marian now views her younger self sympathetically, with the adult awareness of the injustice created by labelling:

It is so sad that myself, at that young age, was wanting to be in the top group with the smarter kids. The top group were given the chance to do more subjects...they were able to do music and languages...people in my group who were well fit for it, but they didn't get that opportunity as they were in that group, and it was so unfair. It just totally disadvantages you from the day and hour you walk in.

As an adult, Jane struggles to make sense of a system that, through low expectations, placed limits on her and her friends who have now achieved professional status, thus questioning the label of 'low' ability:

It seems so unfair when you look at where we all came from and what we went through in education to where we are today. One of my best mates...she just dropped out. But it's funny how she came back round to education...she became a dental nurse...now she's doing a management course. I feel at the time there was no push...so it was easy for her to take that option...at the time she just thought it was easier to drop out of school. Now she's realises. She's come so far... She's doing her management courses at night now. Maybe she wouldn't have needed to do that.

A sense of bafflement and indignation is conveyed in Jane's language which captures her experience of education as a long and difficult journey towards a conception of the good, juxtaposing past and present realities. Her description of her friend who dropped out illustrates that as an adolescent she merely accepted the label assigned to her and there was 'no push' for her to stay.

Elaine also questioned the process of her placement, especially critical of the failure to involve the pupil or their family in the decision:

I definitely don't think it was fair...who decided what group I was in? I wasn't made aware of the group. Obviously, I was aware from my own natural instincts, but not my mother...she doesn't remember being made aware and she had no input into the decision. There should at least be an initial interview or something to discuss so you know what class you're going into and the rationale as to why.

Marian recounted an emotional memory of a girl in her class which illustrated the unfairness of the grouping system:

I know a girl who was in my class who had brains to burn...brilliant at maths...she was offered the chance to move up and she said no due to a lack of confidence...her self-confidence and self-worth was on the floor at school and it was because of how we were

viewed...she dropped out... I remember feeling so sorry for her she came to our formal night to see her friend...she wasn't there as an attendee...everyone who dropped out of my class should have been there, it's a big night she should have been there...I remember being in the Sports Hall and everyone was there in their fancy gowns, feeling fabulous, and she was there in jeans and a t-shirt.

Paul's interview was punctuated by many silences, indicated below using ellipses, as he recalled his experiences at school. When asked whether he did anything about the refusal to let him choose subjects he loved, his response is revealing, indicating both a lack of social capital and an eventual acceptance of defeat:

I just let it go...I went home and said to my ones...and they were going to argue the point, but then just said "What's the sense of it?"...more hassle...enough hassle going on in school at the time, never mind arguing about that...See that whole grouping thing and all, I think that's making a lot of differences...everybody should have the choice to do whatever subjects they want...Fair enough, I mightn't have been fit for GCSE History or whatever...but I would still have liked to have a go at it...Everybody deserves a chance in a way, don't they?

5.3.4 Long-term effects

The last theme generated from the data on adult perspectives of their experiences was the long-term effects that placement in a low ability group had had on their lives. These were described in terms of emotional or psychological impact, social impact, and impact on adult life chances. Malachy's response was typical as he described how placement in a low ability group affects his relationships to this day, as he finds himself in embarrassing social situations where he recognizes, but can't name, former pupils from his year:

There's people in my year who I never got to know...I never knew ones in the top bands, you know, and when you meet them in social circles you know, and they're looking at you like...ahh...in the same year at school for seven years and I don't even know their name...they probably don't know my name.

Jane describes a similar circumstance for a girl from her low ability class:

There were no other means of making friends without sport. One girl that I hung around with didn't play sport...she has no link back to school...you can definitely see, even now, she has no link back to any other people from school except us...she had no opportunity to make friends.

From a psychological perspective, feelings of inferiority have persisted into adulthood for almost all participants, as they struggle to overcome the identity assigned to them at school.

From an adult perspective Sean reflects more thoughtfully on the teasing experienced by those in low groups, moving to a recognition of the possible long-term impact:

You know they got slagging...you know slagging is alright...just good crack...and then people start to believe it and box themselves in...I'm sure that there's a lot of people who really disliked school.

Marian speaks of her continued insecurity, despite becoming a professional person:

Looking back...I do even now have a massive chip on my shoulder...I think that people are judging me on my cognitive abilities all the time, even at work...I'm a social worker and I could walk into any case conference, and even though I write reports every day and walk into court...I think...they'll think I'm stupid. I could cry...

The long-term effect of placement is seen also in Danielle's description of how former pupils see her now, labels persisting beyond school:

Even now people say to me 'I can't believe you're in Australia', because they never thought I was going to do well. They are so surprised...always low expectations for me.

For many participants, failure to address their learning needs at school has had consequences into their adult lives. For some, reading and writing and mathematics remain persistent challenges. As Malachy commented:

I'm still a very bad reader... I'm nearly convinced I've got dyslexia...I mix up words...even like proofreading things ...I get my fiancée to proofread things for me...

While, for Ronan whose literacy needs were not met at school, a disadvantage continues to affect his daily life:

I found writing difficult at school...even now I find it tough...when I write a text message...and when I read a text message I start from the bottom and read from right to left.

Conor's allocation to a low ability group gave rise to experiences at school which have had a long-term impact on his life, affecting his job prospects, aspirations and self-confidence. His recollection is of being allocated a teacher who was not effective at meeting his needs, something which continues to influence his life:

I could have done with a stronger teacher...other than Mr...I still really struggle with maths... we knew it was the dunce class... I feel that if I had got a better teacher, I would have been able to achieve more. Even now if people ask me to do a simple maths' question, I panic...I probably could do it, but my immediate reaction is to panic. I got an equivalent to GCSE at the Tech...Essential Skills...I'm happy enough with that...That'll

do...I don't think that I'll ever have a job when I have to show those qualifications...or maybe I will?'

Although Danielle feels that she is now doing well, she reflects often on her experiences of being in a low ability group at school and how this has had an impact on her day-to-day life:

There are days like...when I ...the first time being away from home...and I struggled with that and the job...It was a heavy job, late at night, in the bar...you're tired and you're trying to work things out and I used to get really frustrated.

Danielle's lack of education in maths has had consequences into her adult life, affecting her day-to-day functioning:

Even in my life today, I'm still really nervous about money. When I was in New York, I worked in a bar...and you know...splitting up tips...I didn't know...I struggled with that...I still struggle.

The hesitations in her speech reflect Danielle's sense of embarrassment at not being able to cope with everyday financial tasks, which could have consequences for her financial security.

Although Danielle would have liked to be a nurse or a health-care worker, her lack of qualifications meant that she had to take on a variety of low-skilled jobs, with language such as 'heavy', 'struggled', 'late at night', 'tired', 'frustrated' suggesting the challenges she has faced. Her account reveals an attempt as an adult to try and make sense of how she has ended up in these jobs: 'you're trying to work things out'.

Paul craves professional autonomy, while his hesitations and pauses may convey a sense of regret at the lack of control, he was able to exert at school. Asked if he would not consider a return to education to try and achieve his goal, Paul illustrates the long-term impact of placement in an account once more punctuated by silences:

I have a good job now, but they have their own businesses now and I'm working for a man because I didn't have the qualifications to go to Uni...But my first choice would have been to be a PE teacher...But sure I'm 25 now...It's a bit too late now. I've got the Tech equivalent of GCSE English...I've got Key Skills...I wouldn't mind doing something because...There's nothing wrong with the job I'm in (sighs), but you know what I mean, you're working for somebody...I'm concreting and shuttering...I hate taking orders (laughs)...I would like to be the foreman...not listening to the foreman.

The long-term impact on Sean has been an absolute determination to transcend the learner identity attached to him at school and do things independently, something he expressed in a tone of defiance. When recounting his response to a university lecturer who suggested that he should get tested for dyslexia, Sean describes rejecting any offer of help:

I'm going to do this without any help, without any crutches. I just went for it. I thought you know...you got to that stage...and I was just like 'I'm just going to go and rattle this'.

Interestingly, as a teacher Sean acknowledges that:

This is not a good thing to do...I wouldn't condone what I did or have any of my pupils do this.

For Sean, his description of support as a 'crutch', suggests that Sean sees it as a sign of weakness, and he is determined to overcome the label assigned to him in school and prove that he can succeed without help from others 'and rattle this'. He describes his attitude at university in powerful terms, echoing the 'fire' imagery employed earlier:

I've become...my goal...I needed to do well here, and it nearly became an addictive thing...it was as if I was a drug addict...I needed something to strive for. I always want to strive to be the best.

The repetition of 'needed', 'addict'/'addictive', 'strive' combine to suggest a deep desire to prove himself and defy the label assigned to him in school. Arguably influenced by his negative experience at school and the barriers he has had to overcome by himself, Sean was highly critical of his own profession, using emotive language, repetition, and a passionate tone of voice:

I've often noticed...see teachers are a bad breed. They don't expect to work...they don't expect to work. I don't know...like teachers do not expect to work. They think that they shouldn't have to work...or they are asked to do something and...they're crazy. They maybe start off with a good intention, but they just become stagnant, or you know...

Sean's speech suggests impatience with teachers who he sees as lazy, or as not striving to improve.

Another long-term impact for both Malachy and Sean is a sense of professional embarrassment. The policy of entering pupils in lower groups for Foundation tier at GCSE

placed limits on Sean and Malachy's achievement, something about which they are still very conscious:

Malachy:

'I only ever did Foundation...the highest I could get was a C...and I teach it now'.

Sean:

'It is my own subject and the most I could get was a 'C'.

Jane finished her interview with a reflection on the experience:

I wouldn't have changed my career path, but definitely it would have impacted on me psychologically, confidence-wise and academic capability. I felt as if I wasn't good enough to be doing what I was doing...I don't feel the need for the groups...I think everyone should be on a level par.

Marcus concluded with a powerfully perceptive insight into his experience of being allocated to a low ability group:

You have to think 'What works for me? What do I need to focus on? What do I need to reduce that doesn't work for me?' No-one made it a priority to focus on me...I didn't have the chance to explain myself at school'...I believe that the most important issue was the almost machinery-like way that education does labelling and grouping...the boxing isn't efficient. I should have been encouraged to develop the mindset I have now...that is being passionate about my own independent learning from an earlier age. That's what I would have liked.

Summary

This chapter presented findings in response to the first and second research questions, organised according to the superordinate themes generated from the data. Findings suggest that placement was experienced as something over which participants had not control. Participants recalled their feelings of inferiority, of low teacher expectation, and of restrictions on choice and achievement. In Chapter 6, the third research question is answered through an interpretative analysis of the findings, using four of Nussbaum's (2011, pp33-34) ten central capabilities as sensitising concepts:

4. Senses, imagination and thought. Being able to use the senses, to imagine, think and reason- and to do these things in a truly human way, a way informed and cultivated by an adequate education, having freedom of expression including political, artistic and religious liberties and being able to have pleasurable experiences.

6. Practical reasoning. Being able to form a conception of the good and to engage in critical reflection about the planning of one's life.

7. Affiliation. (A) Being able to live with and toward others, to recognise and show concern for other human beings, to engage in various forms of social interaction; to be able to imagine the situation of another. (B) Having the social bases of self-respect and non-humiliation; being able to be treated as a dignified being whose worth is equal to that of others.

10. Control over one's political and material environment. To be able to participate in political choices and have one's free speech protected; to be able to hold property and have property rights and seek employment on an equal basis with others, exercise practical reasoning and enter into meaningful relationships with others. In the next chapter, the findings will be located within existing literature and discussed using four of Nussbaum's ten central capabilities as a conceptual tool.

6. Discussion

6.1 Introduction

This chapter will locate the findings presented in the previous chapter within existing literature and conceptualise them using four of the ten central capabilities. Although the capabilities are non-fungible, meaning that one may not be traded off against another, as each one is focused on ‘the protection of areas of freedom so central that their removal makes a life not worthy of human dignity’ (Nussbaum, 2011, p31), constraints imposed by space preclude an examination of all ten central capabilities. After viewing the findings through the lens of all ten capabilities, I chose four as I judged them to be most significant for my research questions. These are: Control over one’s Environment (Capability 10); Senses Imagination and Thought (Capability Four); Practical Reason (Capability Six); and Affiliation (Capability Seven). Viewing the findings through the lens of these capabilities, placement is evaluated by answering the question, ‘What is each person able to do and to be?’ Viewed through the lens of these four capabilities, I argue that placement in a low ability group was not commensurate with participants’ human dignity, and created instead a ‘corrosive disadvantage’, a deprivation that jeopardised the development of these capabilities.

As discussed in Chapter 3.5, ‘Education is at the heart of the Capabilities Approach, because it can form people’s existing capacities into internal capabilities of many kinds’ (Nussbaum, 2011, p152). Borrowing from Wolff and de-Shalit (2007), Nussbaum considers education a particularly significant ‘fertile functioning’ as it enables other functionings central to dignity, equality and opportunity (Nussbaum, 2011). However, this view of education as a fertile functioning is predicated on educational practices which promote human freedom and dignity. The CA offered an effective framework to identify where practices do not promote a fertile functioning, as it does not merely look at teacher inputs or resource allocation, but at what people are actually able to do and to be as a result. The CA urges an evaluation of educational practices in terms of the extent to which they promote human dignity and

support the development of an ample threshold in the central capabilities, what Unterhalter describes as ‘the ways in which being educated supports what each and every person has reason to value’ (2007, p75).

While the previous chapter focused explicitly on presenting detailed accounts of participants’ experiences and reflections on placement, this chapter will use the CA to situate the policy of ability grouping ‘within the narrative context of human lives’ (Nussbaum, 2011, pxi) and to notice how such a policy affected participants’ functionings. The role played by such detailed accounts of participants’ experiences and reflections is, as Nussbaum (2011, p80) has argued, ‘primarily educational’ as without seeing the range of conditions within which participants were striving, important problems could have been missed, or their connections to one another could have remained hidden. Bringing Nussbaum’s Capability Approach to bear on the data, I argue that placement in a low ability group failed to support what participants had reason to value and was actually a deprivation of education, creating a series of other deprivations which denied participants dignity, equality and eroded their self-esteem and confidence.

I suggest that, rather than a mechanism to meet the needs of all learners more effectively (as often cited by policymakers), ability grouping prioritises the needs of those placed in higher groups to the detriment of the rights of participants placed lower down in the academic hierarchy (Francis et al, 2016; Archer et al, 2018). Nussbaum’s CA provided a useful way to explore the dilemma that emerges when the rights of pupils compete with each other. Although the CA is a species of human rights, ‘the language of capabilities gives important precision and supplementation to the language of rights’ and focuses on each person as an end of themselves, deserving of treatment commensurate with their human dignity (Nussbaum, 2003, p 37).

6.2 Control over one’s environment (10)

Nussbaum (2011, p34) defines this capability as:

A. Political. Being able to participate effectively in political choices that govern one's life; having the right of political participation, protections of free speech and association.

Although I concur with Nussbaum's identification of two architectonic capabilities (6.

Practical Reason and 7. Affiliation), as discussed in Chapter 3.1, I include Control over one's environment in my thesis as a capability which played an architectonic role, as it organised and pervaded the others. Participants' lack of control over their initial placement in a low ability group was a persistent finding. The lack of control over placement resonates strongly with other research which suggests that pupils are excluded from the process and that group allocation is a decision over which pupils have little or no influence and that arrangements for group placement are unclear (Dunne et al, 2007; Wiliam and Bartholomew, 2004).

Participants expressed anger that, as children, they were excluded from any participation in the decision to place them in a low ability group, an allocation which they felt had reduced their educational opportunities. Participants also complained about the lack of consultation and transparency in the rationale for their group placement, especially as the decision proved to have far-reaching consequences. The literature shows instead that decisions about ability grouping are taken by senior staff and are governed more often by school operational and strategic factors, including timetabling, finance, and teachers' values and perceptions of pupil ability (Archer et al, 2018; Boaler 1997; Moller and Stearnes, 2012; Muijs and Dunne, 2010).

Lack of control over placement is more concerning given the overwhelming evidence that pupils from socially disadvantaged backgrounds (and those from certain minority ethnic groups) are over-represented in low attainment groups (Jackson, 1964; Kutnick et al, 2005; Meissel et al, 2017; Taylor et al, 2018; Taylor and Tereshchenko, 2020). Allocation to groups has been found to be inequitable, with a wealth of evidence suggesting that a range of subjective, and arguably discriminatory, practices are employed to place pupils, including teacher views on pupil ability (Campbell, 2014; Ireson et al, 2002; Mujis and Dunne 2010; OECD, 2018; Taylor et al, 2019; Timmermans, 2015). In a recent study, Connolly et al

(2019) suggest that almost a third of pupils may be misallocated, when compared to others of similar prior attainment.

Although it could be argued that few, if any, pupils exercise control over school processes, for participants possibly placed in the lowest groups because of subjective, and potentially inequitable, judgements, the consequences were overwhelmingly negative and far-reaching. Grouping pupils by ability led schools to take decisions, without any pupil participation or consultation, which reduced the scope of participants' educational opportunities, hindered the development of the capability of Control and affected their lives into adulthood. Following the CA, I suggest that distributive injustice, defined by Fraser (2007) as a maldistribution of resources, was a direct consequence of placement in a low ability group which, Nussbaum (2011, p41) argues, is an insult to the dignity of the unequal:

If children in a nation have educational opportunities manifestly unequal to those of other children, even though all get above a minimum...raises an issue of basic fairness...either equality or something near to it is required for adequacy.

School decisions, underpinned by a commitment to grouping pupils by perceived ability, resulted in inequalities of distribution in terms of subject choice, tier of entry for GCSE examinations, curricular access, access to higher GCSE grades, and the quality of teaching and learning support available. Participants' initial lack of control over their placement led to a further corrosion of the capability of Control over one's environment, excluding them from 'participation in choices that govern one's life' (Nussbaum, 2011, p34). The data revealed that placement in a low ability group affected participants' access to the curriculum, denied them the opportunity to achieve the highest grades at GCSE and corroded the development of the central capability of Senses, Imagination and Thought and Practical Reason, which is discussed below.

6.3. Senses, Imagination and Thought

Nussbaum (2011, p33) defines this capability as

Being able to use the senses, to imagine, think and reason- and to do these things in a truly human way, a way informed and cultivated by an adequate education, including, but by no means limited to, literacy and basic mathematical and scientific training.

Being able to use imagination and thought in connection with experiencing and producing works and events of one's own choice, religious, literary, musical and so forth.

Being able to use one's mind in ways protected by guarantees of freedom of expression with respect to both political and artistic speech and freedom of religious exercise. Being able to have pleasurable experiences and to avoid nonbeneficial pain.

As suggested in the previous section, the corrosion of the capability of Control over one's environment created further disadvantages for participants. The lack of opportunity to choose and to act over GCSE subject choice was one of the issues that stirred powerful feelings of frustration. While the rhetoric of choice is pervasive in educational policy (DENI, 2022) <https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/articles/entitlement-framework#toc-1>, participants experienced considerable restrictions when making subject choices for GCSE, restrictions which served to mutilate the development of the capabilities of Senses, Imagination and Thought. Participants were denied the access to subjects including literature, languages and music, studies that could have enriched their lives, and were directed instead towards a narrow range of vocational subjects. Brine (2006) also found that pupils in low ability groups were directed away from more prestigious 'academic' subjects and more towards less valued occupational routes.

Findings of this study are echoed in a range of research which found that pupils' choices are constrained by what teachers consider appropriate for them based on notions of academic ability and behaviour (Ball,1981; Riddell,1992), while others note that institutions play a role in shaping socially stratified 'choices' (Ball,1981; Gillborn and Youdell, 2000).

The lack of opportunity to study the humanities, (including literature, history, geography and languages), which are essential for responsible democratic citizenship (Nussbaum, 2016), represented a serious corrosion of the capability of Senses, Imagination and Thought.

Placement in a low ability group led to a failure to nourish the development of participants' powers of mind. Encounters with the arts and humanities can lead to an awareness of

history, the development of empathy, compassion and appreciation of beauty, all of which can help each person reach self-actualisation. Participants' experience of education was reduced to training for (an often gendered) occupation, negating the intrinsic value of education (Nussbaum, 2010). Enabling pupils to develop rich literacy skills provides them with an opportunity for self-actualisation and, conversely, deprivation of literacy will affect every aspect of life, as captured by Pettigrew (1989, p4):

'We are our language; our reality is created by, and limited by, our language'.

Literacy skills are developed most fruitfully through experience of, and engagement with, rich language, especially abundant in literature. Instead, participants, who had the greatest need for support in order to achieve an ample threshold in literacy, experienced the poorest learning experiences, including drilling in perfunctory language tasks, led by non-qualified personnel in storerooms. This is supported in an influential study on language acquisition by Perera (1987) who suggests that those pupils who need the most stimulus to their own language development often get the least. Rather than support participants' learning, and nurture the development of Senses, Imagination and Thought, opportunities to learn alongside others who possessed a richer vocabulary (at that time) were shut down, which served to reinforce, rather than address, literacy deficits.

Although the CA does not confine education to basic literacy and numeracy skills, Nussbaum acknowledges that 'when these are absent many avenues of opportunity are closed' (Nussbaum, 2011, p155). Thus, Senses, Imagination and Thought specifies that an adequate education must include literacy and basic mathematical and scientific training. However, because of their placement, almost all participants felt that they had failed to achieve an ample threshold in literacy and numeracy. They described the impact of their lives ranging from feelings of embarrassment and inadequacy to employment options restricted to low-skilled, insecure, or poorly paid jobs. Existing literature suggests that for pupils in low ability groups restrictions in subject choice hindered pupil progression to A Level, limited achievement, reduced career aspiration and employment opportunities (Baird

et al, 2001; Barrance and Elwood, 2018; Boaler et al, 2000; Brine, 2006; Gillborn and Youdell, 2000; Sullivan et al, 2010). Thus, placement has undoubtedly had an effect on the development of other capabilities: Life, Bodily Integrity and Play, although exploration of this is beyond the scope of this study.

The CA is sensitive to the difference in conversion factors, acknowledging that converting resources into functioning will be different for a pupil with previous low attainment in literacy and/or numeracy than it will be for others. The data show that participants who required significant help to overcome barriers to literacy and numeracy received support of poor quality. Instead of helping them to overcome deficits, placement in a low ability group erected additional obstacles to participants' learning and hindered their opportunities for self-development.

The circumstances that call for different resources should be understood as residing in the social environment, pupils' interaction with the structure and norms of their school, in their relationship to conventional rules and practices, as well as in their relationship to their peers and teachers. (Hedge and MacKenzie, 2012, p337)

Some participants' lack of awareness over the implications of subject choice is reflected in the literature by Oates (2013) who found that the consequences of decisions taken about subjects and qualifications may not be fully understood by pupils or their parents at the time they are made. As Brine (2006, p439) argues based on evidence from her work, 'the lower groups were socialised away from knowledge, their everyday experience was of that which they were denied'.

The data in this present study suggest that restricted subject choice was especially damaging to those participants who did not have the social or financial capital to counter the deprivation. This finding is supported by Weeden (2011) who found that pupils from more advantaged backgrounds have more access to support at home to help them make choices and influence what is available, and Lumby and Foskett (2005) who showed that pupils from the most disadvantaged backgrounds have fewer resources and less access to assistance when making difficult decisions with repercussions for their life trajectories. For those in low

ability groups, the corrosion of the capability of Control over one's environment (Capability 10) led to the mutilation of the capability of Senses, Imagination and Thought (and Practical Reason which is discussed below).

Another difference in educational opportunity, which hindered the development of Senses Imagination and Thought as a result of placement, was the quality of pedagogy experienced. Participants spoke repeatedly about their experience of low teacher expectations, and of being asked to complete low level work lacking pace and challenge, several described the work as childish and patronising in nature. This finding is supported in the literature which shows differences in the allocation of resources, expectations and curricular opportunities for different ability groups. Low ability groups were found to be more likely to be taught by non-specialists, or by a series of substitute teachers with less experienced, temporary and non-specialist teachers were more likely to teach lower sets or younger pupils (Eaton et al, 2007; Francis et al, 2017). Entry for Foundation Tier at GCSE meant that participants were denied comprehensive opportunities to develop higher order thinking skills, skills which they could then have chosen to exercise or not. As curricula are aligned to GCSE specifications, tier of entry had a significant impact on how pupils experienced the curriculum, supported by the work of Barrance and Elwood (2018) who found that the options taken at GCSE level are likely to determine the options that pupils take up at the next levels. They argue that lack of choice and information around these options represent institutional inequalities. Restricted subject choice for participants therefore meant that their learning was defined by what they were denied: access to a higher tier curriculum. Sen articulates this as the 'opportunity aspect of freedom' (2009, p. 232), a space in which to realise 'comprehensive opportunities' which are not simply the culmination of plans and goals. Citizens' capacity to think and to reason is absolutely vital for a democratic society, and therefore the corrosion of participants' development of Senses, Imagination and Thought can have far reaching political consequences. If the capacity to imagine, think and reason is deformed "there can be no genuine (political) participation, but only the imposition of the ideas of those who are

linguistically capable' (Kingman, 1988, p7). Different expectations of groups resulted in different pedagogical approaches with higher groups given opportunities for independent learning, and faster paced, more demanding 'Higher Tier' work. In contrast, the literature reveals the impoverished pedagogy and infantilisation associated with teaching in lower groups (Francis et al, 2019; Ireson and Hallam, 2001; Mazenod et al, 2019; McGillicuddy and Devine 2018).

6. 4. Practical Reason

This is defined by Nussbaum (2011, p33) as:

'Being able to form a conception of the good and to engage in critical reflection about the planning of one's life'.

With inadequate access to information on the possible impact of subject choice on their future educational progression, participants' conception of the good and the development of their capability of Practical Reason was corroded. As a result of placement, participants were entered for Foundation tier in all GCSE subjects at GCSE, which meant that the highest grade available to them was a 'C', capping attainment. Entry for the lower Foundation tier also led to participants experiencing a GCSE curriculum with reduced content (thus making movement to a higher tier much less likely). Consequently, participants' opportunities for progression to A Level and Higher education were reduced. Even those participants who were developing the capability of Practical Reason were unable to exercise freedom and choice over tiers of entry, which in turn limited possible 'A' Level choices, application to Higher education and job opportunities. Evaluated using the CA, the schools' decision to enter participants for Foundation Tier represents a serious deformation of their ability to participate in a choice that was to affect their lives into adulthood. Several participants who had a clear conception of the good, with aspirations to continue study or progress to university, had attempts to engage in critical reflection about the planning of their lives shut down by career advisors' low expectations for them because of the label assigned by

grouping. Those participants with social and financial capital were able to circumvent this deprivation, while others merely accepted the label and adjusted their aspirations, what Nussbaum terms 'adaptive preference and is exemplified powerfully by Jane's comments:

It will stick with me forever... I said that I probably wanted to get into the health field, paramedic, Occupational Therapy, or nursing...anything at all. I was told, you know, "I don't think that's the pathway for you"...never a reason why...just always "I don't think it is for you". I just wonder about the rest...if they went in and were told that, did they think "Ah well, sure, whatever and that's alright then?"

Danielle, Conor and Paul, participants with the least social and financial capital, adapted their preferences to suit their lack of qualifications, rather than persist with learning. Although participants' internal capabilities were present, when these were combined with the opportunities for choice and action in their specific situation, the effects of placement inhibited the development of Practical Reason. Without the resources to overcome their circumstances they experienced combined capability failure. Paul gave up on his ambition to be a PE teacher, and Danielle's desire to be a nurse is hampered by her lack of qualifications. To the extent that they were educated in the same school as their peers they were being treated equally, but they did not enjoy equal dignity with other pupils. Their choice to leave school at the earliest opportunity may thus be viewed as an intelligent one, given their experience of stigma, but it did not support their combined capabilities and prevented them from achieving threshold functioning in Senses, Imagination and Thought.

The link between group allocation and tier of entry for GCSE examinations is supported by Barrance (2020) who found that the impact of being placed in the foundation tier had a negative impact on pupils' self-esteem and relationship with their peers, and by Elwood and Murphy (2002) who showed that pupils' ability to achieve was actually limited before they entered the examination hall, affecting their future prospects, as pupils needed certain grades at GCSE to progress to A-level and university. Allocation to tiers was shown to be based on pupils' placement in ability groups, which often takes place three years before the GCSE course begins (Boaler et al, 2000). The consequences of tiering were extensive, not only affecting the grades available to them, but also the ways that other students viewed and

treated them. Messages conveyed to pupils about their ability by tiers appear to be internalised and ability is seen as fixed, creating a self-fulfilling prophecy (Elwood and Murphy (2002). The identity as a low ability pupil assigned by placement, and reinforced by entry for Foundation Tier at GCSE, has affected how some participants continue to regard themselves and has led to a reduction in their aspirations, leading to a mutilation of the capability of Practical Reason.

Participants' spoke of the differences between their experience and that of those in higher groups. Entry for Foundation Tier meant that participants were either not examined at all (for example taking Key Skills in Literacy and Numeracy, rather than GCSE English and maths), or examined at lower tier. As highlighted above, the foundation tier typically offers a narrower, less challenging curriculum while the higher tier is aligned to the full subject specification (Barrance and Elwood, 2018). This is supported by Boaler et al (2000), who found that the difference in subject material covered within foundation and higher tiers in mathematics meant that it was almost impossible for students to move up to the higher tier.

As a result of repeated encounters with the stigmatizing gaze of a culturally dominant other, the members of disesteemed groups internalize negative self-images and are prevented from developing a healthy cultural identity of their own. (Fraser, 2000, p2)

Most participants accepted the label assigned to them when at school, although almost all challenged this as adults. Even when participants described eloquently their adolescent aspirations, showing evidence of the internal capability of Practical Reason, this capability was lost in the absence of the opportunity to function due to low teacher expectations, poor careers advice, restricted subject choice and entry for foundation tier at GCSE. This finding is substantiated in the literature where it is argued that ability grouping affects not only how children 'do' learning, but also how they embody learning through a particular feeling of 'being' a learner in the classroom internalising labels and reducing aspirations (McGillycuddy and Devine, 2020). The acceptance of an assigned identity led several to abandon childhood hopes of becoming a PE teacher, a nurse, an engineer or of studying History at university. Several participants had dropped out of school or described how they found it

very difficult to settle into sixth form. They described a lack of self-belief and felt unable to overcome their assigned identity as a low ability pupil. Those participants with the least social and financial capital accepted the label/identity assigned by the school at the time although, as adults, they now express anger about their treatment. However, they felt powerless to address the capability failures caused by their placement and felt that it was too late to overcome earlier deficits. This reflects a finding by Francis et al (2017) that grouping creates a self-fulfilling prophecy, with pupils internalising labels leading to reduced academic and general self-concept. Instead, several participants had reduced their earlier aspirations to take up low paid, unskilled employment. They had downgraded their expectations of what to expect from life, having adapted their preferences to accustom themselves to the stigma, low expectations and restricted options in life. Developing a positive independent learner identity at school can shape an individual's outlook on learning for life. It is crucial, not only for the pupil's experiences in school, but also for lifelong learning trajectories (Gorard and Rees, 2002).

6.5 Affiliation

This is defined by Nussbaum as:

(A) Being able to live with and toward others, to recognise and show concern for other human beings, to engage in various forms of social interaction; to be able to imagine the situation of another.

(B) Having the social bases of self-respect and non-humiliation; being able to be treated as a dignified being whose worth is equal to that of others. (Nussbaum, 2011, p33).

The data suggest that, although the restricted curriculum, impoverished pedagogy and capped attainment were sources of anger for participants, the emotional impact of the stigma attached to placement was a vivid and persistent memory. As discussed earlier, Nussbaum describes 'Affiliation' and 'Practical Reason' as playing a distinctive architectonic role as they organise and pervade the other capabilities.

6.5.1 Corroded affiliation with peers

The findings are interpreted as showing that ability grouping results in social, as well as academic segregation. Placement in a low ability group reduced participants' opportunity to achieve both 'the social bases of self-respect' and the ability to be 'treated as a dignified being whose worth is equal to that of others'. Nussbaum sees affiliation as an especially fertile capability: being linked to other people who regard you with respect, and as an equal, creates other freedoms. One of the most painful outcomes of placement for participants was the stigma attached to being assigned an identity as a low 'ability' pupil, an identity which corroded the development of affiliation. Reay (2009) argues that pupils' identities are constructed as much through a sense of what they are not and notions of how others see them, as through conceptions of who they are. Participants described the difficulties they experienced when trying to achieve positive peer to peer and teacher-pupil relationships. A key recollection for all participants was the sense of embarrassment and shame they felt, marked out as inferior, not just academically, but socially. Participants were visibly different from their peers, and almost all spoke of the embarrassment caused by the ordinary clothes (as opposed to school uniform), which pupils in lower groups wore on days when they went to the local Technical College. A further source of humiliation was the practice of being seated at the back of the Assembly Hall so that the low ability groups could rise and exit early from the hall to get the 'Tech bus', while the rest of the year group continued with their assembly. This finding lends support to research by McGillicuddy (2021) which found that ability grouping evoked strong emotional and psychosocial responses characterised by feelings of 'shame', 'upset' and 'inferiority' for those in the low-ability groups and constructed pupils against one another.

Existing sociological and psychological literature argues that there is a link between group placement and identity and that placement in a lower ability group results in a more fractured relationship with peers and more negative expression of psychosocial well-being.

Segregation by grouping legitimises a pupil's social status, leading to exclusion from peers and increased experience of bullying, evoking feelings of disengagement, anger and

isolation (Boaler et al, 2000; Brine, 2006; McGillycuddy and Devine, 2018; Swartz, 1981).

McGillycuddy (2021) found that grouping 'creates a visible hierarchical ranking provides a measurement against which pupils evaluate and define themselves/others as learners within the structured space' (2021, p6).

6.5.2 Corroded affiliation with teachers

The stigma attached to the label assigned by group placement was a source of corrosive disadvantage for participants, leading to other disadvantages which clustered together. Affiliation with peers were not the only relationships mutilated by placement. Participants spoke repeatedly of the difficulties of establishing positive relationships with teachers; they reported feeling patronised by teachers who treated them like babies or being mistrusted by teachers who expected them to behave badly. This finding is substantiated in the literature which found that teachers respond to the identity assigned by allocation to a low group with expectations of poor behaviour and fixed pupil ability. McGillycuddy and Devine (2018) found that grouping resulted in differentiated interactions across ability groups with negative interactions between teachers and pupils in lower ability groups. Failure to develop positive pupil-teacher relationships influenced participants' capacity to learn and aspire, affected by teachers' low expectations in terms of their ability and behaviour. Participants described teachers who expected their class to be badly behaved, who were therefore always on 'high alert' and who were therefore reluctant to engage socially with the pupils in their class in case they lost control. This resulted in a tense atmosphere in the classroom, one in which participants were afraid to ask questions, in case they were shouted at, or teased by their teachers. Thus, the capabilities interacted in a corrosive way; the corrosion of the capability of affiliation distorted the development of participants' senses imagination and thought.

Consistent with previous research indicating the creation of disaffection and anti-school attitudes pupils in lower ability groups were often found to be seen as disaffected,

problematic, and lacking in skills required to be effective learners (Boaler et al, 2000; Brine, 2006; Devine, 2013; McGillycuddy, 2021). The literature provides strong evidence for the negative impact of placement in a low ability group on pupil and teacher perceptions (Connolly et al, 2017; Francis, Boaler et al, 2000; Francis et al, 2017), while Mazonod et al (2018) found a tendency for teachers to 'infantilise' pupils in low ability groups with 'over-support' and low expectations.

Low teacher expectations and poor relationships with teachers, hindered participants' opportunity to think and reason in a truly human way. Viewed through the lens of Affiliation, allocation to a low ability group placed participants in a social hierarchy which hindered the development of meaningful relationships with teachers and peers. This is consistent with previous research indicating a link between positive relationships and learning. Dunne et al (2011) found that one of the three main ways in which schools made good progress with low attaining pupils was the fostering of positive learning environments, while Harland and Macready (2012. p83) found that the nature of teacher/pupil relationships was 'the primary factor in boys' motivation and attitudes towards learning'.

In contrast to the effects of positive teacher-pupil relationships on learning, participants described feelings of being abandoned by their teachers, of being left to their own devices in the classroom. Others spoke about feeling patronised by low level work which they saw as childish and embarrassing. Such treatment was viewed as participants as a lack of care on the part of the teacher. This deficit framing of pupils in low groups as disruptive and/or unable to work or think independently is arguably self-fulfilling. The finding is substantiated in the literature where it is argued that placement in a low ability group constitutes a 'snowball prophecy' (stronger than self-fulfilling), as it builds momentum and impact as a result of 'the various practices, understandings and behaviours on the part of the individual concerned (pupil), inter-actors (teachers, parents, peers), and organisational structures (the school and its practices)' (Francis et al, 2020, p14).

6.6. Conclusion

The CA offers a way to conceptualise placement in a low ability group as a matter of social (in)justice due to the educational deprivations that accrue as a result. Participants' lack of control over their allocation to a low ability group led to the mutilation of other central capabilities. Nussbaum's CA holds that 'all individuals possess an inalienable human dignity that must be respected by laws and institutions' (Nussbaum, 2012, p24). Using the CA, I interpret participants' recollections of their experiences and their reflections on placement as revealing a hidden injustice at the centre of their education. The CA represents an egalitarian approach to social justice, and, instead of looking at people's access to resources, the CA focuses on the functionings people are able to achieve. Although on the surface participants appeared to have equal access to education, Nussbaum's CA can uncover injustice by asking what participants were actually able to do and to be as a result of their placement in a low ability group.

This chapter has explored how the CA can be used to conceptualise participants' experiences and reflections. Using each of the four chosen central capabilities as a focus, I have answered the question 'What were participants able to do and to be as a result of placement? I argue that participants' capabilities were mutilated and deformed as a result of allocation to a low ability group. Viewed through the lens of Nussbaum's CA, which takes account of the social contours affecting people's ability to convert opportunity into functioning, placement is illuminated as corrosive to the development of participants' capabilities. Participants' lack of Control over their environment, resulted in a stigma which corroded Affiliation with peers and teachers, which corroded the development of their capability of Senses, Imagination and Thought, which corroded the development of their capability of Practical Reason. The initial disadvantage of placement was thus compounded by a cluster of consequent disadvantages leading to capability failure.

7. CONCLUSIONS

7.1 Introduction

‘There are few things more important for a country than improving the well-being and life chances of its children and young people.’ (NI Executive, 2021, Children and Young People’s Strategy, 2020-2030, p i)

The chapter draws together the main findings from the research and offers some conclusions based on the analysis of these findings. Positionality is discussed and some recommendations are made. As outlined in Chapter 1, this study contributes to knowledge by considering adult recollections of, and reflections on, their placement in a low ability group while at (non-selective) post-primary school in Northern Ireland (NI). Theoretically, it makes a contribution to the existing body of research by using the Capabilities Approach (Nussbaum, 2011) (CA) to assess whether placement in a low ability group represented a ‘fertile functioning’ or a ‘corrosive disadvantage’ for the participants in this study.

Chapter One examined the background against which the study is set. The Northern Ireland (NI) education system and its failure to narrow the attainment gap between the most affluent and the most disadvantaged young people was discussed. Chapter Two examined the literature relating to the practice of ability grouping which shows both that certain groups of pupils are disproportionately represented in low ability groups and that such placement negatively affects both pedagogical approaches and classroom relationships. In Chapter Three Nussbaum’s CA was outlined, followed by an exploration of why the CA may be viewed as superior to other evaluative frameworks. The perceived weaknesses of the CA were evaluated, and the chapter concluded with a discussion of why it is particularly useful when evaluating educational provision. Chapter 4 described how the research was designed and carried out, including a description of methods of data collection, and analysis, evaluation of research methods, and a consideration of ethical issues. Chapter 5 presented the findings from the data in response to Research Questions 1 and 2, with an emphasis on

honouring participants' experiences. In Chapter 6 findings were located within literature and discussed and interpreted using Nussbaum's CA as a theoretical lens.

A socially just educational system is one in which a nation secures educationally for all children 'what a wise parent would desire for his own children' (Tawney, 1964a, p146). Regrettably, for the participants in this study, placement in a low ability group represented a social injustice which led to serious capability deprivation. Viewing placement through the lens of Nussbaum's CA, I argue that placement denied participants' human dignity, creating corrosive disadvantage which mutilated the development of their central capabilities of Control over their environment, Affiliation, Senses, Imagination and Thought and Practical reason.

7.2 Summary of Findings

This study has presented a new way of viewing placement in a low ability group both from an adult perspective and through the prism of the CA.

7.2.1 Main conclusions

The research questions were:

1. How do adults recollect their experience of placement in a low ability group in post-primary school?
2. How do participants now understand and make sense of their experiences of placement in a 'low' ability group?
3. How can I use Nussbaum's Capabilities Approach to conceptualise participants' experiences of placement in a low ability group?

7.2.2 Research Questions 1 and 2

The findings of this study demonstrate that placement in a low ability group was recalled by the adults as an overwhelmingly negative experience, which the majority of participants now describe as an unfair and damaging practice which has had adverse effects into adulthood. Participants' lack of control over the decision to place them in a low ability group, was an initial disadvantage from which further disadvantages emerged. The hierarchical ranking imposed by ability grouping created what Brine (2006) calls a 'visual signifier' of difference between pupils, assigning inferior learner identities to those in low groups. The resulting stigma was recalled powerfully by participants as feeling 'looked down on' by peers and teachers. These findings corroborate research which suggests that feelings of embarrassment and inferiority are associated with placement in low groups (Archer et al, 2018; Boaler, 1997, Boaler et al, 2000; McGillicuddy, 2021; McGillicuddy and Devine, 2020). The label assigned by placement created further disadvantage: poor pupil-teacher relationships led some participants to misbehave and disengage from learning, which was then taken as corroborative evidence of the initial judgement of low ability. Low teacher expectation meant that participants had few opportunities to engage in either challenging activities or independent thinking or discussion, instead characterised as 'non-knowers' by teachers (Hanna, 2020, p143). This finding reflects extensive evidence in the literature that pupils in the bottom group experience low expectations, a diet of low-level work and more prescriptive pedagogy (Boaler, 2000; Mazenod et al, 2019; McGillicuddy and Devine, 2018; Swartz 1981).

A vicious cycle of placement, stigma and poorer quality learning opportunities culminated in restricted opportunities in terms of GCSE subject choice and tier of examination entry. These disadvantages erected barriers which limited participants' routes of progression into sixth-form, employment or higher education. These findings are substantiated in the literature which shows that 'horizontal inequalities' emerge through the practice of subject option choices and tiers of examination entry at GCSE, which impact differentially on future access to universities or employment opportunities, with particular disadvantages pertaining to

placement in a low ability group (Baird et al, 2001; Barrance and Elwood, 2018; Boaler et al, 2000; Brine, 2006; 2000; Sullivan et al, 2010).

As already stated, this research contributes to existing knowledge through its focus on adult recollections and reflections of placement. All participants were in their mid-twenties at the time of interview and had time to think about their time at school, informed by subsequent life experiences. It was clear in the discussions that each participant had reflected very deeply on their placement at school, and that they were very keen to communicate their reflections on the experience. The most common reaction expressed was anger at how placement had affected every aspect of their school experience and, indeed, continues to affect their adult lives. Participants were angry at being denied the same opportunities as pupils in 'higher' groups.

Those with little social or financial capital as adolescents felt that, not only had their attainment had been constrained by placement, but that they had been set up for low attainment in life and for less valued occupations, supporting the work of Boaler (2005) and Brine (2006). Ten of the eleven participants were highly critical of the way in which their learning was adversely affected by placement, with most suggesting that their schools had failed in their responsibilities towards them. While educational rhetoric speaks of an education system where all can succeed, the opposite reality exposed in this study is captured by several participants who hold schools morally responsible for failing to meet their learning needs. Although there is little existing research which has a similar focus on adult views, a wealth of studies indicates that pupils in low groups experience low teacher expectations and reduced opportunities to learn, and that many pupils feel worthless, helpless, and even ignored by teachers (Barrance, 2020; Boaler et al, 2000; Mazonod, 2018; McGillycuddy and Devine, 2018; Swartz, 1981). A frequently expressed concern was around how unfair participants felt the grouping structures to be. Adult participants viewed their younger selves sympathetically, articulating clearly and explicitly the injustices they believed were visited upon them because of their placement, which persisted throughout their school

careers. Such injustices around identity, curriculum, subject choice and assessment are reflected in research undertaken by Barrance and Elwood (2018) and Hanna (2019).

What this research uniquely shows is that participants' adult lives have continued to be adversely affected by placement, described by them in terms of emotional or psychological impact, social impact, and impact on their life chances. Although it was clear that participants have worked hard to overcome disadvantages that arose from placement, for most, social and emotional scars remain. The predominant reflection was one of anger and resentment at both their treatment as adolescents, and at their diminished educational experience, although one participant expressed the view that the adversity associated with his placement had made him a stronger and more self-reliant person. From a psychological perspective, feelings of inferiority or self-doubt have persisted into adulthood for almost all participants and the stigma experienced by participants has been reflected in social distinctions beyond school.

7.2.3 Research Question 3

As explored in Chapter 3, Nussbaum's Capabilities Approach offers a fertile framework to evaluate hidden injustices which are the effects of discrimination or marginalisation. Using four of Nussbaum's ten central capabilities to interpret the findings, placement was evaluated to assess the extent to which it represents a fertile functioning or a corrosive disadvantage. Those who advocate ability grouping argue that it is an effective way of matching pedagogy to pupil needs, and should, arguably therefore, constitute a fertile functioning for pupils, nurturing the development of basic capabilities into combined capabilities and a range of functionings. However, this study finds that placement denied participants the opportunity to be treated as a dignified being whose worth is equal to that of others and denied them the opportunity to receive an adequate education, hindering the development of the capabilities of Affiliation, Senses, Imagination and Thought and Practical

Reason. For those without resources to counter the disadvantages of placement the negative long-term effects of placement were felt most profoundly. For those adults, deficits in basic literacy and numeracy skills hindered their ability to plan their lives and reduced their chances of achieving secure employment in work that they value. Their conception of the good, expressed as adolescent aspirations to work as teachers and nurses has been adapted and, instead they have accepted roles in low-paid, insecure employment, echoing the work of Boaler (2005) who found that adults placed in low groups as adolescents suffered from broken ambition and described being set up for low attainment in life.

I argue in this thesis that placement in a low ability group represented a corrosive disadvantage for participants, an initial disadvantage which spread its effects to other areas (Wolff and de Shalit, 2007). While the negative effects for pupils of placement in a low ability group are well documented in the literature, this study contributes to knowledge by showing that effects persist into adulthood. Framing my findings around Nussbaum's Capability Approach, in the third interpretative phase of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis, the superordinate themes generated in response to the first two research questions were revisited repeatedly in an iterative approach. Using four of Nussbaum's ten Central Capabilities, chosen for their relevance to the data generated, the data was revisited, this time to assess whether placement promoted or hindered the participants' development of: Control over one's environment, Affiliation, Senses, Imagination and Thought, and Practical Reason.

I suggest that there is strong evidence for the negative impact of placement on participants' perception of themselves as learners, the negative impact on their relationships with others, and the negative impact on their opportunities to learn and progress at school. These findings are reflected consistently in the literature (Boaler et al, 2000; Francis et al, 2020; Mazenod et al, 2018; McGillicuddy ,2020; Swartz, 1981). The lack of control over placement was a corrosion of control over their own lives. Placement led to inequalities of distribution in terms of access to subjects, tiers of examination entry, and careers' advice all of which

mutilated the development of the capability of Senses, Imagination and Thought. Due to reduced opportunities to learn and achieve, the possibility of developing the capability of Practical Reason was also deformed, with participants accepting a diminished conception of the good. Participants' diminished learner identity is interpreted as a corrosion of Practical Reason hindering their ability to do and to be what they had reason to value and as a corrosion of Affiliation, denying participants the bases of self-respect. Placement did not allow participants to achieve threshold functioning in the four capabilities explored in detail, although capability mutilation must surely have occurred in a range of others, including Emotion and Life. This practice denied participants the opportunity freedom to flourish, instead most had adapted their preferences as a result of placement in a low ability group (Boaler, 2005; Brine, 2006; Francis et al,2017; McGillycuddy and Devine, 2020).

7.3 Challenges

A distinct challenge I encountered was my own position in the research process. The position of the researcher has been conceptualised as a central component within qualitative research, as it is thought to impact on all aspects and stages of the research process. Inevitably, my professional experiences of ability grouping will have had some influence upon the themes that were derived from the data. The choice of Nussbaum's Capabilities Approach as a theoretical framework was undoubtedly informed by my commitment to social justice and because, as an English teacher, I was drawn to its emphasis on the stories of individual lives in context.

Nussbaum (2011, p15) asserts that 'storytelling is never neutral...the narrator always directs attention to some features of the world rather than others'. As I attempted to tell the stories of eleven individuals who were placed in low ability groups, I was constantly alert to my own

position and reflected regularly on how my assumptions and experiences might have influenced my thinking and practice within the research process. In this regard, collaboration with and feedback from supervisors was essential. Although an interpretivist methodology acknowledges the impossibility of neutrality, as an English teacher, there was perhaps a temptation to over-analyse participants' use of language and imagery, so I revisited the findings chapter several times to check that I was honouring their stories. I was always conscious of being engaged in a double hermeneutic' (Smith et al, 2012, p3), that is, being a researcher trying to make sense of the participant trying to make sense of their experience. One of the features of interpretative phenomenological analysis is its acknowledgement of researcher subjectivity, as advocated by Gadamer (1990, p267)

It is necessary to keep one's gazes fixed on the things throughout all the constant distractions that originate in the interpreter himself (sic). A person who is trying to understand a text is always projecting...interpretation begins with fore-conceptions which are replaced by more suitable ones.

My own position was undoubtedly affected by my experiences in education. Thirty-five years in a variety of roles provided me with a range of different perspectives from which to view the strengths and limitations of the NI system. As an inspector I had the privilege of being in different types of schools. I witnessed excellent practice which inspired pupils, but I also saw pedagogy which was poor, compounded disadvantage and failed pupils who needed most support. Most recently, as principal of a large post-primary non-selective school, I led the organisation, over a period of two years, through a period of significant change moving from a system of rigid ability grouping to the adoption of mixed ability grouping and all-ability teaching. This followed a whole school review in which several interviewees had participated as pupils. Their words made a deep impression on my view of the grouping structures: they described feeling inferior and powerless in a school that had written them off from day one.

Although mixed ability grouping was embraced enthusiastically by a significant proportion of teaching and non-teaching staff, it was resisted strongly by others, who openly opposed the removal of grouping pupils by 'ability' and worked to remove it and return to the previous organisational structure. Teachers who opposed the change expressed concern about what

they felt would be an additional workload caused by mixed ability classes, while others articulated concerns that the poor behaviour of pupils, originally from low groups, would inhibit the learning of the more 'able' pupils. Ironically, instances of poor behaviour decreased following the shift to mixed ability groupings, captured by a teacher who said that there were no 'bad classes' anymore, and analysis of GCSE examination results showed an increase in grades (including those pupils achieving A*) year on year.

During data collection I found that a key limitation of the research design was the absence of a research question which attended to the relationship between placement and social disadvantage. Clear differences emerged in the interviews in terms of participants' access to social and financial capital, and although such access did not prevent placement in a low ability group, it appeared to be a deciding factor for participants' capacity to overcome some of the disadvantages associated with it. For example, some participants described how being able to afford private tuition for GCSE English helped them to circumvent the lack of access at school, while others spoke how of parents or siblings were able to help them negotiate the process of applying to university, when careers teachers attempted to dissuade them from this aspiration. The socio-economic issue, however, was not addressed in the methodology and therefore future research might usefully adopt a Bourdieusian approach (Bourdieu, 1998) to attend to the relationship between placement, social and financial capital, and long-term effects.

Another challenge experienced during interviews was maintaining emotional distance. I found some of the interviews very difficult, especially where participants became upset, or where they were obviously struggling because of restricted opportunities. I found myself reassuring participants, trying to counter their low self-esteem, and encouraging them to go back to education. Participants' descriptions of poor-quality teaching and disrespect from teachers were personally painful, given my own (unsuccessful) attempts to address poor teacher performance, something which led to my decision to retire early. I felt guilty that

participants had experienced such treatment, especially those who had attended my former school, and I found myself apologising to participants on more than one occasion.

7.4 Recommendations

This study, which has focused on adult recollections of and reflections on placement in a low ability group, has illuminated how the effects of placement, which were remembered as pervasive and negative, have persisted into adulthood for all participants, to varying degrees. The New Decade New Approach deal (2020, p44) asserts that the 'educational experience and outcomes for children and young people are the most important factors' in the education system and to this end, an independent review of education has been established. This review is unequivocal in its assertion that the education system in Northern Ireland is unsustainable in its current form and that transformation is required to ensure that it helps to provide positive outcomes for children and young people. The Review will consider a wide range of issues linked to the design and delivery of education, including the education journey and outcomes of children and young people, and a vision of how education should be delivered in Northern Ireland in the 21st century (DENI, 2022, <https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/independent-review-education>). Policy makers' vigorous pursuit of academic selection and grouping by perceived ability is apparently predicated on a belief in innate and fixed human ability which can be accurately measured. Until policy makers engage in a serious and evidence-based debate about the nature of human intelligence and ability, the dominance of the practice of grouping pupils by perceived academic ability will continue. It seems unlikely, therefore, especially given the political challenges outlined in Chapter 1, that there will be a formal movement away from academic selection in Northern Ireland.

This study strongly suggests that there is a fundamental need for grouping structures in school which respect the dignity and rights of all pupils, not merely those judged to be 'more

able'. The Capabilities Approach 'ascribes an urgent task to government and public policy – namely, to improve the quality of life for all people, as defined by their capabilities' (Nussbaum, 2011, p19). The past and current experiences of participants in this study, viewed through the lens of the Capabilities Approach, suggest that grouping created systemic inequities and injustices imposed by their placement in low groups. The marginalisation and reduction in opportunity freedom caused by placement in a low ability group was unjust and therefore, while recognising the challenges and barriers to change, a key recommendation of this study is the critical need for schools to demonstrate respect for the dignity of all pupils by ending the practice of 'ability' grouping.

School principals could effect significant change within their own non-selective schools, by taking account of the right of all pupils to an education which respects their inherent dignity (Lundy and Tobin, 2019). I suggest that school leaders should begin by creating time for teachers to reflect on the predominant discourse on fixed intelligence, informed by the latest research in neuroscience, including a reflection on the theories of psychosocial development (Erikson, 1968), neurobiology (Siegelman, 1999), and social learning (Bandura, 1977). This endeavour could become part of the School Development Plan and, by 'enabling teachers to read and use research, and link their understanding of research to their knowledge of teaching', informal movements could germinate (Vanderlinde and van Braak, 2010, p308). Staff should then be encouraged to engage with the Convention on the Rights of the Child, beginning with a consideration of General Comment No. 1 (2001) Article 29 (1): The Aims of Education. Staff (and pupils) should reflect on the implications for practice and, in consultation with pupils from low ability groups, consider whether grouping structures reflect the aims and values articulated in Article 29, or whether grouping arrangements are effectively operating as social sorting machines, creating categories that serve as the foundation of later life inequalities (Domina et al, 2017).

Further research could make a valuable contribution to knowledge in this area by exploring the prevalence of ability grouping in non-selective schools in Northern Ireland and by

examining the relationship between placement in a low ability group, examination entry policies, and outcomes at GCSE. Furthermore, research which gathers data by observing the pedagogy experienced by pupils in low ability groups in Northern Ireland would be of great benefit.

7.5 Conclusion

The Capabilities Approach has, at its core, a concern for dignity, flourishing and equality with a relational focus on what individuals are able to do and to be in their particular social contexts. (Hedge & MacKenzie, 2012, pp339-340).

I argue that, based on an analysis of the data and using Nussbaum's Capabilities Approach as a theoretical interpretative tool, the 'particular social context' created by ability grouping denied participants' freedom and diminished what they were able to do and to be, leading to a corrosive disadvantage which had an adverse effect on other areas of participants' lives. This study of adult recollections of, and reflections on, their placement in a low ability group has been significant in illuminating the negative and pervasive effects of placement, some of which have persisted into adulthood for participants, to varying degrees. In Chapter One the ongoing quest to reduce the attainment gap between advantaged and disadvantaged pupils in Northern Ireland was discussed; this research raises questions about possible links between placement in a low ability group, educational inequity, and low attainment at GCSE.

Currently two out of every five pupils (overwhelmingly from socially disadvantaged backgrounds) leave school in Northern Ireland without GCSE maths and English (DENI, 2019). This suggests a fundamental injustice embedded within the education system, and therefore ascribes an urgent task to government: 'to improve the quality of life for all people, as defined by their capabilities' (Nussbaum, 2011, p19). Given policy makers' vigorous pursuit of academic selection by perceived ability, predicated on a belief in innate and fixed human ability which can be accurately measured, Northern Ireland remains an educational environment dominated by competition. Any attempt to move to more equitable practices, such as a movement away from segregating pupils according to perceived ability towards

mixed attainment grouping, is therefore likely to face significant opposition and logistical challenges.

As suggested by the quotation from the Children and Young People's Strategy (2020-2030) at the start of this chapter, the Northern Ireland Executive acknowledges the critical importance of improving the well-being and life chances of its young people. However, despite the rhetoric, this study has found that participants placed in a low ability group experienced inequalities in terms of their access to curriculum, their bases for self-respect, and their opportunity to learn and attain. If the experiences of stigma, low expectations, curriculum polarisation, and diminished opportunity to learn are being replicated more widely across post-primary schools in Northern Ireland, placement in a low ability group could be exacerbating, rather than reducing, the attainment gap, a gap which has been shown to widen as pupils progress through post-primary school (Demie, 2021). Regrettably though, in the absence of a serious and evidence-based debate about the nature of human ability, and a continued emphasis on competition in education, the dominance of the practice of grouping pupils by perceived academic ability is likely to continue.

The ongoing Independent Review of Education is long overdue from a social justice perspective. To enable all pupils to attain and exist above the threshold level of functioning in the central capabilities, and to affirm the equal value and human dignity of every pupil, the government has a moral duty to address the corrosive disadvantage of placement. Young people are being failed by a system which labels them as 'low ability' learners and, instead of addressing their needs, compounds disadvantage by offering them an inferior education.

'Ever tried. Ever failed. No matter. Try again. Fail better.'

Samuel Becket

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Appendix ONE

June 2021

Participant Information Sheet: One-to-one interviews

Study: An investigation into adult reflections on the experience of ability grouping in post-primary school.

Introduction

I would like to invite you to take part in a research project. Before you decide you need to understand why the research is being done and what it will involve for you.

Please take the time to read the following information carefully and ask questions about anything you do not understand.

This research will be led by Pat McGuckian, a Doctoral student at Queen's University, Belfast.

- **What is the purpose of the research?**

This study seeks to gain insights into the experience of being placed in ability groups through one-to-one semi-structured interviews.

The privacy rights of the participants are a priority of the study and privacy, anonymity and confidentiality will be assured. The audio transcripts from the meetings will be anonymised, and no one will be able to link any responses back to you. The responses to the survey will not be linked to any computer, email address or other electronic identifiers. Once the interviews have been transcribed, the audio files will be destroyed.

You are free to withdraw from the study by contacting the researcher by email within two weeks of completion of your interview. The anonymised dataset of survey results will be securely stored and destroyed after five years.

The results of the study will be published in my Doctoral dissertation. No report on the data or the analysis of the data will mention the names of any individuals or organisations.

- **Why have I been invited to take part in the research?**

You have been invited to take part in this study because you have experience of being placed in an ability group in secondary school. You are best placed to provide insight into the impact of this practice over time.

I would be very grateful for your time and knowledge that you could offer this research project.

- **Do I have to take part?**

Participation in the study is entirely voluntary.

- **What will my involvement require?**

If you agree to take part, I will then ask you to provide formal consent of participation. You will be given this information sheet and a copy of your signed consent form.

The researcher will be engaged in this study from June 2021 – July 2021. During this time, you will be asked to participate in an interview which should take no longer than 60 minutes. The interview will take place via Microsoft Teams which allows for end-to-end encryption and data security. The interview will provide the opportunity for you to provide information on the experience and advise on data collection. You can speak off the record and determine if you would like any data from the interviews excluded.

- **What will happen to data that I provide?**

The study will provide anonymity and confidentiality to all participants, and the safe collection and storage of data. No data can be traceable to a specific individual, and you can be assured that once the data is transcribed, no-one will have access to any personal information that can reveal your identity. The researcher's Microsoft Teams university account will be used for the interviews with individual participants, which will be deleted when the transcript is uploaded to Nvivo or a similar platform.

Anonymised transcripts and anonymised survey datasets will be stored securely within encrypted password protected cloud-based files for five years following their last access. Access to the raw data will be limited to the researcher and the supervisors of the project. The data will be used for the doctoral research and any associated published papers on the subject.

Privacy Notice as per GDPR Guidelines

Queen's University, Belfast considers the lawful basis for processing personal data to fall under Article 6(1)(e) of GDPR as the processing of research participant data is necessary for learning and teaching purposes and all research with human participants by staff and students must be scrutinised and approved by a Research Ethics Committee.

In addition, you will have been informed of the purposes behind the processing of the data and will have provided explicit consent to the collection of your personal data. The data processing is therefore also lawful under Article 9(2)(a) of the GDPR as the provision of personal data will be completely voluntary.

The Microsoft Teams' account allows for end-to-end encryption and secure cloud storage, and there are no rights for any third party to review the content. All data will be destroyed after five years.

- What are the possible disadvantages or risks of taking part?

Participants will remain completely anonymous therefore it is not expected that any risk will be involved. No responses can be traced to specific individuals and all data will be stored securely. The ability to withdraw within two weeks of completion of interview allows each respondent to determine if they wish to participate with no coercion or undue influence from the researcher or any executive. This information is also contained within the standard consent letters. Details of support organisations will be provided, should participation bring up painful memories and you would like to speak to someone.

- What are the possible benefits of taking part?

The overarching objective is to provide data which evaluates any possible immediate or long-term impacts of ability grouping on young people and adults from several perspectives. You will be contributing to a body of academic knowledge which can help understand the impact of this educational practice on young people.

The opportunity to make your voice heard about the experience of being placed in an ability group.

- What will happen when the research study stops?

If for any reason the research is stopped prior to completion, the data will be kept anonymised. On completion of the research and after the required period that data must be kept, all data will be destroyed using an appropriate method such as cross shredding for any paper records and permanent file deletion if held electronically.

Facebook Privacy policy: <https://en-gb.facebook.com/policy.php>

Twitter Privacy policy: <https://twitter.com/en/privacy>

Contact details:

Pat McGuckian pmcguckian01@qub.ac.uk

Supervisor's details:

Dr Alison MacKenzie, Queen's University, Belfast. a.mackenzie@qub.ac.uk

Thank you for taking the time to read this Information Sheet.

Appendix Two



June 2021

Participant Consent Form: One-to-one Interviews

Study: An investigation into adult reflections on the experience of ability grouping in post-primary school.

The study aims to explore the impact of ability grouping in secondary school on young people while at school and, later, as adults.

The privacy rights of the group members are a priority of the study and privacy, anonymity and confidentiality will be assured. The researcher will be available to answer any queries regarding the study.

Please read and complete this form carefully. If you are willing to participate in this study, ring the appropriate responses and sign and date the declaration at the end. If you do not understand anything and would like more information, please ask.

- I have had the research satisfactorily explained to me in verbal and / or written form by the researcher and understand the aims and objectives of the research. YES/NO
- I agree to be interviewed as part of the research project. YES/NO
- I agree to have the interviews audio recorded and I understand this will be transcribed and the original recording will be deleted. YES/ NO
- I am happy to facilitate the research process, for analysis by the researcher. YES /NO
- I understand that all information will be treated in strict confidence and that my comments will not be traced back to me. YES /NO
- I understand that any audiotape material of the interview will be used solely for research purposes and will be destroyed on completion of transcription. All data will be destroyed after 5 years. YES/NO
- I understand that data from the interviews conducted through Microsoft Teams will be private. YES/NO

- I understand that I may withdraw from this study up to two weeks after my interview is completed by emailing the researcher without having to give an explanation. YES/NO

I freely give my consent to participate in this research study and have been given a copy of this form for my own information.

Participant's Signature: _____

Date: _____

Participant's Name (Printed): _____

Contact details: _____

Researcher's Name (Printed): PAT MCGUCKIAN

Researcher's Signature: Pat McGuckian

Contact details:

Pat McGuckian pmcguckian01@qub.ac.uk

Supervisor's Details:

Dr Alison MacKenzie, Queen's University, Belfast. a.mackenzie@qub.ac.uk



Appendix Three

Date

Dear

Thank you for taking part in the survey on the experience of ability grouping in secondary school. As promised, the information you have given me remains confidential. Filling in the questionnaire may have raised some issues for you or someone you know.

Many people face difficulties at times in their lives and it is important that you speak to someone if there is something troubling you. It is not unusual to face problems and there are lots of people who will spare the time to talk about anything that's on your mind.

There are a number of people you can turn to if you are feeling down. It could be a friend or family member, but it might be a doctor or nurse, social worker, or counsellor. It is important that you **talk to someone**.

If you feel you would prefer to speak to someone you don't know, there are lots of helpline numbers which will offer confidential advice.

Useful Numbers/Links

The Samaritans 08457 909090

www.samaritans.org

Talk to Frank

0800 776600

www.talktofrank.com

Lifeline

0808 808 8000

Minding Your Head

www.mindyourhead.org.uk

Yours....

Researcher Pat McGuckian pmcguckian01@qub.ac.uk +44 7533511413

Doctoral Supervisor Dr Alison MacKenzie Queen's University, Belfast

Appendix Four

Interview Schedule with anonymised names and brief biographical detail

Interview and date	Anonymous name FEMALE	Anonymous name MALE
1. 16/06/21		Marcus (aged 23) Marcus left school at sixteen with few formal qualifications. He now attends technical college, is an ambassador for autism, and is learning German.
2. 17/06/21	Marian (aged 25) is now a social worker. She was one of the few people from her class who returned to sixth form following GCSEs.	
3. 18/06/21		Malachy (aged 25) did not have the opportunity to study GCSE English and mathematics. He studied GCSE English in sixth form and passed it in Year 14. He is a teacher.
4. 19/06/21	Danielle (aged 25) left school at sixteen with two vocational GCSEs. She does not have any qualifications in mathematics or English. She now works as a childminder during the day and a care worker at night.	
5. 23/06/21		Paul (aged 25) was asked to leave school before the end of Year 12. He has no qualifications in English and mathematics. He now works as a labourer.
6. 24/06/21	Elaine (aged 25) did not have the opportunity to take GCSE English until sixth form, although she passed it in Year 14 and is now a nurse.	
7. 25/06/21	Jane (aged 25) did not have the opportunity to take GCSE English at school. Her family paid for private tuition and entered her privately for GCSE English. She is a nurse.	
8. 27/06/21		Ronan (aged 25) was diagnosed with a dyslexic-type literacy difficulty following an assessment arranged by his family. He did not have the opportunity to study

		GCSE English until sixth form. He passed it in Year 14. He now works in his father's business.
9. 29/06/21		Sean (aged 25) is a teacher, having achieved a first-class honours degree at university. Although he did not have the opportunity to study GCSE until sixth form, he passed it in Year 14.
10. 02/07/ 21	Louise (aged 24) has a temporary teaching post in Dublin. She did not have the opportunity to study languages at school. She is currently studying the Irish language at night.	
11. 06/07/21		Conor (aged 26) left school at age sixteen without any formal qualifications in mathematics. He dropped out of technical college and has worked in several pizza restaurants.

Appendix Five

Interview questions (*Suggested*)



The one-to-one interviews will be semi-structured.

Introduction to the project, including clarification on issues of confidentiality and anonymity and seeking permission to record the interview.

Grouping practices

- When and how did you discover which group you were in?
- At what stage in school were you placed into a particular group? (Start of year? After a term? etc.)
- Were pupils able to move up/down between groups?
- How frequently were pupils moved between groups?
- Who decided what groups pupils were in?
- Do you know the reasons why you were placed in a particular group?
- Were you, or your parents/carers, involved in any of the decisions about grouping?
- Do you think the process was fair? Why (or why not)?
- How did you feel about being in your group?

Your progress in school

- Do you feel you made good progress in your subjects? Why? Why not?
- What type of feedback did you receive from your teachers about how you were doing? Was it helpful?

Classroom experiences

What did you think about the work you did in that group?

What was it like to be in your classroom?

- Did you find the work in too easy, just about right or too hard? Why?
- How well were you able to concentrate in school? What helped you/hindered you?
- Did your teachers do anything in particular that helped you to learn?
- Did your teachers do anything in particular that made it more difficult for you to learn?
- Did anyone help you with your work? If so, how did they do this? Did you find it useful?
- Do you feel that you had enough help?
- If you went out of lessons sometimes for extra help, what did you do in these sessions? Were they useful? Were there any problems about going out for extra help?
- Did you receive any help with your work at other times from other people, e.g. parents, mentors?

- What one thing would you have changed about your lessons to help improve your learning?

Pros and cons of attainment grouping

- What were the advantages of being in this group?
- What were the disadvantages of being in this group?

As an adult looking back...

Has the experience of being in a particular group had any longer-term effect on you?

(e.g. your attitude to education or learning/ self-confidence/ friendships, etc.?)

What are your views on ability grouping now?

Is there anything else you would like to add?



Thank you very much for taking the time to participate in this interview.



Appendix Six: Sample Transcript

Malachy (Teacher, aged 25)

It's been almost 10 years...from first to fourth year I thought nobody cared about me...I'm not looking pity...I remember meeting you and you taking an interest in me...I was in Lower Sixth when you arrived. I remember you taking the classes and just the way you explained things...I had never heard of a rhetorical question before...I'd never heard that phrase before...I thought 'What the hell does that mean?'...like I'm not stupid, but I had never heard it before.

So, you are now an adult, you have had life experience and time to reflect on your first four years at high school. I am interested to hear your thoughts now...Did you know which group you were in?

Malachy: I knew I was in Band B from my very first day in Year 8...when the year 8 came in there was an assembly and I remember all the Form teachers went up and read their list...called out the names 'OK boys and girls'...I was in one of the last classes called out...my Form Teacher called out my name and brought us up to the Form room and lined up at the back of the room...and I think someone in the class asked her...she said has anyone got any questions and someone said 'Miss, Are we in a Band B class'? I didn't even know what that meant... I remember that clear as day and I had a conversation with a teacher in school recently about that...about this memory...She said 'Yes, you are B band. So, she explained the whole banding system, so those two classes with that were called out first there, A Band, then the next two are B band, and you are one of the lower groups...we were in one of the lower groups or something.

So from day one, from my very first day, I knew I was... We were told we were B band, but we were actually a bit lower than that probably...

How did you feel about that?

Malachy: It's hard to say how because I didn't understand...My gut feeling now is that I didn't feel good...but I can't say...I just felt confused. You know I felt that I was stupid straight away.

Do you know how you were placed in this group?

As far as I know, it was a test we did in P7 were actually do this test. I remember one day towards the end of the year you were told you had to go and do this test...someone from the high school coming before it in the primary school and we were told this is what would happen blah blah blah and I remember going to the high school and doing the test.

I don't know if it didn't know anything I don't even think I answered a thing. I probably didn't know anything, but I don't know. I have a vague memory of that...it was one test on a day. I remember being told that this test will determine what you do and what class you would be in...that must be where the question from someone in my class came from...

I have a vague memory of that.

I don't even think I answered a thing.

It was one test on a day or an evening where we walked up to the high school or done the test.

Uh, I don't know that we only we made aware how important this was. I don't think so. I don't think so...whether there was other factors, whether there was other assessments, I'm sure there was...I hope there was, but my main memory was one test.

Were your friendship groups from primary school affected by your placement?

If I look back, yeah, in primary school I would have been very popular and, not to be cocky or anything, but I was into football, and it was football, football, football... still was through high school, but uhm....I did have loads of friends, but when I went I'm started Year 8, all my friends...most my friends were top group...so I never even got to see them.

Now I was lucky enough. I made loads, friends and... like I'm not...I had loads of friends. I'm not saying it didn't, but my close friends and the people who are hung out with outside of school were all top groups or middle groups, all above me anyway and I never got to see it until lunchtime... even at lunchtime....No, it was all their classes.

Uh, it probably wasn't that bad until we got up to GCSE level, by that time, that was different because... then you started to notice the groups more due to the fact that one day a week we went to tech and had to wear our own clothes. In assemblies, you know, tech class to the back and before the assembly was over ...Year heads said 'Right Tech, classes away you go on the bus' and you have the right through the back door and the assembly hall and hop on the bus and then they carried on with their assembly.

It's memories like that stick in my head you know was there any signals and you know was there. I was just thinking that, you know my blood is boiling away thinking about it,

I do not want to hurt you. Please don't talk about this if you don't want to.

Malachy: I want to talk about it. Yeah, 'cause I don't really talk about it. It does anger me...like say before you go to form class you're in in your own clothes.

You know there's that maybe 10 minutes when you get to be with your friends...I remember walking to form class one day and a group of boys in the year above me were roaring and laughing at what I was wearing my own clothes and they were shouting, you know 'Look at the Tech-tard'. A Tech- tard... Yeah. That that was the theme in the school at the time 'Tech-tard'.

Now I didn't get it as bad now. I had loads of friends in A Bands... I was captain of the football team, so I didn't really get it, but I've seen other people get it really bad, but I was a captain of football teams,

I'm getting a wee bit annoyed thinking about it... you know?....Yeah, we're definitely looked down on with your peers, definitely.

It wasn't until you got the GCSE's. That's when I really started to feel it, you know.

Did it affect your GCSE Subject choices?

Uhm, I remember when the GCSE options came out. We were told right you are going to the Tech... I remember when the GCSE options came out....Can we not do languages? Can we not do geography? Can we not do history? NO, NO, NO, you didn't even have an option. And if you wanted to do that, I remember ... wanted to do. I don't know what it was, some other GCSE that wasn't available to her. She had to move form class. She didn't want to go

to the tech. She didn't go to the tech, moved form class so she didn't know anyone in her new form class.

She had to leave her peers, she had to completely switch form classes. You know, I think she was adamant that she wanted to do so as some GCSE. I don't even know what it was but...it wasn't even an option.

Like...there are other people who didn't want to go to tech, you know, to mean. I'm sure there were...you know why, but you know. But they didn't want that.

They went to the Tech because they didn't want to have to move form class, right? They couldn't do it, because they made...because the other form classes will be full in and you know...it's all these always excuses.

How did it affect you?

So I never got an option to do double award science. I never got an option. It wasn't offered to you, and if you questioned it was always, No, it's not available, just not available...Languages so...French, Irish wasn't available. Spanish wasn't offered at the time. And geography wasn't available. History wasn't available. Now. You know what I mean?

What do you think about that now?

I think it's crazy like you... you did it at key stage 3. But when you get to choosing your GCSE options, it's not even available to you. What did I spend three years doing? And yeah...I know you should have a basic knowledge of everything but, You know, that's like saying to a child we're going to teach you this for three years...

You might love it. You may be terrible at it, but you might love it, but we're not going to let you do it. Yeah.

That defeats the purpose for me...just the defeats the purpose when you're not making subjects available.

You're not, I did...I see that as not having the same opportunity, but someone in A band...do you know what I'm trying to say?

And whether that's...if you have the make the subject available maybe not on an academic route but on a vocational route, yeah, that's better. That's better than not letting the child have an option...to tell them no...

You know, and now don't get me wrong. I'm not saying I wanted to do Irish, but I wanted to have the choice.

I think some teacher said to 'You will never do this, so you'll never be able to do that'. But she said, 'But I wanna' do that...I think she wanted to be a paramedic. I know she said 'I need double award science' or something and then it wasn't available to her... so she fought and fought and I think her mom fought and fought and eventually got her to move.

She's doing well now but, you know it's just terrible. I think maybe you shouldn't have to fight so hard and then they end up resenting the place, you know.

I mean, on the flip side, I've talked to boys and girls who want to go down the vocational route. Want to do a trade...but they will need GCSEs as well...

Are there any long-term impacts of being in that group?

There's people in my year who I never got to know. I never knew the ones who were in the top bands, you know, when you meet them in social circles, you know and they're looking at you like, ah, you know, hello. In the same year at school for seven years, I don't even know their name? They probably don't know my name.

When I went to do A levels now...you might have a question about this after, but I remember passing... GCSE's I think it was at the time and got into A levels, but because I went into A levels I was put into a new form class. I didn't know anyone and I clung on to the boys I played football with...

And I don't know anyone in the form class and I ended up being a bit of a class clown because it came from the B band.

Yeah, they said 'I think you went to Tech didn't you'? You know it's always that in the back of their head...and then you just end up...yeah, I ended up a bit of a class clown.

Did you feel that there were high expectations for you?

To be honest with you I don't even know what the work ethic was like. I don't really have many memories of any class. If you know what I mean but. I do have a memory of. You know, I think it was an English class. It wasn't even a GCSE class. I was taken out of my GCSE English class and I was put into a class where it was essential skills...it was a mixture of year, year 11 and year 12 pupils.

We were just bunged into one classroom and you were just told to do something.

I didn't learn anything...and I think that's the way most of my classes went...you weren't actually challenged. There was no challenge, it was just do this do that they did.

I've done that and then the teacher says right...'then mess about there', you know. Then the other classes...they were getting all this homework and they were being taught right the full length that lesson and I might have sat there all day doing nothing. No, we thought this was gas... the best crack.

Yeah, I know that brings the memory back to me. I remember one of my TD lessons. I'm a TD Teacher now but I only ever did Foundation TD at GCSE...Highest I could get was a C...and I teach it now. Anyway, I remember my teacher, the same teacher from first to third year. And even for GCSE actually... the whole way up to 5th year. He told us to scribble all over a page. He says, right, I want you to pick out shapes and I want you to shade them in different colours...I just sat there. He stood in the store talking to another teacher for the full double period. Whatever it was you know and it was just like draw lines and pick out shapes from those lines. You know colour in between the gaps. Pathetic. Absolutely pathetic.

Half an hour later the teacher comes in and obviously the boys had been chatting and messing and then he would go mad that you were messing about...

There's no, there's no stimulation there at all. I'll not even tell you about my primary school experience...in primary school, I struggled with reading and...all these wee memories are coming into my head, I'm sorry...

I remember the Primary school teacher taking me out for extra reading. I couldn't get into a rhythm of reading. I'm still a very bad reader. Now I'm nearly convinced of some sort of dyslexia, but anyway, still a terrible reader, just I mix up words...

That must have been tough at university...?

Malachy: Even like proofreading things that I still get, my fiancée to proofread things for me, yeah? Like I said it's a joke, I'm a head of the year now. I can't even proofread my, you know I'm trying to say Mommy and Daddy were giving me a bath one night. On there they noticed all these marks on my back. They said 'What is that?' I don't really remember this now, but they said I burst into tears saying it was the teacher I'll not say her name, but such and such done that on me in school today.

Daddy went buck mad and went straight into the school and challenged the principal and challenged the teacher...Or what the hell is going on?

The teacher's excuse was...and what happened was that she was poking me in the back with a pen to get me into a rhythm, a rhythm...

I don't I don't remember, I don't remember...Mum and dad would say that I came home and whatever happened they were bought for me and it was all bruised... You know my shoulder blade. She hit me with a pen, obviously wasn't very hard...but I think it was about...I was about P4 or P5 because in P4 they had bother as well. I don't know...all I did was play in the sand all day. They laugh, the family laugh at me like now you know... you're a teacher and all you did was play in the sand.

Not many know that, Mommy and Daddy know that...like I, I would still say 'Why did you not do more about that?' If I had a child now I knew someone would have done that...I see it now...some teachers get comfortable, others don't even like teaching or children. It would suck the life out of you

You've touched on the challenges of moving to Sixth Form. In terms of the work at A level, was it a big step up?

I think there was...like I remember A level PE. My A Level PE...was difficult for everyone, even the top students there...But why I was allowed to do it I don't know.

But I just thought I am a footballer, so 'A' Level PE would do well. I remember my 'A' level PE teacher he had to get me to come and see him on my free periods to show me how to organize my file, show me how to revise, show me how...It's embarrassing thinking back to it, like you know...

No, what it suggests to me is that you weren't able to develop the required organisational skills at KS4...

Study skills...that's probably what I found hardest, not necessarily the workload or, the ability or the level of it...that's it... it was just managing, organising and study skills...

I wanted to do the teaching and Coleraine wouldn't accept me because I only had essential skill modules. But anyway, there was a knock on effect that I didn't expect. The guys, I had planned to live with the boys and their they had houses sorted. I ended up sharing a house with girls who were in our year, but I wasn't friends with them or anything. I know that's a complaint that doesn't really matter, but you know...wee things like that could put you off...

You know when you get your results, you have to line-up and if we have to speak to the careers advisor... Well, uh. I got my A level results and I was actually happy enough. So, I lined up to speak to the careers' officer and she basically just said 'They are no good to you'. I said that I'm not getting my first choice 'cause it was not B and a C. Like NO. I was like 'What about clearing?' and... I just want to get the uni you know 'cause it was not gonna be in a... at the time I was like I just wanna get in...NO, NO, NO you won't even get into clearing and I was like well you have a look and see what I can get into.

I remember her having a look at clearing and options and she basically sent me on my way now and I says right? Well I'd be willing to come back and repeat 'cause I'm very young for my year. I've been speaking to sports coach already. He said I can still play football 'cause it's under 18 half. I tried to justify to her why I should get back in... Because she told me I'm not getting into uni.

She just said No, you can't just come back and I says, why like? I had no behavioral issues, but no, no. I was coming away from the high school that day devastated, not because my results, but because of what I was told.

I was just told that you're not getting into uni and you can't come back here next year. On that, when I went back into the school to teach later...The person was like 'Hello, what are you doing? , they Passed themselves and I passed myself and. No, they probably don't even remember...but I remember. You know, yes, it was real negativity.

You know, no, you're not getting in... You're not getting the clearing and you're not get into uni and you're not getting back here.

I'm really not lying. That's part of what happened to me as well.

117 going to happen, terrible...like the ends
118 of the earth with 'them'
119 33. - that mad
120 crowd(laughing)...that's what
121 happened. We were doing the harder
122 questions at the end of the book...like
123 5 points for one question...teacher
124 telling us
125 34. that 'the other class gets this at
126 the start'...always the other class...and I
127 mean people have different learning
128 abilities. Imagine saying this to people
129 with dyspraxia
130 or...
131 35. In terms of the teachers'
132 expectations in other subjects...how
133 did this affect you?
134 36. The expectation was that you
135 were doing foundation and that was it
136 there was no opportunity to do
137 higher...unless...there wasn't even any
138 opportunity...unless you
139 moved groups and that very, very
140 rarely happened...the only opportunity
141 was at the end of KS3 based on your
142 Christmas and summer reports...one
143 boy in my class
144 39. was moved...he had to get As in
145 core subjects RE, Science, English and
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*Teacher
Selling them
down
every
single
one*

*Lack of control
How much
very
rarely*

*Pattern of
negative
language
'B Bad'
'terrible/ends
of the earth'
them
that mad
crowd
'That's what
happened...
Confirming of
perceived
expectation
'The other class...
Always the
other class...'
ADULT
'I mean people
have different...
'Imagine saying
this to people...
with dyspraxia'
- Adult
indignation
at the
labelling of
pupils
Reinforced expectations
low expectations
expectation was
that you were
doing foundation
and that was it
Finality captured -
'that was it'*

175 47. We had a different booklet and
176 we had to do two vocational subjects
177 from the Tech - occupational studies... I
178 did hairdressing and make-up
179 application and I did
180 photography in first year and
181 creating a website in second year... I
182 mean, they were good life skills, but if I
183 had the chance again I would choose
184 differently. That
185 48. counted for two GCSEs, whereas
186 the top group were given the chance
187 to do more subjects...like they were
188 able to do music and languages. I was
189 allowed to do a
190 language which was totally
191 unheard of in a lower group...I did it
192 after school two nights a week...it was
193 called a twilight class. I won an award
194 for it, but I think I got
195 49. doing it because we created a fuss
196 as I went to an Irish primary
197 school...there were other people in my
198 class who were well fit for it, but they
199 didn't get that
200 50. opportunity as they were in that
201 group, and it was so unfair
202 (emphasis)...
203 51. Reflecting on the process now...

*Acceptance
used to be
we had to
do...*

*we had to
do...*

*Long term impact
'if I had the
chance again
I would choose
differently'
- more scope +
choice for
top groups
- wider curricular
offer - more
enriching
Lit/Music
Art/History
etc.*

*I missed
out on this
- missing the
twilight
class for me*

*'well fit for it'
'didn't get that
opportunity'
Adult awareness
of the unfair
treatment of
other classmates
"so unfair"
Tone of indignation*

146 maths from first year to third year...like
147 nobody tells you that...he did move up,
148 fine...working
149 40. in a shop now...it made no
150 difference, it doesn't matter.
151 The big thing was that if you're in
152 a top group you're going to do well...if
153 you're put in a low group you're put in
154 a box and labelled as 'Foundation'...it
155 limits those
156 42. opportunities...and it limits your
157 education...you're only given the
158 opportunity to get a C, so your chances
159 are minimised from the start.
160 43. I got 100% in my science and
161 could only get a B...the exam board
162 made an exception because I got full
163 marks. I remember begging, I actually
164 remember begging the
165 Head of Science 'Please, please let
166 me do higher tier' and he said no you
167 can't you're in for Foundation and
168 that's it. I said 'There are two weeks
169 before the exam
170 45. and I will be able to cram it
171 in'...and he just said no, no. So that
172 was it.
173 46. What were your subject choices
174 at GCSE?

*if you're in a top group... Expectation
you're going to do well... fulfilled*

*long term impact
lack of information/
control
'like nobody tells
you that'
- Grouping structure
'made no
difference to
him'
'you're put in
a box and
labelled as
Foundation'
- limits opportunities
- limits education
'you're only given
opportunity to get a C'
- chances minimised
from the start
Long-term impact
- Got a 'B' even
though
higher
- Memory - limited
opportunity to
achieve
'I remember
begging, I actually
remember begging'
Powerful emotional
language +
repetition
'Please, please
let me do higher.'*

Restricted opportunities

*Lack of control
'No, you can't... that's it'
Finality of response
'No, no'
'So that was it'*

204 54. It just totally disadvantages you
205 from the day and hour you walk in... I
206 never thought we were doing such an
207 important exam in P7, if we knew what
208 was at stake in
209 P7...my future, my mum would
210 have had us at tutors, but we weren't
211 aware.
212 56. God, I hated it! I remember
213 walking out to get the bus to the tech
214 in your ordinary clothes, people are so
215 silly, but they were laughing at you as
216 you weren't in
217 57. uniform...the abuse would start
218 'Techtards', what are you doing today,
219 blah, blah?
220 58. We were always back a few
221 minutes early from Tech to be there
222 for the bus...so we were waiting and
223 people walked out laughing at us... you
224 felt so inferior and so
225 59. small. Made you feel like nothing.
226 We all felt so embarrassed...my friends
227 would say this is awful - everybody is
228 laughing at us. It was like bullying...but
229 (at the time) - Then = Acceptance/numb
230 you are nearly numb to the
231 situation because you've been so used
232 to it from first year. They just walk over
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*So that's
the
Capital*

*Adult perspective
- unfair +
realtive
totally
disadvantages
you...
from the day
+ how you
walk in
Emphatic language
- Lack of
awareness/
information
Emphasis on
feeling marginal
'God, I hated it'
Vivid memory of
being 'separate'
'walking to bus
in ordinary clothes'
ADULT PERSPECTIVE
of the pupils
'people are so
silly'
'they were
laughing
'abuse'
'Techtards'
'people walked out laughing at us'
'felt so inferior + so small'
Repetition of 'so' - emphatic
'Made you feel like nothing'
'awful' 'everybody is
laughing at
us'*

*Then +
Now*

the top of you... You're in your box and they are in theirs

61. and that's it! The grouping created such a divide, so you just get numb to that treatment... and it wasn't just the pupils. The teachers treated us differently, they

62. expected our class to be very badly behaved... and it's nearly like that was the default, there might have been a couple of ones who caused uproar, but like nobody

63. was that bad, there were no bad children.

64. We were treated differently to the other classes...

65. What are your memories of returning into Sixth Form?

66. To be honest I was delighted to get into sixth form to get the chance to do A Levels... I found the transition very strange... because, I'll be honest, it was the treatment

67. of the teachers that I found the strangest... you just didn't have that... I had found that they were very defensive towards our class, or a wee bit guarded towards our

68. class as if they were expecting us to behave badly... nearly on edge... now they were much more relaxed... more easy we were able to have relaxed conversations with them

69. them, whereas before it was constantly be quiet, or you were getting scolded, you were never able to have a normal relaxed conversation with them... so then you

70. were afraid to ask for help then... you were afraid of getting shouted at... like there are so many... you could unpick this all day honestly... LACK OF CONTROL

71. You can't unlock the potential that you have, because you are in this trap, because of the school culture, because of the attitudes towards you, you have just been stuck in box that you in from day one and are never going to get out of it... unless you put in 100% effort and basically suck it up and keep going until you fight through suck it up... keep going... fight through

73. it... I did notice different attitude in sixth form... a positive change

74. What about the others who didn't make it to sixth form? Are you

Handwritten notes on page 1:

- They just want the top of you
- You're in your box and they are in theirs
- LACK OF CONTROL
- Such a divide
- You get numb
- FEELINGS
- IMPACT OF LABELS
- low expectations of work + behaviour
- treated us differently
- we were treated differently
- expected us to be very badly behaved
- that was the default
- nobody was that bad, there were no bad children
- ADULT MEMORY
- Sixth form
- delighted
- get the chance to do A levels
- SEPARATION creates low expectations
- expecting poor behaviour
- Repetition of relaxed, easy
- Affiliation possible
- 'Be quiet'
- Scolded
- never able to have a normal conversation
- Negative impact of separation - vicious cycle
- apart to ask for help
- apart of getting shouted at
- Adult reflection - emerging insights
- like these are so many - realization of former effects
- You could unpick this all day
- adult insight
- revealing insight
- locked/trapped in a box - see it deeply
- School culture / Attitudes
- * Epiphany for EDEL

aware of any pupils who did not come back?

75. I know a girl who was in my class who had brains to burn... brilliant at maths... she was offered the chance to move up and she said no due to a lack of

76. confidence... her self-confidence and self-worth was on the floor at school and it was because of how we were viewed... she dropped out... she owns her own business

77. now - she did it a different way... I remember feeling so sorry for her she came to our formal night to see her friend... she wasn't there as an attendee... everyone who

78. dropped out of my class should have been there, it's a big night she should have been there... I remember being in the Sports Hall and everyone was there in their

79. fancy gowns, feeling fabulous, and she was there in jeans and a t-shirt.

80. Final thoughts on the experience?

81. Looking back... I do even now have a massive chip on my shoulder... I think that people are judging me on my

Handwritten notes on page 2:

- Others who are less resilient)
- 'brains to burn' brilliant at maths
- Contract =
- lack of confidence
- Self-worth on the floor
- 'because of how we were viewed'
- 'dropped out'
- 'owns her own business now - Despire school'
- feelings
- "so sorry for her... formal night"
- 'wasn't an attendee'
- 'everyone who dropped out' suggests a high rate of attrition
- Repetition of 'She should have been there'
- Repetition of 'remember'
- long term impact
- I do even now have a massive chip on my shoulder
- carries a sense of the stigmatization of treatment at school
- and metaphor of placed in a box & labelled
- Professionally annoyed - 'write reports every day'
- competent + confident
- situations of glorias
- yet underneath harbours a fear that others will 'think I'm stupid'
- 'I could cry' - vulnerability which extends beyond adolescence into adulthood - even though she can rationalize the experience.
- Justice Fairness
- 'fancy gowns' 'feeling fabulous' 'jeans + a t-shirt'
- Visible contrast - Separation
- CLASH & REPRESENTATION OF DIFFERENCE
- ADULT MEMORY
- SEPARATION creates low expectations
- expecting poor behaviour
- Repetition of relaxed, easy
- Affiliation possible
- 'Be quiet'
- Scolded
- never able to have a normal conversation
- Negative impact of separation - vicious cycle
- apart to ask for help
- apart of getting shouted at
- Adult reflection - emerging insights
- like these are so many - realization of former effects
- You could unpick this all day
- adult insight
- revealing insight
- locked/trapped in a box - see it deeply
- School culture / Attitudes
- * Epiphany for EDEL

Appendix Eight

Marcus' visual representation of his recollection

