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## Beauty is in the Eye of the Beholder: Reframing the Possible Employment Outcomes of Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA) Students from Disadvantaged Communities

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# Beauty is in the Eye of the Beholder: Reframing the Possible Employment Outcomes of Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA) Students from Disadvantaged Communities

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## Abstract

Researching disadvantage can potentially make a difference to the lives of those who are involved. Can we research disadvantage without adding to an already negative narrative or appearing to be condescending? Application of Active Research as a methodology can bring an inclusive and participatory approach to studying disadvantage. Comprehension of the impact of theories such as social reproduction and possible selves, their interaction and how one could be used to counteract the other, will allow an opportunity for conversation around positive solutions. Through understanding the language used to describe disadvantage we can bring an openness to challenge how we look at what society deems to be educational disadvantage. This paper will explore why there is a need for discourse around disadvantage and whether there is an opportunity to reframe the narrative and create a pathway to employment that is both positive and participant focused.

## Keywords

Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA); DEIS; Disadvantage; Action Research; Cognitive Reframing; Possible Selves

## Introduction

Without giving context and background to any topic it can be difficult to understand why it should be researched. This paper seeks to outline the authors planned PhD research study by giving an overview of the reasons for choosing the topic. The title of the Research Topic is "Inclusion at a local level- the potential impact of Industry on the trajectory of employment for Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA) students in DEIS communities." The aim of the study is to create a pathway into Industry for Leaving Cert Applied students who attend Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS) schools. It

will create a pathway that gives students the opportunity to showcase their talents while they learn skills identified by industry as critical for success. It will build on two Global Sustainable Goals of ending poverty and providing education. From an industry perspective it will ensure the companies involved are supporting and growing the local communities they are based in.

## Defining Disadvantage

To understand why this topic is important to further the discourse around disadvantage in its many forms, we must define which specific areas the research will further develop. Disadvantage is defined in the Collins dictionary as “an unfavourable circumstance or harmful circumstance.” To be “at a disadvantage” is to be in “a less favourable position than other people.”<sup>1</sup>

In undertaking research on this area, the researcher wants to give disadvantage a space as a topic for discussion and research. Social class and poverty can be considered by some to be taboo especially if it is discussed as being in our own communities, as it continues to draw negative connotations to it. Can this be changed? Can the way we research disadvantage and talk about disadvantage be changed to enable a positive approach to finding solutions?

### Who should research Disadvantage?

Are you by default no longer disadvantaged if you are advantageous enough to be able to add to the body of research? Every researcher brings their own personal paradigm and in this field of study there is no difference.<sup>2</sup> As a researcher working within the community the author is cognisant of the potential for bias. When we look later at the impact of language, it will also be important to recognise the power of the words and language we use throughout the study to try to minimise any perceived or direct condescension.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> *Collins English Dictionary*, second edition (2006), s.v. “disadvantage.”

<sup>2</sup> Louis Cohen, Lawrence Manion and Keith Morrison, *Research Methods in Education* (London: Routledge, 2017), 302.

<sup>3</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, *Language and Symbolic Power* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991), 1.

## Research Methodology

The author has chosen Action Research as their methodology specifically to facilitate a study that is participatory in its format. Action research focuses on creating meaningful and authentic change for those involved and works as cycles of improvements. Study participants are involved in testing and feedback of solutions and their interpretations and feedback build changes in each consecutive cycle.<sup>4</sup> To try to understand how cycles of disadvantage and social structure norms can be changed or influenced positively this methodology will give a voice to those deemed “disadvantaged.”

Jacob Harold, in discussing strategies for crafting social impact, recommends that a cyclical approach is a good ethical match for social change as it does not put the social change agent above those they serve.<sup>5</sup> A potential drawback of a cyclical approach is noted as the reliance on feedback from your constituents and that if constituents cannot yet imagine a different world, their feedback may pull towards the status quo. This will be further considered when we look at the concept of “possible selves” later in the paper and whether students have the ability to consider possibilities outside of their current environment.

The study cohort will be young people undertaking the Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA) programme, their teachers, and Hiring Managers from a local company across three sites in Dublin, Ireland. All the groups will be interviewed at each stage to incorporate their feedback before the study evolves and progresses.

## Leaving Certificate Applied

What is it?

The LCA programme was first introduced in Ireland in 1995 and was designed as an alternative to the other, traditional Leaving Certificate models, with its primary focus on preparing students for the world of adult and working life.<sup>6</sup> By design it already made the students who completed this programme different. They were not heading to college, and they were not

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<sup>4</sup>Michelle Vaughan, Christopher Boerum and Linda S. Whitehead, “Action Research in Doctoral Coursework: Perceptions of Independent Research Experiences,” *International Journal for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning* 13, no. 1 (2019): 6.

<sup>5</sup>Jacob Harold, *The Toolbox: Strategies For Crafting Social Impact* (New Jersey: John Wiley & Sons, 2023).

<sup>6</sup>NCCA, *Leaving Certificate Applied, Programme Statement & Outline of Student Tasks*. (Dublin: The Stationery Office, 2021), [https://ncca.ie/en/resources/lca\\_programme/](https://ncca.ie/en/resources/lca_programme/).

expected to, as the qualification is excluded from the CAO points system for college entry in Ireland, limiting students in directly accessing third-level education.<sup>7</sup>

Schools with high participation rates in LCA (where over 26% of their senior cycle students take the LCA programme) are DEIS schools, vocational schools, and schools in Dublin.<sup>8</sup> The DEIS programme began in Ireland in 2005 when the Irish Governments response to supporting students from low Socio-Economic Status backgrounds was to adopt a policy of positive discrimination.<sup>9</sup> Schools were determined to be eligible for DEIS status based on a “deprivation index.” The Deprivation Index is a government dataset which is based on the combination of three dimensions of relative affluence and deprivation: Demographic Profile, Social Class Composition and Labour Market Situation.<sup>10</sup> Variables such as employment status, education levels, single parenthood, overcrowding, and dependency rates are considered. The language of negativity cannot be ignored here.

As part of the DEIS programme the Junior Certificate Schools Programme (JCSP) and the Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA) were to be made available to all schools serving disadvantaged areas. It could be argued that through this well-intentioned additional support an immediate link was forged between LCA and disadvantage. While the LCA can offer an opportunity for students to complete school with a qualification who otherwise may have dropped out it can also be regarded as somewhat of a safety net whereby it catches students who may not complete the traditional school pathway but in doing so can ring-fence them and limit their potential outcomes.<sup>11</sup>

Research shows that students who take vocational education tracks in Denmark differ in terms of academic ability, family background and educational aspirations from students who choose an academic upper

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<sup>7</sup> Joanne Banks, Delma Byrne, Selina McCoy and Emer Smyth, *Engaging Young People? Student Experiences of the Leaving Certificate Applied* (Dublin: The Economic and Social Research Institute, 2010), xvii.

<sup>8</sup> Joanne Banks, Emer Smyth and Selina McCoy, “Leaving Certificate Applied Programme Discussion Paper,” *Economic Social Research Institute* (2017), 11.

<sup>9</sup> Brian Fleming and Judith Harford. “The DEIS programme as a Policy Aimed at Combating Educational Disadvantage: Fit for Purpose?,” *Irish Educational Studies* 42, no. 3 (2021): 4.

<sup>10</sup> Pobal HP Deprivation Index, 2021, <https://data.gov.ie/dataset/pobal-hp-deprivation-index>.

<sup>11</sup> Gary Squires, Afroditi Kalambouka and Joanna Bragg, “A Study of the Experiences of Pupils with Special Educational Needs,” *National Council for Special Education* (2016), 29.

secondary education.<sup>12</sup> Senator Lynne Ruane, in a discussion in the Senate around reform of the Leaving Certificate highlighted that the social demographic of those who undertake apprenticeships is not spread across society and that those from the middle or higher classes do not encourage their children into apprenticeships and this furthers the class divide.<sup>13</sup> Reay agrees that for as long as vocational tracks are stigmatised, “stereotyped and devalued,” they will be what working-class people do.<sup>14</sup>

### So why then would students choose these routes?

In discussing whether the DEIS programme is fit for purpose Fleming and Hartford noted that pupils and parents in DEIS schools rely far more on school-based guidance for post-school options than in more advantaged schools<sup>15</sup> and that in instances where these resources are not there DEIS pupils have “nowhere else to turn” unlike middle-class families who have social networks and a private education market.<sup>16</sup> Social-Class inequalities in educational attainment have been called out in research previously where it has been shown that children whose parents work in professional or managerial roles generally “make more ambitious educational choices” than do children from working class backgrounds.<sup>17</sup>

Senator Ruane believes that apprenticeships reinforce a cycle of poverty which can develop when people have skills that are not transferrable, which

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<sup>12</sup> Anders Holm and Mads Meier Jaeger, “Dentist, Driver or Dropout? Family Background and Secondary Education Choices in Denmark,” in Michelle Jackson, ed., *Determined to Succeed?: Performance Versus Choice in Educational Attainment* (Redwood City CA: Stanford University Press, 2013), 228-252.

<sup>13</sup> *Seanad Eireann Debate*, Tuesday, 11 May 2021, [https://www.oireachtas.ie/en/debates/debate/seanad/2021-05-11/11/?highlight%5B0%5D=diversity&highlight%5B1%5D=diversity#spk\\_85](https://www.oireachtas.ie/en/debates/debate/seanad/2021-05-11/11/?highlight%5B0%5D=diversity&highlight%5B1%5D=diversity#spk_85).

<sup>14</sup> Diane Reay, “Schooling for Democracy: A Common School and a Common University? A Response to ‘Schooling for Democracy’,” *Democracy and Education* 19, no. 1 (2011): 6.

<sup>15</sup> Fleming and Harford, “The DEIS programme,” 1-19.

<sup>16</sup> Kathleen Lynch and Claire O’Riordan, “Inequality in Higher Education: A Study of Class Barriers,” *British Journal of Sociology of Education* 19, no. 4 (1998): 471; Tamara Thiele, Daniel Pope, Alexander Singleton, Darlene Snape and Debbi Stanistreet, “Experience of Disadvantage: The Influence of Identity on Engagement in Working Class Students’ Educational Trajectories to an Elite University,” *British Educational Research Journal* 43, no. 1 (2017): 62.

<sup>17</sup> Richard Breen, Ruud Luijck, Walter Müller and Reinhard Pollak, “Nonpersistent Inequality in Educational Attainment: Evidence from Eight European Countries,” *American Journal of Sociology* 114, no. 5 (2009): 1478; Yossi Shavit and Hans-Peter Blossfeld, *Persistent Inequality: Changing Educational Attainment in Thirteen Countries. Social Inequality Series* (Boulder CO: Westview Press, 1993), quoted in Michelle Jackson, ed., *Determined to Succeed?: Performance Versus Choice in Educational Attainment* (Redwood City CA: Stanford University Press, 2013), 2.

is often the case with Trade Apprenticeships. Social Reproduction Theory argues that student pathways are socially structured and that vocational tracks, which the LCA programme is, channel working-class young people into subordinate roles which limits their educational opportunities.<sup>18</sup> The idea that school and the education system might play a part in reproducing social inequalities can be unpalatable to those working in education as it challenges meritocratic assumptions that who have ability, will perform well and be successful based on the merit of their work. But Collins goes on to confirm that the basic idea that the school system rations kinds of knowledge to class or ethnically stratified student populations.<sup>19</sup>

An Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI) discussion paper on the LCA programme, aligns with Senator Ruane's position, in that it identified that a part of the LCA programme was the polarity of unintended consequences, that while vocational programmes such as LCA were intended to assist disadvantaged young people, they may in fact add to their exclusion and limit their life chances.<sup>20</sup> As mentioned previously the direct link between LCA and the DEIS programme gives an example of an unintended consequence where there was an immediate conceptual link created between LCA and disadvantage.

Should we consider perhaps that similar to inherent bias it might be possible that schools and teachers are not proactively and purposefully agents of social exclusion but that the system of stratification allows and facilitates it to happen? One criticism of social reproduction theory being borne out in school is an argument that says the theory does not into account agency and change.<sup>21</sup> The argument here being that it is cultural agency and class conflicts in society that play out in school – with an example given of how the behaviour of working-class English lads behave like their father's shop-floor tactics controlling the flow of factory work – and not that school itself impacts on social class.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Cristina Iannelli and David Raffe, "Vocational Upper-Secondary Education and the Transition from School," *European Sociological Review* 23, no. 1 (2007): 49.

<sup>19</sup> James Collins, "Social Reproduction in Classrooms and Schools," *Annual Review of Anthropology* 38 (2009): 35.

<sup>20</sup> Banks, Smyth and McCoy, "Leaving Certificate Applied Programme," 14.

<sup>21</sup> Henry A. Giroux, "Theories of Reproduction and Resistance in the New Sociology of Education," *Harvard Education Review* 53, no 3 (1983): 259.

<sup>22</sup> Michael W. Apple, *Education and Power* (London: Routledge, 2012), quoted in James Collins, "Social Reproduction in Classrooms and Schools," *Annual Review of Anthropology* (2009): 36.

Collins' reports that it has been shown that family socioeconomic status was the strongest influence on a child's educational achievement and life chances.<sup>23</sup> What could be considered controversial is Feinstein's position that most studies do not seem to take account of the fact that cognitive ability itself is considerably influenced by social class however this supports Boudon's 1974 suggestion that parental social class effects children's educational outcomes.<sup>24</sup> When Bourdieu explains habitus in his discussions on social reproduction – that individuals are already predisposed to act in certain ways as we are the products of our own history and lived experiences – he goes on to deduce that is it down to habitus that working class young people tend to eliminate themselves from the educational system or to resign themselves to a vocational course of training.<sup>25</sup> Foley would align with the concept of students self-eliminating where he describes that working class kids do not play the classroom game well as they are either passive and exclude themselves from classroom interaction or openly defiant and likely to provoke confrontations from teachers.<sup>26</sup> A critique of Bourdieu's theory cast doubt on the role of education as a mechanism of class reproduction and determined that intergenerational reproduction of social class-based advantage has not been demonstrated.<sup>27</sup> Counter to this criticism, Bowles and Gintis propose that capitalism generates a high degree of inequality, and this inequality is transmitted across generations, with schooling reproducing rather than ameliorating that inequality.<sup>28</sup> Farid, Abbasi and Mahmood, in their paper modelling social reproduction theory show that education does contribute to the reproduction of social class and an intergenerational perpetuation of social hierarchies.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Collins, "Social Reproduction in Classrooms and Schools," 43.

<sup>24</sup> Leon Feinstein, "Inequality in the Early Cognitive Development of British Children in the 1970 Cohort," *Economica* 70, no. 277 (2003): 83.

<sup>25</sup> Bourdieu, *Language and Symbolic Power*, 22.

<sup>26</sup> Douglas E. Foley, *Learning Capitalist Culture: Deep in the Heart of Tejas* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1990), xv

<sup>27</sup> John Katsillis and Richard Rubinson, "Cultural Capital, Student Achievement, and Educational Reproduction: The Case of Greece," *American Sociological Review* 55, no. 2 (1990): 270-279.

<sup>28</sup> Samuel Bowles and Herbert Gintis, "Schooling in Capitalist America Twenty-Five Years Later," *Sociological Forum* 18, no. 2 (2003): 343.

<sup>29</sup> Shahzad Farid, Saif Ur Rehman Saif Abbasi and Qaisar Khalid Mahmood, "Modelling Bourdieusian Social Reproduction Theory," *Social Indicators Research* (2021): 323.



## Beauty is in the eye of the beholder

While sociology research continues to identify the many issues caused by a multiple of social structures including class, parental earnings, postcodes, and levels of education, it should be considered that what one person views as a disadvantage may be considered by others, in some situations, as an advantage.<sup>30</sup> When the LCA was established key objectives of the programme were to improve self-confidence, teach life skills and maturity to prepare students for the workplace when they left secondary school. While the LCA programme has worked on delivering these objectives it has left LCA students with a distinct trajectory that differs to their peers completing the Leaving Certificate.<sup>31</sup> Our focus on college places, points and college pathways can mean that the other skills and talents young people have can be overlooked. As this may be more prevalent for LCA students, whose qualification cannot bring them directly to college, we lose out on the benefits that the LCA was to deliver, and this cohort of students remain at a disadvantage.

## Can research focusing on the positive attributes of LCA show employers what they are missing out on?

Capability Approach, as developed by Sen and further developed by Nussbaum, argues that social arrangements should aim to expand people's capabilities and that there is greater equality in society when there is parity in people's capability to do or be what is valuable to them.<sup>32</sup> If our research focus can identify the skills the young people themselves have – what are they good at – it could help employers and educators move away from a focus on a hierarchy of outcomes with third-level education being seen as the top-tier and anything else being “less-than.” Watts suggests that using a capabilities approach would allow for the possibility that freedom to make

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<sup>30</sup> Robert Erikson, “Inequality of Educational Opportunity: The Role of Performance and Choice,” *European Review* 28, no.15 (2020): S44-S55; Fleming and Harford, “The DEIS Programme”; Iannelli and Raffe, “Vocational Upper Secondary Education”; Elizabeth B. Raposa, Lance D. Erickson, Matthew Hagler and Jean E. Rhodes, “How Economic Disadvantage Affects the Availability and Nature of Mentoring Relationships during the Transition to Adulthood,” *American Journal of Community Psychology* 61, no. 1-2 (2018): 191-203.

<sup>31</sup> Banks, Smyth and McCoy, “Leaving Certificate Applied Programme,” 1-22.

<sup>32</sup> John Broome, “Inequality Reexamined,” *The Economic Journal* 103, no. 419 (1993): 1067-1069; Martha Nussbaum, “Wellbeing, Contracts and Capabilities,” *Rethinking Wellbeing* (2005): 27.

choices includes the freedom to reject what is viewed as a higher or better option.<sup>33</sup>

Interestingly the capability approach is used in a discussion to promote a programme for “college for every student” which seems to move from widening the scope of capabilities to a narrower focus of developing capabilities needed to go on to college.<sup>34</sup> The capability approach however should be investigated further as it has the potential to illustrate the wide variety of capabilities and the wide application these may have in society and not only for identifying the capabilities required to go on to third level education.

### **A lack of diversity of thought**

What are employers missing out on? Potentially if there are groups of students with sufficient ability, who for whatever reason did not proceed on to complete secondary or university education, then there is an argument that there must be working-class children who are not realising their full potential. This is defined as the talent reserve by Husèn, a concept revisited by Härnqvist.<sup>35</sup> Erikson, through his research for the Swedish Institute for Social Research, explains an idea of Inequality of Educational Opportunity (IEO) which is understood to be the link between the social origin of students, by parental class, education or earnings, and the level of education the student has reached when they leave school for the labour market. Erickson notes one of the reasons IEO should be reduced is for societal efficiency.<sup>36</sup> This argument assumes that if young people do not develop their abilities in full, societal development will be impaired. Therefore, if children of working-class parents do not reach their full potential the loss is not only seen as loss to themselves but also to society. Combining Husèn and Erickson could mean that society could reap the benefits of the strengths and abilities of the reserve

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<sup>33</sup> Michael F. Watts, “The Ethics of Widening Participation: The Funding of Higher Education,” in *Professional Ethics: Education for a Humane Society*, ed. Feng Su and Bart McGettrick (Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2012), quoted in Cliona Hannon, Daniel Faas and Katriona O’Sullivan, “Widening the Educational Capabilities of Socio-economically Disadvantaged Students through a Model of Social and Cultural Capital Development,” *British Educational Research Journal* 43, no 6 (2017): 1228.

<sup>34</sup> Hannon, Faas and O’Sullivan, “Widening the Educational Capabilities of Socio-economically Disadvantaged Students through a Model of Social and Cultural Capital Development,”: 1226.

<sup>35</sup> Torsten Husèn, *Talent Equality and Meritocracy* (Dordrecht: Springer, 1974); Kiell Härnqvist, “Educational Reserves Revisited,” *Scandinavian Journal of Educational Research* 47, no. 5 (2003): 483.

<sup>36</sup> Erikson, “Inequality of Educational Opportunity,” 45.

of talent that could potentially fill employment gaps and add positively to society.

Ireland has been facing a skills and talent shortage since Covid which threatens the potential for Irelands economic recovery. A “war on talent” and a lack of skilled workers means that employers need to reconsider their usual talent pool and talent acquisition strategy.<sup>37</sup> Since Covid we are in an age of flux. Change has been hard and constant. But within change there can be opportunity.<sup>38</sup>

If we give space to this idea of a talent reserve, then we could take a more positive view of the opportunity of a wider talent pool and potential of individuals who do not go on to complete higher levels of education. We can consider that perhaps we, as employers, and society are missing out on a whole group of people who might think differently and bring different skills to their counterparts who have been schooled literally in a different school of thought. In an effort to widen the talent pool, employers should consider where vocational hires and non-university candidates could deliver new roles and skills.<sup>39</sup> We are guided that employers need to go to where the diverse talent is. Employers need to be visible in spaces that demonstrate to prospective employees that you are working to be a part of their community.<sup>40</sup> Aligned to this, McKinsey report that diverse companies may be able to outperform because they recruit from the widest pool of talent.<sup>41</sup>

This research, by taking a targeted approach to a specific underrepresented group, LCA students in socio-economic disadvantaged areas, will show an approach to working with students at the place they are at, rather than working on students to change themselves. Harold counsels that we should “act with others, not upon them” and we can apply this to our research by ensuring that students themselves are heard and included in the construction

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<sup>37</sup> Sean Murray, “Skills Shortage: Irish Employers Urgently Need More Trained And Experienced Workers,” *Irish Examiner*, February 28, 2022, <https://www.irishexaminer.com/news/spotlight/arid-40811664.html>.

<sup>38</sup> Harold, *The Toolbox*, 37

<sup>39</sup> Peter Cooper, Alastair Hamilton, Colin Shaw and Liberty, York, “Fixing the Ladder: How UK Businesses Benefit from Better Social Mobility,” *McKinsey & Company*, January 25, 2023, <https://www.mckinsey.com/industries/public-sector/our-insights/fixing-the-ladder-how-uk-businesses-benefit-from-better-social-mobility>.

<sup>40</sup> Victoria Mattingly, Sertrice Grice and Allison Goldstein, *Inclusalytics: How Diversity, Equity, And Inclusion Leaders Use Data To Drive Their Work* (Mattingly Solutions, 2022), 126.

<sup>41</sup> Sundiatu Dixon-Fyle, Kevin Dolan, Vivian Hunt and Sara Prince, *Diversity Wins!: How Inclusion Matters*, McKinsey & Company, May 19, 2020, <https://www.mckinsey.com/featured-insights/diversity-and-inclusion/diversity-wins-how-inclusion-matters>.

of solutions.<sup>42</sup> Companies with Diverse management teams and boards deliver better economic results, with diverse teams having been shown to be more likely to radically innovative and anticipate shifts in consumer need thereby helping these companies to gain a competitive edge.<sup>43</sup> Diversity in our workplace makes us smarter, more innovative, and promotes better critical thinking.<sup>44</sup>

A note of caution advises us that diversity is a tight knit tapestry of elements that need to be considered. Most organisations in the US focus their Diversity, Equality, and Inclusion (DEI) strategies on what are identified as the “big three” gender, race and sexual identity (LGBTQ+).<sup>45</sup> It would serve organisations well to consider that talent comes in unusual packages and that “in a world of disruption, what got us here in terms of the types of leaders and managers we hire, will not get us there in future.”<sup>46</sup> If we can consider socio-economic diverse leadership teams rather than focus specifically on the more well-versed differences of gender and race, it could make space for a discussion and research around how to lessen this divide. We do not need to look too far away for examples of where industry is aware of addressing socio-economic diversity. In the United Kingdom for example, the Social Mobility Commission publishes a Social Mobility Employer Index and is working to proactively promote and highlight companies who are helping to drive social progress.<sup>47</sup> To support and drive this important awareness within industry the research will need to enable a discussion and narrative to develop that is shaped both by the experiences of those who are underrepresented and the intentions and aspirations of organisations who are willing to effect change in this area.

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<sup>42</sup> Harold, *The Toolbox*, 71.

<sup>43</sup> Dixon-Fyle, *et al.*, *Diversity wins!*, 2.

<sup>44</sup> Ruchika Tulshyan, “How to Reduce Personal Bias When Hiring,” *Harvard Business Review*, June 28, 2019, <https://hbr.org/2019/06/how-to-reduce-personal-bias-when-hiring>.

<sup>45</sup> Mattingly, Grice and Goldstein, *Inclusalytics*, 164.

<sup>46</sup> John Amaechi in British Psychological Society, “‘Every single person, no matter their background, if they are driven and willing to learn the technical elements of a role, they can lead effectively,’ says John Amaechi OBE,” LinkedIn post, 2022, <https://www.linkedin.com/feed/update/urn:li:activity:6999355602388840448/>.

<sup>47</sup> “Social Mobility Employer Index 2022,” *Social Mobility Foundation*, 2022, <https://socialmobility.org.uk/index/>.

## Let's talk about it

This research will attempt to combat the language of disadvantage. In doing so we can move to a more positive discussion around young people who do not go on to further education and look to move directly into the workforce instead. The very word disadvantage has a negative connotation. The "Dis" prefix does little to encourage a reader to want to be a part of that phenomenon, whatever it is. It has been argued that even just using the term "Educational Disadvantage" is by itself perpetuating inequality.<sup>48</sup> The use of language such as "impediment," "disadvantage" and "prevent," has a disempowering effect with the "disadvantaged" group becoming an entity on its own which is different, othered and often vilified.<sup>49</sup> The use of language describing highbrow and lowbrow cultural capital through preferences for art and music, or television genres again uses a high versus low terminology which encapsulates a negativity in itself. Lowbrow can hardly be seen as a positive term when there is a "higher" version available.<sup>50</sup>

A Swedish study on the Social Context of Inequality of Educational Opportunity (IEO) discussing the role of performance and choice starts out with an introduction describing "children of higher origins."<sup>51</sup> Already at page 1, an uncomfortable negativity surrounds the discussion of class and education. The idea of there being inequality or disadvantage associated with types or levels of educational opportunity has been discussed since 1974.<sup>52</sup> For almost 50 years we have known that this is a phenomenon. But is the power of language in our own hands – is it a personal association with the words we hear and how we interpret them? How much is research that touches on disadvantage impacted by the social position of the researcher and their bias based on their own interpretation of their background and experiences?

The narrative around the symbolic power of language tells us that for the power of language to be successful those who are subjected to it must believe in the meaning and interpretation of the words and the power of those that use them. In believing in the negativity however, Bourdieu argues that it makes us actively complicit in enabling their power.<sup>53</sup> In a way, by agreeing

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<sup>48</sup> Fleming and Harford, "The DEIS Programme," 2.

<sup>49</sup> Fleming and Harford, "The DEIS Programme," 4.

<sup>50</sup> Farid, Abbasi and Mahmood, "Modelling Bourdieusian Social Reproduction Theory," 306.

<sup>51</sup> Erikson, "Inequality of Educational Opportunity," S44.

<sup>52</sup> Raymond Boudon, *Education, Opportunity, and Social Inequality: Changing Prospects in Western Society* (New Jersey: John Wiley & Sons, 1974).

<sup>53</sup> Bourdieu, *Language and Symbolic Power*, 23.

that one is disadvantaged, in any form, you give power to that idea and make it true. This may be a harder notion to accept for people defined as disadvantaged rather than those researching it, as it could be interpreted to mean that somehow the circumstances of disadvantage are of their own making.

### **What if we don't know what we don't know**

People should have a choice as to what to do with their lives.<sup>54</sup> What if, because of their social class, or lived school experience, students are not aware of all the possibilities? As far back as the early 1970s, when discussing inequalities of social opportunity (ISO) and how this impacts on social class immobility, Boudon argued that it was a puzzling feature of well-developed educational systems in modern societies that children of less advantaged social backgrounds “choose to acquire” less education on average than children from more advantaged backgrounds, going on to say that these students must know that their opportunities would be substantially improved if they had more education rather than less.<sup>55</sup> But what if they do not know. Their social structure and surrounding family, friend groups, community etc. are all they know. Maybe they do know that their peers who stay in school and go on to college will fare better with jobs however education, in the format they know it in, still does not entice them or facilitate the way they learn and express themselves best.

In 1986 Markus and Nurius, in the *American Psychologist Journal*, developed the concept of “Possible Selves.”<sup>56</sup> Levinson had earlier referenced the imagined possibilities of self as a motivating force.<sup>57</sup> In today's culture this can be likened to “If I can see it, I can be it” – a popular tagline for encouraging diversity across several fronts including race and gender. Possible Selves theory can be applied in a social context to the comparisons people make to others – “what others are now I could become.” By working with students to help them to visualise a variety of options and future roles in society this allows them to activate a new idea of themselves. Once this process of thought has been started or activated, it is assumed that in doing so that they

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<sup>54</sup> *Seanad Eireann Debate*, Tuesday, 11 May 2021.

<sup>55</sup> Boudon, *Education, Opportunity, and Social Inequality*, quoted in Michelle Jackson, ed., *Determined to Succeed?: Performance Versus Choice in Educational Attainment* (Redwood City CA: Stanford University Press, 2013), 8.

<sup>56</sup> Hazel Markus and Paula Nurius, “Possible Selves,” *American Psychologist* 41, no. 9 (1986): 954.

<sup>57</sup> Daniel J. Levinson, *The Seasons of a Man's Life* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1986), quoted in Hazel Markus and Paula Nurius, “Possible Selves,” 956.

can also then conceive of or imagine other possibilities.<sup>58</sup> The idea of planting a seed of the notion of “others,” other roles, other jobs, other lifestyles could open up the world of possibilities for a whole range of possible selves.

From the perspective of disadvantage, the idea of applying an intervention that supports identifying possible selves and how young people arrive at the self-knowledge of the actual breadth of opportunity available to them, outside of their current view of the world, should be researched to understand what effect economic and educational disadvantages can have in limiting the scope of that knowledge. A 2002 possible selves’ intervention in a study across 208 students over a three-year period worked with low-income African American students.<sup>59</sup> This study describes how young people construct their possible selves by combining what they know of their own skills and abilities with what they know of the skills needed to be the future version of themselves. But what if your social connections, community role models and familial models are similar, your potential of experiencing other views and possibilities may be limited. If everyone I know works in a factory or a building site or an office, then this is my sphere of reference when I think of a job I might like to do. A later 2018 study tested the concepts of weak and strong ties and their impact in bridging social capital. The researchers were interested in how economic disadvantage affects the availability and nature of mentoring relationships during the transition to adulthood. Strong ties are those of our family, neighbours, and friends. Weak ties are a broader network of relationships with teacher, coaches, and employers.<sup>60</sup>

Young people with a wider network of weak ties have access to connections, knowledge and expertise that can facilitate upward mobility from lower socioeconomic backgrounds to more privileged socioeconomic positions.<sup>61</sup> In recognising the gap in the ability of young people to make that connection to their potential and identify their possible selves, Raposa links to Markus and Nurius by identifying the important role mentors have as role models to influence the young person’s perceptions of who they might become or like to become.<sup>62</sup> Can we help young people to make connections between what they know they are good at and the vast range of possibilities out in the workplace that might match those skills? If I don’t know any engineers or website content designers then I may not think that my maths

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<sup>58</sup> Markus and Nurius, “Possible Selves,” 958.

<sup>59</sup> Daphna Oyserman, Kathy Terry and Deborah Bybee, “A Possible Selves Intervention to Enhance School Involvement,” *Journal of Adolescence* 25, no. 3 (2002): 313-326.

<sup>60</sup> Raposa, *et al.*, “How Economic Disadvantage Affects,” 198.

<sup>61</sup> Raposa, *et al.*, “How Economic Disadvantage Affects,” 198.

<sup>62</sup> Markus and Nurius, “Possible Selves,” 954.

skills and love of order, or creative skills and love of computers could help me get a job in an area I would enjoy. We know that merely thinking about an event makes it seem more probable.<sup>63</sup> If we can open discussions with students from disadvantaged socio-economic areas around ideas of being worthy, being enough, the boundaries could potentially be pushed further than students think possible.

Raposa *et al.* suggest that while familial ties, for young people from disadvantaged background, are important sources of support, they are typically less able to connect young people with educational or employment opportunities.<sup>64</sup> It could potentially be a self-fulfilling prophecy of social reproduction theory that by staying in the same familiar territory, with their network of strong ties, it becomes a case of "this is what I know and am comfortable with."

Lareau's "Home advantage" analysed how working- and middle-class adults with young school children view education and interact with school and reported that this influenced the child's school experience.<sup>65</sup> If your parents do not interact and support education you will be impacted negatively. School personnel often view working class parents as insufficiently involved in their children's education.<sup>66</sup> It was found that persistent family based structural inequalities produce differences in the effectiveness of parent's school contacts, exhibiting different levels of advocacy and mediation on behalf of their children but there was no evidence of schools discriminating against working class parents. It should be considered that without parental advocacy, for whatever reason, decisions will be made that impact children and that the absence of the advocacy in and of itself will lend itself to inequality. Markus and Nurius purport that "a possible self, like the Messiah prophecy, cannot be disproven" and that only an individual themselves can determine what is possible.<sup>67</sup> By providing a space to discuss possibilities it can challenge and empower students themselves and to those hiring and working within an organisation to think big enough, outside of the norm, to determine what is possible.

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<sup>63</sup> John S. Carroll, "The Effect of Imagining an Event on Expectations for the Event: An Interpretation in Terms of the Availability Heuristic," *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology* 14, no. 1 (1978): 88.

<sup>64</sup> Raposa, *et al.*, "How Economic Disadvantage Affects," 200.

<sup>65</sup> Annette Lareau, *Home Advantage: Social Class and Parental Intervention in Elementary Education* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2000).

<sup>66</sup> Melissa Freeman, "Toward a Rearticulation of a Discourse on Class within the Practice of Parental Involvement," *Qualitative Inquiry* 10, no. 4 (2004): 573.

<sup>67</sup> Markus and Nurius, "Possible Selves," 963.



## Research can reframe the narrative

Cognitive reframing is a psychological technique that consists of identifying and then changing the way situations, experiences, events, ideas, and/or emotions are viewed. Cognitive reframing is the process by which such situations or thoughts are challenged and then changed.<sup>68</sup> By approaching a research study from a positive perspective, we can reframe the narrative. Research into disadvantage doesn't have to be negative and dark, undertaking the research itself could provide opportunity. By changing the language we use and the areas to spotlight we can attempt to change perceptions. While research can acknowledge the reality of a negative situation, we can aim not to add to an already negative narrative by a focus on the positives to highlight and make change. Through Active Research we are asking participants to consider not only what the research can do for them but what their participation in the research can do to positively develop this area of research as well.

KPMG report that social class is the biggest barrier to career progression, with socio-economic background having the strongest effect on an individual's career progression, compared to any other diversity characteristic.<sup>69</sup> Employers are beginning to address this issue more actively and more visibly detail the work they are doing in this arena.<sup>70</sup> It can be easy to see how an approach to helping students and employees from disadvantaged or under-represented socio-economic backgrounds is useful and warranted but may come across as charitable or coming from a place of pity for those deemed to be less fortunate than others. This study aims to move away from that charitable perception that LCA students need help because of their disadvantage and reframe the discussion to illustrate, through their participation, what positive skills and advantages they offer employers, which differ from and complement their peers.

In discussion with Aidan McCullen on how to begin to change the narrative around diversity, Joan Williams talks about how we need to change mindsets, that changing the person may be the easier part but changing the system is something completely different and they go on to point out that the

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<sup>68</sup> "Using Cognitive Reframing to Encourage Behaviour Change," *AAFP*, February 15, 2021; acc. November 19, 2022, [https://www.aafp.org/pubs/fpm/blogs/inpractice/entry/cognitive\\_reframing](https://www.aafp.org/pubs/fpm/blogs/inpractice/entry/cognitive_reframing).

<sup>69</sup> KPMG, *Social Mobility Progression Report 2022: Mind the Gap* (2022), <https://assets.kpmg.com/content/dam/kpmg/uk/pdf/2022/12/social-mobility-progression-report-2022-mind-the-gap-brochure.pdf>, 3.

<sup>70</sup> Cooper, *et al.*, "Fixing the Ladder," 2.

problem is not to fix those people, it is to fix the business systems.<sup>71</sup> While a focus of this research will be on getting LCA students career ready, the research will need to focus as much, if not more, on getting society and industry LCA ready, therefore the narrative needs to be reframed from multiple perspectives. Through the concept of cognitive reframing, we will start to change mindsets. Tulshyan advises that to effect change and behaviours as they are today, we will need to help organisations move from a fixed mindset, where they believe that they are already doing everything they can around DE&I initiatives to a growth mindset where employers are open to understanding and confronting personal bias when hiring.<sup>72</sup>

## Conclusion

To change the narrative around disadvantage we need to rethink, reword, and refocus what we think we know. We need to rethink the talent reserve, how can research help us to dig into this potential. We need to rethink diversity of thought to include disadvantage/ advantage narrative instead of focusing on gender or race alone. We need to rethink stereotypes of vocational tracks to look beyond what students don't have to what they bring to the table. As researchers around disadvantage, we also need to hold two conflicting thoughts. We need to balance testing through research whether we can help to improve trajectories for young people from disadvantaged areas whilst also considering that the choices young people make may indeed be their own choice and not one we decide has been pre-determined by their "dis"advantage. The aim of this research study will be to move the dial by delivering research that is impactful and novel. To deliver a new perspective on the value of reframing disadvantage to potential. As the research blurs the lines of language and perceptions it could allow a clearer, more open discussion on the possibilities of opportunities, if we are willing to consider that different can be better, different doesn't have to be "less than."

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<sup>71</sup> Aidan McCullen, "Bias Interrupted Part Two (No. 377)," *The Innovation Show*, August 22, 2023, audio podcast episode, 32:25, <https://theinnovationshow.io/episode/joan-c-williams-bias-interrupted-part-2/>.

<sup>72</sup> Tulshyan, "How to Reduce Personal Bias"