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Abstract

This research sought to investigate the experiences of students from low socioeconomic status (SES) backgrounds who chose to attend socioeconomically integrated secondary schools in Ireland. Socioeconomic integration is the practice whereby students from varying socioeconomic backgrounds are integrated into heterogeneous school settings in order to diversify their socioeconomic composition. While the literature indicates consistent academic benefits of the practice for low-SES students, uncertainties remain surrounding their psychosocial experience. To better understand such uncertainties, this research embodied a case study approach, investigating the socioeconomic integration experiences of two low-SES families (n = 4) through online surveys and semi-structured interviews. The responses ascertained from case study accounts were subsequently presented to individuals with knowledge in the field (n = 7) during expert interviews. Triangulated findings indicate that the experiences of participating low-SES students were generally positive, with the development of friendships, extra-curricular participation, and subtle teacher vigilance being highlighted as advantageous. Nevertheless, participants also indicated significant tensions associated with the practice, including desires for assimilation, sentiments of isolation, possible dilution of identity, and rare instances of peer-condescension. This paper presents practical opportunities to improve the experiences of low-SES students in socioeconomically integrated schools, while also offering valuable lines of inquiry for future research.

Keywords: Socioeconomic School Integration, Student Experience, School Choice

Introduction

An Irish public-school teacher stands before his cohort of pre-adolescent students for their morning math lesson. Many have not eaten breakfast. More are visibly fatigued. Others have readied younger siblings for the forthcoming school day prior to themselves. Struggling to reconcile the plight of their socioeconomic disadvantage from his modest yet comparably privileged upbringing, the teacher ruminates upon his role, as well as that of *the school*, in either

precluding or perpetuating such societal injustice. Can school truly embody "the great equalizer," as aspirationally posited by twentieth-century Massachusetts politician Horace Mann? Or, does it contrarily represent a structure for the reproduction of inequality? Such a quandary is not uncommon for educators serving communities of socioeconomic disadvantage. Indelible within the benevolent altruism of many teachers is a desire to mitigate the effects of societal injustice and inequality, thus affording optimum opportunities to the students under their care.

While it may be argued that such a societal quandary does not embody a novel facet of contemporary civilization, there is a lamentable consensus that "most of the world, including Europe, has been growing more unequal for the past three or so decades" (Sweeney, 2019, p. 40). In the Irish context, however, Sweeney (2019) outlines that socioeconomic inequality has remained relatively stable over the same period, attributing such deviation from global norms to robust fiscal measures including progressive taxation and welfare transfers. Moreover, despite being a historically high-inequality country, it is explained that such distributive stability amidst growing trends of international socioeconomic inequality now positions Ireland toward the middle of European countries in this regard. Nevertheless, through an educational lens, at the outset of the aforementioned three-decade period, a rallying cry was issued to Irish policy makers by the Combat Poverty Agency, asserting that, arising from circumstances whereby "children living in poverty [were] at an educational disadvantage relative to children from more comfortable backgrounds, … there [was] a cycle of poverty by which the children of poor parents [were] destined to remain poor and marginalised in the future unless specific programmes aimed at changing the situation [were] implemented" (1993, p. 6). In response to such a situation, over one decade later, the Department of Education and Science (2005) implemented the "Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools" program across the nation, coherently bringing together a number of earlier stand-alone initiatives targeting educational disadvantage.

The acronymic title of the program, DEIS, pronounced [desh] in *Gaeilge*, translates as "opportunity." As such, the DEIS program aspires to enhance the opportunities of students attending schools which serve "communities at risk of disadvantage and social exclusion" (Department of Education and Skills [DES], 2017a, p. 6) by providing supports such as reduced class sizes, free early childhood education, additional grants, home-school-community liaison services, school completion programs, and school meals (DES, 2017b). Such schools are identified and categorized by combining DES data with scores determined through the Haase-Pratschke Index of Deprivation (DES, 2017a). During the 2017–2018 academic year, 698 of 3,111 Irish primary schools were incorporated in the DEIS program, with 339 being urban and 359 rural, while 198 of 715 secondary schools were categorized included in the program (DES, 2018a, b).

Nevertheless, despite the evidently targeted and robust nature of the DEIS program, it is unclear whether it has been wholly effective as aspired. While evaluations of the program have indicated a number of definitive gains, including improved planning and target-setting, increased attendance, a narrowing in the retention rate gap with non-DEIS schools (Smyth et al., 2015), and "substantially" greater reporting of students liking school (Kavanagh et al., 2017, p. 64), other effects of DEIS remain less clear-cut. For instance, although Kavanagh and colleagues (2017) delineate advances in the aspirations and expectations of DEIS students for educational

attainment, "a substantial gap" (p. 64) remains between said aspirations and expectations. Moreover, this gap is described as being "more marked" (p. 64) amongst DEIS students than students nationally. Furthermore, perhaps of most interest to educational policy makers, multiple "evaluation studies [of DEIS] indicate a significant improvement over time in the literacy and numeracy test scores of students" (Smyth et al., 2015, p. vii). Importantly, however, Kavanagh and colleagues (2017) temper this statement, emphasizing that "these increases can be described as modest" (p. 60). Compounding such ambiguity, Smyth and colleagues (2015) highlight that the absence of a control group in the aforementioned evaluations makes it difficult to determine whether such modest gains are directly resultant of the DEIS program or ought to be attributed to "improvements for all … schools, most likely reflecting the impact of the national literacy and numeracy strategy" (p. vii). Indeed, taking broader national improvements into account, it becomes evident that "the gap in achievement between DEIS and non-DEIS schools has not narrowed over time" (p. ix-x). Furthermore, owing to "a number of differences in school organisation and process," significant intra- and inter-school variation exists in this regard (Smyth et al., 2015, p. viii). Indeed, as Kavanagh and colleagues (2017) note, "the most common pattern" within DEIS schools over a period of seven years "was a mixture of increases and decreases in average achievement" (p. 60). Evidently, therefore, such undeniable variability, coupled with the difficulty in disentangling the impact of specific elements of the program, shroud in ambiguity the ultimate effectiveness and appropriateness of DEIS in tackling educational disadvantage in Ireland. In addition, as Smyth and colleagues (2015) describe with regret, "there has been little discussion of whether the scale of additional DEIS funding is sufficient to bridge the gap in resources between disadvantaged and non-disadvantaged settings" (p. x). As such, in Ireland, reflecting the lamentations of Richard D. Kahlenberg (2012a) of the Century Foundation, "95% of the education discussion … focusses on trying to 'fix' high-poverty schools," consequently accepting "economic segregation as an immutable fact of life" (p. 3).

In light of this, therefore, a transformative dialogue transcendent of socioeconomic segregation is unquestionably worthwhile in the Irish educational context. Such a dialogue ought to consider the practice of socioeconomic school integration, a "strategy to reduce the proportion of high-poverty schools ... by integrating students from rich and poor families" (Kahlenberg, 2012a, p. 2). The academic benefits of this practice for students from backgrounds of low socioeconomic status (SES) have been illustrated beyond dispute throughout a large body of empirical research (e.g. Coleman et al., 1966; McMillian et al., 2018; Mickelson & Bottia, 2010; Mickelson et al., 2013; Palardy, 2013; Perry & McConney, 2010; Rogers, 2016; Willms, 2010). It is necessary to acknowledge at this juncture that such socioeconomic integration research has hitherto been situated primarily in the educational context of the United States, wherein inextricable intersectionality exists between race and SES (Reeves et al., 2016), and thus educational disadvantage (National Center for Education Statistics, 2015). By contrast, the influence of such intersectionality is significantly more muted in the Irish context, albeit that demonstrable levels of racial socioeconomic inequality nonetheless exist (McGinnity et al., 2018). Stemming from the aforementioned irrefutable academic benefits of socioeconomic integration, Kahlenberg (2012b) definitively summarizes that, irrespective of "individual students' socioeconomic status, as the poverty level of the school goes up, the average achievement level goes down" (p. 4). Stemming from this, Kahlenberg (2012c) delineates three primary factors behind such enhanced attainment in socioeconomically integrated settings: (a) a learning environment of academic

engagement and behavioral compliance, (b) an actively involved and well-informed community of middle-class parents holding school personnel to account, and (c) a faculty of competent and experienced teachers with high expectations. The accumulated effect of such stipulations was most compellingly supported by the findings of a carefully controlled study conducted by Schwartz (2010), specifically comparing the educational outcomes of low-income students in socioeconomically integrated and segregated school settings. The research, conducted in an American school district which incorporates a number of socioeconomically integrated schools through an inclusionary housing policy, illustrated that the academic performance of low-income students in integrated schools surpassed that of their counterparts attending high-poverty schools, despite their receipt of substantial educational investments. This suggests that disadvantaged students benefit more profoundly from being surrounded by the students, parents, and educators of socioeconomically integrated schools than comprehensive investment in low-SES settings.

Nevertheless, despite such evident potential, the practical realization of such aspirations can embody a logistically elusive and, oftentimes, controversial endeavor. To begin, on a fundamental level, Kahlenberg (2012a) emphasizes that socioeconomic integration ought not to be perceived as "resurrect[ing] the specter of forced busing" (p. 3), associated with the racial desegregation of American schools following the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* Supreme Court ruling. Conversely, he asserts that "today's integration relies on public school choice" (p. 3). Significantly, such choice necessitates that middle-class families willingly select schools in disadvantaged areas for their children, while middle-class schools must concurrently be encouraged to voluntarily accept students from low socioeconomic backgrounds. In light of this, Basile (2012) proposes that such stipulations can be respectively satisfied through the establishment of magnet schools in disadvantaged areas which embrace particular themes or pedagogical approaches, and through the provision of financial incentives to middle-class schools to diversify their socioeconomic composition. In Ireland, a unique incarnation of magnet schools is embodied by *Gaelcholáistí*, wherein all instruction and assessment are conducted through *Gaeilge*. Arising from this, opponents of socioeconomic integration question the costs associated with such initiatives. Indeed, Kahlenberg (2012a) notes that a common argument concerns the frugality of allocating funds to the bus transportation necessary for socioeconomic integration rather than to schools themselves. Contrarily, however, in a comprehensive cost-benefit analysis, Basile (2012) found that the return on investment from socioeconomic integration is three to five times greater than its associated costs, exceeding the returns of almost all other investments in education with the exception of high-quality early childhood education. Finally, although middle-class communities oftentimes express concerns about potential negative effects of socioeconomic integration, Kahlenberg (2012b) emphasizes that "middle-class students are not hurt," insisting that the "numerical majority sets the tone in a school" (p. 5). Moreover, in a rigorous analysis of data from the Programme for International Student Assessment, commonly referred to as "PISA," from over seventy countries, Montt (2016) ascertained evidence of gains for disadvantaged students at no loss for their more privileged classmates "in some countries: Canada, Denmark, Slovenia, and Tunisia" (p. 823). It is highlighted that these results ought to instigate study on the specific policies and practices of these nations "in order to illuminate the mechanisms that have allowed for effective socioeconomic integration to arise" (p. 823).

However, whilst acknowledging its academic benefits and logistical feasibility, legitimate concerns persist surrounding the experiences of low-SES students in socioeconomically integrated schools. Despite such concerns, however, as Crosnoe (2009) explains, "because of the primacy of achievement" in the evaluation of educational practices and policies "the empirical base for socioeconomic desegregation focuses heavily on test scores" (p. 711), as has been explored. As such, "a dearth of experimental data" exists in the area (p. 710). Nevertheless, arising from the stipulations of psychological social comparison theories which "contend that students evaluate themselves relative to those in their specific contexts," Crosnoe (2009) emphasizes that "poverty is more likely to be a social liability in a school where it is rare than one in which it is well-represented" (p. 711). In Crosnoe's (2009) investigation of over 1,100 low-income public high school students across the United States, it was found that, as the proportion of the student body with middle- or high-income and college-educated parents increased, the "psychosocial problems" experienced by low-income students increased in tandem (p. 709). This was illustrated by coefficient scores relating to negative self-image, perceived social isolation, and depression. Furthermore, a large-scale investigation conducted by Patalay (2019) of approximately 23,000 students between 8 and 10 years old in 648 primary schools across the United Kingdom illustrated that, as the proportion of more affluent students in a school increases, the incidence of "emotional difficulties" for low-SES students concurrently increases (slide 22). Such findings from large-scale investigations highlight the value and necessity of examining the experiences of low-SES students in socioeconomically integrated schools.

Methodology

In light of this lacuna in the literature, the present investigation examined the experiences of socioeconomic integration encountered by two white Irish families residing in low-SES areas of a southern Irish city. Participants were recruited via convenience sampling, enabling the researcher to select a homogenous sample for whom socioeconomic integration was an ongoing or recent experience (Jager et al., 2017). A deliberate decision was made to employ such a case study approach, trading off the widespread generalizability of findings for the ascertainment of a rich and specific illustration of participants' experiences. In Ireland, as the education system is centrally coordinated by the national government, there is no arrangement comparable to school districts as in the United States, allowing for total choice in the selection of students' scholastic placements. This is with the sole caveat of potential prioritization criteria for oversubscribed schools, which oftentimes include habitation in the school's "catchment area" (Oireachtas Éireann, 2018). One participating family (Family A) was experiencing socioeconomic integration at the time of data collection, while the other (Family B) had completed their experience 6 years previously. Both participating families chose to attend second-level schools in alternative locations to that of their primary education. As such, while both experienced primary schooling in settings which served communities of socioeconomic disadvantage, their secondary institutions were situated in more affluent areas. Initial data collection comprised of online surveys and semi-structured interviews with a child and parent from each family. Subsequently, the quantitative and qualitative findings were presented during expert interviews to seven individuals with expertise in educational practices and policies related to access and equity. Stemming from this, the triangulated findings were thematically coded and four primary themes were extrapolated in relation to the experiences of low-SES students attending

socioeconomically integrated secondary school settings: choice, adjustment, psychosocial experiences, and recommendations.

<div align="center">

Results
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Choice

Choice refers to the factors that influenced the decision of participating parents and students to select second-level institutions in a more advantaged area than that of their primary schooling. The three principal sub-themes that arose in this regard were comparison with alternatives, knowledge of academic opportunities, and knowledge of psychosocial supports.

Comparison with Alternatives

As indicated by both survey and interview data, the decision of participating families to attend second-level institutions in more privileged areas was the culmination of a deliberative and comparative process. Rather than accepting or internalizing their lower socioeconomic standing, participants were acutely aware of and endeavored to attain the opportunities presented by such settings. However, during his expert interview, Dr. David Backer of West Chester University of Pennsylvania (WCU) juxtaposed such a perception of education as a "way out" of classed societal divisions with the corpus of sociological and philosophical literature which posits schooling as a structure that reproduces social inequality. Such tensions, however, did not feature in the aspirational convictions of participating families.

Stemming from this, in the case of these families, the deliberation process was evidently parentally directed, with subsequent consensual approval from children. For instance, during her interview, Parent A definitively asserted that "[her daughter] was never going to the school near us." Similarly, Parent B described her daughter as "one of the lucky ones," when compared to "all of the young people with so much potential who never get there because … [their parents/guardians] didn't make the right decisions for them." Despite such evident parental direction, there was also notable deliberation on the part of students concerning their choice of scholastic placement. For example, as Student A emphasized, "people in my [primary] class used to get in trouble a lot … I didn't want to be around those people for five or six more years." This contemplation reflects Kahlenberg's (2012c) statement that schools in more privileged areas tend to be less behaviorally challenging than those with high consolidations of poverty. Moreover, such a comparative mindset was also reflected in the thought-process of parents, with Parent A stating, "we did look at other schools … [but] this was by far the best choice." The most salient factor considered by parents and students in reaching this decision concerned their knowledge of academic opportunities at their prospective school settings.

Knowledge of Academic Opportunities

Within the Irish education system, progression to third-level education is determined by a points-system based upon students' performance in high-stakes examinations conducted at the end of secondary schooling. Students select at least three curricular areas to accompany compulsory examinations in English, Mathematics, and *Gaeilge*. These examinations may be taken at "Ordinary Level" or "Higher Level," with a greater number of points for tertiary progression

being offered for those in the latter. This narrowly academic system of college admissions featured heavily in the deliberations of all four participants as outlined in Table 1 below:

Table 1

Consideration of Third-Level Progression in School Choice

Student A	"They didn't do any higher-level subjects in the school near us"
Parent A	"They also offered higher-level subjects which was a huge thing for us … [because] you need them to get into college."
Student B	"I had a better chance of progressing to third-level … [because] there was more of a choice on offer regarding higher-level subjects."
Parent B	"She was never not being able to go to college afterwards."

In an expert interview with Richard Kahlenberg of the Century Foundation, "the intellectual father of the economic integration movement in K–12 schooling" (Century Foundation, 2019), it was noted that such prioritization of prospective academic opportunities resonated with previous accounts of the factors influencing parents' choice of socioeconomically integrated schools. He anecdotally recounted one experience of an African American parent from Connecticut for whom removing their child from the local low-SES community in pursuit of a better education embodied a moral dilemma. Nevertheless, Kahlenberg emphasized that it was upon learning of the local school's utilization of textbooks two grade levels below that of the alternative setting that they concluded "that's enough," thus choosing to "put [their] child through a maybe uncomfortable experience," wherein they may "face discrimination." He described such a profound tension as a "terrible choice for a parent to have to make."

Furthermore, the consideration by participants in the present study of greater academic opportunities for third-level progression was accentuated by parents' desire that their children be academically encouraged and supported. For instance, in her interview, Parent B asserted that "I wanted somewhere they would push her … somewhere with high expectations." Similarly, Student B highlighted the influence of the "better opportunities to develop academically" in her choice of school. Indeed, these desires were evidently realized in students' subsequent academic experiences, with both parents and students identifying clear encouragement to do one's best, effective provision of learning supports, higher expectations for academic success, and an overall greater emphasis on education, thus corroborating the vast body of research concerning the positive academic effects of socioeconomic integration on low-SES students (e.g. Mickelson & Bottia, 2010; Schwartz, 2010).

Knowledge of Psychosocial Supports

Although it did not feature as heavily in their deliberations as academic opportunities, participants' knowledge of psychosocial supports was also a salient factor in their choice of alternative scholastic settings. Specifically, familial influences played a significant role in this regard for participants in the present research. As a sibling of Student A had already graduated from the same alternative secondary school, Parent A noted that "[her] positive experience … was a huge factor in our decision." Additionally, this positive familial experience led Student A to affirm that "I decided it would be right for me too." Similarly, a close relative of Student B was commencing secondary education in the alternative setting at the same time, leading Parent B to highlight that "it's great they were able to stick together."

Adjustment

Adjustment refers to the initial psychosocial experiences of participating students upon commencing schooling at their alternative second-level institutions. The aforementioned presence of Student B's close relative positively differentiated her adjustment experience from that of Student A. This contrast will be explored under the theme of "familiar faces." Parent A defined such familiar faces as "people who you can approach and talk to on those first couple of days." Subsequently, the role of extracurricular participation in the adjustment process will be outlined.

Importance of Familiar Faces

During her interview, Student B firmly attested that "I settled in very fast." Similarly, in two survey items, she "strongly agreed" that she found it easy to adjust and make friends. Her mother, Parent B, explained this positive adjustment by stating, "the fact that they had each other [her aforementioned close relative] was great … It meant they wouldn't be alone on the first day." By contrast, Student A lamented that "everyone else on the first day knew people from their primary school … I was one of the only ones who was on their own." These sentiments were reflected by Parent A, explaining that "there were no familiar faces out there for her at all … Even though everyone was friendly to her, they seemed to know each other already … from sports clubs, primary schools, or neighbors … They all would have found familiar faces to go to, but she didn't." Parent A added that this led her daughter to "want to go back to school in the [local] area … [before] eventually deciding to stick with it." The consistencies between such assertions are significant as they indicate that participating students' adjustment experience was not perceived to be influenced by their lower socioeconomic standing relative to their new classmates, but rather due to the absence or presence of familiar faces. During his expert interview, David Backer exalted this commonality, highlighting that their sense of belongingness, or lack thereof, was not perceived through a lens of class. As such, it is reasonable to propose that the factors influencing these students' adjustment to their alternative school settings were no different than those at play in the literature concerning the general transition experiences of students to new schools (e.g. Astor et al., 2017; Dupere et al., 2015). Nevertheless, during an expert interview with Dr. Katherine Norris of WCU, it was suggested that this negligible role played by the diversity characteristic of these low-SES students in their adjustment experience may be attributed to its inconspicuous nature. Indeed, when compared to the more overt diversity characteristic of race, she noted that "it's [SES is] easier to go unnoticed." Moreover, in her expert interview, Dr. Kathleen Riley of WCU noted that this

apparent exclusivity of so-called familiar faces in influencing students' adjustment experience may be misguided. She emphasized that, although it may have been the most salient factor for students at the time, it is likely that additional influences, particularly SES, may also have been at play in this regard.

### *Role of Extracurricular Participation*

Stemming from Student A's adjustment difficulties, Parent A asserted that her daughter "never regretted [her] decision" to remain at the alternative second-level setting. When asked to describe the turning-point in her negative adjustment experience, Student A noted that "starting to play camogie and football with the school was really important for me … [because] it gave people a chance to get to know me outside of class … [and] see that I was normal." Parent A corroborated this experience by highlighting that "the big thing was when she started playing football and camogie with the school … It was through these that she really got to know people and make genuine friends." She also added that her daughter's participation in such extracurricular activities affords her a sense of valuation as it "makes her feel as though she plays a big role in the school." Such positive effects of extracurricular participation on adjustment experiences were similarly reflected by Student B, mentioning that "I became involved with a lot of sports in the school and the girls never judged me for playing with them." Parent B added that "some of the best friends she made … came from the football, basketball, and camogie teams." These findings distinctly reflect the consensus within the broader literature that students' participation in extracurricular activities is positively related to the development of meaningful friendships, even in unlikely situations such as those of differential SES (e.g. Bohnert et al., 2013; Schaefer et al., 2011). In his expert interview, Richard Kahlenberg characterized such findings as "encouraging," specifically lauding extracurricular engagements as a "great source of camaraderie" in overcoming ability-based tracking practices within schools, which oftentimes diminish "opportunities for interaction across class or racial lines." In addition, it is evident that the involvement of participating students in extracurricular activities, such as school sports teams, fulfill the stipulations of Gordon Allport's (1954) seminal contact theory, wherein minority students are of equal status to their peers in regular pursuit of the common objective of sporting victory during school-sanctioned games and competitions.

Psychosocial Experiences

For the purposes of this research, the theme of psychosocial experiences is operationalized as the psychological and social engagements, behaviors, and interactions of participants at their alternative school settings post-adjustment. Overall, participants responded overwhelmingly positively in this regard (see Figure 1). Sentiments of respect, feelings of comfort, commonalities with friends, and positive interactions with peers were cited by all participants. Importantly, such positive experiences of participating students contradict Crosnoe's (2009) findings of "psychosocial problems" (p. 709) and Patalay's (2019) conclusions of "emotional difficulties" (slide 22) for low-SES students in more advantaged schools. In light of this, the forthcoming paragraphs will specifically explore the following sub-themes which influenced participating students' psychosocial experiences: the role of teachers, tensions concerning distance, and instances of peer-condescension.

Figure 1

Responses to Participating Students' Happiness at Socioeconomically Integrated Schools
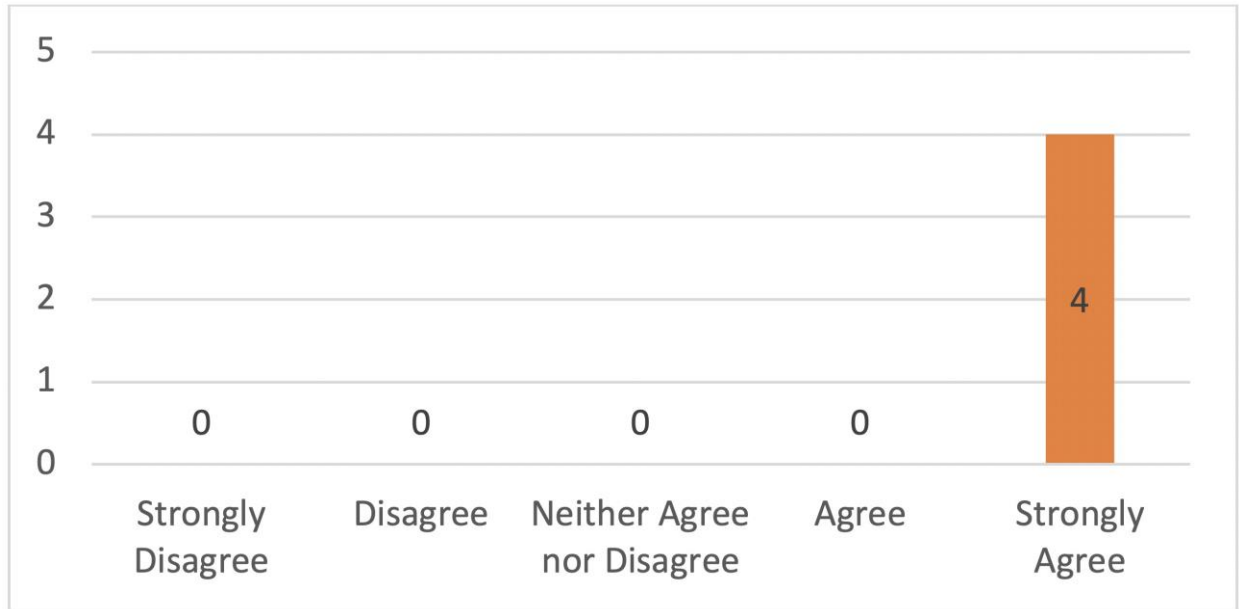
Role of Teachers

According to survey data, all participants "strongly agreed" that the students with whom this research is concerned received fair and respectful treatment from their teachers. This was also reflected in interview data, wherein positive sentiments concerning the role of teachers in their psychosocial experience were expressed. Participants highlighted a sense of safety and security cultivated by an awareness that their teachers were looking out for them. As the assertions below illustrate, this awareness was tempered by the subtlety with which their teachers did so:

Table 2

Subtle Vigilance of Teachers

Student A	"They have to look out for you, but at the same time not make you feel different."
Parent A	"The teachers never treated her any differently, but they still watched out for her. They made her feel safe without singling her out."
Parent B	"They were always looking out for her, but not in a way that she felt that she was getting any special treatment … I think that's very reassuring."

During her expert interview, Dr. Jacqueline Van Schooneveld of WCU described this theme of teachers' subtle vigilance as "powerful," highlighting it as something which could be harnessed in ensuring the optimum experience of socioeconomic integration for students from low-SES backgrounds. Additionally, Kathleen Riley, in her expert interview, responded to this trend by commenting on its illustration of participants' understanding of the nuanced balances associated with their situation. However, during an expert interview with Dr. Paul Sylvester of WCU, an alternative perception of such nuance was expressed, inferring that it suggests a priority of participating students to "fly under the radar," with "diversity to be avoided at all costs." Comparing the situation to the educational embrace of cultural and linguistic diversity, Sylvester emphasized that "people don't want to acknowledge social class," making it a more elusive domain in which to realize meaningful inclusion. Indeed, broaching such tensions between meaningful acknowledgement and mindful subtlety embodies a challenging endeavor in cultivating a positive experience for students from low-SES backgrounds engaging in socioeconomic integration. In order to appropriately achieve such meaningful acknowledgement of socioeconomic diversity, the central tenets of culturally relevant pedagogy may be harnessed by the teachers of low-SES students in socioeconomically integrated schools (Gay, 2018; Ladson-Billings, 1995). This pedagogical philosophy stipulates that teachers comprehensively understand the influence of students' unique cultures on their day-to-day engagements, and thus strive to incorporate such diversity into their typical classroom practices in order to improve student outcomes.

In addition to this, teachers were described to positively influence the psychosocial experience of students by respectfully fostering their social development and self-confidence. As Student B noted, "my teachers never looked down on me because I came from a disadvantaged area. Instead, they encouraged me the whole time to progress and develop in terms of self-confidence and socially."

Distance

The geographical distance which the homes of participating students were located from their alternative school settings engendered psychosocial tensions in the qualitative data. According to survey responses, Student A resided "between 20 and 30 minutes" from her secondary school, while the home of Student B was "between 10 and 20 minutes" away from hers. These tensions manifested as a dual problem, each side of which is almost reciprocal to the other. First, although Student A noted that "I spend most of my time with friends from where I go now," she subsequently lamented that "I wish that I lived closer to them." Indeed, although her mother mentioned that "she'll sometimes get busses or figure out something out to get there," Student A expressed evident annoyance at the facility with which her friends can spontaneously socialize outside of school, while she must "organize when I can spend time with them." In her expert interview, Jacqueline Van Schooneveld questioned whether this frustration may be extenuated by social media postings, inducing a so-called "fear of missing out" or "FOMO" through an awareness that her friends are socializing in a location beyond her reach. Conversely, however, during his expert interview, Paul Sylvester queried whether contemporary social media and gaming platforms may actually embody a means of alleviating the negative psychosocial consequences of such students' distant location by providing a virtual space in which to "hang out." Additionally, in response to such findings, Richard Kahlenberg anecdotally recounted the practices of a New York City school which "arranged play dates outside of school" with financial supports in order to alleviate the challenges associated with geographical distance. Nevertheless, he concurrently acknowledged that, in areas with an insufficient public transport network, "it's just going to be hard to do." Related to this, when interviewed, Katherine Norris also proposed that financial constraints of low-SES families may similarly embody a barrier to socialization with classmates from more affluent backgrounds.

Leading on from this, while the geographical distance of students' residences induced challenges in socializing with friends from their alternative school setting, the reciprocal to this was outlined by Parent B, noting that her daughter no longer associates with her counterparts who reside in their local area: "She doesn't really have much to do with the people in around here who are her age." She proposed that such dissociation from the local community may embody "a downside of her going away for secondary school." In light of this sense of isolation, during her expert interview, Katherine Norris highlighted that such a trend is consistently replicated in the integration experiences of racially diverse students. Similarly, such a finding reflects the challenges described by former students of Boston's Metropolitan Council for Educational Opportunity program in Susan Eaton's (2001) *The Other Boston Busing Story*. As Eaton describes, upon their integration to schools of the White middle-class Boston suburbs, Black students struggled to simultaneously reconcile their experience with the deprivation of their home backgrounds, leading to sentiments of "otherness" in both contexts. In addition, Katherine Norris noted that such dissociation from one's native community oftentimes cultivates a mindset that "you've got to leave," resulting in a consolidation of inequality in disadvantaged areas. Stemming from this, when interviewed, Kathleen Riley reflected upon the challenges presented by such tensions associated with socioeconomic integration, emphasizing that, although it affords low-SES students improved academic opportunities, "it comes at a cost." She highlighted that families must consider such sacrifices alongside potential benefits when making such a decision.

Peer-Condescension

Overall, instances of peer-condescension were emphasized as being exceptionally rare by all participants (see Figure 2). These quantitative findings, coupled with participants' qualitative accounts, contradict Crosnoe's (2009) assertion that low-SES embodies a "social liability" in more advantaged schools (p. 711). Nevertheless, it is worthy to explore the intermittent occurrences of peer-condescension referred to during parent and student interviews. The most noteworthy of such incidents transpired early in Student A's time at secondary school whereupon a classmate verbally demeaned her on the grounds of her background, resulting in a violent physical altercation. Student A expressed clear sentiments of frustration towards the boy's behavior, highlighting that "he was judging me because of where I came from … I punched him in the nose." Such irritation was similarly conveyed by her mother, questioning the motives of the boy's behavior: "She wasn't trying to hide where she had gone to primary ... Why should she? She wasn't ashamed of where she came from." This assertion of Parent A embodies the distinct antithesis of the Freirean (1968/1970) conception of self-depreciation, which posits that oppressed peoples are manipulated into an unthinking "internalization of the opinion the oppressors hold of them" (p. 63). Rather than internalizing the stereotype of their familial socioeconomic standing, she forcefully refuted it. While such vehemence may initially appear to contradict the aforementioned postulations of expert interviewees relating to strivings for inconspicuous assimilation, it may also be proposed that the accumulation of condescension imposed upon Student A in this instance transgressed her threshold of tolerance, impelling both her and her mother to forcefully confront the transgression with conscious overtness of their identity.

Figure 2

Responses to the Frequency with Which Participating Students are "Singled out"
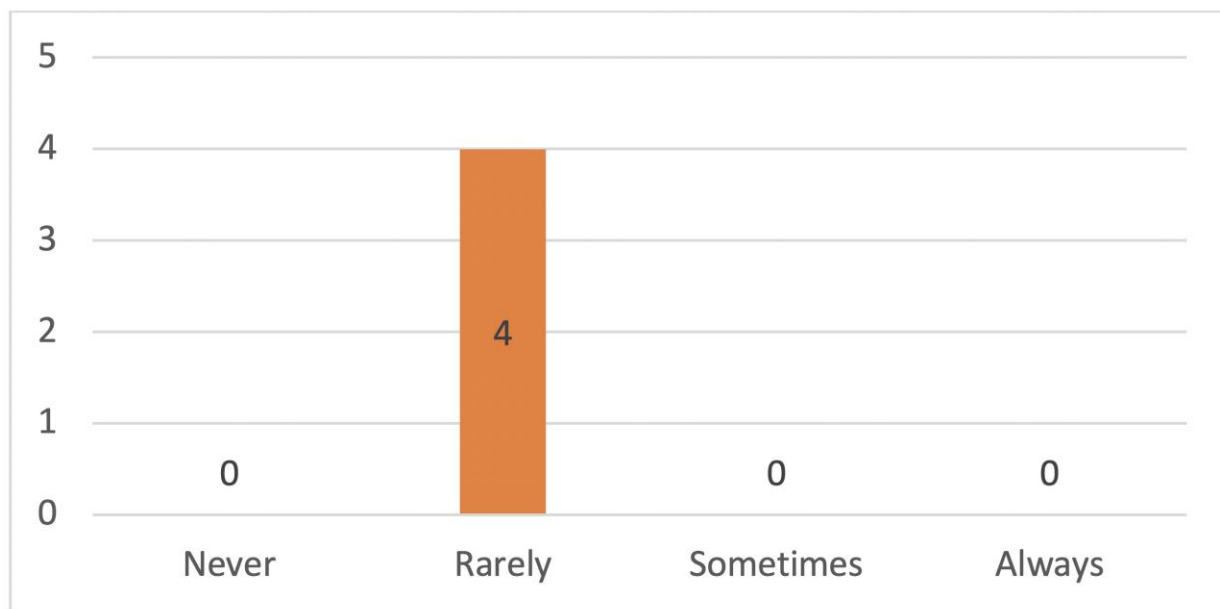
Nevertheless, while Student A evidently did not aspire to subvert the truth of her origin, one assertion concerning her transition to secondary school highlights her awareness of the prejudiced conception held by her peers: "When people would ask me where I was from, they would look at me funny when I told them … Some people made up ideas about me in their heads." Student A's awareness of the perceptions held by some of her peers distinctly reflects W. E. B. Du Bois' (1903) notion of double consciousness, as theorized in his 1903 book, *The Souls of Black Folk*, whereby she intermittently experienced her alternative schooling through "through the eyes of others" (p. 2).

Recommendations

When prompted in both surveys and interviews to describe the ideal experience for a student from a disadvantaged area attending a socioeconomically integrated school, participants' recommendations distinctly followed two themes: the development of a social network and the cultivation of a positive school culture.

Developing a Social Network

The development of a supportive social network at an early stage was highlighted by participants as being necessary in realizing the perfect experience of socioeconomic integration, particularly during the transition phase when, as Student A noted, "everything was really new." In light of this, Parent B emphasized that, in order to develop such social networks, "it's important that they get lots of opportunities to meet with their classmates outside of the classroom." Much as was reported previously, students' participation in extracurricular activities was promoted as the primary means through which to realize this endeavor. For instance, Student A recommended "getting involved in stuff outside of school," while Parent B highlighted that "the more clubs and teams they can join, the better." As Richard Kahlenberg affirmed during his expert interview, such findings "make a great deal of sense [because] it is in extracurricular activities that students find their community." Additionally, Parent A suggested the implementation of a "buddy program" during the summer preceding students' secondary transition in order to ensure that prospective students engaging in socioeconomic integration have "friendly faces … [to] approach and talk to on those first couple of days." In response to the suggestion of such a program, Paul Sylvester, during his expert interview, recounted a personal experience of a "wilderness camp" prior to commencing college. He highlighted that it facilitated his subsequent adjustment to college life as he had developed a familiar social network beforehand. Moreover, much as was proposed for extracurricular participation, the activities which would constitute such a camp or program may similarly fulfil the stipulations of Allport's (1954) contact theory: equal status, sufficient duration, common goals, and authority-sanction.

Positive School Culture

In addition to such development of supportive social networks, all participants spoke of a transcendental culture of safety, comfort, and respect within the schools attended by participating students. A broad range of synonymous adjectives were employed by participants during surveys and interviews in describing this "special kind of atmosphere," as characterized by Parent B. Such adjectives included "safe," "accepting," and "comfortable." Parent A encapsulated the

dynamic essence of this overarching atmosphere permeating the culture of her daughter's school, stating that "the most important thing is for them to feel accepted. … No matter who you are or where it is you come from, you're just accepted. … This includes teachers, other students, everyone in the whole school." Parent A subsequently concluded her interview with a profound value-laden statement concerning the ideal experience for a student from a disadvantaged area attending a socioeconomically integrated school, asserting that "they're always welcome, but they have to fit in too." When presented with this statement during his expert interview, David Backer questioned if such a mindset ensured the perpetuation of the dominant culture within the alternative school setting. He noted that the very notion of "fitting in" suggests a completed structure which cannot be altered. Similarly, when interviewed, Katherine Norris proposed that Parent A's assertions on "fitting in" somewhat challenge the underpinnings of the aforementioned positive psychosocial experiences due to their emphasis on assimilation and the possible dilution of identity.

Discussion

Findings

Despite the case study nature of the present research, its findings reflect a number of salient trends and themes highlighted throughout the body of empirical and theoretical literature. As such, it is reasonable to propose that this investigation ascertained a meaningful understanding of the experiences of students from low-SES backgrounds attending socioeconomically integrated secondary schools in Ireland. Moreover, the focused approach taken towards the specific cases of participating families allowed for the illustration of a comprehensive and holistic picture of their socioeconomic integration experiences. In light of this, therefore, while the forthcoming conclusions cannot definitively be extrapolated to the broader population, the insights gained from both families robustly elucidate viable permutations in the experiences of students engaging in socioeconomic integration.

Choice

Participating families' choice to attend secondary schools in more privileged areas was the culmination of a deliberative process grounded in thoughtful, knowledge-based comparison with alternatives. At the core of such deliberation was participants' knowledge of the academic opportunities to be attained in alternative settings, with particular emphasis upon their influence on students' subsequent higher education progression. While not as pertinent as their consideration of academic opportunities, participants' knowledge of psychosocial supports was an additional factor that influenced choice.

Adjustment

The adjustment of participating families to their alternative secondary settings contrasted distinctly with the presence of "familiar faces" profoundly differentiating their experience. It was significantly more difficult to adjust and to develop social networks without the presence of such "familiar faces." It is worthy to note that participating students' adjustment was not considered in relation to their lower relative social standing, but rather exclusively through a lens of their

friendships, or lack thereof, indicating consistencies with more general transition experience literature. Participation in extracurricular activities was consistently highlighted as an effective means of developing social networks and, hence, ameliorating students' adjustment experience.

Psychosocial Experiences

In general, the psychosocial experience of participating students attending socioeconomically integrated schools was positive, with reports of comfort, safety, and respect, along with supportive friendships and positive peer interactions. The role of teachers was found to be particularly influential in this regard, with participants appreciating the subtlety with which their teachers expressed vigilance towards their nuanced situations, suggesting a potential desire for inconspicuous assimilation. A dual challenge, embodying a reciprocal tension, was engendered by the distance of participants' homes from the locations of their alternative secondary schools. Fundamentally, while such distance oftentimes prevented participating students from socializing with friends from their new school, it concurrently resulted in their dissociation from counterparts in their native area, inducing sentiments of frustrated isolation. While all participants highlighted that instances of peer-condescension were exceptionally rare, intermittent instances of demeaning remarks, nonetheless, played a tangential role in their psychosocial experience.

Recommendations

The development of a supportive social network at an early stage during students' transition to alternative socioeconomically integrated settings was promoted by all participants, with participation in extracurricular activities and engagement with school-led transition programs being promoted as effective means of realizing such a goal. Finally, all participants spoke of an overarching atmosphere of warmth and acceptance as a necessary facet of achieving the optimum experience of socioeconomic integration for students from low-SES backgrounds.

Implications

The practical implications of these findings can be postulated to extend across two distinct contexts. Firstly, insights are offered for the amelioration of practices in schools with high proportions of students from low-SES backgrounds. Secondly, serving as a viable alternative or parallel approach to the DEIS program, the findings present several opportunities for potentiating the optimum psychosocial experience for low-SES students in socioeconomically integrated schools. Such schools may realize a socioeconomically diverse composition via the magnet school and incentivization approach, as outlined by Basile (2012), or through the integration of communities themselves, such as in the American school district with an inclusionary housing policy investigated by Schwartz (2010). Indeed, such socioeconomically diverse communities may be best placed in affording low-SES students the irrefutable academic benefits of socioeconomic integration, whilst evading its associated psychosocial tensions as unearthed in this research. At present, Irish law, through Part V of the Planning and Development Act 2000, mandates that 10% of the units built in private residential developments be designated for social housing (Oireachtas Éireann, 2019). In light of the above argument, it may be of value to increase this mandated social housing allocation, as well as tighten exemptions which allow

developers to build such social housing units off site from the original development, in order to further facilitate the socioeconomic diversification of Irish communities.

Participants' prioritization of academic factors in their choice of alternative school settings, specifically those in relation to the range of available subjects and their influence on opportunities for third-level progression, ought to be presented as an opportunity for schools in low-SES areas. In order to encourage and maintain the enrollment of students from the local community, particularly those with high aspirations, advanced-level courses must be available across the curriculum in such schools.

The influence of developing social networks and friendships on students' adjustment and overall psychosocial experience presents many practical implications. School stakeholders ought to encourage low-SES students in socioeconomically integrated schools to participate in extracurricular activities from an early stage in their transition. Clubs and activities that may be of interest should be suggested to such students, or alternative organizations that reflect popular passions may be established. In addition, a formal school-led program aimed at developing the social networks of potentially marginalized students may be of value in the summer preceding their secondary transition.

The integral role played by teachers in the psychosocial experiences of participating low-SES students in socioeconomically integrated schools ought to be harnessed in the practical context. Teachers should be informed of the positive sentiments induced by students' awareness that their teachers are "looking out" for them, as well as be encouraged to do so in their practice. Nevertheless, it is important to note that such vigilance must be tempered with mindful subtlety, while concurrently acknowledging the diverse cultural identity of such students.

In order for a positive psychosocial experience of socioeconomic integration to flourish, an overarching culture of positivity must be inculcated across a school. Such an atmosphere ought to be characterized by warmth, respect, and acceptance on the part of all school stakeholders.

Corroborating a consistent theme from the larger body of school integration research, participants in this investigation highlighted sentiments of isolation invoked by an inability to socialize with classmates and a concurrent dissociation from counterparts in their local area. Initiatives aimed at satisfying such tensions ought to be explored in the future in order to ameliorate the experiences of low-SES students engaging in socioeconomic integration. It is also necessary to highlight that such sentiments of isolation may cause individuals to leave their native low-SES area as adults, thus exacerbating the cycle of inequality through a consolidation of disadvantage. While such a postulation is pointedly cynical, it is a worthy conversation to establish when considering the potential long-term effects of socioeconomic integration.

In conclusion, I aspire that the present paper stimulates discussion surrounding the experiences of students from low-SES backgrounds in socioeconomically integrated schools. While the academic benefits of the practice are, as illustrated by the aforementioned body of research, empirically beyond rebuke, it is nonetheless important to acknowledge and aspire to alleviate the psychosocial tensions which it concurrently engenders. The findings of this research offer a range of recommendations for socioeconomically integrated schools, as well as those with high

consolidations of low-SES students, for the amelioration of their practices. Moreover, the experiences of participants in this study indicate the necessity that both educators and policy makers are cognizant of the wide-ranging, holistic effects of socioeconomic integration on low-SES students when exploring and proposing strategies aimed at breaking the cycle of educational, and thus socioeconomic, disadvantage. Indeed, it is only through such an informed and open critique that education can truly come to embody the aspirational "great equalizer" of socioeconomic injustice and disadvantage. As envisaged by French sociologist and philosopher, Pierre Bourdieu (1986), our ultimate aspiration must embody the realization of a utopian "universe of … perfect equality of opportunity," wherein "every moment is perfectly independent of the previous one, … and every prize can be attained, instantaneously, by everyone, so that at each moment anyone can become anything" (p. 46).

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