A WHOLE SCHOOL APPROACH TO SUPPORTING PROGRESSION

Tackling low progression rates to further and higher education through Trinity Access' evidence-based Schools of Distinction Programme.

WHAT IS THE CHALLENGE?

Although higher education participation rates have increased significantly over the last few decades, there is a persistent pattern of inequality of access for low socio-economic status (SES) students (Hannon, 2020; McCoy et al 2014). Studies highlight how access to higher education is not evenly distributed across all groups in society, with social class continuing to influence student pathways from secondary school. In Ireland, participation in higher education among the most disadvantaged groups is as low as 27 per cent compared to almost full participation by those whose parents are working as higher professionals. While educational policies at second and third level aim to address disadvantage in school and broaden participation in higher education, research shows that strong patterns of inequality remain (HEA, 2018).

A major challenge for universities, both nationally and internationally, is to address the lack of diversity and access for groups traditionally underrepresented in higher education. Access, widening participation or foundation programmes have been introduced by many universities in recent years to reduce existing stratified race and class structures, and to bridge the knowledge gap that may exist for non-traditional students. Widening participation programmes aim to increase the progression of students from underrepresented groups to higher education as well as supporting these students once in university.

WHAT ARE THE BARRIERS?

Previous research has demonstrated that barriers to educational progression for people from areas of socio-economic disadvantage include but are not limited to: underperformance in school (Chowdry et al., 2013; Smyth et al., 2014; Keane, 2015), low parental support, negative student-teacher relationships as well as educational disengagement, and negative perceptions of higher education (Bray et al., 2020; McCoy et al., 2014). Similarly, teacher attrition in DEIS schools, financial issues, lack of information and available guidance are all cited as barriers to educational progression for young people from underrepresented groups (Smyth & Banks, 2012; McCoy et al., 2014). *The Leaving School in Ireland: A Longitudinal Study of Post-School Transitions* (2014) explored students' decision-making about their post-school pathways. Findings showed that many young people highlighted the importance of intrinsic motivation for progressing to further or higher education – wanting to study a subject they were interested in, personal fulfilment, and being able to get an interesting job. However, young people who had attended DEIS schools were more likely to have extrinsic motivation – an income and a secure job, suggesting greater risk aversion among this group (McCoy et al., 2010; Reay et al., 2005). Growing up in Ireland (a national longitudinal study) data has shown that having high aspirations and goals is important for achieving academic resilience (even when levels of maths and literacy are controlled for) (GUI, 2020; Kong, 2020). This is reflected in other Irish studies which suggest that a culture of high expectations and support in promoting successful post-school transitions for second-level students is especially important for students whose parents had not attended college themselves (Smyth and Banks, 2012; McCoy et al., 2014). These parents lacked the "insider" knowledge of the higher education system which could help their children make choices about which course and which college to apply for. Furthermore, social class differences in aspirations to higher education were evident as early as Junior Cycle.

Clearly, the findings, point to the importance of a whole-school approach to guidance, in which advice from teachers on what subjects and levels to study keeps options open for the future and encourages young people to have high aspirations (McCoy et al., 2014).

It is important to note that having high aspirations does not always mean that these aspirations translate into reaching their desired goal. McCoy and colleagues (2014) found that not all young people were able to realise their plans upon leaving school – one in six did not go on to do what they had planned, while over a fifth only did so 'to some extent'. Students from disadvantaged areas were more likely to regret their progression decisions than their more affluent peers. There were a number of reasons underlying regrets among these students: not being able to realise their desired goal, largely because of lower Leaving Certificate grades; courses not being what was anticipated, which in some cases resulted in non-completion; and completing a course before realising the specific field of study was 'not for them' (McCoy et al., 2014). Other factors that influenced how students fared once in higher education included the significant differences in teaching and learning between their second-level education and their post-school course. This is an important factor for widening participation programmes to consider when working with secondary schools. The goal is not just to increase aspirations but to support students in achieving their goals while also helping to fully inform students of what is to be expected at higher education and what a particular course of choice will entail.

WHAT ARE THE SOLUTIONS?

The model for access programmes can vary, with some based in second level schools instead of universities. The focus of school-based programmes is often different as they aim to raise aspirations among young people and help them acquire the competence and the language of learning that may support transitions to higher education. Trinity Access has an extensive outreach programme for students in its post-primary linked schools which enforces the aim of its three core practices: Mentoring, Leadership in Learning and Pathways to College. Such activities are founded on evidence-based practice in order to increase aspirations and support students to make informed decisions about their future. The literature highlights the importance of guidance and realistic role models (Mentoring), knowledge and information about higher education (Pathways to College) as well as creative pedagogies and strong student teacher relationships (Leadership in Learning), in order to tackle educational disadvantage. By building on the large amount of work Trinity Access linked schools undertake to encourage a college-going culture, these outreach programmes provide students with the opportunity to envision themselves in third level education by equipping them with the essential knowledge and skills required to progress.

SO, WHAT DOES THIS LOOK LIKE IN A SCHOOL?

Each Trinity Access school is supported to develop programmes that nurture their students and help to create an innovative, college-going culture through the three core practices. The three core practices consist of activities that are designed to support the work of the guidance counsellor, creating a whole school culture around progression and student attainment.

PATHWAYS TO COLLEGE

The Pathways to College core practice involves coordinating activities that provide students with a chance to explore post-secondary options. Engagement in this core practice equips students with the knowledge to make informed choices regarding subjects and subject levels for Junior and Senior Cycle in the context of exploring post-secondary educational and career options. Activities include, for example, projects relating to college/ courses choices, mock applications, campus visits, careers fairs, talks by professionals, and workplace visits.

Students from 1st to 6th year, consistently engage in activities that promote college-going. They create and adapt materials that promote college in an inclusive way so that students from   diverse backgrounds are encouraged to consider college as an option for them. Thus, the idea of progressing to college is promoted and made highly visible in the school and community.

" … a wonderful, eye-opening program. It is phenomenal and has further inspired me to go to college one day. They help me look ahead to college and explore new career paths that I may not have thought about on my own."
Meka, student in Westland Row

MENTORING

The Mentoring core practice involves various types of mentoring programmes, designed to foster academic and personal growth among all students. These include college-focused mentoring, peer-to-peer mentoring, and career-focused mentoring.

Mentoring provides all students with a supportive relationship with a more experienced individual who can serve as a role model, such as teachers, past pupils, community leaders, peers, adults, and/or college students.

Effective mentoring programmes are well structured, build relationships through which information can be transferred, and enable students to develop self-esteem and confidence. Mentoring is not a once-off activity; it involves a mentor engaging with a mentee/small group of mentees over a length of time. In Trinity Access schools, all students participate in long-term mentoring programmes as both mentees and mentors, mentoring becomes integrated in school planning, and community partners form part of the mentoring structure.

" … together, we set realistic goals for me to work towards. Examining my past exams and setting goals for myself helped me an extraordinary amount as it showed me which areas I was stronger and which areas I needed to improve on … In conclusion I highly recommend academic mentoring as it helped me with the preparation of my exams. I will definitely continue to use the methods I learnt in this process in my upcoming exams."
Mariya, student in Portlaoise College

LEADERSHIP IN LEARNING

The Leadership in Learning core practice involves teachers guiding students in ways that help develop students' autonomy and self-direction, as well as skills such as collaboration, communication, creativity, and critical thinking/problem-solving. Teachers often use an innovative, student-centred pedagogy — the Bridge21 model — to provide a framework for students to develop skills within the context of teaching and learning in the formal curriculum, and engagement in student-led community service projects.

The Leadership in Learning core practice is distinct from Pathways and Mentoring in that it has components aimed both directly at students and at supporting teacher professional development.

"I was hugely impressed by the leadership skills demonstrated by these 2nd year students. They demonstrated remarkable independence, confidence and team working ability. I was delighted to be asked to support their work."
Joe, IT Consultant, supported Drimnagh Castle Leadership in Learning Core Practice

IS IT WORKING?

In 2018, Trinity Access commenced their longitudinal study of post-primary students. These students are based in 20 Trinity Access linked schools in the wider Dublin area. Students in all 20 linked schools are invited to participate each year, and their data is tracked year on year. The longitudinal study is now in its third year of data collection. Using this data, researchers can measure students' engagement with Trinity Access's Core practices and look at the impact of such activities. Data from nearly 4,000 students has shown that students who have a high engagement with each of the three core practices are experiencing positive results.

Aspirations and goals refer to students reporting that they think their education will create many future opportunities for them and that school is an important part of achieving their future goals. Students with high aspirations want to continue their education following school and may plan on going to college. These students are also hopeful about their future. Trinity Access data has shown that students who engaged in more Leadership in Learning or Pathways to College activities had higher aspirations and goals. Moreover, those students with a high-quality mentor relationship also had higher aspirations compared to those who did not have a mentor.

The study also measured students' perceived confidence in college success. Students who are confident in achieving college success believe that they will fit in and make friends at college or university. They believe that they will be accepted to college and that they will be able to successfully graduate
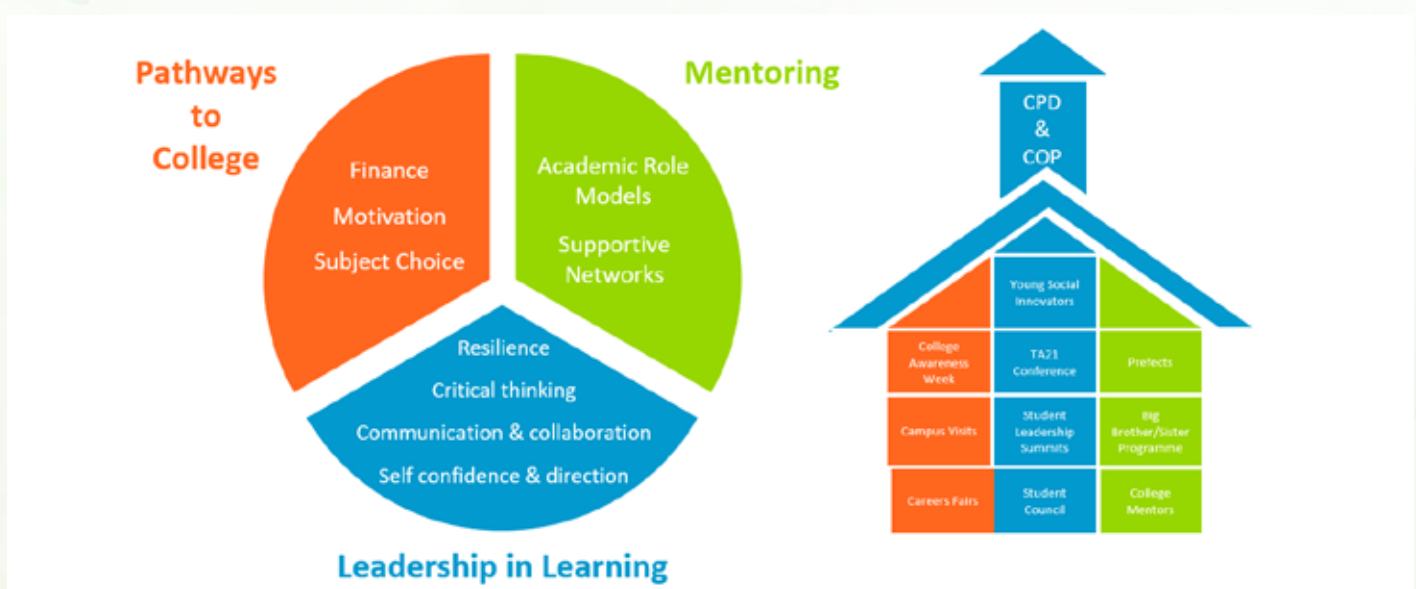
from college or university. Findings suggest that students who engaged in more Leadership in Learning or Pathways to College activities had higher confidence in college success. Again, those with a high-quality mentor relationship also had higher confidence in college success compared to those who did not have a mentor.

Good student-teacher relationships imply that students feel like their teachers are available to them for emotional support when they need them. Students feel like the adults in their school listen to them and that overall, they are open and honest with them. Students work with adults to find solutions to school problems, and students develop projects and programmes that improve the school as a whole. Students and adults work together to make their school a better place. Students were asked to report on their exposure to 21st Century teaching and learning in their everyday classes. 21st Century teaching and learning consists of pedagogies that support students to be creative, work in groups, complete projects, and frequently present work to their class. Their teachers present lessons in different ways and technology is often used for learning in their school. Our research has shown that students with a high exposure to 21st Century teaching and learning are significantly more likely to have higher student-teacher relationships.

Active Engagement in school implies that students enjoy being at school, that they enjoy challenging assignments, they don't perceive school to be boring and they enjoy participating in their classes. Students who are actively engaged enjoy learning new things and believe that learning can be fun! Our findings suggest that those students who engaged with more Leadership in Learning activities were more likely to be actively engaged in school.

These initial findings suggest that these three core practices are having a positive impact on the students in these schools. Data is being collected annually from students, teachers, and school leaders to evaluate and improve practices year on year. The aim of this is to support schools, teachers, and ultimately students in enabling every student to reach their full educational potential. This data is also available to linked schools and Schools of Distinction award winners to allow them to gain valuable insights from the data in their own individual school as well as incorporate both the student and teacher voice in their planning going forward.

HOW CAN MY SCHOOL GET INVOLVED?

The Trinity Access Schools of Distinction programme aims to support the development of college-going practices and student-centred, innovative learning environments across schools nationwide, particularly within schools serving communities where there is a traditionally low progression rate to post-secondary education.

"It encouraged collaboration within all subject departments and committee groups and brought real life experiences to our whole school evaluations each year as it brough richness to our DEIS plan and SSE ... it is great to get recognition and reassurance that the work we are all doing is valued and worthwhile. We are proud to be associated with this program and excited about continuing our work with it in the future."

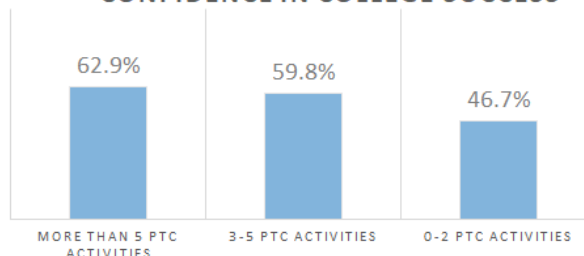## CHERYL, TEACHER IN ST DOMINIC'S COLLEGE

Our vibrant Community of Practice creates a space for like-minded educators to share ideas, resources, and inspire one another to champion change in our school communities for the benefit of our students. We know that everyone likes to engage in different ways, so we offer a range of opportunities throughout the school year.

Our annual Conferences and Teachmeets are designed to foster connection, innovation and transformation. Through collaboration, the sharing of
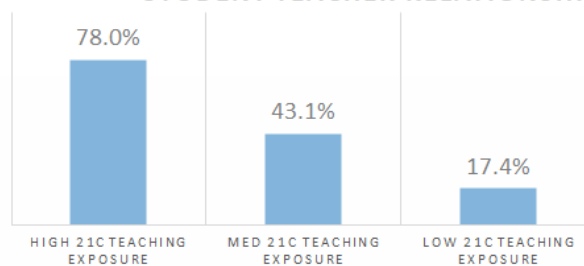
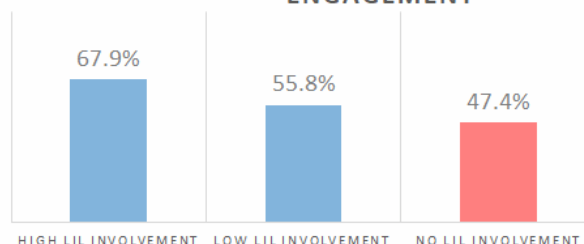**% OF STUDENTS REPORTING HIGH ASPIRATIONS AND GOALS**

GOOD MENTOR RELATIONSHIP	NO MENTOR
63.7%	45.3%
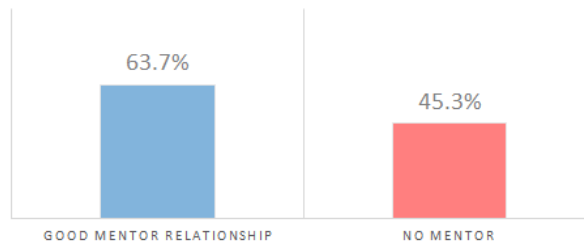
% STUDENTS REPORTING HIGH CONFIDENCE IN COLLEGE SUCCESS

MORE THAN 5 PTC ACTIVITIES	3-5 PTC ACTIVITIES	0-2 PTC ACTIVITIES
62.9%	59.8%	46.7%

% STUDENTS REPORTING HIGH STUDENT TEACHER RELATIONSHIP

HIGH 21C TEACHING EXPOSURE	MED 21C TEACHING EXPOSURE	LOW 21C TEACHING EXPOSURE
78.0%	43.1%	17.4%

% STUDENTS REPORTING HIGH ACTIVE ENGAGEMENT

HIGH LIL INVOLVEMENT	LOW LIL INVOLVEMENT	NO LIL INVOLVEMENT
67.9%	55.8%	47.4%

ideas, and inspirational keynote speakers, teachers and school leaders are empowered to bring best practices, new ideas and innovations into their own classrooms and schools.

Staffroom Chats are a series of drop-in conversations hosted online, a casual and social space where we focus on a different issue or topic each week. In connecting with other schools across the country we hope to support each other, share our experiences both good and bad, and ultimately elevate the learning experience of our students.

TheStaffroom.ie is a resource sharing website for Trinity Access schools. It provides a space for sharing and searching for learning activities by core practice. TheStaffroom.ie also acts as a noticeboard for upcoming events and community news as well as providing access to our fortnightly Staffroom Mailer.

In our fortnightly Staffroom Mailer, we focus on the teachers and management in schools. We share relevant resources, highlight CPD opportunities, and advertise ways for you to collaborate with other schools.

Our Schools of Distinction Awards recognize and celebrate the wonderful work happening in schools across the country to tackle the educational divide and ensure that all our students are fully equipped to forge their own bright future after secondary school. It encourages participants to draw on their own school and community resources as well as the resources of the Trinity Access project in Trinity College Dublin to support educational innovation and change.

Schools can be awarded one of three awards, each of which comes with prizes designed to support the implementation of the three core practices and enrich the teaching and learning experience in these schools. For more information or to join our community check out thestaffroom.ie

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

Q: My school is DEIS and partnered with another Higher Education Institution, can we still apply?

Yes, the Schools of Distinction Award programme is open to all DEIS schools and schools located in areas of low progression to higher education nationwide.

Q: Where can I get more information on the three core practices?

Visit thestaffroom.ie and download the Practitioners Guide. The guide contains information about the three core practices as well as sample activities. You'll also find resources created by others in our Community of Practice which are available for free.

Q: How do I get started?

To get started, complete an audit of the activities currently taking place in your school and categorise them under the three core practices. Our planning document, which doubles as the application document, will assist you in doing this. Contact Claire@ta21.ie or Deirdre@ta21.ie for support in this exercise.

Q: How can I start incorporating more Leadership in Learning activities in my classroom?

Our PG Certificate in 21st Century Teaching and Learning equips teachers with the requisite knowledge, skills, and competence to support the development of an innovative learning culture within schools that is team-based, technology mediated, project-focused, and cross-curricular. Or why not join a Staffroom Chat to hear how other educators are developing leadership skills within their classrooms?

Q: What supports are available?

Our teacher fellows are available to answer any questions or queries you may have. Contact Claire@ta21.ie or Deirdre@ta21.ie . We'll arrange a consultation to help get you started. You'll also find a range of resources on our website, thestaffroom.ie.

Q: What does my school receive as a prize?

You will receive a banner to recognise your school's achievement along

with a TCD campus tour for a Junior Cycle year group, a visit from a TAP Ambassador to speak to Senior Cycle students about their experience of the HEAR Scheme, access to our research tools, and we will contribute to the financial cost of a staff member attending our conference or embarking on our flagship PG Certificate in 21st Century Teaching and Learning (QQI Level 9).

AUTHORS

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