

Bridging home and school: Enhancing the capability to be educated to prevent early leaving from education in socio-economically marginalised contexts

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This qualitative research study examines the concept of the capability to be educated within the context of Early Leaving from Education and Training (ELET) policy. We argue that existing policies often overlook the importance of early intervention during compulsory education and explore the socio-economic and structural factors contributing to ELET by analysing the Home School Community Liaison (HSCL) programme in Ireland, which seeks to build partnerships between parents and schools with the goal of reducing educational inequalities. Drawing on semi-structured interviews with parents, HSCL coordinators, and teachers, the extent to which the HSCL programme bolsters the 'capability to be educated' is showcased, highlighting that education must extend beyond mere access to schools to include meaningful engagement in the learning process. Employing Hart's Sen-Bourdieu Analytical Framework (SBAF), the research analyses the ways in which proactive parental engagement, beginning in the early years of schooling, can serve as a critical preventative measure against ELET. The findings demonstrate the relationality between absenteeism, academic achievement, and parental engagement and the need for targeted interventions, such as home visits and specialised training, to empower students and families, thereby mitigating the risk of ELET and reducing educational disparities. Arguably, policy measures addressing the misalignment of parental and institutional habitus are vital to disrupt the perpetuation of disengagement and promote educational well-being in relation to ELET, particularly in contexts of socio-economic marginalisation, thereby contributing to the broader discourse on policy reform, prevention, and intervention strategies.

Keywords: capabilities approach; education policy; parental engagement; educational disadvantage; early school leaving; early leaving from education and training

1. Introduction

This paper explores how improving parental engagement in education can help reduce the risk of Early Leaving from Education and Training (ELET) among communities experiencing disadvantage in Ireland. ELET involves young people aged 18-24 who do not hold an upper secondary qualification (European Council 2021). While it is essential to address the challenges faced by this demographic, such a focus often overlooks the critical need for preventive policies aimed at younger students who are at risk of disengagement from the education system. Despite the acknowledged importance of prevention and early intervention, there is a significant lack of research and policy measures that address socio-economic disadvantages during compulsory education in Europe (Eurydice 2023; Donlevy et al. 2019). This gap highlights an urgent need for cross-sector partnerships focused on earlier intervention strategies. Moreover, evaluations of ELET within the European Union tend to overlook preventive measures and interventions, primarily concentrating on statistical outcomes, such as the number of young individuals who do or do not attain their upper secondary certificate by age 24. The ongoing achievement gap associated with socio-economic disadvantage is apparent in many European countries, yet there are relatively few policies specifically designed to address this disparity (European Council 2021). This situation highlights the critical need for a comprehensive approach that incorporates support and engagement at the earliest stages of education. Therefore, in this research, we examine the concept of *the capability to be educated*, exploring its implications through the lens of the ELET prevention initiative embodied in the Home School Community Liaison (HSCL) programme, employing a series of interviews with key stakeholders, including parents, HSCL coordinators, and educators. Through this

analysis, we seek to elucidate how education serves as a fundamental freedom—one that facilitates the realisation of additional freedoms and opportunities—thereby positioning individuals in either advantageous or disadvantageous circumstances (Terzi 2007).

The capability to be educated is grounded in the capabilities approach of Amartya Sen (1999), who considers education to be one of these essential capabilities for an individual to lead life with dignity and to achieve what they have reason to value. The capability to be educated extends well beyond mere access to formal schooling and encompasses the potential for meaningful engagement in educational processes that empower individuals to achieve vital educational outcomes, such as literacy, critical thinking, and active societal participation. The capabilities approach posits that educational success requires not only access to education but also the development of internal capabilities that facilitate effective learning and development (Unterhalter and Walker, 2007). The capability to be educated incorporates several critical dimensions necessary for effective learning and personal growth. First, individuals must have genuine opportunities to attend school and access essential educational resources, including textbooks, technology, and extracurricular activities. Addressing the pedagogical dimensions of education and advocating for systems that ensure participation and equitable access for marginalised students are key factors **in shaping inclusive and just education systems**; educational structures must operate at both macro and micro levels to appropriately cultivate and advance the educational well-being for every individual (Okkolin et al., 2018). However, access alone is insufficient; meaningful engagement in the educational process is paramount, requiring active participation and the cultivation of critical thinking and problem-solving skills (see Cin, 2017). Secondly, a supportive environment—both at home and in educational settings—is essential, necessitating encouragement from parents and caregivers, as well as fostering a school culture that promotes inclusion, respect, and diversity. Ultimately, the capability to be educated advocates for a holistic educational framework that ensures all learners have access to the necessary tools, support, and opportunities to realise their full potential.

Within the context of ELET, we argue that schools and the education system should more effectively build the capability to be educated, particularly for socio-economically disadvantaged students. We contend that the capability to be educated should be recognised as a structural issue, rather than being solely an individual concern. **The findings presented in this paper indicate that schools and policy directives should continue to emphasise the critical role these three areas—absenteeism, academic achievement, and parental engagement—play, as they are deeply interconnected and collectively influence students' ability to remain in school and their broader capability to be educated. However, rather than simply reaffirming the importance of these factors, our data illuminate how these factors are relationally linked, forming a dynamic system where improvements in one area, for instance in parental engagement, can reinforce and catalyse positive change in the others. Specifically, the insights from this research reveal how targeted engagement across these interconnected domains can influence not just short-term outcomes but also contribute to redressing disadvantages, fostering a more equitable capacity for individuals to benefit from education. Recognising this relationality is important for developing nuanced, context-sensitive strategies that do not treat these factors in isolation but rather address their interplay within the broader framework of human capabilities, thereby offering a pathway for more effective and responsive policy interventions that support genuine educational inclusion and social mobility.** Through the HSCL programme, we explore how and to what extent targeted interventions address these critical factors. In doing so, we use Hart's (2012, 2019) Sen-Bourdieu Analytical Framework (SBAF), arguing that enhancing parental engagement from the early years of schooling can act as a key preventative measure against ELET. Although children are recognised as 'capable social actors' (Hart and Brando 2018, p. 295), we find that their agency within the *capability to be educated*—particularly in the context of ELET—is often constrained by the adults in their lives,

most notably parents, and at times, teachers. This suggests that while children possess the capacity for agency, external factors like family disadvantage and school environments can limit their ability to fully exercise this agency within the educational sphere.

There have been other initiatives in Europe to address ELET, such as **PREVENT¹** (see Downes, 2014), but the HSCL policy in Ireland stands out as a distinctive initiative aimed at addressing the socio-economic inequalities that students may face within schools due to their disadvantaged backgrounds. The Home School Community Liaison (HSCL) programme and the Education Welfare Officers (EWOs) in Ireland work collaboratively, as both are strands of the Tusla Education Support Service (TESS), which falls under the remit of the Department of Education. Their roles are distinct but complementary, aiming to improve educational outcomes for children and young people by addressing barriers to attendance, participation, and retention. The HSCL seeks to build parent-teacher partnerships in disadvantaged settings to enhance both student and parental agency and capabilities (Ryan and Lannin, 2021). It was developed to address the lack of opportunities faced by students in disadvantaged areas, as highlighted by the Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS) initiative (DEIS 2014, 2017). As part of the broader DEIS programme (Furey 2019), HSCL seeks to mitigate student disadvantage by fostering partnerships with families from the early years of schooling, aiming to provide a more equitable and socially just education. Acting as a bridge between home and school, the HSCL adopts a whole-school approach to enhance family engagement and reduce educational inequalities experienced by students due to socio-economic disadvantages within the family unit. Analysing HSCL through SBAF, we contribute to the broader discourse on ELET policy transformation, prevention, and intervention strategies. In the next section, we present the debates and literature on ELET.

2. A Whole-School approach to Early Leaving from Education and Training (ELET)

The EU Council recommends a whole-school approach (WSA) to mitigate the risk of Early Leaving from Education and Training (ELET) (Eurydice, 2023). WSA centres on the learner and necessitates collaboration with families and the community to support student success (Eivers, 2019; Montero and Turcatti, 2022). While progress has been made, gaps persist in areas such as school networks and early warning systems (Donlevy et al., 2019; **Canbolat, 2024; Wu and Weiland, 2024**). Implementing early warning systems is crucial for identifying at-risk students and providing timely support; without these systems, schools risk widening the achievement gap. Many schools rely on teachers to identify students facing academic difficulties (Eivers, 2019; **Psyridou et al., 2024**), but ELET often results from factors extending beyond the classroom. Social and economic challenges may not be readily visible to teachers (Sani, 2023), and students may experience emotional or psychological difficulties related to their home environment, often manifesting subtly in the classroom (Montero-Sieburth and Turcatti, 2022). These factors underscore the need for schools to adopt a comprehensive approach to student support that considers both academic performance and broader social and emotional well-being.

Research indicates that schools in Europe may inadvertently increase educational disparities, limiting access to higher education, particularly for students from disadvantaged backgrounds (Tarabini and

¹ **PREVENT (2011–2013)** was a European Union project funded under the URBACT II programme. It aimed to tackle Early Leaving from Education and Training (ELET) by fostering cooperation between schools, families, and local stakeholders in urban areas. The project facilitated the exchange of best practices and supported cities in developing local action plans focused on prevention (Downes, 2014).

Jacovkis, 2021; Ingram and Tarabini, 2018) because they often operate within a framework that reflects and reinforces societal inequalities, resulting in unequal access to resources, attention, and opportunities. In her ethnographic study, Lareau (2011) explains that differences within the home environment emerging from social class impact how children relate to others outside the home, defining this as the ‘invisible inequality’ (p. 747). Therefore, we contend that addressing these issues solely within the school context is insufficient. Many indicators of educational risk—such as irregular attendance and behaviour problems—can be exacerbated by family disadvantage, often overlooked in the school setting. While family disadvantage is linked to poor academic performance and ELET, policies frequently lack clear measures to support both home and school environments. Factors such as family illness, financial hardship, or emotional challenges can lead to irregular attendance or disengagement from education (Montero-Sieburth and Turcatti, 2022; McKenna and Simmie, 2024). Additionally, the lack of wellbeing at school may stem from difficulties within the home, affecting overall academic performance (Brown et al., 2024; Oliver and Rossello, 2024). It is for these reasons that we argue that, in order to implement a whole-school approach, an early warning system in the school should first be developed in order to identify family disadvantage inequalities and develop targeted support, not only within the school environment, but also within the home environment.

Research on parental engagement and ELET shows the critical role that parents play in providing material resources, skills, and values that contribute to their children’s educational success—resources that are often lacking in disadvantaged families (Ahmed, Khalid, and Rehman 2024; Kantova 2024). However, parental engagement programmes in schools can also inadvertently reinforce existing inequalities, as these initiatives tend to be designed with a ‘one-size-fits-all’ approach, neglecting the diverse socio-economic contexts of families (Reay 2018; Hornby and Lafaele 2011). Such programmes are more accessible to parents who are not burdened by financial or socio-emotional difficulties, leaving disadvantaged families underserved, focusing on school-based activities, and overlooking the crucial need for support within the home environment, where many disadvantages are entrenched. A significant gap in ELET research lies in the development of support systems that address family disadvantage and promote parental engagement through a whole-school approach that targets both home and school environments (Donlevy et al. 2019). A whole-school approach involves not only providing support for students but also for the key adults in their lives—parents and teachers (Eurydice 2023; Spiteri and Farrugia 2023). This requires transforming current support systems within schools to foster parent-teacher partnerships aimed at addressing ELET risk factors and empowering all students, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds.

A key example of a whole-school approach designed to reduce socio-economic inequalities and tackle ELET risk factors is the Home School Community Liaison (HSCL) programme in Ireland (DEIS 2014, 2017). We will now provide further detail on the HSCL programme as a practical illustration of how whole-school approaches can engage families and communities to support student retention and success. The HSCL programme seeks to reduce educational inequalities by providing targeted parental support, with disadvantaged areas in Ireland identified to place liaison educators in schools serving these communities (Ryan and Lannin 2021). This structure facilitates timely interventions not only within schools but also in the home environment (Conaty 2002; Ross, Kennedy, and Devitt 2021). One of the strengths of the HSCL programme, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic, was its ability to rapidly mobilise support for disadvantaged families, who had already been identified prior to the crisis. This pre-established system enabled immediate assistance and allowed for continuous monitoring of risk factors. Moreover, it ensured that communication between schools, students, and their families remained consistent, even during periods of disruption (Ross, Kennedy, and Devitt 2021). Such proactive measures illustrate the potential of a whole-school approach in addressing ELET and socio-economic inequalities within education. In the next section, we now turn to our theoretical framework,

SBAF, to explore ELET and then focus on the conversion factors identified in this research for ELET and how HSCL has been implemented to mitigate this.

3. The Sen-Bourdieu Analytical Framework (SBAF) to explore ELET

In this research, we draw on Hart's (2012, 2019) Sen-Bourdieu Analytical Framework (SBAF), which integrates Sen's Capability Approach (CA) and Bourdieu's theories of socio-cultural reproduction to provide a nuanced understanding of students' capabilities. Both Sen's CA and Bourdieu's socio-cultural reproduction are grounded in the concepts of agency and freedom (Hart, 2012, 2019; Unterhalter et al., 2014), offering a theoretical lens through which we can explore students' active participation, or lack thereof, as well as their retention in education. The Capability Approach is a normative framework that focuses on each individual's potential to achieve what they value. Central to the CA are four key concepts: functionings, capabilities, agency, and conversion factors (Sen, 1992, 2009). Functionings represent what an individual is actually able to do, while capabilities reflect the freedom to choose how to use these functionings to pursue a life they have reason to value (Sen, 1992). While functionings and capabilities are interconnected, it is important to distinguish between what a student is able to achieve based on their personal values and abilities, and the external support provided by their school and family environments. For instance, if a student values education and performs well in school, but their parents do not prioritise academic success or provide adequate time and space for studying at home, the student's opportunities—and thus their capabilities—may be limited. Within the CA, each individual is considered an active agent, and plays a central role in the CA. Sen (1999) explains that an agent is "someone who acts and brings about change, and whose achievements can be judged in terms of her own values and objectives" (p. 19). Agency is therefore "the realisation of goals and values (a person) has reasons to pursue" (Sen, 1992, p. 56). A student is therefore an agent if they have the choice to do well (or not do well) academically. However, conversion factors significantly influence one's agency in using available resources and commodities to achieve their valued capabilities. In this study, conversion factors help explain why certain resources—including relationships, support, and other non-material assets—may not be effectively used to enhance capabilities and functionings.

In developing the Sen-Bourdieu Analytical Framework (SBAF), Hart (2012) posits that 'using the capability approach to understand the nature of conversion factors allows a reinterpretation of the way in which capital is transferred between individuals' (p. 62). Bourdieu's concepts of 'habitus', 'capital', and 'field' (Bourdieu 1997; Bourdieu and Passeron 1977; Reay 2004) offer a sociologically informed understanding of how capabilities are shaped within different social environments. Habitus is a social construct of thoughts and actions that guide what is deemed appropriate or inappropriate in each social context. In the context of ELET, habitus encompasses the history, experiences, and family background of both students and parents, including parenting skills, and how these influence educational capabilities either positively or negatively (Reay 2004). Ingram (2018), for instance, highlights that while habitus can be transformative, it also has limitations, particularly in its role in developing agency. For students from different social classes, habitus can act as both an enabler and a barrier, reinforcing inequalities and impacting their educational trajectory. On the other hand, family background—including preferences, values, and experiences—can also be a key ELET risk factor through the lens of habitus. Bourdieu's notions of capital—economic capital (financial resources), social capital (social networks and connections), and cultural capital (knowledge, education, and values that confer social status)—are closely linked to habitus and shape the choices available to individuals. Capital interacts with habitus to further constrain or expand students' educational opportunities. For example, a student's risk of ELET may not solely stem from financial difficulties but also from the

family's educational background, skills, and lack of social connections, which could hinder their ability to improve their socio-economic standing (Lareau and Weininger 2003). To further understand how habitus and capital function as ELET risk factors, it is necessary to consider the concept of *field*, which Bourdieu (1984) defines as the structured social spaces where interactions and practices occur. These fields, such as the educational system, are shaped by power dynamics and structural inequalities that affect how individuals engage within them. Therefore, even students with similar habitus and capital might experience different outcomes based on how they interact within various fields. The field in which students find themselves—whether it be the classroom, home, or broader social system—can significantly impact their ability to convert resources into capabilities and functionings, further shaping their educational trajectories.

Bourdieu's framework provides a dynamic perspective on the conversion factors that facilitate or hinder the development of capabilities in various contexts, such as home and school, thereby enabling a deeper analysis of inequalities that impact a student's education (Hart 2019, p. 285). For example, by examining a student's disadvantaged family background through both Sen's CA (Nussbaum 2011; Sen 1999, 2009) and Bourdieu's notions of capital, we can gain a clearer picture of the structural barriers that limit the development of capabilities. The lack of economic, cultural, or social capital in a family context can restrict the freedoms and opportunities necessary for a student to achieve key educational functionings. The integration of Sen's focus on individual agency with Bourdieu's emphasis on structural inequalities offers an expanded evaluative framework, allowing for a more comprehensive understanding of how socio-economic disadvantage affects students' educational outcomes (Hart 2019, pp. 282-285). Thus, SBAF (Hart 2012; 2019) can help us explore the interplay between ELET risk factors, socio-economic background, and conversion factors within multiple fields, such as school and home. Bourdieu's framework is particularly useful for identifying different types of capital—economic, social, cultural—and their influence on educational risk. Meanwhile, Sen's CA provides critical insights into how these forms of capital are converted into capabilities, impacting students' agency and their capacity to navigate and benefit from educational opportunities.

More recently, Hart (2019) has highlighted that the conversion of capital into capabilities often occurs in two phases. The first phase typically requires family support, particularly in the form of financial capital, which may also be supplemented by the school. For instance, if a student lacks the financial resources to participate in school activities, such as field trips or extra learning support, the school can provide necessary funding. Once this financial support is in place, the second phase involves the actual transformation of capital into capabilities. At this stage, students begin 'achieving the capability to be educated through the respective finance, support, and access received, as well as the consequent capabilities derived thereafter' (Hart 2018, p. 62). Students' agency is ultimately realised in their decision-making process regarding which capabilities to pursue and how to convert these capabilities into functionings. In figure 1 below, we mapped out the Irish Home School Community Liaison (HSCL) policy and analysed how it could serve as a whole-school approach.

[Figure 1 near here]

4. Context and methodology

This research examines the Home School Community Liaison (HSCL) programme in Ireland through twenty semi-structured interviews with educators and parents in schools experiencing socio-economic disadvantages under the Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS) criteria. Interviews, conducted before and after COVID-19, explored HSCL implementation and emerging ELET risks. Contact with participants was established via the Irish Department of Education and Skills, and schools were selected as they were recognised as socio-economically marginalised within an urban setting. No

interview refusals were noted by authors possibly due to the access facilitated by official departmental channels. Participants included five HSCL coordinators, five teachers and ten parents. Additionally, four non-participant observations of parent and teacher training sessions were analysed. The confidentiality of all participants was guaranteed, and the names of all participants were omitted and replaced with pseudonyms. We employed a purposive sampling strategy to gain rich insights into the experiences of individuals within the Irish context concerning ELET. Recognising family disadvantage as a primary risk factor, two primary and two post-primary schools designated as DEIS (Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools) by the Irish Department of Education and Skills were intentionally selected as the sites for this research. All participants, comprising teachers, Home School Community Liaison (HSCL) coordinators, and parents, were directly affiliated with these identified DEIS schools. This deliberate selection ensured the inclusion of parents experiencing socio-economic disadvantage and educators working within disadvantaged areas, thus targeting communities carrying valuable critical data relevant to the research focus on ELET and its connection to family disadvantage (Bryman, 2015; Denscombe, 2007).

The HSCL programme addresses educational inequalities in schools experiencing disadvantage by focusing on parental empowerment rather than traditional parental involvement. As part of the DEIS initiative, HSCL aims to increase students' educational opportunities by empowering parents and helping teachers understand risk indicators related to disadvantaged backgrounds (Tusla 2024). The programme also functions as an early warning system for identifying potential ELET risks. The HSCL operates nationally in socio-economically marginalised schools, which are classified based on criteria like poor attendance, low achievement, and socio-economic challenges (OECD, 2024). Schools receive additional funding to support DEIS programmes, including the HSCL and the School Completion Programme (SCP). HSCL coordinators, funded through school action plans, work directly with families to foster parental engagement, encouraging a positive outlook on schooling and learning (Ryan 2021). Regular home visits enable coordinators to better understand and address the needs of both students and their families, providing tailored support. We therefore argue that a programme such as the HSCL serves as a significant example of a parental engagement approach which does not exacerbate disadvantage and in doing so, directly addresses the concerns highlighted in some of that literature. In the next section, we first focus on the conversion factors of ELET, and then move to how HSCL works towards mitigating the risks through parental engagement.

Ethical approval was obtained from Lancaster University, and all participants were informed of their rights, including anonymity, confidentiality, and the voluntary nature of participation, with signed consent forms collected from all participants. Interviews were recorded on an encrypted device, which was later transcribed and anonymised. Thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006; 2013) was used to identify key themes, forming a framework to categorise trends. Although triangulation through interviews, observations, and document analysis was employed to enhance the study's credibility, the relatively small sample size limits the generalisability of findings across broader demographic groups. The focus on in-depth, contextual understanding means the results are more indicative than representative. To mitigate this, purposive sampling was used to include a range of diverse stakeholders, thereby capturing diverse perspectives within the scope of this paper.

5. Findings

5.1. The Capability to be Educated in Relation to ELET

The ‘capability to be educated’ highlights education’s critical role in expanding current and future opportunities, foundational for leading a flourishing life (Terzi 2007). In the context of ELET, it goes beyond access to education, emphasizing the freedom to fully engage and benefit from it (Robeyns 2017). This research identifies three key conversion factors—absenteeism, academic achievement, and parental engagement—from thematic coding of data, reflecting patterns that emerged across participant narratives. These narratives highlighted that these key factors influence children’s ability to transform educational access into meaningful learning opportunities, particularly in marginalised contexts.

5.1.1. Absenteeism

Absenteeism, whether excused or unexcused, is a key factor in ELET, as repeated absences significantly hinder a student’s ability to complete compulsory education (Dräger et al. 2024). Frequent absences reduce learning opportunities, limiting students’ chances of academic success (Turkatti et al. 2024; Eivers 2019; MFED 2020). Whilst there can be many reasons for absenteeism, in our research, lack of parental support was identified as a major contributor, with Jo², a teacher, noting that students are often kept home to assist their families.

Well, not all have the same opportunities, but it is not always an issue within the school. For example, this year, I have a student (Mark), who was really doing well in accounting. We often spoke about his desire to follow that career path. He comes from a family of farmers, but he would like to follow a different path. There were no real issues in school, but Mark started being absent from school quite often. It turned out that his dad needed help, so he was staying home to help him.

This shows that, despite Mark’s willingness to pursue a career in accounting that could lead him to academic success, his progress is being limited by his home context and parental engagement with his studies. His father, who works in the fields and has achieved success without formal education, needed his help, indicating that education was not the priority in the face of an urgent need to earn an income.

As a result, Mark’s decision to pursue a career in accounting might be influenced by his father’s request for help in the fields, rather than furthering his studies, which also contributes to chronic absenteeism, one of the key indicators of Early Leaving from Education and Training (ELET) (Spiteri and Farrugia 2023; Van Praag et al. 2018). Fionnuala, a teacher, contends that absenteeism is primarily due to the lack of ‘the back-up from home’, although she recognises that senior management teams actively strive to reintegrate students into school. This perspective is supported by a parent, Sinead, who acknowledged that she does not necessarily encourage her son to attend secondary school:

R: Do you send your child to school regularly?

Yes, I do, but if he doesn’t want to go, I don’t argue too much. I don’t always have the energy to fight with him. He doesn’t like school much. He’s a grown-up boy now.

R: Do you get worried when he’s absent from school? Like, he won’t catch up, or he’ll miss important things from school?

² All participants’ names used in this study are pseudonyms to protect their identity and ensure confidentiality in accordance with ethical research standards.

Sometimes. (Pause) But it's not like I can force him. If he doesn't want to learn, there's not much I can do alone about it.

Similarly, another parent, Aisling clearly said that:

Look, to be honest with you, sometimes it's just a battle I'm not always up for. Little Eoin, he can be fierce contrary about the school some mornings. And when you're trying to get everyone out the door, fed and watered, and you've your own worries on your mind... sometimes it's easier to just let him have his day at home.

The lack of support, whether from the school or the community, constrains the parent's ability to ensure that their child attends school regularly. This suggests that absenteeism reflects structural barriers, such as a lack of adequate resources or supportive systems that would enable both the parent and child to overcome challenges related to school attendance. On the other hand, the school management's approach to absenteeism shows that the onus of attendance still falls heavily on the family, indicating an over-reliance on parental engagement to fulfil the functioning of school attendance, as Carolyn, one of the teachers, notes:

R: Why do you think some children are often absent from school?

I wouldn't say there is one reason. At school, we try to implement a positive approach to this and reward school attendance rather than absenteeism. But we're aware of the consequences of not attending school, so we alert the systems when needed.

In sum, absenteeism is deeply embedded in the socio-cultural and economic contexts that shape the capabilities of both parents and children and the contextual factors—both structural and interpersonal—affect the ability of families to engage in the educational process and thus impact absenteeism. The lack of alignment between the home (parental engagement) and the school (teacher expectations) reflects what Hart (2012) identifies as an unequal distribution of capital, where some families lack the resources to transform their aspirations for their children's education into actual achievements. This is clearly reflected in parents', Roisin's and Deirdre's response:

Roisin: 'It's a different world in the school these days, isn't it? My own schooling was very different, and to be honest, sometimes I haven't a clue what they're talking about at the parent-teacher meetings with all the fancy terms and the way things are done now.'

Deirdre: 'It's not that you don't want the best for them, you do, of course. But sometimes the best you can do is just keeping the roof over their heads and food on the table. Between the bills and trying to make ends meet, there isn't always the time, or the money, for the extra bits the school talks about, you know?'

These parental interviews show how both cultural and economic capitals disproportionately affect absenteeism in education, influencing parents' ability to navigate the educational landscape, and impacting students' capability to be educated. Additionally, more functional factors, such as ineffective communication between schools and families, further exacerbate the disconnect, signalling an urgent

need for parent empowerment and the establishment of robust home-school liaisons that facilitate ongoing dialogue, foster trust, and create collaborative partnerships aimed at promoting student achievement and enhancing parental engagement.

5.1.2. Academic Achievement

Academic achievement was also another key factor in determining ELET and it directly correlates with students' ability to complete compulsory schooling (Eivers 2019; Spiteri 2022, 2023; MFED 2020). From an ELET perspective, academic success serves as a crucial functioning, representing students' qualifications and readiness to proceed to post-compulsory education (Van Praag et al. 2018). However, focusing solely on academic outcomes can obscure not only the real opportunities students derive from education but also the various underlying factors that contribute to poor academic performance, such as learning difficulties or insufficient support.

This research reveals that there is a pattern of mutual over-reliance between schools and parents when it comes to supporting students' academic achievement. Teachers often view parents as crucial partners in reinforcing their children's learning at home, but many parents, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds, may lack the necessary capital—whether financial, cultural, or social—to provide that support (Eivers, Worth, and Ghosh 2020). Some parents may even feel ill-equipped to assist their children with schoolwork, as Kelly and Roisin, parents, explained:

Kelly: 'It's not easy when you don't have an answer to his question. I tell him to ask the teacher, but sometimes, he just wants me to help.'

Roisin: 'Like you should be able to guide him, but the truth is, I'm often out of my depth. It's not that I don't want to help, it's just... I haven't got the first clue half the time.'

In cases where families cannot afford private tutoring or extra support, parents may prioritize other needs, as Elva and Aisling, shared:

Elva: 'I can't afford it (private tuition). But honestly, they already go to school. Why should I pay more for extra lessons? I'd prefer to use the money for other stuff.'

Aisling: 'Sure, the money's tight enough as it is, without forking out for extra classes after they've spent all day in school already.'

Similarly, Leah, a teacher suggests that some parents she has met think that academic achievement is only linked to what is done at school, particularly in disadvantaged areas, as opposed to others who would seek to support their children at home. These examples illustrate how financial and cultural capital—or the lack thereof—affects parental engagement in children's education. While this perception alone does not necessarily indicate a lack of financial or cultural capital, in the context of this study, such views often co-occurred with limited access to educational resources, constrained time, and a lack of confidence in engaging with school practices—factors commonly associated with reduced financial and cultural capital. This suggests that it is not simply the belief itself, but its interaction with structural disadvantage, that limits parental engagement. This dynamic also shows the importance between the possession and activation of capital or resources (Lareau and Horvat, 1999; de Moll et al., 2024). In some cases, parents' own habitus, shaped by their personal experiences and values, may lead them to disengage from their children's schooling, believing that education is solely the school's responsibility. At the same time, schools may expect parents to fill gaps in their children's learning at home, creating

a system of mutual dependency where neither side fully assumes responsibility. As one teacher, Emma, noted:

Sometimes, we offer support in school and recommend outside help, but not all parents are keen to follow through. Sometimes children themselves don't feel motivated, and parents second that (...) I often meet students who could do much better if they had more help at home.

This complex dynamic suggests the need for a more integrated approach, where schools and parents are equally empowered to support students. For many families, particularly those in disadvantaged situations, addressing socio-economic barriers is essential to enabling parental engagement in education.

5.1.3. Parental engagement

Parental engagement significantly impacts ELET, yet structural barriers often hinder active involvement from disadvantaged parents. These barriers arise from differences between the structures and systems within schools and those in their home environments, which can make parental engagement challenging. It is important to recognise that when parents lack engagement, it is not simply a reflection of their attitudes toward education, but often stems from a lack of resources or capital—whether financial, cultural, or social—that would enable them to be more supportive. As noted in our study, when a parent does not see the relevance of education, this perception may lead to disengagement, as illustrated by John and Chris, who shared his view:

John: 'School is a great place, but nothing like what I like to do. I've been a farmer ever since I remember. Sitting down listening and writing was never for me. I didn't see the point of it, and I still don't (...) I never finished school. I don't feel comfortable speaking to teachers or going to school for meetings. I feel we speak different languages.'

Chris: 'All that book-learning never really did anyone in our family much good. My father learned everything on the job. I followed him into it, and I've done alright for myself.'

A growing body of literature highlights that parents from disadvantaged, often working-class backgrounds, tend to experience greater difficulties in engaging with their children's education (Ingram and Tarabini 2018). This restricted engagement is not always linked to the little priority given to education by parents, but is deeply influenced by socio-economic conditions. It is often tied to the lack of capital, including financial, cultural, and social resources. In our study, the level of parental engagement often reflected the financial pressures they faced. Parents with limited financial capital—those dealing with issues like housing instability, low incomes, or reliance on social benefits—often felt constrained by their circumstances. Their focus, understandably, shifted to more immediate concerns, such as providing food and shelter, rather than supporting their children's education. As one parent, Eemer, explained:

'We've applied for housing. It's been a long wait, and bills still need to be paid. Rent is quite high. It's not easy for us. Sometimes, we don't even have enough money for food. That's what worries us most. It's like, first, there's food and a home.'

Addressing these foundational needs is crucial to enabling parents to play a more active role in their children's education, particularly in the context of ELET. Thus, poverty is not merely an external challenge but a central factor limiting the capacity of parents to engage in their children's schooling.

While absenteeism, academic achievement, and parental engagement have been widely acknowledged as important risk factors for ELET, this study demonstrates that these are interconnected conversion factors within the capability to be educated. By employing the Sen-Bourdieu Analytical Framework, we move beyond individual challenges to reveal the systemic inequalities that constrain students' agency within a complex web of social and economic influences. In doing so, the research represents a basis from which to consider critical insights into the relationality of absenteeism, academic achievement, and parental engagement as these factors are intertwined with one another, rather than necessarily being outcomes of one another. We argue that equitable interventions must be grounded in a deep understanding of family habitus, capital, and the structural barriers affecting the opportunities inherent within a particular setting. In considering these three issues as interconnected conversion factors influencing the capability to be educated involve offering parents greater support and resources to engage in their children's education, such as access to community-based programmes that build their cultural and educational capital, or providing additional support for students who face challenges that go beyond the classroom.

In the following section, we will explore how the Home School Community Liaison (HSCL) scheme has addressed these issues, presenting it as an example of good practice in reducing ELET risk. HSCL initiatives have demonstrated effective strategies for improving parental engagement, supporting student achievement, and reducing absenteeism, particularly in communities facing socio-economic challenges (OECD, 2024; Weir et al., 2018), thereby contributing to more inclusive and supportive educational environments.

Transforming ELET support to enhance parental engagement: Bridging school and home

Considering the identified risk factors, how can ELET support enhance parental engagement as a conversion factor? The HSCL programme provides key insights, designed to address educational inequalities linked to family disadvantage (Conaty 2002; DEIS 2014, 2017). By working directly with parents, HSCL creates opportunities for engagement, recognising that limited parental capabilities can hinder children's education. Targeted support in disadvantaged areas fosters parental capabilities, empowering parents to better support their child's learning. Parents in disadvantaged contexts often lack the capital needed for effective engagement, affecting their children's ELET risk factors like absenteeism, academic achievement, and wellbeing. The HSCL programme, with school-based educators targeting parental disadvantage, supports these families through open communication and home visits (DEIS 2014, 2017). Lisa (HSCL) explains:

It's crucial to know the parents. I visit all parents in first and last year of primary, leave notes if they don't answer, and ensure regular contact. Understanding their struggles helps me support them better.

R: How is it different?

You truly get to know them. They trust you and know you're there to help. In class, the focus is on academic performance, but here, you learn the real reasons behind students' struggles and can genuinely help.

Lisa highlights that understanding home difficulties enables the development of tailored plans with parents and teachers, improving students' academic outcomes. Other HSCL coordinators also emphasise absenteeism and wellbeing as critical focus areas. Lisa explains how sometimes students are struggling at school because of difficulties experienced at home and how through a plan she develops together with parents and teachers to target those difficulties, the students usually have a greater opportunity of improving their school achievement. This is backed up by other HSCL coordinators who also mention absenteeism and wellbeing as being key indicators they work on together with parents. Louisa (HSCLI) explains that:

When a student presents multiple wellbeing issues and might also be frequently absent from school, the teacher would flag that student to me or to the Principal. I meet weekly with the principal so we can decide on a way forward but one of the first things I do is to try and contact the parents by visiting them. My recent case was a student who following a few behavioural issues and failed exams stopped coming to school. I found out him and his mum were dealing with a rough loss as the dad had left.

Having a dedicated person to identify risk factors early facilitates timely support within both school and home. This liaison between teachers, parents, and students helps address ELET risks and enhances children's agency, which often requires adult support (Biggeri, Ballet, and Comim 2011).

Parental engagement does not solely depend on the teachers, but is directly co-ordinated by HSCL coordinators that have engagement as a specific task, it allows for the development of individual capabilities of parents. The HSCL coordinator organises training within the school according to the needs of parents and together with other parents manages these training sessions. Hence, parental agency is also increased by directly involving other parents hailing from disadvantage but who would have already embarked on training sessions or programmes with the HSCL coordinators. Sue (HSCLI) explains:

We have a space in the school for parents. So they are free to visit but we also have training sessions that can range from yoga to fitness to literacy sessions. We also organise visits to the library and other community places. Other parents who I would have known previously through this programme would organise sessions themselves and deliver some training. This helps as they would be helping others through their own experience. The literacy programme is quite a good example of this. Parents teach other parents and we meet in the library. Most parents attend this.

We argue that the HSCL setup within policy (DEIS 2014, 2017) and as described by HSCL coordinators and experienced by parents within this study, **offers a counter-argument to the literature** that argues how parental engagement can cause further inequalities because it is mostly promoted for those that do not hail from disadvantage (Reay 2018; Lareau and Weininger 2003). The HSCL programme was indeed found to promote parental engagement programmes that were designed with the help and input of other parents who experienced disadvantage, and which was developed specifically to target agency and capabilities of those parents experiencing disadvantage. Parents were supported to engage in their child's achievement, absenteeism issues through support that enhanced capital: financial, social and cultural. Consequently, parents had the possibility to enhance their own capabilities and had the opportunity to engage in their child's learning. The HSCL coordinator was found to be a key person in liaising between the school and home and thus providing a whole school approach to tackling ELET

risk factors as Elva and Aisling, parents narrate:

Elva: Maya (the HSCL coordinator in her child's school) has been so helpful. I didn't know what to do. I kept receiving these messages that he wasn't going to school. I was going through a depressive phase myself. We were alone, and although I did try to send him initially, I gave up after the first couple of days. It just became our routine. He stayed home and I stayed home. Miguel is not a young child anymore. I can't physically drag him to school. Maya really was a blessing. If I have a problem with Miguel or the others, I just come to her. She calms me down and always helps.

R: How did she help with Miguel?

We planned. She came home, helped me talk to him. She gets him schoolwork right to our doorstep. Now, he's gradually going back for a couple of days a week. She even helped me to book support for myself and him.

Aisling: When things were really tough at home last year, and young Eoin was missing a good bit of school, I honestly didn't know where to turn. I was feeling completely overwhelmed. Then someone at the school (the HSCL coordinator) reached out. I was a bit hesitant at first, you know, felt like I was admitting I couldn't cope. But honestly, reaching out to her was the best thing I did. She didn't judge me at all. She just listened, really listened, to what was going on. She helped me figure out small steps we could take to get Eoin back into a routine. Even just having someone to talk to who understood the pressures made a huge difference. She linked me up with a few supports in the community.

Although most parents spoke about feelings of helplessness and not knowing how to act or engage when issues arose, the HSCL coordinator acted as a replacement for the lack of social and cultural family capital (Lareau 2015) in order to immediately act upon arising issues and tackle related inequality gaps. In the case of children not attending school, a solution was sought together with the parents and children involved. The HSCL coordinator did not just give them appointments at school, but also visited their homes. This allowed not only the development of parental agency, but also a better understanding to identify any hidden inequalities between the school and home environment.

The HSCL programme's targeted training sessions also address gaps in cultural and social capital, enhancing parental engagement by directly tackling absenteeism and achievement issues as per identified needs. Two HSCL coordinator narrates:

Mairin: Training sessions for parents are a big part of the HSCL. They can range from keep-fit sessions, to digital sessions, healthy eating – helps in lunches too. It depends on the parents mostly (..) We promote healthy eating in schools, but sometimes, parents lack the skills of organising healthy eating at home. So, we do these courses for them. So, it's easier to send healthy lunches for the kids. We even speak about budgeting for this, which is very much needed when you're working in poorer areas.

Jane: Another area we focus on is building parents' confidence in interacting with the school. We might run workshops or even just informal coffee mornings or workshops that are parent led to create a comfortable space for parents to connect with each other. It's about breaking down those feelings of intimidation or not knowing how things work here

As Mairin and Jane (HSCL coordinator) explain, the programme addresses practical needs, such as teaching parents how to budget for healthy meals, which in turn helps ensure children are well-nourished and better able to focus on their studies. This kind of intervention directly enhances the capability of both parents and children, as it addresses underlying barriers that hinder regular school attendance and academic success. Also, some parents, especially those with negative past experiences in education as we have seen above, view school as a space disconnected from their own life experiences. The HSCL programme, however, bridges this gap by offering an *open-door policy* and creating a safe, welcoming space within the school that is linked to the parent's field of home, and increases parents' *social capital* by fostering relationships with other parents, school staff, and the broader community, which they can then leverage to support their child's academic journey. This holistic approach demonstrates that addressing educational inequalities requires both structural interventions and the empowerment of individuals within their specific socio-economic contexts.

Figure 2 below consequently, developed through a SBAF analysis lens, summarises the main process recommended to transform parental engagement practices into an enabling conversion factor within the capability of being educated in relation to ELET. By strengthening parental engagement, the framework also supports the child's agency, which may otherwise be constrained by socio-economic disadvantage and a lack of parental involvement. Through this transformation, both the parent and the child are better equipped to navigate and benefit from the educational system, reducing the risks associated with ELET.

[Figure 2 near here]

Conclusion

The key insights we can draw from parents, teachers, and HSCL coordinators reveal that socio-economic factors are often cited by parents as the primary reasons for absenteeism and for not being able to send their children to school, especially when assistance is needed at home or in educational settings. This does not imply that parents undervalue education; rather, in cases of extreme poverty, genuine parental engagement becomes challenging as families grapple with immediate survival needs, which can shift their focus away from actively prioritising educational initiatives, mirroring dynamics seen in other educational settings where socio-economic constraints play a pivotal role (Karlıdağ-Dennis, Temiz, & Cin, 2022). Additionally, the institutional habitus of schools often widens the gap between home and school, failing to align with the habitus of families. This disconnection negatively impacts educational capabilities, causing parents to feel that their cultural and social contexts are devalued and excluded in the school environment, which leads to a perception of schools as spaces with which they cannot effectively engage.

On the other hand, HSCL coordinators and teachers emphasize the critical importance of parental engagement and a supportive home environment for student success, advocating for mutual support and dialogue between schools and parents. However, they acknowledge that in situations of significant socio-economic disadvantage, parents may lack the necessary capital to support their children effectively. Consequently, the programme aims to build relationships with parents and establish bridges between home and school to support both children and their families. Despite offering training opportunities, challenges remain in encouraging parental participation in these initiatives, as some parents may be reluctant to engage due to negative experiences from their own educational backgrounds.

What we observe is that the misalignment of the habitus of parents with the institutional habitus of schools creates barriers to engagement, as parents may feel that their cultural and social backgrounds

are invalidated within the school environment, thereby perpetuating a cycle of disengagement. Schools function as dominant players within the educational field; they establish norms and expectations that often reinforce their position while sidelining those who lack the requisite capital to navigate these structures effectively, making it difficult for parental engagement, a necessary factor for the educational well-being of children from low socio-economic backgrounds. While HSCL coordinators and teachers strive to bridge these gaps, for some parents, the prevailing socio-economic conditions and negative prior experiences of parents create resistance to engagement. The interplay of their habitus and capital underscores the necessity for educational institutions to reevaluate how they engage parents to foster inclusivity and acknowledge the diverse forms of capital that families bring to the educational table to promote students' capability to be educated. On the other hand, HSCL also emerges as a concrete prevention strategy that address both the home and school environments and as a model of good practice for developing a whole-school approach bridge the gap between home and school, effectively mitigating the risk of early school leaving. These strategies target the development of financial, cultural, social, and educational capitals that families may lack, beginning in the early years of schooling—an area often overlooked by existing policies and practices (Conaty 2002; Donlevy et al, 2019). Ultimately, our findings emphasize that the capability to be educated is not merely about attending school or completing compulsory education, but about fostering a supportive, interconnected environment across both home and school. Excluding the home environment from educational support risks perpetuating and even exacerbating the inequalities that lead to ELET. A holistic approach that integrates both school-based and family-centred strategies is essential for reducing these inequalities and ensuring that all students have the opportunity to fully realise their educational capabilities. Such an approach will enable students from low socio-economic backgrounds to convert their capital into educational capabilities necessary for achieving educational well-being and preventing early drop out, which can subsequently be followed by pursuing and building on the capability of being successful in school, being included in school, and developing aspirations, all of which are key to the capability of being educated.

In conclusion, integrating the HSCL role within a multidisciplinary team-based framework can lead to higher levels of parental engagement, as argued by Downes (2011) and the OECD's 2024 review of the DEIS initiative, which advocates for holistic methodologies in addressing educational disadvantage, positing that the incorporation of a broad spectrum of professionals—extending beyond the confines of classroom educators—can markedly bolster the efficacy of HSCL programmes. Such a relational model can amplify the support mechanisms available to families and situates the recognition of the intricate socio-economic determinants that profoundly affect student engagement and academic success. Positioning HSCL within multidisciplinary teams, educational institutions can foster a nuanced understanding of the multifaceted barriers confronting families, thereby promoting enhanced communication and collaboration among stakeholders and enabling development of responsive strategies tailored to the diverse needs of students. Embracing a multidisciplinary framework can facilitate the transformation of how schools engage with communities, yielding a more equitable educational landscape that champions the success of all students.

Ethics

The project was given approval by the University of Lancaster as part of a PhD dissertation.

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Figure 1. The HSCL as an opportunity development programme to reduce ELET risk factors by increasing capabilities and functionings (Spiteri, 2022,2023; Adapted from Hart 2018, p.589-591)

Figure 2. Transforming parental engagement as a conversion factor to tackle disadvantage