The Capability of Being Educated in Relation to ELET -

Developing an equity-based SBAF policy opportunity, to target the unjust case of family disadvantage in Malta and within the EU

Pamela Marie Spiteri, B.Ed. (Primary Education), M.A. (Education: Teaching, Learning and Research)

February 2022

This thesis is submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

Department of Educational Research
Lancaster University
UK

Abstract

ELET (Early Leaving from Education and Training) and its link to family disadvantage have been a pressing issue in Malta and the EU (European Union) due to an inequality achievement gap, hence social justice implications. This thesis aimed to not only reveal the experiences of disadvantaged parents and educators working with disadvantaged students, but also to provide insights into a specific policy opportunity unique to the Irish context, namely, the HSCL (Home-School Community Liaison) that seeks to develop parental agency and capabilities, while offering recommendations for its possible adoption within the Maltese context. The data for this project was collected through three phases of analysis, the first within the Irish context, the second within the Maltese context, while the third phase was post COVID-19. Sixty interviews were conducted with forty participants. Observations and data analysis were also used for triangulation purposes. Underpinned by Hart's (2012, 2019) SBAF (Sen-Bourdieu Analytical Framework), the findings firstly highlighted similar inequalities experienced within the capability of being educated in relation to ELET. The study subsequently discussed two main conversion factors linked to these inequalities, namely, parental and educator engagement, which might be substantially limited because of family disadvantage. Secondly, the findings provided policy recommendations that could be employed within different educational contexts in order to target these conversion factors within the capability of being educated in relation to ELET. Thirdly, contextual recommendations for policy borrowing and learning within the Maltese context were drawn up. Moreover, these findings provided two main contributions to knowledge, first by exploring ELET through the SBAF and then by using the SBAF to develop ELET equity-based policy opportunities by analysing the HSCL. These findings indicated the need for educational policies to develop specific support for parental agency in order to not only provide support at school, but also target inequalities at home thereby impacting the children's agency within the capability of being educated in relation to ELET and providing better opportunities to tackle the limiting factors.

Table of Contents

List of Figures and Tables

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank my supervisor Dr. Melis Cin for her guidance and thoughtful insights throughout this project. Her support and understanding through the difficult illness and loss of my dear father and the personal challenges experienced following the start of Covid-19 has given me the strength and confidence to keep going. I would also like to thank Lancaster staff during phase 1 of this programme who were always supportive and encouraged a collaborative community amongst peers which has been extremely helpful in difficult times. Additionally, this thesis would not have been possible without the support of TUSLA (Educational Welfare Services - Ireland) in particular the national manager, the collaboration of the Maltese and Irish educational institutions and all participants. Finally, I thank my loving mum, Georgina, unique sister, Catriona, brothers, William and Clint, partner, Francesco, my favourite preemie super-hero nephew, Chris, unique colleagues, Alex, Joseph and Ruth, who were all my constant inspiration and through very tough times have never let me give up and encouraged me to seek a TESS scholarship (Malta) which allowed me to proceed in my journey. *Dad*, it has been heart breaking proceeding whilst recalling your last words 'Will I see you graduate?' I only hope that wherever you are, you *will* - and as usual smile proudly and say 'Edukazzjoni u Ġustizja Socjali!'.

Author's Declaration: This thesis results entirely from my own work and has not been offered previously for any other degree or diploma. The word count conforms to the permitted limit.

Publications Derived from Work on Doctoral Programmes

Spiteri, P. (2020). Introductory Chapter: ELET – The Way Forward. Conference Proceedings. Malta. November 2019. Online. Retrieved from https://epale.ec.europa.eu/en/resource-centre/content/early-leaving-education-and-training-unit-webinar-presentation-conference

Spiteri, P. and Farrugia, A., (2021) Early Leaving from Education and Training Policy. The Way Forward 2020-2030. A Holistic and Inclusive approach to tackle ELET in Malta. Ministry for Education, Malta. Retrieved from https://meae.gov.mt/en/Public_Consultations/MEDE/Documents/ELET%20POLICY%20Document.pdf

Spiteri, P. (2021). A widening inequality gap: Reducing educational inequalities in Europe by reaching out to students and families at risk during a time of crisis and beyond. *Education in an altered world*. Bloomsbury, in press.

Chapter 1: **Introduction**

1.1 **Introduction: Aims, Objectives and Purpose of the Study**

Early leaving from education and training (ELET) is defined by Eurostat as those who do not achieve a qualification at upper secondary level or higher. Data is collected for those who are 18-24 years old and have only achieved a qualification at lower secondary within compulsory education and beyond (Spiteri and Farrugia, 2021; Eivers, 2019). This study focuses on students within compulsory education who are at risk of ELET, and hence, it refers to those students at risk of not completing compulsory education or those who complete compulsory education, but do not achieve an upper secondary qualification.

Education systems that seek to achieve equity within schools need to provide the same opportunities for students hailing from diverse backgrounds such as those of diverse socio-economic status, gender or nationality. This does not imply that students will achieve the same educational outcomes but that the educational outcomes are not related to any social or financial factors within a student's background (OECD, 2018). Similarly, I argue that a student should not be at a disadvantage thus at a higher risk of ELET because of these factors. Hence why, disadvantage in this study refers to ELET as being part of educational disadvantage processes due to a lack or not of educational systems, in providing equal opportunities for all students including those that hail from a socio-economic disadvantaged background, in order not to limit students' outcomes and wellbeing.

The aim of this research is to capture the different experiences and challenges within the Irish and Maltese contexts when dealing with family disadvantage within school contexts and the link to ELET through a deep exploration of the Irish HSCL (home-school community liaison) programme (in Ireland) or lack thereof (in Malta). Underpinned by Hart's (2012, 2019) SBAF (Sen-Bourdieu Analytical Framework), and taking into consideration policy borrowing and policy learning theories (Phillips, 2015; Philips and Ochs, 2003; Sabatier, 2005), this study aims to answer the research questions in Figure 1.1.

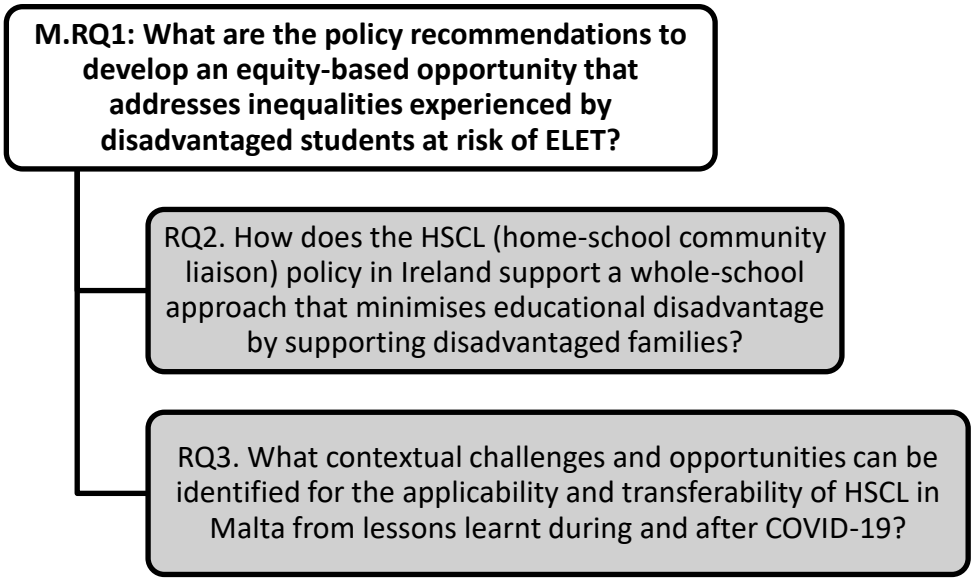


Figure 1.1 Research Questions

A qualitative case study with three phases of analysis was designed. Utilising the perceptions of parents, teachers, educators, and other significant educational stakeholders hailing from a disadvantaged background or working in a main area of disadvantage, this case study aims to formulate policy recommendations that develop a strategic action to target ELET risk for students hailing from a disadvantaged background. The first two phases pertain to the Irish and Maltese contexts. Since this study was started before the outbreak of COVID-19 globally, impacting education in multiple ways, particularly disadvantaged students, the aims of this research were consequently further developed to propose recommendations to deal with family disadvantage in schools before and after COVID-19.

The objectives and purpose of the study are to include their perceptions and experiences within the scope of utilising and adapting the HSCL in order to identify opportunities that develop more inclusive partnerships with families and communities which could contribute to reduced inequality in schools within the EU context and reduced risk of ELET in Malta. A total of sixty interviews were conducted within both contexts. Policies and documents pertaining to the HSCL and ELET were consulted, together with two observation sessions within each context, thus ensuring triangulation in order to develop a deeper understanding of the ability to deal with disadvantage and how partnerships with families and

communities contribute, or otherwise, to reducing inequality in schools under the theoretical lens of the SBAF (Hart, 2019).

1.2 **Background and Context**

Malta presents one of the highest numbers of students classified as early leavers from education and training (ELET), whereas Ireland's ELET rate is one of the lowest in Europe (Eurostat, 2019). A significant body of literature discusses the existing link between achieving (or not) educational outcomes and students hailing from disadvantaged families and diverse backgrounds. Studies conducted by Karlıdağ-Dennis et al., (2020, 2021), Ingram (2011, 2018), Tarabini and Ingram (2018), Cin (2017), Hart et al., (2015), and Reay (2004a,b, 2005) demonstrate the lack of social justice within education for such students. This is often depicted as a recurring situation perpetuated through family generations and classified as educational inequality in schools (Gonzalez et al., 2019; Reay, 2004a).

The first national policy for the prevention of ELET was a major development in Malta (MFED, 2015), and was developed as part of a strategy to decrease its ELET rate to 10% by 2020. A number of national interventions targeting different stakeholders within Malta's educational context have emerged from this policy, such as the ESLU (early school leaving unit) that specifically monitors policy and practice linked to students at risk. Although Malta has seen a significant decrease in the number of students who leave education and training with less than a Level three qualification (ELET), it still exceeds the 10% rate which it is committed to achieving (Spiteri and Farrugia, 2021).

Research in Malta has identified the socio-economic gap as a factor that contributes to increased educational attainment differences between students coming from different family backgrounds (Borg et al., 2015; Schraad-Tischler and Schiller, 2016; Hellmann et al., 2019). Local and international research-based policies recommend the establishment of a whole-school measure, hence one that also includes parental engagement within educational systems in order to target all students, particularly those hailing from a socio-economically disadvantaged background who are at a higher risk of ELET (MFED, 2015, 2020;

European Commission, 2013; Downes et al., 2019). Malta has recently launched a new policy that aims to develop whole-school practices to decrease ELET (Spiteri and Farrugia, 2021).

The Irish context offers a unique system in Europe, the HSCL national policy in disadvantaged areas, as part of a vaster programme identified as DEIS (Delivering Quality of Opportunity in Schools) (Furey, 2019; Smyth et al., 2015). Its primary aim is to support disadvantaged families and build a link between school, home, and the community in order to decrease any educational inequalities experienced by students due to their family unit.

While the Irish case was selected due to its uniqueness within the EU context, it was further thought to be of interest for a number of reasons. Firstly, although Ireland has a large percentage of students who are at risk of ELET because of socio-economic disadvantages, the ELET percentage in Ireland plummeted to 6.1% in 2017, as opposed to Malta's 17.6% (Eivers, 2019). Secondly, Ireland's educational context presents a number of similarities that could be predictors of ELET. Both the Irish and Maltese systems include two national languages (and languages of instruction), have one of the EU's highest rates of migrants as a percentage of school students, and many schools are classified as denominational and non-state (European Commission, 2019; Camilleri Grima, 2016). Another similarity pertaining to the context of this study is that the Irish system is centralised and relatively small, making it more appropriate for the purpose of this study given Malta's centralised system and population size. The education process and structure leading to secondary education level (which is directly related to ELET) also presents a number of similarities, as evidenced in Appendix A.

1.3 **Significance of the Study**

ELET has been a pressing issue in Europe since it is claimed to lead to poverty, lack of wellbeing, and social exclusion. In fact, one of the pressing EU benchmarks within the last decade was that of lowering the ELET rate below 10% (European Commission, 2019). Despite the measures taken, this has not been achieved by all EU countries, including Malta. Research and policies within the

ELET field have identified a number of factors that contribute to this phenomenon. One of the most prominent factors is students coming from a disadvantaged family background which is said to impact negatively education success and participation (Tarabini et al., 2019; Borg et al., 2015; Ingram and Tarabini, 2018; European Commission, 2019; Van Praag et al., 2018). Although both research and policies identify family disadvantage as a leading marker for ELET, I argue that more research is needed to identify and develop strategic actions that attempt to minimise this inequality since, to date, research underpinned by social justice frameworks, analysing good policy practices, and developing strategic actions that minimise family disadvantage within ELET research is scant. ELET research rather tends to statistically focus on students who complete upper secondary education (successfully or otherwise), and move on (or not) to tertiary education (Van Praag et al., 2018).

Several studies have defined a whole-school approach in schools as “positive models of caring societies” (Warin, 2017, p. 188) and a model to target inclusivity in schools (Garbacz, 2019). Research on ELET prevention and intervention in Malta, albeit scarce, highlights a gap between policy, theory, and practice (Borg et al., 2015; Camilleri et al., 2011; Cefai et al., 2009; Eivers, 2019). Developing parental engagement that encourages students’ wellbeing by employing measures that actively involve all stakeholders is pivotal within a whole-school approach. Nevertheless, despite the priority to achieve a whole-school approach in schools, practical research and context-based frameworks are still not evidenced in Malta. This study is however timely given the recently launched ELET policy (Spiteri and Farrugia, 2021) that aims to develop whole-school strategic actions. Moreover, through a research project conducted by the EU and Malta’s Ministry of Education, the HSCL case emerged as one of the main recommendations for Malta to reduce educational disadvantage (Eivers, 2019). The main reasons for this HSCL identification were the absence of preventive measures in Malta that identify disadvantaged children at a young age in order to give them support, as well as lack of parental engagement.

To date, little research is available on policy borrowing and learning underpinned by social justice theories in relation to tackling family disadvantage within ELET

as a prevention and intervention measure. This could be because few practices tackle ELET through a whole-school approach within the EU by acting as an EWS (early warning system) within both the school and home environment (Donlevy et al., 2019; Eivers, 2019). To date, the HSCL in Ireland was found to be the only national programme in Europe that targets student disadvantage and attempts to develop a partnership with families from the early years of schooling in order to offer a more equitable and socially just education.

The role of the HSCL model, being the main focus in this case study, is thus particularly important as the HSCL aims to act as a bridge between home and school through a whole-school approach to target family disadvantage and engagement. This is in sharp contrast to practice in Malta where, to date, no equivalent national whole-school policy exists. This is also the case within the EU context, where a review of EU policies found the HSCL to be unique within the EU context (Donlevy et al., 2019).

The policy recommendations drawn up in this study might therefore be useful to policymakers and practitioners, not only within the Maltese context, but also other contexts within the EU. This study therefore aims to contribute to literature on socially just policy measures in education by innovatively analysing ELET and the HSCL through the SBAF lens which, to date, could very well be the first. Given that several studies in fact discuss how some parental engagement measures can exacerbate social iniquity (Reay, 2004a,b; Lareau and Weininger, 2003), while others such as Wood and Warin (2014) suggest that practical solutions need to offer a "democratic approach between parents and schools" (p. 938), this study attempts to analyse an example that offers such a solution in disadvantaged schools. This study could also be a contribution to a growing body of literature that discusses children's agency within the capability approach and its link to disadvantage.

1.4 **My Positionality and Motivation in this Study**

Since one main objective of this study is to also contribute nationally, it is imperative to locate my positionality and motivation since they are directly associated with my work as an education officer for the prevention of ELET within

the Ministry of Education in Malta (MFED). I currently lead the early school leaving unit (ESLU) which was set up in 2015 due to the high incidence of students not obtaining a Level 3 qualification at the end of compulsory education. My role is to monitor ELET policy on a national and international level in order to assess and develop strategic actions within prevention, intervention, and compensation levels.

Consequently, I also conduct research projects directly linked to the ELET policy (MFED, 2015) that could support student retention, while increasing educational equity in Malta. Prior to this study, I sought and obtained European funds in order to conduct research on early identification and support of students at risk of ELET (Eivers, 2019). A number of recommendations emerged, including prioritising the identification of disadvantaged students in Malta at an early stage of their education (currently absent in our system) in order to support them and their families through a whole-school approach (Eivers, 2019).

Another main recommendation was for Malta to explore the possibility of borrowing the HSCL programme and policy from Ireland, both as a means to provide educational equity by targeting disadvantaged students through a whole-school approach and as a scheme that supports effective parental engagement, which was found as a scarce national measure (Eivers, 2019). This recommendation is one of the main strategic actions drafted within the new ELET policy launched in 2021 (Spiteri and Farrugia, 2021). This study therefore provides great motivation for me as its findings can support my work in developing an equity-based opportunity measure in schools to address disadvantage and reduce ELET.

I believe it is imperative to reflect that whilst within the Maltese context I was a researcher viewed as an insider, within the Irish context I was placed as an outsider (Borrill, Lorenz, and Abbasnejad, 2012). I acknowledge that being an insider can be more favourable due to being familiar with the cultural context, issues and educational system. However, although I do not work within the Irish context, during my years as a teacher and as an education officer, I was able to visit a number of schools in Ireland and also have closely worked with Irish

educational stakeholders on a number of projects. This has helped my reflexive journey (Hesse-Biber and Leavy, 2006) during this research in reducing any validity issues as a qualitative researcher in being both an insider and an outsider during the data collection and analysis process.

1.5 **Conclusion: Overview of the Thesis**

This thesis is divided into seven main chapters. Chapter 2 discusses ELET literature on social justice issues, policy learning, policy borrowing, and inequalities. Subsequently, Chapter 3 provides a rationale for the selection of the SBAF as the social justice theoretical framework underpinning this study, while Chapter 4 explains the methodology and how this was implemented. Thereafter, Chapters 5 and 6 present and discuss this study's findings, mainly regarding inequality implications for the capability of being educated in relation to ELET and policy recommendations emerging from this study. The last chapter discusses the main contributions to knowledge, and summarises the main research findings.

Chapter 2: **Early Leaving in Education and Training (ELET): Social Justice Implications**

2.1 **Introduction: ELET within the European Context – A Brief Overview**

Early leaving from education and training (ELET) is defined as

> young people who leave (or drop out of) school without completing what is considered in the national context as basic education (usually primary and secondary education), as well as those who define early leavers as young people who leave school without an upper secondary school leaving certificate. (Donlevy et al., 2019, p. 3)

ELET is Eurostat's more recent definition as it encompasses also vocational education (Downes et al., 2017; Donlevy et al., 2019), as opposed to the previously held view of ESL (early school leaving). For the purpose of this study, ELET will be used throughout given that vocational education is provided within both the Irish and Maltese contexts. Additionally, Eurostat officially publishes EU ELET statistics, using ELET instead of ESL. Through the labour force survey, each country collects annually, data pertaining to those aged between 18 and 24 years who have only completed what is classified by Eurostat as lower secondary education and are no longer following any further educational programme (Labour Market and Information Society Statistics Unit, 2021; Eurostat, 2021; European Union Council, 2021).

For the last decade, ELET has been a pressing issue within the European Union (EU) as it is considered a phenomenon within the educational context that minimises life opportunities for young people (European Union Council, 2021; Van Praag et al., 2018; Nouwen et al., 2016; Van Caudenberg et al., 2017; Cedefop, 2016). This is because ELET is often linked to the labour market, in the sense that, having only a lower secondary qualification reduces opportunities of future employment and educational advancement in one's career (Nouwen and Clycq, 2019; Donlevy et al., 2019). Research and policies further indicate that those who do not achieve an upper secondary qualification stand at a higher chance of experiencing disadvantage in their life (European Union Council, 2021; Pitman et al., 2019; Faas et al., 2019; Borg et al., 2015; MFED, 2015, 2020). Therefore, the EU has made it a priority to lower ELET to an average of 10% by

2020 (European Commission, 2015). Although there was a substantial and significant reduction during these years, the target of 10% has not been achieved by all EU countries (Donlevy et al., 2019; Eurostat, 2021). Interestingly, significant differences are found between EU countries, such as those in this study, where Ireland currently stands at 5%, as opposed to Malta's 12.6%[1] (Eurostat, 2021).

Ongoing data collection has been useful for policies, but presents a very limited view of ELET given that it is recognised as a phenomenon brought about by a number of factors (Popovici, 2019; Borgna and Struffolino, 2017; Gonzalez-Rodriguez et al., 2019). These factors are often related to a students' diverse socio-economic background which reflects that students not achieving upper secondary education level, are getting through the educational compulsory process with less opportunities to successfully achieve educational outcomes than their peers. This study therefore mainly refers to disadvantage as those that hail from diverse socio-economic backgrounds and the relation to ELET. Within a broader perspective, this implies a lack of equity due to minimised opportunities because of background differences and consequently ELET policies should seek to minimise this educational disadvantage given that it is closely related to students' family background. Thus, education inequality is inherent in the very decision of developing a particular policy measure or not, mediated by individuals' initial disadvantage and which impacts children's skills, learning, wellbeing and outcomes (OECD, 2018).

Though European policy recommendations highlight the development of prevention, intervention, and compensation measures (European Commission, 2015; Donlevy et al., 2019), the definition and data collection in themselves limit

[1] Until November 2021, Malta's ELET rate was officially above 16%, but NSO published revised statistics as a result of "the realignment of the International Standard Classification of Education (ISCED) with the Malta Qualifications Framework (MQF). This revision was necessary to ensure better compliance with European Regulations governing education statistics and improve comparability of results at the European level" (Labour Market and Information Society Statistics Unit, 2021, p. 1).

the understanding of why these students are at risk of ELET and how to minimise this risk. This is because official data is collected for those who are no longer pursuing compulsory schooling (aged eighteen to twenty-four years), but data is only linked to further education and employment. Academic research, albeit limited within certain contexts such as Malta (Borg et al., 2015), has, on the other hand, tried to identify factors leading to ELET. Literature observes that, although no single factor can be linked to ELET, family disadvantage is one of the main reasons why a student might or might not achieve upper secondary education. Other emerging factors point to individual factors (e.g., wellbeing at home or at school), school processes (e.g., teaching and learning strategies), and general socio-economic conditions (Popovici, 2019; Borgna and Struffolino, 2017; Gonzalez-Rodriguez et al., 2019).

Despite the ELET official definition, limiting data collection only to the final achievement in compulsory education, EU documents recognise the diverse risk factors that could lead a student to not achieving an upper secondary qualification. According to a recent EU document:

> To ensure a truly inclusive education and equal opportunities for all learners in all levels and types of education and training, academic attainment and achievement should be dissociated from social, economic and cultural status, or from other personal circumstances. (European Union Council, 2021, p. 5)

Consequently, policies concerning ELET have been drafted in three main areas, namely, prevention, intervention, and compensation. Prevention strategic actions attempt to minimise risk factors in early compulsory education, such as, the development of quality provision in early childhood education. Intervention strategic actions attempt to identify risk factors within compulsory education and minimise any emerging inequalities. For example, if a child in primary education is struggling with literacy skills, an intervention measure would provide an immediate programme, such as, reading recovery. While prevention and intervention measures attempt to minimise and cater for ELET risk within compulsory education, compensation measures attempt to target those students who have completed (or not) compulsory education without achieving upper

secondary qualification. Compensation measures are often referred to as those programmes that offer second chance education (Donlovey et al., 2019).

Nonetheless, much literature on ELET tends to focus on compensation measures and the entry into further education (or not), which I argue could be related to the limited official definition and data collection process in itself (Van Praag et al., 2018; MFED, 2020). However, I contend that, achieving upper secondary qualification is a process that starts at the very early years of schooling, and continues throughout compulsory education. While the risk factor of family disadvantage, such as students hailing from migrant families or students presenting socio-economic difficulties, is considered an important marker of ELET, there are yet few studies which highlight measures on how this risk factor can be identified and targeted within the areas of prevention and intervention, as opposed to compensation. Nouwen et al.'s (2015) research is one of the few studies that attempt to provide school-based solutions of good practice within prevention and intervention in several EU countries. Their longitudinal study also identifies underlying conditions, such as, family disadvantage and dis/engagement. They however do not provide a detailed review of good practice on how to target these underlying conditions within both the school and home context, as opposed to the reviews of good practice proposed for concrete measures, such as, poor academic achievement and how it can be targeted in the school (Nouwen et al., 2015).

This is an identified gap within literature as, although policy recommendations clearly indicate that, even in countries with a low ELET rate, students who are most at risk are those hailing from disadvantaged backgrounds, there are still no clear EU policy guidelines on how this ELET factor can be addressed within education. For example, within the Irish context, despite its low rate compared to its EU counterparts, the majority of ELET students still hail from disadvantaged areas (Smyth et al., 2015; Donlevy et al., 2019). Despite an evident lack of targeted support within this field, research however agrees that students coming from disadvantaged families might experience greater inequalities in the provision of education when compared to their peers, such as, learning experienced in schools and the actual opportunity to learn (Donlevy et al., 2019).

Disadvantage measures within ELET policies, in general, often attempt to target a financial gap which, despite being essential within a wider picture, is insufficient. For example, Malta has adopted an initiative of eliminating any exam fees leading to upper secondary qualification (MFED, 2015). This has been a great incentive to encourage students to sit for their final exam, and hence, exam participation percentages have gone up. However, in spite of encouraging those students who might not have taken the final exam due to financial disadvantage, this measure on its own was insufficient in increasing achievement among students with diverse backgrounds (Debono, 2020). Other measures similar within both contexts include, for example, the provision of free uniforms, breakfasts, and lunches which target those students who might struggle to be provided with food and basic needs at home (DEIS, 2014, 2017; MFED, 2015).

From an ELET perspective, I argue that, identifying financial gaps and developing measures of support are essential in order to target achievement within schooling. However, apart from identifying financial barriers to school achievement, other barriers need to be identified and catered for. Since literature and policies identify a gap between students who hail from a disadvantaged background and those who do not, policy actions should attempt to identify students' needs in both the school and home thereby portraying a more holistic picture of what real opportunities these students have to complete compulsory schooling and achieve upper secondary qualification. These needs might not always be related to materialistic resources, nor might they be limited to the school environment. For example, in a previous study I conducted on family literacy programmes, I discussed that students who have literacy issues at school might benefit from family literacy programmes that involve the development of parental skills in literacy within the community (Spiteri, 2020). Parents might not always have the knowledge and skills to support their children, thus limiting their engagement.

Support should also be developed and provided before the end of compulsory schooling. While arguing that compulsory measures are essential for those who are at risk of ELET following compulsory education, it is imperative that more prevention and intervention measures are developed to target both the school

and the students' home environment, particularly for those identified as hailing from disadvantaged backgrounds. School-based solutions for prevention and intervention are needed, but are limited if underlying conditions such as family and home disadvantage are not included. Therefore, data on ELET should not only include achievement rates at the end of compulsory schooling, but should include an understanding of who and why those rates were not achieved, not only in post-primary, but also in primary education. This would lead to more informed policy measures that would develop strategic actions targeting ELET risk indicators at prevention and intervention levels, while reducing inequalities due to ELET, such as, family disadvantage.

2.2 **A Whole-School Approach to Target ELET Risk Indicators as Prevention and Intervention Measures in Malta and the EU**

The EU council recommendations for countries to develop policies on ELET recommend a whole-school approach to target ELET risk indicators (European Commission, 2015; Donlevy et al., 2019). A whole-school approach puts the learner at the centre, and implies that educators in the school work together with families, other professionals, and the community to support students' success during their schooling (European Commission, 2015; Eivers, 2019). A recent review of the implementation of these recommendations within the EU found that, while compensation measures were implemented across established ELET policies in Europe, those related to prevention and intervention were found to be lacking in some crucial areas (Donlevy et al., 2019). Similarly, research conducted in Malta found the main gap to be parental engagement measures through a whole-school approach (Eivers, 2019). Parental engagement measures within the EU were also found to be "missing (or have not been implemented to any great extent) in around one quarter of the countries in the review" (Donlevy et al., 2019, p. 34). While school support to cater for students' diverse needs was found to be implemented and developed within both policy and practice in the majority of EU countries, "implementation of infrastructural measures shows the weakest coverage including for example measures relating to school networks, early warning systems and extra-curricular provision" (Donlevy et al., 2019, p. 34).

Early warning systems (EWSs) are closely related to the implementation of a whole-school approach to target ELET through prevention and immediate intervention. This is because an EWS is a way of identifying risk indicators at a very early stage in order to provide timely support and minimise ELET risk. I argue that a whole-school support programme cannot be developed unless an EWS is in place to identify students at risk and target their needs. This would help to prevent a growing achievement gap between students who are at a disadvantage and their peers, and provide more equity provision measures within the schooling process. Often, schools rely solely on teachers to signal students who might be experiencing academic difficulties (Eivers, 2019). However, ELET is a phenomenon that presents a number of other factors which also include socio-economic difficulties. Given the daily constraints teachers face, signalling socio-economic difficulties might not always be feasible, even because this might not always be visible within a classroom context. Moreover, students experiencing difficulties within their home environment might endure emotional difficulties which might not be evident in the classroom (Downes, 2013, 2020; Downes and Cefai, 2016), but which, I argue, could highly impact their ELET risk.

There are a number of risk indicators which lead to ELET (Downes et al., 2017; Eivers, 2019; Donlevy et al., 2019) that I will define as visible risks, and which ELET policy measures generally address. Absenteeism is found to be one of the primary indicators since, if a student misses school repeatedly, it could impact their learning, as opposed to a student who regularly attends school. Another risk indicator of ELET is school behaviour and educational wellbeing. Resilient behaviour at school can often indicate a lack of student wellbeing. A lack of wellbeing can often manifest in the students' behaviour which is not always considered appropriate according to school rules. This might also have an impact on the students' engagement and academic achievement, hence why schools have developed programmes that target behaviour and wellbeing (MFED, 2015; Donlevy et al., 2019; Nouwen et al., 2015). Learning difficulties and disability are also ELET indicators which affect academic achievement (Dyson and Squires, 2016). Schools have also developed specific support in order to assist students and target this risk indicator. Absenteeism, school wellbeing, and learning

difficulties can all impact negatively academic achievement, hence why I argue that they might be more visible and targeted within the school context (Nouwen et al., 2016). Therefore, policies and educational systems within the EU and the Maltese context might have developed school-based programmes for these risk indicators.

Although the policy recommendations review (Donlevy et al., 2019) observes that a number of school-based measures targeting these risk indicators are in place, research still shows that background difference can lead to achievement disparity, hence a higher risk of ELET. Research shows that schools might be increasing the gap thereby limiting access to higher education (Tarabini and Jacovkis, 2021; Ingram and Tarabini, 2018). 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). I thus contend that support within solely the school context is insufficient as all these indicators might be enhanced because of family disadvantage, which is not always visible in the school. Though literature shows that family disadvantage is a marker of poor academic achievement, and hence, of ELET, it may tend to be ambiguous as it does not always link this to ELET risk indicators, nor does it always provide policy guidelines for better practice that could give support both at school and at home.

Irregular school attendance, inappropriate behaviour, lack of school wellbeing, and achievement gaps might be caused or increased by family disadvantage; therefore, a lack of support within the home environment might further exacerbate the achievement gap between disadvantaged students and their counterparts. A student can, for example, be absent from school of their own volition, but also due to other reasons, such as, family issues that could include family illness, financial issues, lack of knowledge and skills, or emotional wellbeing (Cabus and De Witte, 2015; Sahin et al., 2016). Similarly, a student’s lack of school wellbeing could be attributed to a lack of wellbeing within the home environment due to a number of difficulties experienced by the parents which could range from financial to socio-emotional difficulties (Borgonovi and Pal, 2016). It is for these reasons that I argue that, in order to implement a whole-school approach, an EWS 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.

A student with learning difficulties having support at home might decrease the achievement gap, as opposed to students who do not receive any home support. Similarly, research has prevailingly shown that parental engagement is an important factor for student achievement because of material resources and other learnt skills or values that are often found lacking in disadvantaged families (Muller, 2018; Kerbaiv and Bernhardt, 2018; Lee, 2018; Bower and Griffin, 2011; Epstein, 2005, 2018). However, research also demonstrates that parental engagement might increase an already existent disadvantage gap between students since parental engagement programmes in schools is generally targeted in the same manner for parents from diverse backgrounds (Reay, 2018; Hornby and Lafaele, 2011; Park et al., 2017). This could be because most school parental engagement programmes do not take into consideration disadvantaged backgrounds, and are generally developed for those parents who do not have financial or socio-emotional difficulties. Often, these parental engagement initiatives are school based and lack home intervention. A clear gap in ELET research is therefore the development of support for family disadvantage and engagement through a whole-school approach that targets both the home and school contexts which, to date, is still lacking within the EU (Donlevy et al., 2019). Although Malta for example has innovatively developed a number of parental training sessions which are mostly offered online, it did not consider the skills or knowledge that parents needed to attend them. These types of programmes, despite necessary to target the lack of parental educational skills, might only target a specific parental category without socio-economic and cultural disadvantages. Whole-school parental programmes within the Maltese context were found to be almost non-existent in schools, apart from independent scattered programmes carried out occasionally in certain colleges (Eivers, 2019).

Literature on parental engagement is starting to be linked not only within the school environment, but also within the home environment (Epstein, 2018). Epstein (2018) has reviewed her previous model, and emphasises the lack of

teacher education in building a partnership with parents. While agreeing with Epstein (2018) in that the home, school, and community and student learning overlap, and that teacher training might be limited in building partnerships, I argue that her model could be useful in developing a more specific approach for disadvantaged parents who might lack the skills, as opposed to middle-class parents. For example, although school-based groups which include both parents and teachers might be valuable, working-class parents might not consider participating for various reasons, such as, lack of time, financial resources, and socio-cultural resources. When parents do not get involved in such events, they might be simply deemed as not interested, which could develop further barriers between school and home relationships. Within the ELET field, similar recommendations indicate a lack of training for teacher education programmes in poverty and social exclusion (Donlevy et al., 2019). This indicates that teachers might also lack the skills in building such partnerships between the school, home, and community, particularly in cases of poverty and social exclusion.

Apart from parental engagement, some scholars also argue that ELET can be attributed to the students' own lack of resilience (Abrica, 2018; Chen et al., 2005; Frisby et al., 2020; Brewer et al., 2019). Garcia-Crespo et al. (2021) define resilience in their study with fourth graders in EU countries as "a student's ability to achieve academic results significantly higher than would be expected according to their socioeconomic level" (p. 1). In this study that compares PIRLS 2016 data, Malta interestingly scored very low in student resilience within the EU. A number of variables were taken into consideration for academic achievement, such as, school, teaching, and family background (Garcia-Crespo et al., 2021). It transpired that Maltese students have a mere 6% resilience, as opposed to the highest scores of over 40% by other EU counties. Results indicated that the students' socio-economic background, increased parental support, particularly in the early years of schooling, a sense of belonging in the class and school, and teaching through empathy were directly related to resilience (Garcia-Crespo et al., 2021). Similarly, Lareau (2015) argues that there is a big identified gap between middle-class and working-class students which, rather than labelling it as students' own educational resilience, it is "often defined in terms of

characteristics such as persistence, self-control, and sociability or, put differently, grit or character" (p. 21), thus linking it to a lack of cultural and social capital needed to navigate in the schooling process in order to eliminate barriers. Research therefore demonstrates that students hailing from diverse backgrounds might not have the same opportunities because of a lack of home learning skills or rules which support them within the school context (Lareau, 2011, 2015; Lareau and Weininger, 2003; Lareau et al., 2018; Calarco, 2014).

I therefore argue that specific support needs to be provided within compulsory education, not only to students, but also their parents in order to mitigate this unequal gap. Support given only within the school context is very limited and might not target disadvantage. A lack of targeted support even within the home context for students from a working-class family, or what in this study I refer to as a disadvantaged background, could increase the achievement gap of students coming from diverse backgrounds. Calarco (2014) discusses the difference between children hailing from two different backgrounds seeking support in classrooms, and links their engagement or non-engagement with teachers when experiencing learning difficulties to how parents would have coached them, and hence, their social status. Tarabini et al.'s (2019) qualitative study explores the role of school processes and their impact on ELET, concluding that "students' beliefs about the usefulness of school and their self-perceptions as proper learners are not independent of their social status" (p. 239).

Given that social status is directly related to family background, hence to parental engagement, it implies that a student's background could lead to other ELET indicators, such as, absenteeism, poor academic achievement, and lack of educational wellbeing. Despite quite limited, research on ELET in Malta shows that family disadvantage, and hence, socio-economic factors, is a great issue in providing an equitable education (Borg et al., 2015; Hellmann et al., 2019; Schraad-Tischler and Schiller, 2016). Although the first policy on ELET (MFED, 2015) prioritises a whole-school approach, research shows that this was not implemented (Eivers, 2019). A recent policy and implementation review indicates that parental engagement is lacking within compulsory education, and recommends an EWS through a whole-school approach in order to identify and

cater for disadvantage (Eivers, 2019). An example of policy learning in this review was the HSCL programme within the Irish context that seeks to identify inequalities due to family disadvantage at an early stage and implement targeted support. This will be discussed next.

2.3 The Home-School Community Liaison (Policy) within the Irish Context: Policy Borrowing and Learning Implications

Policy reviews within the EU show that few countries have developed or implemented parental engagement programmes that target prevention and intervention strategies for inequalities emerging from family disadvantage, including parental engagement (Donlevy et al., 2019). This, I argue, could indicate a significant challenge for policymakers and practitioners in schools to support students at risk of ELET who hail from disadvantaged families. This issue is one to consider as a priority within ELET policies given that, as discussed in the previous sections, research has shown that a greater number of students hailing from disadvantaged backgrounds (as opposed to other students) fail to achieve or complete compulsory education. Although family disadvantage is a known issue in schools, to date, there is only one specific programme running on a national level within the European context, namely, Ireland's HSCL (home-school community liaison) programme. This was first developed by an educator more than twenty years ago through a pilot project as a preventative ELET measure (Conaty, 2002). The HSCL specifically attempts to address inequalities emerging from disadvantage in schools by acting on parental empowerment, rather than on traditional parental engagement or involvement. As part of the educational inclusion plan entitled Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS), the HSCL within a broad perspective aims to increase students' opportunities within education by empowering the salient adults in the students' lives, that is, their parents. It also aims to identify and increase teachers' understanding of risk indicators and of the students' disadvantaged background (Tusla, 2018; DEIS, 2014, 2017; Smyth et al., 2015; Weir et al., 2018), and consequently, I argue, acting also as an EWS.

The HSCL runs on a national level through all schools classified as disadvantaged by using clear criteria that are related to ELET, such as, poor

school attendance, low achievement, and a large number of students from poor socio-economic backgrounds (DEIS, 2017). Disadvantaged schools are classified as such through the Department of Education and Skills and the Educational Welfare Services within the Child and Family Agency by liaising with school principals (Weir, 2006; DEIS, 2014, 2017). Funding in disadvantaged schools is greater than in other schools in order to cater for DEIS programmes, such as, the HSCL and other programmes that run parallel, such as, the SCP (School Completion Programme). HSCL coordinators are employed and are given at least a 10% budget or more from the school's action plan budget in order to work directly with families. HSCL coordinators aim to develop a programme with disadvantaged parents, thus enabling them to have a better opportunity to support their children to attend school and be engaged in school activities. They also aim to develop a positive mind frame of schooling and learning for more empowerment (Weir et al., 2018; Ryan, 2021). Similarly, research shows that adults who tend to not participate in lifelong learning, or in their children's education, might have experienced negative schooling themselves, or might have experienced negative instances during their children's schooling (Wilson and McGuire, 2021).

HSCL coordinators act as the key educators in the school, building a partnership between families, teachers, and other support services to implement a whole-school approach to tackle ELET risk factors thereby reducing inequalities due to disadvantage in schools (Weir et al., 2018; Ryan, 2021). Although at the basis of this policy is identifying and acting upon inequalities experienced by students in schools, the HSCL does this by empowering parents thereby giving them a real opportunity for parental engagement through the development of a partnership. This is why the role of the HSCL coordinator is also to provide lifelong learning activities and positive engagement in schools which are also part of the school's action plan (Tusla, 2018). HSCL coordinators also organise regular visits to family homes in order to have a better understanding of students' needs and family needs, thus enabling the development of individual targeted support, not only in the school, but also at home. This contrast in the provision of home

support, as opposed to solely school-based support, is a unique element of the HSCL programme in relation to parental engagement.

Home visits are therefore a unique feature of the HSCL which acts as a two-way communication and understanding for parents and teachers. Parents are gradually introduced to the school experience, and HSCL coordinators are able to capture the students' background to support teachers to cater for the students' real needs. Parents are also enabled to become leaders and agents of change by supporting other parents within the community when their own children start schooling too. An example of this is transition programmes for parents that are developed and delivered by HSCL coordinators and parents themselves (DEIS, 2019). Spaces in schools are also developed for parents to have a safe and welcoming space, where they can socialise and feel a sense of belonging within the school community. HSCL coordinators also aim to liaise with local community providers in order to introduce parents to multiple services and support beyond education. Through initial home visits, safe spaces in schools, leisure, and informal training programmes leading to formal programmes, parents are empowered to become a partner with the HSCL coordinator in order to support not only their children, but other parents by targeting structural barriers. It is through this new formed partnership that the HSCL attempts to develop a whole-school approach to learning and tackle disadvantage by minimising ELET risks (Conaty, 2002; DEIS, 2017).

I therefore argue that a programme such as the HSCL has the potential to challenge literature that observes that parental engagement can increase disadvantage because it directly aims to empower disadvantaged parents, rather than a one-size-fits-all traditional parental engagement. Moreover, it seeks to listen to their voice and develop their skills in order to be active agents in schools, while supporting other parents themselves by also sharing key information with HSCL coordinators in order to develop strategies in schools that tackle disadvantage barriers. Conaty (2002) herself views the HSCL programme as a measure that challenges normative practices in schools in order to support students and parents by bridging a gap between school and home. A policy such as the HSCL also addresses barriers within the classrooms, such as, research

that implies how teachers might not be able to cater for inequalities because of limited training constraints (Thompson, 2017; Epstein, 2018), and other constraints, such as curricular ones, and thus, they might not have sufficient time to develop a relationship with both the parents and the students (Epstein, 2005). Through the support of the HSCL coordinator who is specifically employed and trained to develop a relationship with families, teachers are not only more empowered to tackle identified gaps, but also obtain a better picture of the student outside the school walls. As part of the programme, teachers in this role have to rotate every five years in order to give a chance to more teachers to experience disadvantage within the home context (DEIS, 2018).

I therefore emphasise that parental engagement without such a consolidated link as that provided by the HSCL, that acts actively in the school and home, cannot achieve the same outcomes as those achieved by the HSCL programme. Evaluations of the HSCL have been carried out within the Irish context, concluding that this whole-school approach has indeed had a significant impact on reducing ELET indicators, such as, absenteeism (DEIS, 2017; Donlevy et al., 2019). Parental engagement was found to have been increased positively as it included parents from disadvantaged backgrounds (Weir et al., 2018; Ryan, 2021). A recent analysis by Fleming and Harford (2021) however still recommends structural changes within the HSCL programme, such as, increased funding to better cater for students' wellbeing and achievement. Despite acknowledging that ELET risk indicators were minimised, there are still gaps of achievement between students in disadvantaged areas and their counterparts who are not. They argue that, unless more funding for resources is increased, such as the psychosocial team to target wellbeing, the HSCL might lose its efficacy in addressing inequalities (Fleming and Harford, 2021). Although multiple reviews and research have been carried out within the Irish context, to date, I have not been able to trace a review that aims to develop a policy borrowing framework within another European context similar to that of the HSCL. This is an identified gap given that, as discussed earlier, EU policies that target ELET have been found to lack in prevention and intervention measures that target family disadvantage and parental engagement.

One of the EU recommendations in relation to ELET is to analyse good practices and evaluate the possibility of transfer within different contexts (European Commission, 2014; Eivers, 2019). Policy borrowing, also known as policy transfer, has gained substantial interest in recent years due to global demands and policies by worldwide entities (Verger et al., 2018; Zajda, 2015; Phillips, 2015; Sabatier, 2005; Spillane et al., 2002). It has been defined as "the conscious adoption in one context of policy observed in another" (Phillips and Ochs, 2003, p. 774). Despite being similar, policy learning differs as no actual policy is transferred, but rather, informs about local policies that are to be developed (Moyson et al., 2017; Burdett and O'Donell, 2016). Policy borrowing may be undertaken for a variety of reasons, but mainly, because governments seek solutions for identified local problems by looking at the good practice of other countries, or because they are being influenced by international educational scores, such as, Pisa or OECD (Lewis and West, 2018; Verger et al., 2018; Forestier et al., 2016; Forestier and Crossley, 2015; Meyer and Benavot, 2013). These can sometimes be recommended by international bodies, such as the European Commission, which seek to support countries to reach EU targets, as in the case of ELET (Rambla, 2018; Grimaldi and Landri, 2019; European Commission, 2014). Indeed, this study emerged from recommendations of a study carried out by EU funds wherein policy learning and borrowing of the HSCL programme in Ireland were recommended for Malta's context given the lack of evidence of parental engagement through a whole-school approach to tackle ELET (Eivers, 2019).

Policy borrowing has mostly been criticised for failing to account for complex contextual issues which may render the policy transfer to another country unsuccessful (Dunlop, 2017; Peck and Theodore, 2015; Stone, 2012, 2016). Additionally, some policies may not be transferable since they have "grown out of the legal, educational and social systems of their 'host state'" (Hulme, 2005, p. 488). Policy learning has also been criticised, mainly for the lack of research to bring about change (Stone, 2012). In other words, even if a particular government shows interest in another country's policy, this does not mean that it will bring about policy change in the home country. This could be attributed to several

reasons, including the complex process involved and political ones which could be influenced by identified risks during the policy learning process (Moyson, 2016, 2017; Wesselink, Colebatch and Pearce, 2014; Dolowitz and Marsh, 2000). Nonetheless, subsequent to an evaluation of reforms in the educational system of Hong Kong, Forestier et al. (2016) and Forestier and Crossley (2015) contend that educational policies that take a research-driven approach have a greater chance of being successful within the new context. They favour a strategic design that is informed by local and foreign experts, rather than by a merely government-led policy borrowing or learning process. Similarly, Lewis and West (2018) evaluated policy borrowing failure of ECEC in the UK, concluding that policy borrowing and learning can provide a useful background for policy analysis and development if context variables are fully considered. For their part, Phillips and Ochs (2003) similarly provide a typology that takes into consideration the context in order to support policy borrowing, analysis, and the successful transfer to a different context. Phillips (2015) further provides a model (Figure 2.1) that supports the complex process of policy borrowing in education, from the initial process of policy interest within another context to its actual transfer. It is however suggested that this model is used and further developed in order to analyse and successfully transfer a policy within different contexts.

Taking into account the complexities of policy borrowing, criticism, and the literature gaps in understanding policy learning which is often perceived as not always conducive to successful policy change, this study seeks to complement Phillips' (2015) model by first initiating a policy learning process in order to develop recommendations for the HSCL to be developed within the Maltese context. I therefore argue that Figure 2.1 below can be further developed following this study's findings within an ELET and social justice context.

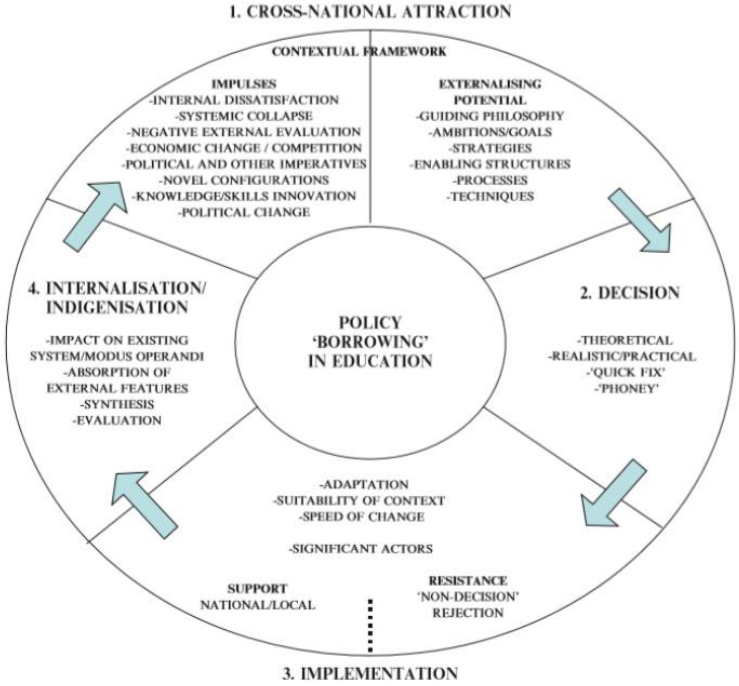


Figure 2.1 Policy Borrowing in Education: A Composite Model (Phillips, 2015, p. 143)

2.3.1 **Limitations of the HSCL policy**

The HSCL policy sets out fifteen open-ended roles that an HSCL coordinator is expected to fulfil (DEIS, 2014). Although providing support and training, some studies reflect that HSCL coordinators have difficulty in implementing all of these roles. This is often due to a top-down planning process which HSCL coordinators have no control of, but are expected to deliver and use their independent decision process (Furey, 2019). Although allowing for bottom-up implementation is part of the HSCL policy ethos in considering that all schools are within wider communities that have diverse needs, I argue that this may limit the measuring of outcomes of such a programme given that often the roles HSCL co-ordinators are expected to deliver are quite vague.

Another limitation is funding for the HSCL programme. HSCL co-ordinators are allocated a 10% of the school budget but do not automatically access them. These funds are often allocated to them by the school principal according to a needs basis justified by the plan of the coordinator and approved by the school principal. I argue that this setting implies that if HSCL coordinators do not have a good relationship with the school principal, their role might be limited due to the

need of the principal's approval to obtain the programme's fund. This leaves HSCL coordinators often relying on the local community for support, in for example organising school activities for parents or in developing training support (Furey, 2019). Moreover, recent research has shown that national cost-cuts have impacted resources which has limited the HSCL coordinators' role in implementing the policy, particularly in the area of wellbeing (Fleming and Harford, 2021).

2.4 **Social Justice Implications Pre and Post COVID-19 in relation to ELET**

Despite the number of ELET policy interventions in EU countries, academic achievement of students experiencing socio-economic issues remains a challenge in schools around Europe and beyond (Donlovey et al., 2019; Schraad-Tischler and Schiller, 2016; Hellmann et al., 2019). Although the provision of compulsory schooling is free for all students in Europe, this achievement gap implies that it might not be equal for all unless this gap is targeted. International statistical reports, such as the Social Justice Index in the EU and OECD countries, indicate that Malta scores quite low in offering an equitable education, and consequently, scores low in social justice in education (Schraad-Tischler and Schiller, 2016; Hellmann et al., 2019). In the latest report, it scores below average in the global social justice index, and is ten places lower than the Irish context (Hellmann et al., 2019). Malta's Pisa academic performance in relation to socio-economic impact also indicates that the students' background is severely impacting academic achievement (Hellmann et al., 2019). Even in contexts such as the Irish one, which has a low incidence of ELET and where specific prevention and intervention measures are being undertaken to tackle disadvantage (e.g., the HSCL), the incidence of ELET is still much higher in disadvantaged areas (Smyth et al., 2015; Hellmann et al., 2019). Within Malta's context, the achievement gap of students hailing from disadvantaged backgrounds as opposed to their counterparts can be said to be a reproduction of inequality that needs to be targeted in order to offer a socially just education. I opine that students from low socio-economic backgrounds, despite being provided with free education which should imply equality in education, are not being offered the same opportunities due to barriers they meet in the educational

system, such as, lack of parental support (in both financial and socio-cultural forms) and the absence of a whole-school approach to target disadvantage within the school and home context.

I have previously argued that, although education has the potential to promote social justice within a global perspective, it still might be the cause of increased disadvantage, depending on the students' social status. Students who do not complete compulsory education successfully have limited chances of higher paying jobs and career progression, as opposed to other students who do complete compulsory education successfully. Research has proven that students who have family support in any form and who hail from middle-class backgrounds have a greater chance of completing education. This implies that students who do not have family support and have a lower social class are facing inequalities within the educational process through lack of equal opportunities and educational achievement. The recent COVID-19 and educational provision implications have brought about a number of issues in relation to this (Ryan, 2021; Eivers et al., 2021; Armitage and Nellums, 2020; Busuttil and Farrugia, 2020; Spiteri, 2021; Ockert, 2021). Following COVID-19 and school closures, the European Commission observes that:

> Early leaving from education and training, which exposes young people and adults to decreased socio-economic opportunities, although reduced in the last decade, remains a challenge, particularly when thinking of the expected consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic. …By ensuring quality and inclusive education and training for all, Member States can further reduce social, economic and cultural inequalities. However, across Europe, learners from disadvantaged backgrounds, including from rural and remote areas, are overrepresented among underachievers and the COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted even more starkly the importance of equity and inclusion in education and training. (European Union Council, 2021, p. 6)

Due to the COVID-19 mitigation measures, school closure has been a safety procedure undertaken globally. In order to continue providing education, schools in Europe have offered online education to compensate for the lack of face-to-face classes, highlighting a number of inequalities between students and their diverse family backgrounds (Ryan, 2021; Eivers et al., 2020; Armitage and

Nellums, 2020; Busuttil and Farrugia, 2020; Spiteri, 2021; Ockert, 2021). Although research is relatively new given this unprecedented global pandemic in education, students experienced inequalities through digital provision due to lack of resources, such as, laptops or tablets, internet provision, home support, such as, digitally literate parents, food provision, as opposed to free school schemes for the disadvantaged, and wellbeing, such as, lack of appropriate space to engage in learning. Research is however emerging that disadvantaged students have an increased gap in learning as opposed to their peers due to the lack of face-to-face classes in schools (Drane et al., 2021; Spiteri, 2021). Due to this gap, international organisations are now advocating for leaving schools open and taking other measures in order to reduce the risk of COVID-19, such as, mask-wearing in schools (Reuge et al., 2021).

I therefore argue that this implies that schools are an essential means to provide education to all students and a means to offer opportunities for disadvantaged students which they might not experience at home. However, free education provision is not sufficient to target inequalities, as was clear in the case of providing online schooling during COVID-19. Face-to-face learning in schools might still be the cause of inequality reproduction within society, as might be the case in Malta and other EU countries. In order to target this gap and start to decrease it, policy and practice in education need to start offering whole-school measures that target the students and their families. Such measures as the HSCL aim to develop equal opportunities in education, and aim for an equal chance of successfully completing compulsory education by developing an EWS through parent-teacher partnerships. It is thus imperative to act immediately on ELET risk indicators by offering support at school and at students' homes. This would lead to a more socially just education provision which, although might still impose challenges in academic achievement, can act as a catalyst in addressing disadvantage in education within contexts that are currently not offering such an EWS through a whole-school approach.

2.5 **Conclusion**

To summarise, there are three main conclusions that are drawn from this discussion. The first is that ELET policies are more concerned with the number of students who proceed to higher education, which is possibly due to the limited definition and statistical EU analysis. The second is that, although family disadvantage and a diverse socio-economic background are evidenced as a direct link to ELET indicators, such as absenteeism, academic achievement, and wellbeing, there is poor evidence of policy and practice that target this within both the school and the home environment. Research has also started to emerge that COVID-19 has increased the gap between disadvantaged students and their counterparts. In conclusion, the HSCL is a policy example of good practice within social justice in education as it challenges traditional parental engagement and instead develops partnerships between the school and home. The HSCL within the Irish context can therefore be used through policy learning and borrowing within the Maltese context that has a high index of students of ELET and a higher gap in achievement for students who hail from diverse backgrounds, but has not yet developed a whole-school approach to address disadvantage.

Chapter 3: **Theoretical Framework**

3.1 **Introduction: The Sen-Bourdieu Analytical Framework for Social Justice Issues**

Sen's Capability Approach (CA) and Bourdieu's Socio-Cultural Reproduction Theory are both underpinned by agency and freedom (Hart, 2012, 2019; Unterhalter et al., 2014). This provided a theoretical lens for this study to understand students' active participation, or otherwise, and retention in schools. Although Sen identifies a number of factors that have an impact on capabilities, the Capability Approach does not specify the particular contexts in which these factors arise (Hart, 2012, 2019). Sen in fact argues that the CA is an open approach rather than a rigid theory (Sen, 1999, 2009). Therefore, Bourdieu's notions of 'habitus', 'capital', and 'field' (Bourdieu, 1997; Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977; Reay, 2004a) can enable a better understanding of how Sen's functionings can be achieved (or not). This is because Sen's CA does not always allow to discuss the importance of socio-cultural and institutional context which apart from being a main criticism (Cohen, 1993), context was needed within this study since the different 'fields' of school and home were taken into account. Hart (2012) has in fact proposed the interplay between Bourdieu and Sen, to also include context within policy analysis. For example, within this thesis, the SBAF was particularly useful because Bourdieu's "socially dynamic understanding of the conversion factors helping and hindering the development of capabilities" within diverse fields through a sociological perspective has supported the identification not only of inequalities impacting a student's education at school, but also at home (Hart, 2019, p. 285). A student's family's disadvantaged background, analysed through not only Sen's understanding of capabilities and agency (Nussbaum, 2011; Sen, 1999, 2009), but also through Bourdieu's concepts of lack of capital and its impact on developing capabilities, can give a clearer picture of what opportunities or freedoms need to be developed in order for functionings to be achieved. The SBAF was therefore particularly suitable to inform policy recommendations because of its "expanded evaluative framework" (Hart, 2019, pp. 282-285) by combining the sociological approach and context. The use of Bourdieu's notions therefore allowed this study to overcome a limitation within Sen's approach that

is assessing ELET risk not only in relation to one's independent freedom but also to issues related to context and power.

The main purpose of this study is to innovatively analyse ELET (early leaving from education and training) from the SBAF (Sen-Bourdieu Analytical Framework) perspective, as opposed to solely exploring ELET risk factors such as lack of achievement and family background on their own. Through the SBAF lens, ELET factors were explored through Bourdieu's notions, and the CA allowed for opportunity development within policy for students at risk. This was done by developing policy recommendations for a programme within the Maltese context that targets the school-home gap, particularly for disadvantaged students who have a greater risk of ELET. This study looked at a specific case of parental engagement in Ireland, that is, HSCL. Given that a number of studies highlight that parental engagement policies tend to be more beneficial to those students who are already advantaged (Reay, 2004a,b; Laureau and Weininger, 2003) thereby possibly creating a wider social gap in the educational field, particular care was taken to choose specifically the Sen-Bourdieu Analytical Framework as the theoretical lens for this study.

The selection was based on the fact that this theoretical framework gives substantial weight to educational equity in policy implications (Hart, 2012, 2018). This theory does not only look at the surface of socio-economic disadvantage, but also at the multiple forms of capital, including relationships with peers and teachers, family backgrounds, and their impact on students' school life. This allows for policy recommendations to be shaped around educational equity that provides students with realistic capital within the school context that supports their individual agency and voice (Hart et al., 2014).

For the purpose of this study, opportunity development through the SBAF-ELET will refer to the innovative exploration of ELET through the SBAF to not only identify disadvantage in schools, but also suggest and develop opportunities wherein students at risk can better convert capital into capabilities and functionings, hence increasing their agency, and identify other contexts where

they cannot, thus providing targeted measures not only for them, but for salient adults in their lives, for example, by developing parents' agency and capabilities.

Using Bourdieu's 'field', 'habitus', and 'capital', while analysing different school contexts in Malta and Ireland, it was possible to gain insight into how students and other stakeholders such as teachers and parents perceive a number of opportunities in specific contexts and identify ELET risk factors (Downes, 2017). Given that both Sen and Bourdieu acknowledge that the environment in which students live has an impact on their educational outcomes (Hart, 2019; Pham, 2019; Molla and Pham, 2019; Walker, 2012; Paterson and Iannelli, 2007; Bourdieu, 1984), these perceived opportunities were linked to students' increased or decreased participation and retention in schools through gained functionings and capabilities within the context of ELET.

I will therefore now expand on Sen's and Bourdieu's specific notions, and will subsequently discuss the specific context in which the Sen-Bourdieu Analytical Framework was used to focus on developing recommendations for an HSCL programme in Malta that will attempt to reduce educational inequalities often experienced by disadvantaged students by improving student-teacher-parent relationships within the school context.

3.2 **Sen's Capability Approach as a Social Justice Theoretical Framework**

This study evaluates and provides real opportunities for social justice in compulsory education. This would imply the development of strategies and policies that develop equality in schools. Through this study, I seek to analyse the HSCL programme in Ireland as a means to develop real opportunities for students and parents within an educational system that is meant to be free and equal for all, while analysing parents' agency in relation to students' wellbeing and freedom. This analysis seeks to develop recommendations for Malta's ELET policy in order to provide a programme that targets opportunity deprivation (Dreze and Sen, 1999; Ferreira and Gignoux, 2008) within compulsory education (Downes, 2014, 2016).

Sen developed the Capability Approach (CA) as an evaluation of individual development by looking at multiple factors, including wellbeing, poverty, and inequalities that might lead to a lack of social justice (Sen, 1997, 2009, 2010). Sen proposed this framework for assessing the quality of life through the notion of 'basic capability equality', as opposed to other models of equality, such as, the Rawlsian models of equality (Robeyns, 2017). Traditional theories of wellbeing mainly imply that equality is measured through material income, possessions, and wealth. Nonetheless, according to Sen, given that people are diverse, they may or may not achieve similar outcomes with the same material wealth (Sen, 1999). From a social justice perspective, Sen's CA can be viewed as a theoretical framework in analysing each individual's potential to achieve what they are able to do and be according to what they value the most, rather than achieving more materialistic resources or basing the evaluation on assumptions.

Freedom and opportunity are consequently two main normative principles underpinning this approach. The ability for an individual to be free, and be able to choose the life they want to live from a number of different opportunities, can be considered the first principle of wellbeing according to Sen (Sen, 1992, 1999). Secondly, Sen (1992, 1999) argues that, within a political perspective, social justice can be said to be achieved if an individual has the real opportunity to live the life they value and choose within a society. So far, the CA has been used as a framework within a range of fields (e.g., health, gender, education, and poverty) that could support the development of policies that aim to understand wellbeing and sustain social justice practices (Robeyns, 2005, 2017; Hart, 2012, 2019).

More specifically, Robeyns (2017) defines the CA as a

> conceptual framework for a range of evaluative exercises, including most prominently the following: (1) the assessment of individual levels of achieved wellbeing and wellbeing freedom; (2) the evaluation and assessment of social arrangements or institutions, and (3) the design of policies and other forms of social change in society. (p. 24)

The CA has been criticised for being an incomplete theory, in the sense that it fails to promote a specific methodology, and is considered vague in questions addressing it (Robeyns, 2017; Alkire, 2005, 2021; Ibrahim and Alkire, 2007).

Robeyns (2017) explains that, in order to address these issues, it is important to distinguish between a “capability approach” and “capability theory” (p. 15). The main difference between the two is that “there is one capability approach and there are many capability theories” (Robeyns, 2017, p. 15). In this aspect, this study utilises the CA for a deeper understanding of ELET in relation to the HSCL programme, rather than generating a theory, as the CA can be said to “lend itself well to providing a better understanding of a certain phenomenon” (Robeyns, 2017, p. 33).

It can be easily stated that ELET, considered a phenomenon brought about by various factors, is often linked to disadvantage or advantage within education to a financially disadvantaged background. This often leads to the development of a number of policy measures that target this financial gap (Rambla, 2018), as in Malta, where a main recent measure was the provision of free examinations with the aim of increasing opportunity for all students to sit for summative assessments that classify students as ELET or not (European Commission et al., 2019; MFED, 2015). Although this measure enabled more students to sit for their final compulsory exams, ELET statistics (achievement) were still similar when compared to previous years. This implies that socially just opportunity development for students at risk of ELET cannot be solely based on financial resources, material possessions, or achievement, but other factors need to be analysed and evaluated.

Since ELET is a phenomenon, the CA includes normative principles of freedom and opportunity based on individual agency and wellbeing that are innovative aspects to better understand ELET as a phenomenon, rather than measuring it solely through wealth, possessions, and capital. However, the CA on its own, given its open-ended approach, was insufficient to generate policy recommendations in this study, but was utilised to better understand the HSCL programme as a possible support policy measure that addresses opportunity deprivation and increases educational equity and social justice through increased choices, opportunities, freedoms, and individual wellbeing. Bourdieu’s theory (that will be discussed later in this chapter) was used in conjunction with the CA as a philosophical theory in order to analyse risk factors, such as, family

background, capital, and the conversion factors that impact agency and wellbeing within the different fields of school and home.

It is additionally imperative to discuss and distinguish between the work of Sen and that of Nussbaum, who are the two main catalysts of the CA. Although they share similar normative principles, Nussbaum's work differs since she offers a partial theory of justice through a specified list of central capabilities (Robeyns, 2017). Sen's CA, on the other hand, does not offer a specified list, which is often the main criticism of his work (Alkire, 2005; Nussbaum, 2004, 2006, 2011; Sen, 2003), but instead offers us an approach for open-ended analysis that has been found useful in developing policy strategies that could expand capabilities.

Robeyns (2005, 2017) argues that Sen's CA's criticism is not valid if it is being used as an approach rather than a theory, and that the CA can be supported by a social or philosophical theory. In fact, although I found both Sen's and Nussbaum's work helpful when analysing this study's findings, I have relied more on Sen's CA due to its open-ended nature as I sought to explore parents' own views on constraints and opportunities in supporting their children to achieve the desired outcomes according to what they value, as well as those barriers they might encounter, including institutional and cultural ones. Had I drawn a list, I might have missed out on what parents really value, particularly since I am dealing with two different cultural contexts. Therefore, through Sen's CA, I was able to explore different parental views on their agency (or lack thereof) and that of their children which might undermine wellbeing and educational equality.

Often, ELET linked to the lack of educational equality is measured by the achievement (or otherwise) of educational outcomes through summative assessment. Unterhalter (2003, 2012) views the CA as a way of obtaining a better understanding of educational equality, and more recently, has questioned 'what', 'when', 'why', and 'how' education is measured (Unterhalter, 2017) through the notion of 'negative capability'. This is also in line with ELET that is only measured through those who achieve upper secondary education through summative assessments, for example, five O levels in Malta. Unterhalter (2017) discusses how educational policies need to start to include other criteria as

> education is not just one thing, for example, a learning outcome, linked to performance in a test, or the numbers enrolled in a particular school phase. Many aspects of education defy measurement. Educational relationships that are social, emotional, epistemological, normative, political, cultural and economic cannot be simply measured. (p. 2)

This research is therefore innovatively looking at a unique policy strategy, namely, the HSCL in Ireland, through the CA lens, as opposed to a simple test performance, that could be utilised in Malta and other educational contexts in order to widen opportunities according to what students and the salient adults in their lives (i.e., their families) value most. In relation to the CA, this implies that the HSCL programme would be developing students' and parents' individual capabilities and functionings which could in turn reduce the risk of ELET through increased opportunities, wellbeing, and agency, as will be discussed next.

3.3 **The CA's Basic Components in relation to Freedom and Wellbeing: Functionings, Capabilities, and Agency**

The Capability Approach can be said to have a set of basic main components that are also the basis of terminology in assessing the CA, namely, functionings, capabilities, and agency (Sen, 1992, 1997, 2009). These notions of freedom carry implications for educational equity, particularly when considering each individual's conversion factors (Hart, 2012, 2018) which have been used in this study, as will be discussed later. Sen (1987) states that "a functioning is an achievement whereas a capability is the ability to achieve" (p. 36). In other words, functionings imply the freedom as to what an individual is able to do, while capabilities are usually referred to as how an individual uses a number of functionings that allow for freedom wherein the individual chooses how to live from a number of possible opportunities (Sen, 1992).

It can thus be stated that functionings can be perceived as milestones that an individual can reach, whereas capabilities can imply the opportunity to choose from a number of milestones (Sen, 2009). In this sense, for instance, a student coming from a disadvantaged family (or not) can have the opportunity to reach a number of milestones within a school context, hence functionings, but might lack the freedom, or choice, to choose the different milestones thereby acquiring

limited capabilities due to what the family values most. As regards wellbeing, Sen (2000) notes that “an impoverished life is one without the freedom to undertake important activities that a person has reason to choose” (p. 4).

In this study, functionings, that is, “the various things a person may value doing or being” (Sen, 1999, p. 75), can be referred to as those educational milestones that parents view for their children and what those children view for themselves as important and valuable in their life. In terms of ELET, this would mean that parents would find value in supporting their children to attend school regularly in order to support them to successfully achieve educational outcomes and competences. Functionings in this study would mean assessing what students are able to achieve and value within their school community, as well as what students are able to achieve and value within their family background through their parents’ support, including, but not relying only on, materialistic resources like goods, such as, books and financial support.

Conversely, capabilities refer to opportunities rather than possible abilities, that is, “the substantive freedom to achieve various lifestyles” (Sen, 1999, p. 75). Although functionings and capabilities are intrinsically connected, it is important to distinguish between what, in this case, a student is able to achieve according to what they personally value and are able to do, and what their school and family backgrounds are offering as sustainable opportunities in relation to their abilities. For example, if a student values studying and achieves great outcomes at school, but is not supported by parents who value schooling or achieving grades, and therefore, has no space or time to study at home, this would limit their opportunities and consequently their capability to further their education and continue developing their grades and aspirations as they grow older.

The HSCL is consequently being viewed as a programme in schools that could support the students’ life journey both at school and at home by supporting parents to develop their own capabilities and functionings in order to help students develop a set of functionings and their capabilities to achieve a valued education and reduce the risk of ELET. Although the HSCL can be viewed as an opportunity to develop functionings and capabilities, central to the CA is also

agency. 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. Wellbeing therefore implies that the student has the ability and willingness to succeed in their educational journey, including the resources needed, and also the freedom to do so both at school and at home if they want to. Agency can thus be viewed as the foundation background of freedom between capabilities and functionings, for example, what the student is able to do and be and the opportunities and freedom to engage in what they value (Robeyns, 2017). Sen (2009) also points out that an individual might use their agency not for their own wellbeing, but to just achieve their personal goals. For example, a student might support another student at school as they value friendship. This would not be directly linked to the student’s own wellbeing achievement, but can be considered an agency achievement.

The concept of agency and wellbeing in the relationship between capabilities and functionings, however, needs to be distinguished between freedom and actual achievement. Four different concepts can be elicited that are related to each individual’s opportunities and values, namely, “wellbeing freedom”, “wellbeing achievement”, “agency freedom”, and “agency achievement” (Sen, 2009, p. 287; Hart, 2019). Within the context of ELET and an educational understanding of a student’s educational process, this would imply not only the educational outcomes and achievements at the end of compulsory education, as is typical in European ELET analysis, but would also consider students’ progress, wellbeing, health, achievements, and personal, social, and family values throughout their educational journey. This study is thus attempting to take an innovative focus and analysis, particularly within the Maltese context, where most academic discourse on ELET lies only within obtaining (or not) the sufficient academic achievements at the end of compulsory education and having (or not) materialistic resources, thus linking more to a Rawlsian perspective.

It is therefore imperative to now conceptualise education within the CA and its link to this study. Education had initially been under-theorised within the CA, but as Walker (2006) notes, there have been great advances of the CA within the educational field, and thus, education has now been analysed in various ways (Robeyns, 2017; Walker and Unterhalter, 2007). The aim of this study in relation to the CA, that will be discussed next, is to present education not only as a basic capability, as originally developed by Sen (Robeyns, 2017; Cin, 2017), but also as a valued functioning by students and their parents, hence a more complex and wider view of education as a capability. The SBAF analysis would support the possible gap of opportunity deprivation within education analysis of the CA in relation to ELET and the development of opportunities that do not solely target achievements, but also freedom and aspirations through wellbeing and agency.

3.4 **Education and ELET within the CA: A Basic Capability and Valued Function that Targets Opportunity Deprivation**

Sen (1985) originally conceptualised education as a basic capability that is fundamental to one's life and achievable through access to the right resources. Stating that education is a basic capability of acquiring knowledge through resources can be compared to providing schools for free to all students, but this would be a very limited view and analysis, as discussed by a number of academics employing the CA in education (Terzi, 2005; Walker and Unterhalter, 2007; Robeyns, 2017; Cin, 2017). It would also be very limited in the case of ELET as it would imply that, by simply offering free education, there would be no student at risk of ELET. This is certainly not the case since Malta offers free education, but has one of the highest rates of ELET. Although agreeing that education is a basic capability, and it should be provided to everyone, this should be shaped as a real opportunity for all students.

Terzi (2005, 2007), though considering education as a basic capability and developing a list that could be criticised for its possible lack of Sen's argument of democratic process, defines education as not only a basic capability, but also "real opportunities both for informal learning and for formal schooling" (Terzi, 2007, p. 25). Terzi (2007) also affirms that failing to provide an education to every individual "would essentially harm or substantially disadvantage the individual"

(p. 30), while also implying that being educated or not would have an impact on other capabilities and on each individual's future.

In their common theme of gender and development, Cin and Walker (2013, 2016), and Cin (2017) argue that an educational system not only needs to be accessible, but should also support the development of capabilities. Though gender inequality is not the main theme in this study, it is still a risk indicator of ELET that needs to be taken into consideration. Indeed, according to Walker (2006), "school lessons can undermine learning as well as support it particularly with regards to gender issues" (p. 186). Saito (2003) has probably anticipated this by providing a clear argument that education involves both intrinsic and instrumental values. This implies that capabilities expansion within education includes both basic fundamental abilities, such as reading and writing, and creating "new capability sets for the child that they were not exposed to before, such as taking up different career paths and being part of different social groups" (Saito, 2003, p. 27).

ELET and education within the CA can be therefore said to imply that students' autonomy, formal schooling, and informal learning are all essential to evaluate opportunities in schools and what they might value at school, but also at home and within their community. Lanzi (2007) discusses how the value in what one wants to be and do, that is, functionings, can be developed and impacted by education. A person's educated life, according to Lanzi (2007), can be valued as the sum of its "instrumental value" like qualifications, its "intrinsic value" like agency, autonomy, wellbeing, and its "positional value" (p. 2) like access to material resources, and social influences. This places ELET in relation to education within the CA as not only being a basic capability, but a complex one that enhances the functionings that individuals (students and parents) have reason to value. Within this broader perspective, education can be viewed as a capability with a number of achieved functionings through 'wellbeing freedom', 'wellbeing achievement', 'agency freedom', and 'agency achievement' (Hart, 2012, 2019).

Therefore, by conceptualising education as not only a fundamental basic capability in relation to ELET, but also as a complex capability, this study supports the broad understanding of parents' and students' experiences and perceptions of the HSCL programme (in Ireland) or lack of it (in Malta) as a measure to enhance their capabilities within a broader view that develops their agency. Hart et al. (2014) similarly suggest that, when looking at education through a broader perspective within the CA, it can support the discovery of what individuals really have reason to value, be, and do both at school and within their communities. The HSCL programme was consequently analysed through the CA lens as a policy support measure that could target opportunity deprivation.

Within this broader perspective of education being a complex capability, we also need to take into consideration agency and conversion factors. Developing a policy measure that targets opportunity deprivation can only be democratic and promote equality if we take into account individual conversion factors and agency (Sen, 1985; Hart, 2019). Bourdieu's theory has been identified and utilised together with Sen's in order to gain a better understanding of the conversion factors in relation to agency, which will be discussed in the next sections.

3.5 **Agency and Conversion Factors – Identifying Bourdieu's Theory as a Support to Sen's CA**

The HSCL programme, as aforementioned, is not aimed directly at children, but at developing parents' capabilities that could in turn support the development of children's capabilities. Biggeri (2007) lists five main issues on children's capabilities, with the first two outlined hereunder:

> the child's capabilities are at least partially affected by the capability set and achieved functionings (as also by their means, i.e., assets, disposable income) of their parents, as an outcome of a cumulative path-depending process that can involve different generations of human beings. The possibility of converting capabilities into functionings depends also on parents', guardians', and teachers' decisions implying that the child's conversion factors are subject to further constraints. (p. 199)

For their part, Biggeri et al., (2011, 2012) and Brando (2020) also discuss the importance of considering children as main social actors and agents linked to

Sen's approach within the CA and conversion factors (Sen, 1985). Conversion factors can be seen as the agent's ability to achieve what they value, while considering their set of resources and their ability to develop capabilities and functionings. Robeyns (2017) categorises conversion factors as personal, social, and environmental. The HSCL programme was therefore analysed in relation to conversion factors and agency pertaining to the salient adults in the children's lives, especially those of parents, and in certain cases, of educators as a way to address Biggeri's issue with children's capabilities with regards to education.

In this study, conversion factors were also useful to obtain a better insight of parents' aspirations for their children, and identify any opportunity deprivation due to their individual agency, valued beings and doings, and lack of resources, not solely materialistic ones. For instance, both Reay (2018) and Ingram (2011, 2018) argue that students hailing from different social classes tend to have different aspirations, even if they have the same educational setting. Meanwhile, Biggeri (2007) also maintains that children's agency should be considered as an active one, but can sometimes create conflict in the children's and parents' relationships. "On the one hand, parents need to respect children's desires and freedoms, but on the other they have to assist children to expand or acquire further capabilities, even though this may need to be done against children's willingness" (Biggeri, 2007, p. 199).

This implies that, although children are considered as active agents within the CA (Biggeri et al., 2011, 2012), salient adults in their lives (parents and teachers) can support the development (or not) of their capability set. On the other hand, salient adults can act as barriers for children's own valued beings and doings within education. Due to the nature of the HSCL programme in supporting parents, it is important to discuss parental agency and its implications in this study. Sen (1985) argues that agency supports individuals not only to form goals, but also to achieve them. Within the context of ELET, parents' agency in relation to students' capabilities can be considered as multidimensional and complex in nature.

Alkire (2008) highlights five features of agency within the CA according to Sen that can apply to this study in order to have a better picture of parents' agency in relation to students' capabilities and how the HSCL could be developed as a support measure to address ELET and opportunity deprivation. The first feature in relation to ELET and parents' agency can be related to their goals and values with regards to their children's education. The second feature implies that parents need to have the capabilities, functionings, and resources in order to support their children in what they value. The third feature deals with parents focusing on the wellbeing of their children thereby possibly impacting their own wellbeing. Valuing the parents' objectives and goals is the fourth feature. Within an ELET context, this can imply high aspirations for their children, or conversely, low aspirations, issues of child safety, particularly in relation to gender or bullying, and logistical issues for school choice or attendance.

The last feature according to Alkire (2008) is the agent's own capability set which, in this study, would refer to the parents' own capability set. This would imply taking into account the real opportunities and options available to parents to support (or not) their children. It is mainly within this last feature of agency that the HSCL programme was analysed, but this does not exclude the other features as it would limit the power of parental agency (Alkire, 2005, 2008). Rather, it was considered a starting point that includes the other features of agency and support their development.

This study therefore suggests that the students' education capability set is complex in nature, thus supporting Biggeri's (2007) claims that, although children are agents on their own, parents, and salient adults play a crucial role in enabling them to achieve capabilities. Conversion factors and children's agency, freedom, and wellbeing can be viewed through a multidimensional context that needs to be placed within a significant position. The CA used with another social policy theory can support not only a better understanding of the phenomenon (D'Angelo and Ryan, 2018), but can also "have normative implications related to the curriculum design, or to answer the question of what is needed to ensure that capability" (Robeyns, 2017, p. 33).

Bourdieu's theory and concepts of 'habitus', 'capital', and 'field' were consequently deemed a useful approach, together with the CA, to consider these complex processes and relationships (Hannon, 2020) that will be discussed next. Bourdieu developed these conceptual concepts as part of a socio-cultural theoretical framework within the social practices field. His work has gained particular interest within educational research as the theoretical framework provided a broad analysis of education and its impact within a socially just society.

Bourdieu also speaks of symbolic violence, which can be defined as decisions and practices in schools that support students hailing from the upper and middle classes, while perpetuating the gap for disadvantaged students as they have different types of capital (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977). In order to develop a strategic action through recommendations for the ELET policy in Malta that targets disadvantaged students, it was first important to identify ELET risk factors, hence inequalities pertaining to family disadvantage within education. Bourdieu's theory through the particular notions of field, habitus, capital, and consequently, symbolic violence in schools was utilised to identify these risk factors in relation to Sen's CA, with a particular focus on conversion factors and agency.

Bourdieu's theory and Sen's CA have been used extensively in educational research, even though research using both these theories within the field of ELET is quite limited. More recently, Hart (2019) has developed the SBAF which was the foundational theoretical approach for this study. I believe this study is the first to use Sen's and Bourdieu's work to develop a specific policy measure that targets opportunity deprivation for students at risk of ELET within a European context. I will therefore first discuss Bourdieu's concepts of 'habitus', 'capital', and 'field', followed by Hart's (2018) SBAF, its implications for this study, and a proposed modified framework of Hart's work to support the development of strategic policy measures targeting opportunity deprivation that I believe are unique to the field of ELET.

3.6 **Bourdieu's Habitus, Capital, and Field as a Tool to Identify ELET Risk Factors in relation to Sen's CA**

ELET risk factors, discussed more broadly in Chapter 2, are greatly influenced by, but not limited to, family disadvantage, including cultural, social, and economic barriers. These factors may impact parents' aspirations for their children's educational capabilities. Bourdieu's concept of habitus is consequently apt for exploring parents' aspirations and support (or lack thereof) to their children. Bourdieu (1977) defines habitus as:

> objectively classifiable judgments and the system of classification of these practices. It is in the relationship between the two capacities which define the habitus, the capacity to produce classifiable practices and works, and the capacity to differentiate and appreciate these practices and products (taste), that the represented social world is constituted. (pp. 171-172)

Habitus can therefore be described as an objective social construct of thoughts and actions in individuals and groups, leading to behaviour that is considered appropriate (or otherwise) in a given context (Bourdieu, 1998). In relation to ELET risk factors, it can be said that habitus refers to students' and parents' history, experiences, and family background in relation to parenting skills, and how these in turn impact positively or negatively educational capabilities. This static and inherent determinism has brought about caution among academics in the field of education and its possible overuse or wrong application (Reay et al., 2001). However, habitus can be a useful tool within education to evaluate beliefs and dispositions from childhood to adulthood within a particular culture in relation to the school context (Reay, 2004 a,b, 2018). This implies that past and present educational experiences can impact the students' educational journey, consequently reducing or increasing the risk of ELET.

Reay (2004 a,b) and Ingram (2018) provide a useful account of how habitus (Bourdieu, 1972) can be transformative, but also limited in developing agency as it could give rise to barriers for students who hail from different social classes. For example, in this study, habitus was useful to evaluate the parents' experiences through their understanding of education and preferences regarding the educational system and the HSCL. This implies that parents' own experience of schooling and their experience of their children's education would generate constraints and freedoms, and can be used as a risk factor, albeit limited in

providing a clear picture of how they would act when supporting their children in education. The notion of habitus in this study is therefore helpful to identify parents' own constraints or advantages, according to their own educational experiences and preferences. This was used as the first main ELET factor in this study.

Family background, preferences, and experiences were consequently considered as a main ELET factor in this study through the notion of habitus. However, ELET is a phenomenon brought about by various factors that cannot be limited to family background. Bourdieu's notions of capital and how this is used in different fields were also applied. Bourdieu (1997) distinguishes between three types of capital: *economic capital*, *social capital*, and *cultural capital. Economic capital* represents financial resources, *social capital* represents social connections, and *cultural capital* represents values, skills, education, and knowledge that can give an individual a higher or lower status in society.

Bourdieu links capital to the type of habitus an individual has and to the choices they are limited to. Linking capital to habitus, it is evident that ELET risk factors are therefore not limited to family background (both past and present experiences), but also to their *economic capital*, *social capital*, and *cultural capital.* For example, a student can be considered at risk of ELET due to their financial difficulties, but also due to their family's limited skills, educational background, and lack of connections to improve this (Lareau et al., 2003).

In order to provide a context for habitus and capital as ELET risk factors, it was important for this study to also look at field and the possible emerging risk factors in relation to it. Bourdieu (1998) defines field as "the specific structure of these quite peculiar social worlds where the universal is engendered" (p. 138). This implies that students within an educational system are expected to integrate within a structure and engage according to this specified structure thereby impacting habitus and capital. A field, however, is not limited to the educational system like a school or university, but can be a village or family. Therefore, students with similar habitus and capital might still engage differently within different fields and impact conversion factors.

Bourdieu (1998) uses the metaphor of a game to explain this notion and the relation with habitus and capital. A game has rules which Bourdieu defines as 'Doxa', and individuals with different capitals use them to play within each field. The form of capital within their habitus would impact their understanding within the field and how they play according to the rules of the game (Reay, 2001, 2012). For example, a parent who has financial capital, but possesses limited cultural capital (perhaps they have a limited educational background), can still pay for private tuition to support their children if they value education. If, on the other hand, a parent would like to support their children, but has limited cultural and financial capital, the student would have to rely totally on school support.

It can consequently be said that field can impact a student's habitus in different ways. Firstly, it structures the habitus and "contributes to constituting the field as a meaningful world, a world endowed with sense or with value, in which it is worth investing one's energy" (Bourdieu, 1972, cited in Wacquant, 1989, p. 44). In the case of school as a field, it can therefore help to reduce ELET by enriching students' habitus (or limiting it) and continue to develop inequalities, for example, between different social classes and cultures where a student may simply adjust to the rules of the game within the field. In this study, the notion of field in relation to habitus and capital as a tool to identify risk factors is crucial since the HSCL is a tool that aims to operate within the field of school in order to bridge any potential gaps between school and home.

Habitus in relation to capital and field is therefore similar to Sen's concept of opportunities as an individual tends to "adjust to circumstances, especially to make life bearable in adverse situations" (Sen, 1999, p. 62). However, Bourdieu's view in this study can provide a wider picture to identify ELET factors and the impact as conversion factors as it "denotes a manner of being, a habitual state (especially of the body), and, in particular, a predisposition, tendency, propensity or inclination" (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977, p. 214). Sen's emphasis is on inequality of opportunity through agency, functionings, and capabilities, whereas Bourdieu emphasises habitus, capital, and field, through which he explores the processes that could create these inequalities, not only through habitus, but within fields and different types of capital.

While Bourdieu's notions on identifying ELET risk factors both at school and outside inform this study on the potential risk of reproducing inequalities within different fields, they are limited in their social nature change. These notions are useful in this study to identify potential inequality reproduction, but on their own, they were insufficient as they do not allow space for the analysis of possible opportunities after analysing conversion factors. Sen's CA was essential to analyse the HSCL as a strategy that targets inequalities and develops opportunities by also allowing for agency development and analysis. I will therefore now discuss how Hart's SBAF could be used innovatively within the field of ELET to identify risk factors and develop policy opportunities that minimise them.

3.7 **Building on Hart's SBAF to Develop Opportunities that Minimise ELET Risk Factors in relation to the HSCL Case**

Through the SBAF, Hart (2012, 2019) has applied Sen's CA and Bourdieu's notions to develop a deeper understanding of students' aspirations in relation to capabilities. Her research mainly focuses on social justice within educational policy and the use of habitus, capital, and field, their relationship to building capabilities, and conversion factors. Building on Robeyn's (2005) studies on conversion factors, Hart (2012) suggests 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).

More recently, Hart (2019) has discussed that conversion of capital into capabilities usually happens in two phases, as shown in Figure 3.1. The first phase usually requires family support also in what is defined as financial capital. In this case, financial capital can additionally be funded by the school; for example, if a student does not have sufficient funds from the family to participate in field trips or support with learning, the school could provide the necessary financial help. Following this support, the next phase is the actual change of capital into capabilities. This implies that students would be "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. 9). Students' agency is finally manifested in their decision-making process about which capabilities to use in different fields in the form of functionings.

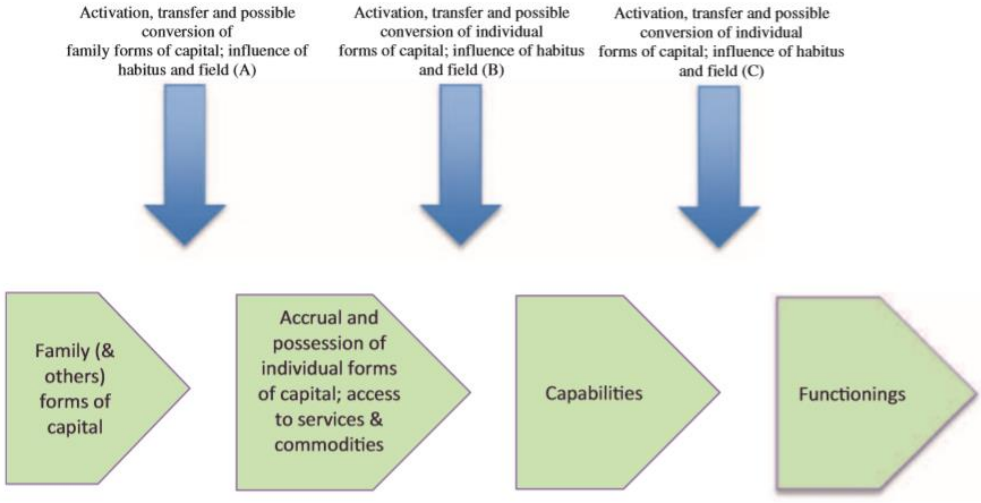


Figure 3.1 Sen-Bourdieu Analytical Framework building on Hart, 2012 (Hart, 2019, p. 10)

Building on Hart's two-phase process of conversion factors, this study has developed its own hypothesis of conversion factors in relation to the existing HSCL programme in Ireland and the possible development of the HSCL strategy to be adopted within a Maltese school context. Figure 3.2 illustrates that in Phase 1, a possible HSCL strategy in Malta could identify ELET risk factors by taking into consideration the students' capital, field, and habitus. The HSCL programme could provide the necessary support by taking into account the 'institutional habitus' factor, which could exacerbate further the predicament of disadvantaged students (Reay et al., 2001; Darmondy, 2012; Burke et al., 2013), and by identifying risk factors at an early stage of schooling. This is also discussed by Hart (2019), who states that "greater awareness of this potential bias may help schools to reduce educational inequalities and to direct resources, and the transfer and activation of forms of capital, in ways that seek to benefit the most disadvantaged students" (p. 10). The relationship between these factors therefore also needs to be taken into consideration.

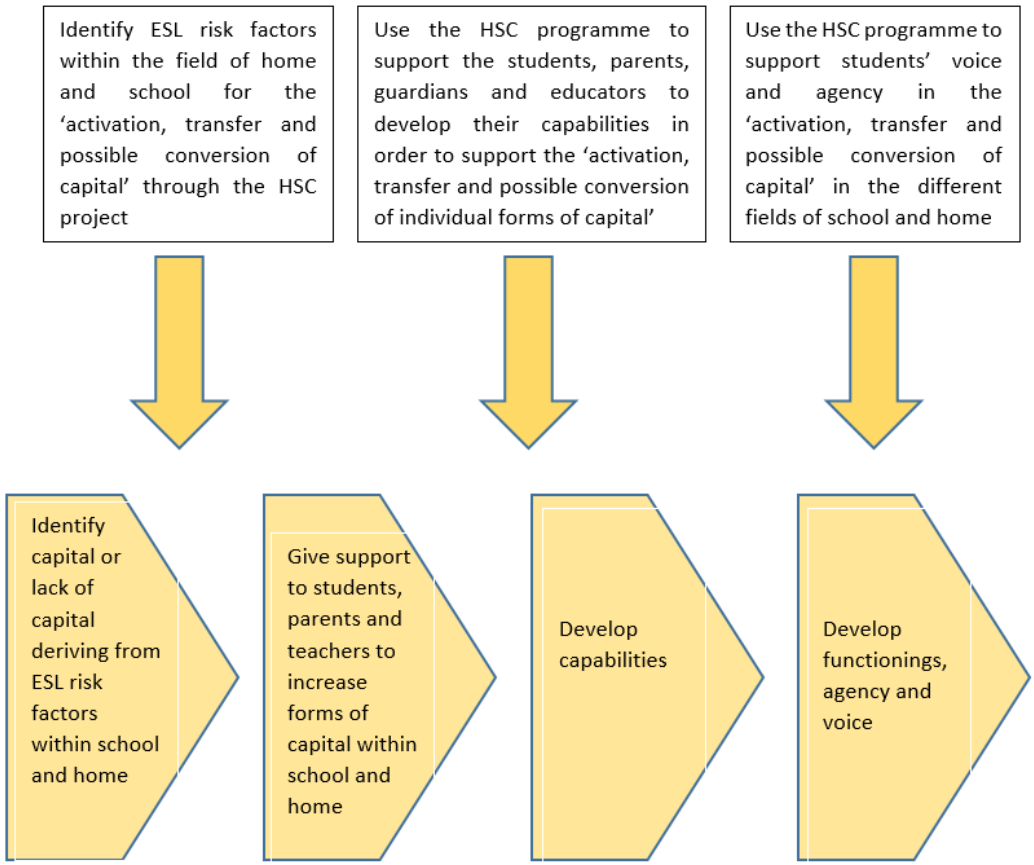


Figure 3.2 Building on Hart's two-phase process: Hypothesis of conversion factors in relation to HSCL as an inclusive strategy

Tarabini et al. (2017) maintain that

> …there are still few studies that examine the processes of ESL (early school leaving), especially from the subjective perspective of the students. What is more, there is still relatively little empirical evidence focusing on the effect that schools, and teachers in particular, have on students' decisions – towards the end of their period of compulsory education – to continue studying or to drop out. (p. 2)

Additionally, a number of scholars have recently conducted research on students not pursuing higher education and whether this was related to their socio-emotionally and economically disadvantaged family background (Doyle and Keane, 2019; Tivaringe, 2019; Jury et al., 2017; Parker et al., 2016; Watts, 2007; Watts and Bridges, 2006; Ferguson et al., 2005; Rumberger and Lim, 2008). Çiftçi and Cin (2018) observe that the missing component of teachers directly working with communities and also failing to take into account economic, cultural,

and social capital could increase educational disadvantage. Despite family background being discussed as a major risk factor which could lead to ELET (Ingram, 2011, 2018; Reay, 2012, 2018), there seem to be few studies on ELET that focus on how to actually overcome this barrier by developing opportunities that target agency development, hence my suggestion to use Hart's model for the possibility of opportunity development specifically targeted for ELET policy development.

Hart (2019) believes that

> …becoming conscious of the roles of educational institutions in the perpetuation of injustices and oppression is a first step on a long journey of development. …. Education policy must go hand in hand with practice developments. Education policy has a dominant focus on the development and education of children and young people. (p. 13)

In this sense, in this study and within the context of ELET, the development of policy recommendations and practice was linked to Hart's SBAF by complementing it mainly with opportunity development when analysing ELET risk factors and other conversion factors highlighted previously (Alexiadou et al., 2019; Tarabini et al., 2017; Borgna and Struffolino, 2017). Given the limitations in academic research that uses the SBAF to analyse the possible development of policy measures for opportunities that target ELET, the addition of opportunity development in this study has supported the analysis of agency development in relation to conversion factors and policy recommendations. Therefore, this study has adopted SBAF and complemented it to specifically "challenge the status quo and normative perceptions of educational processes" (Hart, 2019, p. 14) in order to not only provide an analysis of risk factors and conversion factors, but also provide policy recommendations that can be applied in practice for agency development by identifying specific support when conversion factors are limited. I define this as opportunity development for ELET risk factors within policy development that aim to develop any opportunities disadvantaged students are deprived of. The Methodology underpinned by this approach will follow.

Chapter 4: **Methodology**

4.1 **Introduction**

This chapter explains how the data was collected and analysed. The Sen-Bourdieu Analytical Framework (SBAF), discussed in the previous chapter, was used to underpin this methodological approach. The SBAF allowed for the voices of educators and parents to be heard in relation to their experiences of dealing with educational disadvantage due to diverse family backgrounds within two different contexts, Malta and Ireland. Figure 4.1 lists the three key research questions this study aims to answer, and how these were used to meet the aims and objectives of this study.

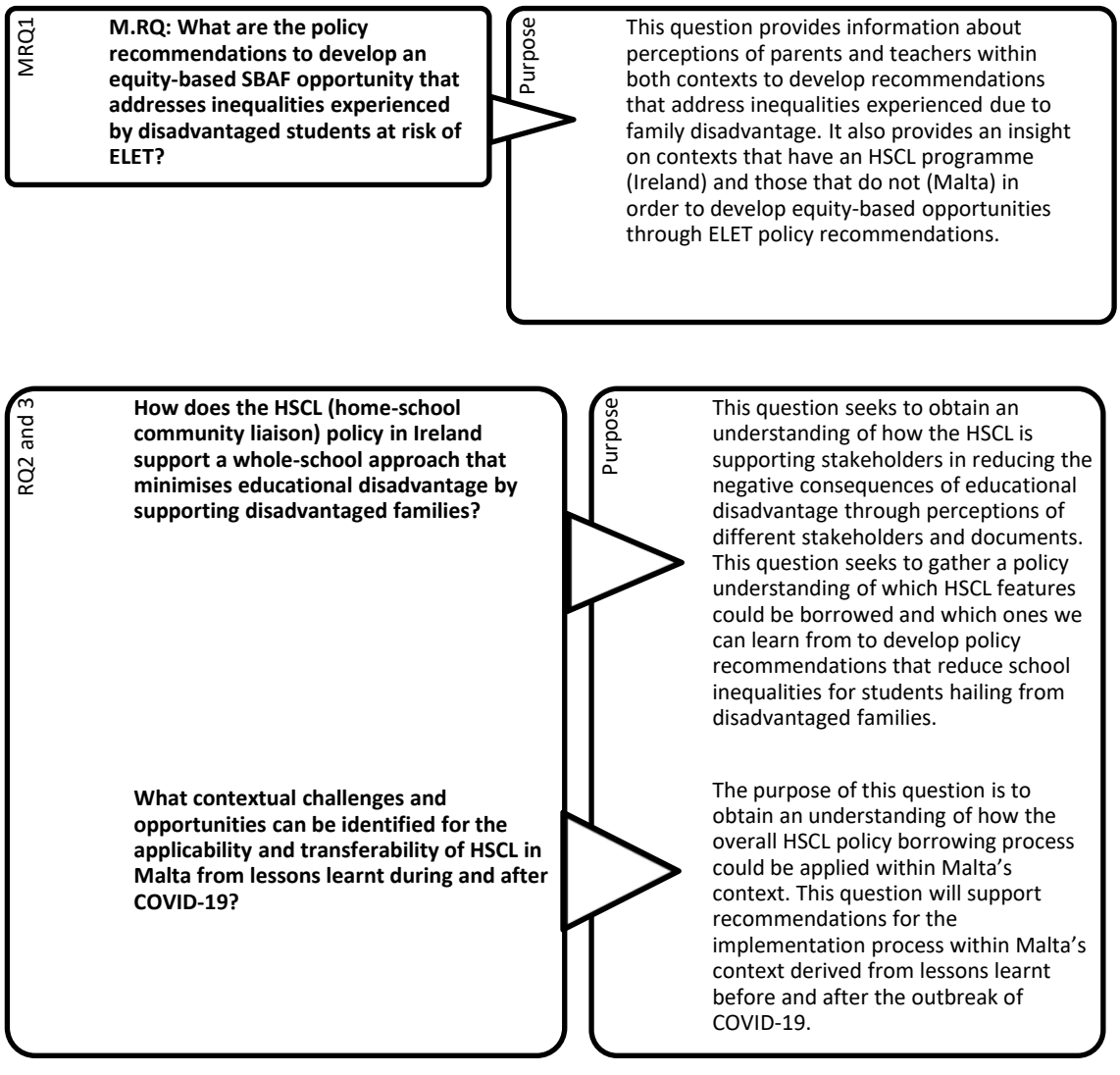


Figure 4.1 Research Questions and Purpose

In order to answer these questions, a qualitative research design was developed. Semi-structured interviews, observations, and document analysis were thought to be the most appropriate means of collecting data underpinned by a social constructionist paradigm. The study's main participants were parents hailing from a disadvantaged background and educators working with disadvantaged students, but policymakers in the field of ELET were also interviewed to enhance the validity of the data. Below is my ontological and epistemological position, followed by the research design and methodology used to answer these research questions, including also methods and analysis. The chapter finally discusses this study's limitations and ethical considerations.

4.2 **Ontological and Epistemological Assumptions**

Underpinned by a social constructionist epistemology, the interviews, observations, and document analysis provided the necessary information to develop solutions to the central research questions. Creswell and Creswell (2018) state that social constructionists seek to develop subjective interpretations according to their experiences and observations in order to understand their surroundings and work. Early leaving from education and training is a phenomenon brought about by a number of factors, including family disadvantage. Social constructionists view phenomena as being created, rather than being discovered (Creswell and Poth, 2017). In view of this, the research design and data collection process aimed to gain a deeper understanding of how the HSCL was used to decrease inequities in education caused by family disadvantage.

Consequently, the relativist ontology used allowed for multiple meanings and realities that could be presented and borrowed within the Maltese context. In this study, multiple realities were those experienced in the adoption of the HSCL in Ireland, the non-use of the HSCL programme in the context of Malta, and family disadvantage following the start of the pandemic within both contexts, all giving rise to different interpretations of the multiple components. A social constructionist underpinning can best be applied to this study because there were multiple influences (cultural contexts, educational settings, and language

differences) and different actors (educators, parents, and policymakers) involved in the data collection process (Creswell and Creswell, 2018).

This paradigm emphasises how specific contexts shape understanding as there is not a single universal reality, but an understanding that develops from people's perceptions within the contexts they live in. This implies that meanings, albeit related to the same concept and phenomenon being studied, could be constructed differently (Denzin and Lincoln, 2008; Dyson and Brown, 2005; Crotty, 2003).

Working within the social constructionist paradigm has given me the flexibility as a researcher to work within the three phases of analysis which were in different educational contexts without assuming that one derived meaning was more appropriate than another (Denzin and Lincoln, 2008). While acknowledging that these multiple realities influenced the research process and findings, I will try to understand, describe, and develop how and why the HSCL could be transferred, rather than predict how the transfer will happen, from the perceptions of the multiple stakeholders involved in this study.

When examining the multiple components of the HSCL in relation to family disadvantage and early leaving from education and training, this research finds that many different views, attitudes, and levels of interaction exist among teachers, coordinators, parents, school administrators, and policymakers within all three phases of analysis. It is hoped that this study brings about a more uniform role of targeting family disadvantage to increase educational equity by learning from the HSCL within the Irish context through the experiences of those experiencing disadvantage within both contexts.

4.3 **Research Design and Methodology Overview: A Qualitative Case Study Approach**

The purpose of this research was to understand the perceptions and practices within specific educational contexts, that is, how the HSCL in Ireland is used to support parents to minimise educational inequalities for disadvantaged children. This was done to develop policy recommendations that provide socially just

opportunities for children at risk of ELET, particularly those who hail from disadvantaged families. This section provides information about the development of a qualitative case study approach and the methodology used.

4.3.1 **A Qualitative Case Study Approach**

This study was consequently designed through a qualitative approach in order to analyse thoroughly a specific case. This has supported the development and use of methods that were crucial in exploring specific policy issues within practice through the experience of multiple stakeholders within different contexts. Bryman (2015) suggests that qualitative case study methods ensure a deep exploration of specific issues. Young and Diem (2014) and Lester et al. (2017) suggest that qualitative policy studies can support a deep analysis of dealing with issues of privilege and justice within different contexts. The specific issue of this case was the lack of equal opportunities for students with difficult family backgrounds due to several reasons like financial or social difficulties, which would be theoretically defined as forms of capital (Bourdieu, 1997), thereby impacting their capabilities and functionings (Nussbaum, 2011; Sen, 1985) which could be enhanced through a specific programme like the HSCL by working not only with students, but also with their families.

Similarly, a number of policy implementation studies that have also sought to explore social justice issues have also used qualitative methods (Coburn et al., 2016; Marsh, 2012; Glazer, 2009; Goertz, 2006; Malen et al., 2002). However, given the aim and purpose of this study, a qualitative case study was seen as an appropriate method as it supports the in-depth experiences of policy implementation of a specific case (Yazan, 2015; Bryman, 2015; Stake, 2005), which will be done through the experiences of multiple stakeholders within the Irish and Maltese contexts through the case of the HSCL. A case study also offers the opportunity to apply different theoretical perspectives, in this case, the SBAF, when analysing different experiences and perspectives on the HSCL policy and its stakeholders within different contexts (Merriam and Grenier, 2019; Creswell and Poth, 2017; Yin, 2014, 2018; Bryman, 2015; Denzin and Lincoln, 2011).

Early school leaving is defined as a complex phenomenon (Downes, 2014) that directly links to Yin's (2014) definition of a case study, that is, a flexible methodology that explores complex problems through an "empirical inquiry that investigates a phenomenon within its real-life context" (p. 5). Yin (2014) further explains that "[s]ubunits of analyses may be incorporated within the single-case study, thereby creating a more complex (or embedded) design. The subunits can often add significant opportunities for extensive analysis, enhancing the insights into the single-case" (p. 54).

Given the different contexts of this study, it was thought appropriate to develop a case study with three phases of analysis, as shown in Figure 4.2, all linked to the research questions. The third phase of analysis was developed after the start of this study due to the impact of the worldwide pandemic which occurred during data collection of this case study.

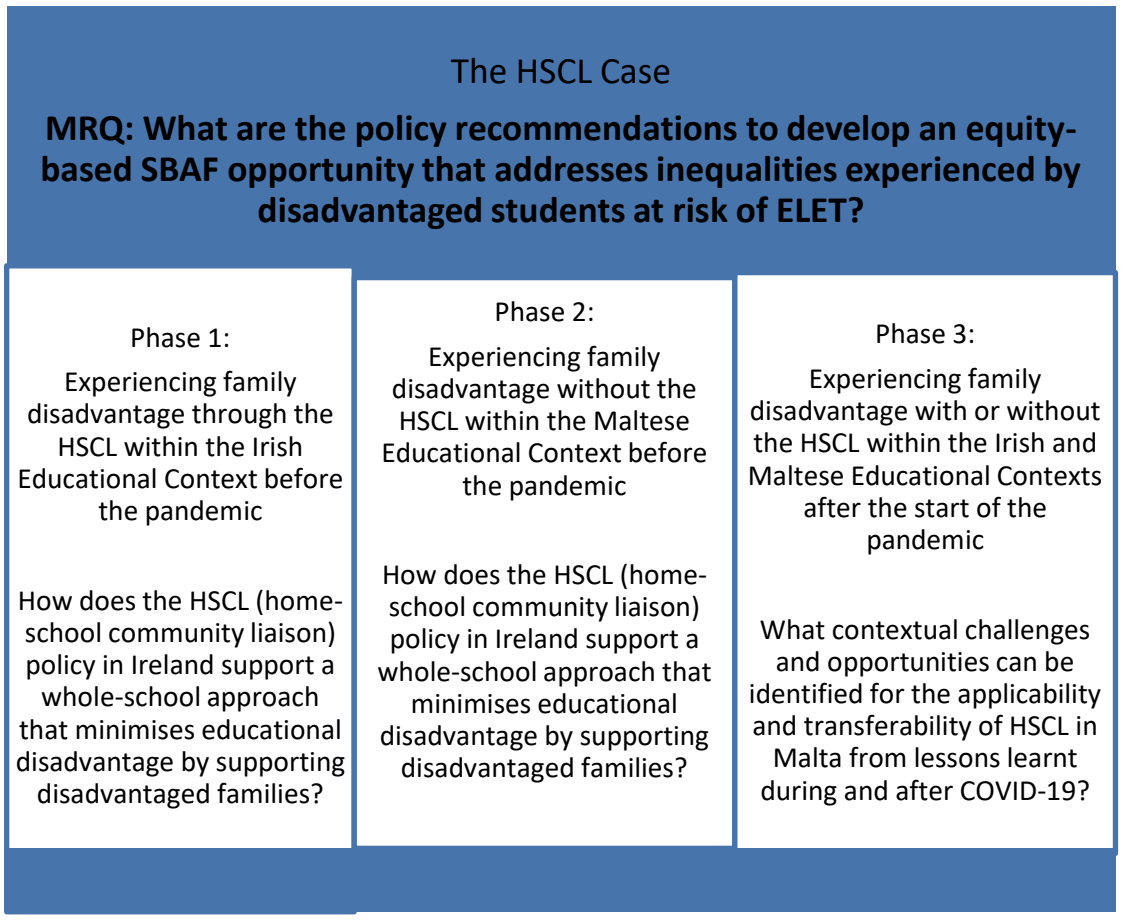


Figure 4.2 Research Design: A qualitative case study

The case will therefore be the HSCL (or lack thereof), and the phases of analysis are the different stakeholders experiencing it (or not) and the impact, if any, on students at risk of ELET hailing from disadvantaged families. Although studies using qualitative case studies and multiple phases of analysis within the field of ELET are limited, Karacabey and Boyacı (2019) have conducted research on school dropouts in Turkey using a single case, but with students from different phases of analysis.

4.3.2 Participants and Sampling

Given the specific focus of ELET and the main risk factor of family disadvantage, purposive sampling as opposed to random sampling was selected to target specific communities that might experience financial or social disadvantage. Purposive sampling is used when selected individuals and documents in the case are deliberately chosen by the researcher using the criterion that they carry valuable critical data in the case (Bryman, 2015; Denscombe, 2007). Due to the different contexts, purposive sampling was adopted in each unit of analysis.

During the first phase of analysis, occurring before the onset of the pandemic globally, participants were selected from the Irish context, while in the second phase of analysis, participants were selected from the Maltese context. A third phase of analysis was developed following the outbreak of the pandemic, and participants were selected from the first and second phases of analysis. The third phase of analysis allowed for a more in-depth and broader perception of the experiences and challenges faced by both cultural contexts before, during, and after the pandemic.

This case study presented a sharp educational contrast between the two contexts. While some schools in Ireland are rated as disadvantaged according to their geographical position and academic scores, and consequently, receive more support (e.g., more human resources and more funding), in Malta, there is no relevant scheme, and all schools are considered on an equal level, irrespective of these factors. It was consequently more transparent to identify participants for the first unit of analysis in relation to this study's aims and objectives.

In total, forty individuals participated in this study. In the first phase of analysis (the Irish context), two primary and two post-primary schools were identified from the ones listed as DEIS schools by the Irish Department of Education and Skills. All participants, that is, teachers, HSCL coordinators, and parents, were linked to these schools, and hence, they were identified as parents experiencing disadvantage or educators working in disadvantaged areas. With regards to the second unit of analysis, participants were selected according to criteria related to educational disadvantage and ELET risk factors. The main criteria used were low national benchmark scores, which highlighted geographical locations of schools, and a high number of migrants or minorities in the schools. Using these criteria helped to eliminate any cultural bias as similar criteria are used to identify DEIS schools in Ireland as parents experiencing disadvantage and educators working in disadvantaged areas were identified within the Maltese context.

Figure 4.3 outlines the selected participants in all phases of analysis, and gives a brief overview of the methods used, which will be discussed next.

The HSCL Case: Selected Participants

MRQ: What are the policy recommendations to develop an equity-based opportunity that addresses inequalities experienced by disadvantaged students at risk of ELET?

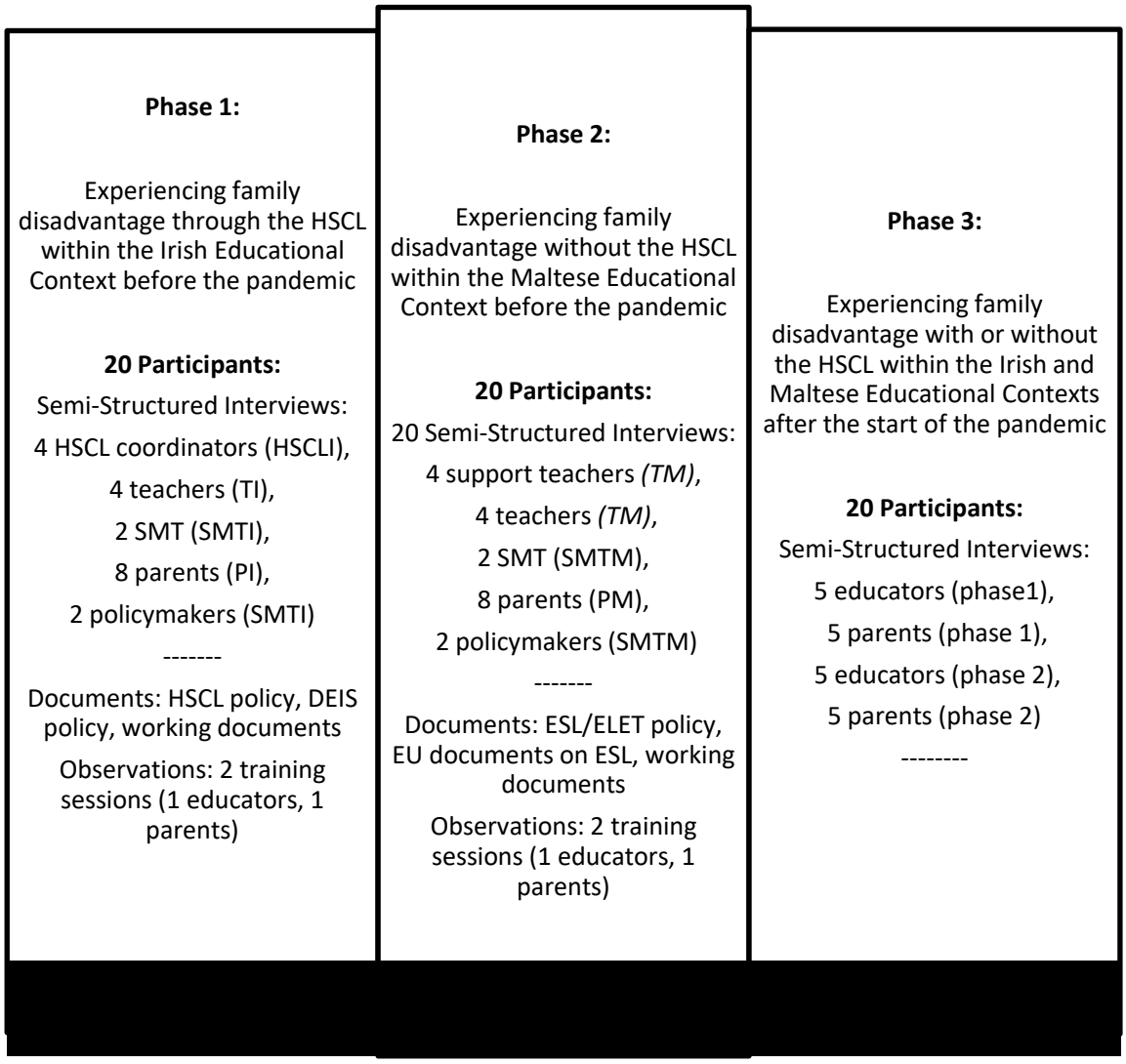


Figure 4.3 Selected Participants

4.4 **Data Collection Methods**

In total, sixty interviews were conducted in all phases. Four observations of training sessions for HSCL coordinators, teachers, and parents were carried out, two during the first unit of analysis and two during the second unit of analysis. Working documents provided by participants were analysed together with four

main policy documents identified related to ELET and the HSCL. Following are more specific details of the methods and profiles for this study.

4.4.1 **Semi-Structured Interviews**

The qualitative approach allows for structured or non-structured interviews (Bryman, 2015; Cohen et al., 2018; Denscombe, 2007). Given the aim of this study, semi-structured interviews were considered as the most appropriate tool as they allow for more personal data gathering due to their open-ended nature, as opposed to structured interviews, while allowing for a certain degree of consistency and control during the interviews (Denscombe, 2007). This supported the flexibility during the interview to change the order of questions with some participants as necessary, but also to analyse data due to the structure of the questions. The semi-structured interview questions were designed using the theoretical framework discussed in the previous chapter, and were linked to the research questions.

All interviews were conducted between January 2020 and January 2021. Initially, the interview questions were designed for face-to-face interviews, but in the middle of the data collection phase, the situation arising from the pandemic necessitated that most interviews had to be conducted online. The questions were thus revised to reflect the unpredicted COVID-19 pandemic. The initial semi-structured interviews had been carried out face-to-face, but school closures, strict restrictions, and partial or complete lockdowns in both countries during part of the second phase of analysis and all the third phase of analysis did not allow for personal contact that is typical in qualitative face-to-face interviews (Merriam and Grenier, 2019; Bryman, 2015).

Similar to Deakin and Wakefield (2014), the use of online interviews was not in any way done “to replicate the face-to-face interview, it was more to provide an opportunity to talk to otherwise inaccessible participants” (p. 606). The chosen software was Skype since it is a free downloadable software, and is a recognised tool within different contexts that allows for video-calling. It has also been employed and discussed by a number of researchers (Weinmann et al., 2012; Deakin and Wakefield, 2014) as an online interview tool. The reason I chose to

use a video-calling tool, rather than carry out interviews over the phone, was because it gave me the option to see the participants in real time and engage with them virtually (Furey, 2019; Deakin and Wakefield, 2014).

During the third phase of analysis, all participants were reluctant to meet face-to-face, even following the end of lockdown, due to COVID-19 threats; however, they felt at ease sharing information via Skype. Creswell and Poth (2017) suggest that respondent reluctance is a well-known fact in interview studies, but in this scenario, it was even more understandable. Therefore, I decided to carry out all interviews via Skype for the last phase in order to minimise reluctance (Sturges and Hanrahan, 2004).

4.4.1.1 **Interview Procedure**

Participant information sheets and consent forms (Appendix B) were all sent via email prior to each interview in all phases. Interviews were conducted on a one-to-one basis. Those conducted before the outbreak of COVID-19 were held at the chosen place and/or time according to each participant's preference. For the first phase of analysis, before the pandemic, all interviews took place in Ireland (January-March 2020). Contact was established with the Irish Department of Education and Skills, and all participants were selected according to their participation in disadvantaged schools as the HSCL programme is offered only in disadvantaged schools. Each interview was subsequently held in the schools. Parents in the first phase of analysis also chose to have their interviews at school.

In the second phase, following contact and approval from the research department of the Ministry for Education (April-August 2020), interviews were carried out both face-to-face and via Skype video calls, according to the participants' request and availability. All interviews had been agreed to prior to the school lockdown, and given the tension that ensued due to the pandemic, I gave time to all participants to reach out themselves before proceeding with the interviews. Following the school lockdown in both Malta and Ireland, I realised that more findings were emerging on pandemic changes within educational systems, hence the development of another unit of analysis.

All interviews in the third phase (September 2020-January 2021) were conducted via Skype. Participants from Ireland and Malta from the first and second phases were invited for a second interview. All interviews were audio-recorded and subsequently transcribed. Field notes were also taken during all interviews.

4.4.1.2 Reflexivity Process: Power Relations within Diverse Contexts

Semi-structured interviews and their validity can be impacted by diverse factors that also includes the social status of participants (Cohen et al., 2018; Denscombe, 2007). Although such influence cannot be avoided because of the nature of interviews as a qualitative tool (Merriam and Grenier, 2019; Bryman, 2015), I tried to use reflexivity as to how these factors might bias the data. Given my relativist ontological approach, I tried to be aware of my own assumptions, values, background and experiences which might be part of the 'interviewer effect' (Denscombe, 2007). The way participants perceive the interviewer and the interviewer's relationship with the context can therefore be said to impact the data (Denscombe, 2007). Hesse-Biber and Leavy (2006) recommend 'reflexivity' as a tool to address this issue, which I implemented throughout this research process.

'Reflexivity' as a tool (Hesse-Biber and Leavy, 2006, p.141), was particularly essential because of two main factors. The first being both an insider and outsider researcher given that part of the interviews took place within a diverse context than my own (Borrill, Lorenz, and Abbasnejad, 2012). The second because of an issue of power (Kvale, 2006; Karnieli-Miller et al., 2009) between me and a number of participants being that I am considered a white middle class privileged women having no children of my own, as opposed to interviewed parents who were considered as underprivileged persons with diverse backgrounds.

There are advantages and disadvantages in being an insider and outsider when being a researcher (Borrill, Lorenz, and Abbasnejad, 2012). As an outsider, within the Irish context, it was not easy to gain access to participants. Participants were consequently selected by the schools. This might have had an impact on data collected given that I had no way of knowing if other parents with diverse views might have been selected had the school not selected these participants. In order

to mitigate this, I increased the number of participants and did not ask for any specific criteria in selecting parents except for them having children being in disadvantaged schools. This allowed for multiple perceptions of participants experiencing diverse types of disadvantage and given the nature of semi-structured interviews I allocated sufficient time for open-ended questions in order for participants to feel free to share any other factors that I might not have taken into consideration. Another way of limiting this effect was by participants being from diverse schools which helped in developing a better understanding due to diverse experiences parents might have in different schools.

As an outsider, within the Irish context, I might have also been in a less position of strength as compared to that of the Maltese context because of cultural differences and relevance. However, given my field of work, I had many opportunities during these last ten years to visit the Irish educational context and also to work with Irish colleagues. This has helped me to be familiar with school processes in Ireland and any cultural bias I might have. On the other hand, within the Maltese context, as an insider, I was aware of the issue of being able or not to detach myself from work related assumptions and the parents' and educators' own assumptions. This is why reflexivity was essential in being able to offer a neutral and distinct narrative of findings by adopting a critical self-evaluation of my positionality during the whole research process. Similarly to the Irish context, participants were selected from diverse schools in order to obtain richer insights into the phenomenon being explored (Rubin and Rubin, 2012).

Within both contexts, I hailed from a diverse background other than that of the participants, due to me being a middle-aged educated woman with no kids. I addressed this issue, firstly, by accentuating my commonalities with the participants of my research. Casual dressing, a genuine respect and interest shown in their conversations as well as including my own genuine care of my nephew in conversations when asked if I had children myself, and by allowing all participants to select the most suitable date and venue for them, helped overcome some issues related to the power relations within the diverse contexts. The reflexive process of my way of expression in relation to my field experience and the pilot interviews helped in the way and type of questions I posed.

Fortunately, within both contexts I did not face any type of hostility but was encountered with parents that were willing to share their experience in relation to the HSCL, schools and their children. I believe that in part this was due to the reflexive process I engaged in, but could also be because of the participants being selected by the school and whom the schools knew might be willing to share their experiences as opposed to others who might not be.

4.4.2 **Observations**

Four semi-structured non-participant observations of training sessions for parents and teachers were carried out in the first two phases between February and November 2020. Participant and non-participant observations have been used in educational research particularly by educators within their work settings to study their students' needs, for peer observation, or for evaluative practices (Merriam and Grenier, 2019; Bryman, 2015). The main aim of this study's observation sessions was to observe the purpose of training programmes targeting parental engagement (both for parents and teachers) and to understand better the training component within the HSCL programme that highlights parental engagement through agency and capability development to target inequalities. Observation forms (including note taking) were used, and can be found in Appendix C.

In the first phase, a day training for newly appointed HSCL coordinators was observed as well as a day training for parents in disadvantaged schools to engage them in using the library. Both these sessions were non-participant observations. Observations offer a direct view of information, and can be used for triangulation with information collected from interviews (Bryman, 2015). Non-participant observations, as opposed to participant observations, involve observing participants without actively participating. Observations were however carried out prior to interviews in order to ask any emerging questions (Merriam and Grenier, 2019; Bryman, 2015).

I decided to observe training sessions for educators in order to gather data on the main aims of the HSCL programme and the main role of the HSCL coordinator. Given that the main aim of this study is to develop policy

recommendations, observing the training session for newly appointed HSCL coordinators yielded essential data on the specific role of this programme and its relation to policy, inclusion, and equity. In contrast to this, I selected a training session for teachers in Malta on developing collaboration with parents. Since there are no HSCL coordinators in Malta, this training is carried out on a voluntary basis and it is open to all educators.

One of the main components of the HSCL is to offer training sessions to parents. I therefore decided to select a training session on literacy since a number of training sessions for parents on literacy have been provided locally. The one carried out in the first phase was a training session for parents on the use of the library for their children and storytelling. Similarly, the one carried out in the second phase was in a local library, whose main purpose was to encourage storytelling.

Although observations were non-participatory, I managed to ask any emerging questions to participants during interviews in relation to training and field notes. I acknowledge that these observations did not capture everything, and the observer's effect might have an impact on the sessions (Denscombe, 2007), which is a major limitation of observations as a research method. Nonetheless, they have supported transparency during interviews, particularly since any emerging field notes that might have been misunderstood were discussed with multiple participants during interviews.

4.4.3 **Document Analysis**

Document analysis as an approach is recommended in qualitative studies. For example, Bryman (2015) suggests that analysing documents can bring multiple advantages to the qualitative research study. Documents can be a unique source of information about issues that cannot be readily addressed through other methods as they can be a tool for the validity of information deriving from other methods, while also contributing to a different level of analysis from other methods.

The selected documents were chosen according to two main criteria:

1. National documents and/or policies that target ELET or the HSCL, and

2. National documents and/or policies that aim to target school retention.

Four main sources were selected as I believed that a major focus on the topic was needed in order to use this data as triangulation preceding and following interviews. Table 4.1 lists the official documents used for this method. Apart from official documents, working documents were collected following interviews in both the first phase and second phase. These documents included mainly information about training sessions (both for teachers and parents), work preparation for educators within both contexts, and data collection on students at risk and their parents.

Phase 1	Phase 2
DEIS Policy Plan 2017-2019 (DEIS, 2017)	Early School Leaving Policy (MFED, 2015)
The HSCL strategy (DEIS, 2014) and working documents (plans for coordinators, educators, and parents) mainly found here: https://www.tusla.ie/tess/	Early Leaving from Education and Training Policy (Spiteri and Farrugia, 2021)

Table 4.1 Selected Documents

4.5 **Ethical Considerations**

Ethical considerations were deemed highly pivotal in this study, particularly since I was involving participants who directly or indirectly experienced disadvantaged situations both in education and other social areas. As a starting point, data collection tools together with an ethics application were submitted for ethical review at Lancaster University. Following approval, I needed to follow two

different ethical procedures since I was dealing with participants from two different countries.

For participants within the Irish context, I contacted the Irish Department for Education and Skills. Ethical clearance was given for teachers, parents, and policymakers. I consequently made contact with the department of the HSCL programme, and they identified disadvantaged schools where I could select participants. I made contact with participants prior to each visit by emailing them the information sheet and consent form, which I also discussed before each interview. All interviews were conducted at the venue selected by participants, including the date and time of meetings.

For participants within the Maltese context, I contacted the Research Department at the Ministry for Education that gave ethical approval to make contact with teachers, parents, and policymakers. Due to the pandemic, all contact was made through phone calls and emails. All information sheets and consent forms were sent through either emails or post, depending on the participants' preference.

The information sheet stated that data would be password stored and used only by me as the researcher for this particular study. The confidentiality of all participants was guaranteed, and the names of all participants were omitted and replaced with pseudonyms thereby ensuring that sensitive information was protected, while safeguarding the identities of educators and families. Voice recordings were undertaken only following each participant's consent, and deleted after each transcription. All ethical considerations were taken during data collection and analysis. The data analysis processes will be explained next.

4.6 **Qualitative Data Analysis**

Qualitative data analysis is an ongoing process of deriving meaning during data collection and after, rather than a set period of time following data collection (Guba and Lincoln, 1998). In order to facilitate this, thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006) was used for the interpretation of data thereby providing an in-depth picture of the full set of qualitative data. Through thematic coding, I recorded and identified key phrases extracted from the interviews, observations,

and documents which were linked to common themes emerging from the research questions and from the collected data. A thematic framework was established by listing different categories (Gibbs, 2007). These were not predetermined, but were rather data driven. Semi-structured interviews helped to generate sub-themes as participants spoke about topics which were not specifically asked, but were related to this research study.

In order to manage and store interview data, all transcriptions were uploaded into NVivo 11, a software programme that provides a feasible means of storing and ordering data. Bryman (2015) explains that the use of qualitative software analysis applications supports the identification of codes through a more feasible approach. Creswell and Creswell (2018) explain that the utilisation of software can support data management in generating codes, which is a subjective and interpretive approach undertaken in qualitative research.

The process of thematic analysis starts when the researcher notices and looks for patterns of meaning and interest linked to the research topic and questions. Braun and Clarke (2006, 2013, 2018) provide a detailed six-stage guide on how to carry out thematic analysis. Using Braun and Clarke's stages, I tried to limit subjectivity, which is a natural process in qualitative data analysis. Initial coding not only allowed me to develop themes but was also an integral part of my own reflexive process as a researcher in relation to data gathering and analysis (Thornberg and Charmaz, 2013). This has been very helpful given that during this research I was both viewed as an insider as well as an outsider, which as discussed before could have an impact on data collection and analysis. Despite being different stages, Braun and Clarke (2006, 2013, 2018) state that this is not a linear process, but rather an iterative one, where one should look back at the previous stages and review the data. Figure 4.4 below outlines all the six phases in relation to this study. Appendix D is the final thematic web that emerged from data analysis.

Phase 1 – *Familiarise yourself with your data* It was presumed that participants would experience challenges within their role, often as a result of the effects of students hailing from disadvantaged families. A lot of reading has been done prior to interviews in order to select documents but also to immerse myself in the content of the study as advised by Braun and Clarke, 2006. Working with transcripts emerging from semi-structured interviews, although at times was time consuming supported this phase as it was an opportunity to be re-familiarised with data collected from the interviews. Transcripts also served as a solid foundation for the early stages of analysis by providing a further opportunity of understanding the data and served as the stepping stone to start interpreting the data. All documents selected were read before and after interviews as some documents emerged from the interviews themselves. Observation notes were read and a summary of observations was done.

Phase 2 – *Generating Initial Codes* Three initial maps of ideas were generated from each sub unit of ideas emerging from the data. Common and divergent responses from interviews were noted. Ideas emerging from different stakeholders were noted separately. So from each sub unit, there was a map of ideas pertaining to educators, another one pertaining to parents, and another one pertaining to policy makers and management. Initial links to the study's research questions were made.

Phase 3 - *Searching for themes* Within this phase, I looked at each map containing codes, pertaining to the different stakeholders and looked for themes. I also re-read transcripts, observation notes and documents in order to confirm common responses and divergent ones. Following the identifying of themes, sub-themes starting emerging which were mainly linked to opportunities and challenges related to HSCL and to the lack of one in the case of Malta.

Phase 4 - *Reviewing themes* .Once the themes and sub-themes were identified, I started the write-up of the findings section by developing write-ups for each theme. At this stage I started also to eliminate any data that was less significant for this study which were identified in phase 1 of this process. Braun and Clarke (2006: 90) also suggest that at this stage some initial codes may be discarded whilst others may be used to form new themes.

Phase 5- *Define and name themes.* Within this stage I started finalising a thematic map of the data generated which helped me to refine the themes also by looking back at all the data within phase 1, 2, 3 and 4. The thematic map was useful in identifying the essence of each theme and with the possibility of summarising the data it captured (Braun and Clarke, 2006).

Phase 6 - *Produce your report* In this phase I evaluated the individual write-ups and thematic map and started developing the findings chapter. Braun and Clarke, 2006, explain how the purpose of this is to tell the complex story of the data in such a way that the reader understands and is convinced of the validity of the data produced.

Figure 4.4 Braun and Clarke's (2006, p. 87) Phases of Thematic Analysis applied in this study

4.6.1 **Validity and Reliability of Data**

Data triangulation was carried out through interviews, observations, and document analysis within the different contexts thereby ensuring validity and reliability of data. This allowed for the use of multiple data sources in qualitative research in order to develop a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon being observed (Creswell and Creswell, 2018; Bryman, 2015). Findings were compared from the different sources and within the different phases. Such measures are consistent with Creswell and Creswell (2018) and Bryman (2015), who emphasise the importance of adopting at least two strategies to ensure that the narrative designed provides meaningful and useful data that is reliable and valid. Having multiple sources has also ensured a continuous reflexive process in order to be able to gather data in diverse ways and ensure validity and reliability (Hesse-Biber and Leavy, 2006).

4.6.2 **Limitations**

A main limitation in this study is that some of the HSCL's components changed suddenly because of the pandemic. For example, at the beginning of data collection, one of the main roles of the HSCL coordinator was to carry out regular home visits in order to keep active communication with families. This changed in the middle of this study, thus having a major impact on analysis and findings. In order to mitigate this limitation, a third phase was developed. Due to travel restrictions and the cancellation of school visits, I carried out interviews through online video calls, mainly Skype, thereby minimising any limitations brought about by the pandemic. While maintaining ethical considerations, I also sought to provide a detailed description of findings in order to support the reader's own analysis in evaluating the data gathered and conclusions presented (Cohen et al., 2018).

Chapter 5: **Exploring the Capability to Be Educated in relation to ELET: Conversion Factors and Implications**

5.1 **Introduction**

This chapter first attempts to innovatively analyse ELET under the SBAF (Sen-Bourdieu Analytical Framework) lens within what I defined as the capability to be educated in relation to ELET. In order to do so, it first explores the capability of being educated in relation to ELET, and the emerging limiting factors, functionings, capabilities, and conversion factors of this capability. Using Sen's CA and Bourdieu's notions, the chapter discusses the unjust implications for students hailing from disadvantaged families within both the Maltese and Irish contexts. It is therefore argued that children's agency within the capability of being educated in relation to ELET can be impacted by limited parental agency and engagement due to lack of capital and capabilities, and diverse habitus and fields. Although the emerging implications were similar in both contexts, this study does not attempt to compare or contrast these two contexts, but rather to learn and provide recommendations for policy borrowing or otherwise (Verger et al., 2018; Zajda, 2015; Phillips, 2015; Sabatier, 2005; Spillane et al., 2002) of the Irish HSCL policy, as a strategy to target ELET.

The issue of children being free to decide what they consider of most value is an open debate. Sen (2007) considers this as the "special problem…since they do not, frequently enough, take their own decisions… [thus, posing the questions] …can children really take these decisions? But is that the right question?" (p. 9). This chapter does not focus on ongoing discussions of children's rights to be free to decide or not (Hart and Brando, 2018), but instead takes the stance of a growing body of literature (Biggeri et al., 2011; Brando, 2020; Hart et al., 2014; Lessmann, Otto and Ziegler, 2011; Schiller and Einarsdottir, 2009) that portrays children as "capable social actors in certain fundamental aspects of their life" (Hart and Brando, 2018, p. 295). It is also within this stance of recognising children as capable social actors that this chapter contributes to literature by presenting the unjust case of disadvantaged children in relation to ELET, thus posing the following question: How can family disadvantage increase educational

inequalities by limiting parental agency, hence impacting the children's capability to be educated in relation to ELET?

Given that the HSCL case targets mainly parental support, I will do so through the voices of disadvantaged parents and educators working in disadvantaged areas within both the Irish and Maltese contexts. In the first part of the chapter, I will therefore present and discuss findings of what might limit children's agency (particularly those hailing from a disadvantaged background) in developing the capability to be educated in relation to ELET within the Maltese and Irish contexts.

5.2 **The Capability to Be Educated in relation to ELET**

Sen's CA in relation to social justice and equity invites us to reflect on criteria to evaluate disadvantage by posing the question, 'equality of what?' (Sen, 1980). The CA took an innovative approach to measuring wellbeing and equality as it was not limited to financial capital, but to what Sen (1999) defines as 'conversion factors' which, according to Sen (1999), are the diverse personal and social situations that limit or enable opportunities. Sen (1999) has developed the concepts of 'capabilities' – 'beings' (a person's freedom and real opportunities) and 'functionings' – 'doings' (a person's achievements) in order to evaluate situations of equality (or not) which do not use financial capital alone as a conversion factor. In relation to educational inequalities, Sen (1992) initially defined the capability to be educated as a 'basic capability', that is, it corresponds to "certain elementary and crucially important functionings" (Sen, 1992, p. 45). It has more recently been argued that the term 'basic capabilities', such as the capability to be educated, is more used in analyses of cases of extreme poverty (Robeyns, 2017). This study refers to the term 'education as a capability in relation to ELET' within policy measures evaluation and development within the context of ELET strategic actions.

Education theorists (Walker and Unterhalter, 2007) have developed the concept of the 'capability to be educated' and its implications for educational inequalities. Terzi (2007) states that education is essential within a just society because:

> First, that absence or lack of opportunities to be educated would essentially harm or substantially disadvantage the individual. Education thus conceived responds to a person's basic need to be educated. Second, since the capability to be educated plays a substantial role in the expansion of other capabilities as well as future ones, it can be considered fundamental and foundational to different capabilities, and hence inherent to the very possibility of leading a good life. (p. 30)

The capability to be educated therefore implies that education is an essential capability that impacts other freedoms or opportunities, placing an individual in present or future disadvantage (Walker and Unterhalter, 2007). Walker and Unterhalter (2007) emphasise the importance of distinguishing between the difference of each individual's functioning and the capability of achieving it. In relation to ELET, this implies that the capability of being educated implies not only having access to free education in order to successfully complete compulsory education, but also having the freedom and opportunity to do so (Robeyns, 2017; Walker, 2019).

In this regard, I argue that policy evaluations should not simply focus on how many students attend school or not, or how many students complete compulsory education with a successful certificate, but rather on the capabilities, functionings, and conversion factors that lead to it. This, I argue, calls for an analysis of the real opportunities being offered to disadvantaged children in relation to their agency and ELET which would lead to more socially just and equitable opportunities. Take Ami's extract below, a primary class teacher in Malta:

> Reading is very important. Children with literacy difficulties need support not only in school, but also at home.
>
> **R:** What do you mean?
>
> We have reading programmes in class for children with difficulties, but time is not sufficient at school. When parents do not follow the programme with us, it doesn't have the same outcome. Whilst a student might still do well without support at home, it is easy to spot the ones that do have support at home as they do better and feel more empowered.
>
> **R:** What if a student does not want to read?

> Do you mean a student that does not want to learn to read?
>
> **R:** Yes. For example, a student that is reluctant to learn to read even at home.
>
> Well, a student that does not want to read and is encouraged to read at home is still better off than a student who does not want to read and is not encouraged to do so at home. (Ami, TM[2])

The above extract implies that a student who has reading difficulties, for example (that is considered one of the essential outcomes in completing compulsory education), and a lack of support from school or home, might be at a disadvantage than those who receive it. A student who, on the other hand, does not have reading difficulties, but does not want to read, yet has the opportunity to do so at school and at home, has still an advantage over a student who does not want to read and has no support at school or at home. This was the general view of most teachers in this study on school achievement (or not), which can also be seen in Riona's extract below:

> Most students that lack support at home tend to have difficulties at school.
>
> **R:** So, you think school support is not sufficient?
>
> Definitely not. School support is important, but parents should be helping too, especially when students are having some difficulty in school. (Riona, TI)

I thus argue that, analysing ELET from an outcome-based approach, such as compulsory schooling certification, is limited as it does not include the student's choice and agency, nor any of the conversion factors acting on them. I also argue that this is similar to how ELET is defined and assessed, that is, a number of outcomes in summative assessments in order to achieve an upper secondary

[2] TM (Teacher Malta), TI (Teacher Ireland), PM (Parent Malta), PI (Parent Ireland), SMTM (Senior Management Team/Policy Makers Malta), SMTI (Senior Management Team/Policy Makers Ireland), HSCLI (HSCL coordinators in Ireland)

level certificate (Van Praag et al., 2018) which does not take into account real freedoms and opportunities (Sen, 2009).

For Sen (2009), freedom means that both the “process aspect” and “opportunity aspect” (pp. 228-230) are essential factors for social agents. This implies that, in order for education to offer real opportunities of equality, the process or conditions of how a student takes the decisions and chooses are essential. In the case of the capability to be educated in relation to ELET, it means that the students’ process aspect does not involve only themselves at school, but also themselves at home. Any real opportunity offered at school might be impacted by their parents’ values and real opportunities they have at home. A student can then be limited in being a social agent because the process is impacted by their parents’ freedom. Consider this observation by a class teacher:

> 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. (Alannah, TI)

Mark, a thirteen-year-old student who is capable of taking a decision to follow a career in accounts and has a capability set of skills that could lead him to academic success in this school path (achieve the functioning), is being limited by his home background. His father works in the fields and does not value the educational system as he was successful in his life by working in the fields without any schooling. Mark’s decision to pursue a career in accounting might be impacted by the father’s request to help him in the fields, rather than furthering his studies, which could impact his functionings and, in turn, his agency and freedom.

Although Mark can be a capable social actor, he decides to help his father in the fields and starts to skip school, which leads to chronic absenteeism, one of the biggest markers of ELET (Badameci et al., 2020; Borg et al., 2015; Downes, 2013; Van Praag et al., 2018). Similarly, documents analysed (DEIS, 2014, 2017;

MFED, 2015; Spiteri and Farrugia, 2021) and interviewed policy makers, point out that there are a number of indicators, which are also referred to in this study as limiting factors, that impact the chance of a student succeeding at school or not, including absenteeism. Findings from class teachers interviewed in this study also indicate that a number of ELET indicators can be developed or impacted according to family agency, hence parents' decisions, and the diverse fields of school and home experienced by students. Figure 5.1 highlights the main ELET risk indicators that emerged from this study linked to family background. This table demonstrates that a number of ELET indicators highlighted in two main policies that tackle ELET in Malta and Ireland suggest that these functionings (absenteeism, educational wellbeing, and academic achievement) need to be addressed holistically. However, these indicators were strikingly perceived by teachers in this study as solely emerging from a lack of parental engagement, as shown in the below extracts in Figure 5.1.

It can therefore be argued that, in the case of the capability to be educated in relation to ELET, absenteeism, academic achievement, and educational wellbeing have emerged within the Irish and Maltese contexts, as the three main limiting factors that are impacted not only by children's agency, but also by parental agency. This implies that parental engagement and educator engagement are essential factors that impact the children's agency in being educated in relation to ELET. The following sections give more detailed accounts of how parental and educator engagement act as conversion factors and impact the children's capability to be educated in relation to ELET before and after the onset of COVID-19. Findings strongly suggest that both conversion factors impact the children's agency within this capability.

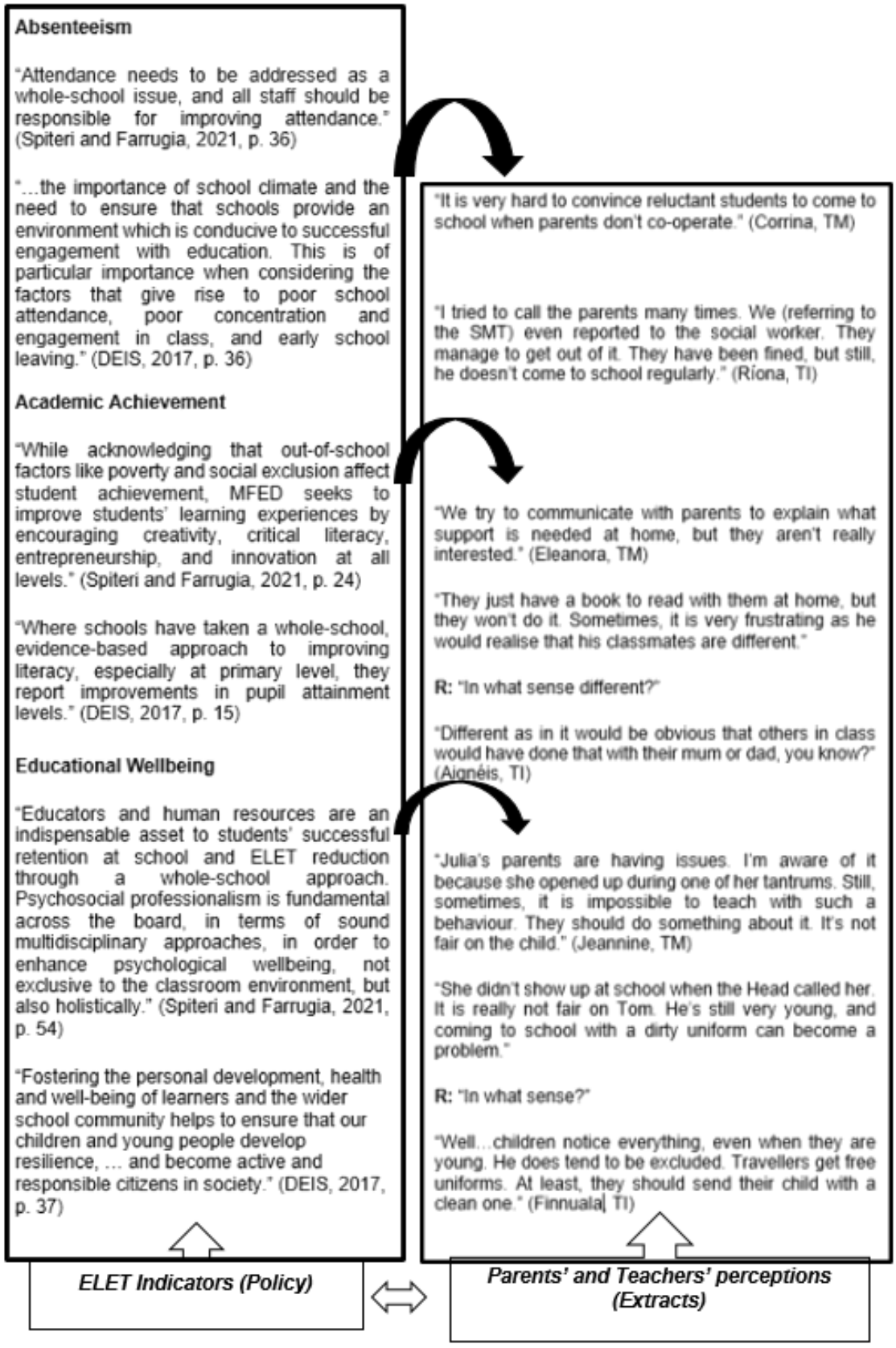


Figure 5.1 Family Disadvantage and ELET Indicators: Policy vs Perceptions

5.2.1 **Absenteeism and Conversion Factors**

In the case of absenteeism (excused or unexcused absences from compulsory schooling), it is considered worldwide as a serious issue with regards to ELET that needs to be addressed by educational systems (Cabus and Witte, 2015; Ockert, 2021; Sahin et al., 2016; Turkatti et al., 2020). Take Kate's case below:

> Carl didn't miss school. Ian did. He wanted to go to school. He thought online school was boring. Carl was fine.
>
> **R:** Were they both happy to go back to school when it opened?
>
> I didn't send them. I was scared of COVID. I kept them home with me. It was okay not to send them.
>
> **R:** Were you worried about them not going to school?
>
> I did think about it, but I thought it was best to stay home. They were safe at home.
>
> **R:** Did you discuss this decision with them?
>
> In what sense?
>
> **R:** Did you decide with them to not go back to school when it opened?
>
> Not really, no. They just thought school was online work, and that's it. I wanted to wait till it was safe. (Kate, PM)

Looking at Kate's extract above, it emerges that Ian and Carl, both in primary education, were absent from school the whole year. COVID-19 has increased the absenteeism rate worldwide, including that in Malta and Ireland (Busuttil and Farrugia, 2020; Ross et al., 2021; Vassallo et al., 2021). When students are absent from school frequently, or for a long period of time, it can limit their opportunity to successfully complete compulsory education (Eivers, 2019; MFED, 2020). Although Carl and Ian have different preferences about schooling, their parents' engagement, or in this case, non-engagement with schooling has increased their ELET risk. While arguing that absenteeism is not solely limited to parental engagement, parents' influence in attending school for Carl and Ian emerges as a primary factor, not respecting their choice or freedom.

Absenteeism and the parent's essential role were also evident before COVID-19. An example of this is Sinead's extract below:

> **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?
>
> 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. (Sinead, PI)

COVID-19 has therefore impacted negatively absenteeism rates worldwide. Attending school has been seen as a priority throughout EU policies for the prevention of ELET (Van Praag et al., 2018) which, however, within a CA framework regarding access to school, simply attending is insufficient for social justice. This is also reflected in documentation that discusses how students who are present at school and complete it do not necessarily achieve certification. While attending school is insufficient to have the capability and functioning to be educated, not attending limits chances and opportunities. UNESCO's fact sheet (2017) states that:

> More than 617 million children and adolescents are not achieving minimum proficiency levels (MPLs) in reading and mathematics, according to new estimates from the UNESCO Institute for Statistics (UIS). This is the equivalent of three times the population of Brazil being unable to read or undertake basic mathematics with proficiency. The new data signal a tremendous waste of human potential that could threaten progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Many of the global goals depend on the achievement of SDG 4, which demands an inclusive and equitable quality education and the promotion of 'lifelong learning opportunities for all'. In particular, Target 4.1 demands that all children complete primary and secondary education of sufficient quality to ensure that they have 'relevant and effective learning outcomes'. (p. 1)

Educators such as class teachers and school management teams have a primary role in encouraging students to attend school and parents to send them. Strikingly though, most educators in this study felt that absenteeism was mainly an issue

that pertained to parents' responsibility, also discussed in Figure 5.1. Below are some extracts from interviews with class teachers within both contexts who all share the same perception:

> **R:** Why do you think some children are often absent from school?
>
> There are various reasons, but mostly, we lack the back-up from home. (Finnuala, TI)
>
> During COVID, when school was online, we had a lot of students that were absent. Some parents are just not interested. (Alannah, TI)
>
> They have all the support, but some parents just choose not to send them. (Aignéis, TI)
>
> Sometimes, parents are having difficulties at home, and instead of asking for help, just avoid school. (Juliana, TM)
>
> I think, sometimes, it is just an excuse. It is not fair on the kids. (Jeannine, TM)
>
> Some parents think it's fine to skip school. They don't see the importance of sending them regularly. (Eleanora, TM)

This contradicts policy incentives that prioritise tackling absenteeism at school level (Figure 5.1). Policies on ELET and disadvantaged students, however, all promote strategic actions that address absenteeism in schools, and indicate that educators and school stakeholders should prioritise this. Similarly, findings from interviews with SMT demonstrate that educators in senior positions were more aware of this, and shared concrete measures of trying to adopt a way of decreasing absenteeism in their school. Below are some interview excerpts where SMTs gave a different perspective in their replies to the same question asked to class teachers:

> **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. (SMTI)

> It could be for different reasons. We try to call home first. If we get no answer or it repeats itself, we alert the Principal first and then social welfare. (SMTM)

It is therefore evident that, in the case of absenteeism, that is, achieving the functioning of attending school, it does not solely depend on the children's own agency. Findings within both contexts indicate that parental engagement (support at home) and educator engagement (support at school) are main conversion factors that might not always be taken into consideration. From a CA perspective, a student can be capable of attending school, but is limited by the parents' role in supporting school attendance. Similarly, the educators' reaction to students attending or not can increase or decrease the risk of ELET. While acknowledging that attending school also depends on the students' own agency which, in this case, implies if they wish to attend school or not, the conversion factors of parental engagement and educator engagement have a strong impact on the students' capability of education in relation to ELET.

5.2.2 **Academic Achievement and Conversion Factors**

Academic achievement, another ELET risk indicator (Eivers, 2019; Spiteri, 2020; MFED, 2020), is directly linked to the students' capability of successfully completing compulsory schooling. Within an ELET perspective, academic achievement can be seen as a functioning, that is, successfully completing compulsory schooling. It can be argued that much research on ELET policy implications focuses on academic achievement, mainly on how many students are obtaining the necessary qualifications to proceed to post-compulsory education and how post-compulsory education could be more accessible to them (Van Praag et al., 2018). I argue that this view, focusing solely on the academic achievement of a total number of students, is quite limited. This is usually because the real opportunity, the capability set and the conversion factors, are often excluded in evaluations. Consider the following:

> She used to like school, but she never passed her exams. It was heart-breaking as I hated seeing her like that. I knew she wasn't good for school. So, I didn't fuss much about it, but she kept on trying.
>
> **R:** Did she get support at school?

I think she did. I'm not good at school myself, so I didn't know how to help her. But she wasn't sad to go to school or anything. It's just that, when she was in secondary, it was different. They compare results and she was always shy. That's why she didn't want to go anymore. I didn't want to see her cry over her marks anymore. She tried her best, but her best wasn't enough.

R: Did you seek outside school support?

Like what?

R: Private lessons?

No, I didn't send her to extra lessons. It was already enough seeing her struggle in school. She wasn't good for school, so I just want her to finish school, that's it, so she can work. (Eve, PM)

Eve describes a situation where her daughter is evidently at a great risk of not achieving the functioning of successfully completing compulsory education. Eve's daughter is still 14 years old, and has been having learning difficulties since she was in primary schooling. The issue with learning difficulties can be tackled both with school and home support. Research demonstrates that learning difficulties that are not addressed at school and at home in the early years and primary education can continue to increase in secondary education (Eivers, 2019), hence why I also argue that this impacts the functioning of attending school. Repeated academic failure for students or fear of failure can lead to students and their parents considering schooling not good for them, which might also lead to absenteeism, another risk factor discussed above.

Findings indicate that learning difficulties within the two contexts of Malta and Ireland tend to be offered in two different ways within both contexts. School support for poor achievement focuses on out-of-class support through complementary sessions or in-class support through literacy prevention programmes, mostly during the early years and primary education (MFED, 2015; DEIS, 2017).

Eve's disclosure above, however, points out that support within schooling might not be sufficient as parents might not have the capability of supporting their children to achieve. This contradicts what is expected of them. Teachers often

view parents as key stakeholders in supporting their children to achieve good results. However, parents are not always offered support to help their children when encountering learning difficulties. Moreover, parents themselves might actually lack the capability set to do so. COVID-19 has also accentuated the fact that struggling children might encounter further learning difficulties when learning online as teachers might not be able to offer the usual support.

> **R:** What about those children who you knew had learning difficulties? How was it during online teaching? How was it?
>
> Mostly, those that had issues didn't show up, and the ones who did were not completely following what was going on. (Juliana, TM)
>
> It was extremely difficult teaching online because a lot of students struggled. I couldn't help them as I do in class. (Aignéis, TI)
>
> Teaching online was hard. Reaching out to all students was not possible. It's already impossible in class sometimes. (Jeannine, TM)
>
> I think some just switched off the camera. Others tried to understand, but online learning for those who already struggled wasn't helpful. (Ríona, TI)

Online learning indicates that students who might have received other support at school failed to do so during COVID-19, which could imply a larger achievement gap. Before and after school closure, struggling students tend to be given support at school that, however, is not always sufficient. Parents at home might simply feel lost about how to help their children (Buzai et al., 2020; Eivers et al., 2020). Similarly, teachers felt lost during COVID-19 about how they could further support these students (Busuttil and Farrugia, 2020). ELET analysis tends to focus on those who do not achieve successful results at the end of secondary schooling. The ELET definition does not help to move away from this outcome analysis as it encompasses those between the ages of 18-24 years who do not obtain a Level 3 qualification (Spiteri and Farrugia, 2021). I however argue that evaluating ELET from a final student exam outcome perspective at the end of secondary education is insufficient. This is reflected in the extract below from Máirín, who works directly with disadvantaged students:

> Some students want to learn, but have other priorities. For example, some want to work to bring money home or simply because that is what they value. Others think they are not good for school because they struggle and tend to give up.
>
> **R:** What do you think? Why do you think some give up?
>
> I think, for some, it is simply their choice. Others, it is because of their experiences; but I do think that it all depends on the support they get both at home and at school. (Máirín, TI)

As Máirín explained, completing successfully compulsory schooling is not simply a matter of exam outcome. Rather, the functioning of academic achievement should be directly linked to the capability of attending school in relation to the factors that support it or not (e.g., school support in relation to ELET indicators) and the conversion factors of parental and educator engagement (capital and capabilities) that impact their agency in supporting them to identify and overcome their learning difficulties. Therefore, although the child's own agency in academic achievement reflects a great part in achieving this functioning or not (Walker and Unterhalter, 2007), I argue that it is insufficient. This is reflected in the excerpt below from one of the SMT's interviewed:

> This year, we've had a problem with replacing teachers in classrooms. Due to COVID measures, we needed more teachers as some classes had to be split. We had a class with no teachers. We are aware that some students will struggle. There are those who will be supported by their parents, but others who won't. Some already didn't do any schooling during lockdown. This is not fair. We're very stressed as support is very limited. (SMTM)

Failing to offer the appropriate support could further increase disadvantage (Hannon, 2020), hence putting students at a greater risk of ELET. Offering free online classes instead of face-to-face classes might have accentuated the academic achievement gap between those who have learning difficulties and those who do not (Spiteri, 2020). Parents' capital and the capability to engage with their child's learning has created a further gap between those who owned it and those who did not. What the extract above and findings suggest is also that children who, for example, end up without a teacher are at a disadvantage academically, as opposed to those who do have a teacher, even if they wish to successfully complete schooling (agency). That is why those who also do not

have any home support would end up experiencing another disadvantage, irrespective of whether their goal is to achieve or not. Therefore, ELET should not only be limited to exam evaluation, but should include all the conversion factors along the schooling process in order to develop the necessary strategic actions.

5.2.3 **Educational Wellbeing and Conversion Factors**

Educational wellbeing (or lack thereof) in ELET research generally indicates behavioural issues which might directly impact absenteeism and achievement. This implies that wellbeing within a CA perspective should not only be viewed as an ELET indicator, but as wellbeing freedom and wellbeing achievement since it impacts both capabilities and freedom. The distinction between wellbeing freedom and wellbeing achievement within a CA perspective is "virtually absent from the wellbeing literature" (Robeyns, 2017, p. 119). Wellbeing in education includes unacceptable behaviour in schools, and can range from students manifesting violence and bullying to behavioural issues or issues of mental wellbeing. Some students may also manifest behavioural issues by isolating themselves and disengaging from the rest of their classmates (Borg et al., 2015; Cefai et al., 2018; Downes and Cefai, 2016).

Although wellbeing can have a direct impact on the capability to be educated in relation to ELET and the other functionings (absenteeism and academic achievement), it is still viewed as lacking in support, and teachers feel that they are not trained to offer such support, as portrayed in the extracts below:

> It is very hard to deal with bad behaviour in class. We are not trained to cope with violent behaviour. (Finnuala TI)
>
> I'm not sure why we are expected to cope with violence. It is not easy to be expected to teach subjects when you have to prevent students from fighting. (Alannah TI)
>
> Bullying has now gone online. Sometimes, we have students fighting in class for online bullying that would have occurred the previous night. What are we supposed to do on this? (Corrina, TM)
>
> A lot of say about wellbeing, but we receive no support. You have a number of students in class who struggle academically, and on top of

> it, are not emotionally well. Just by taking them out for one lesson during the day is not enough. So much time is wasted on dealing with their tantrums. (Eleanora, TM)

Support for student wellbeing can be offered on different tiered levels, including school support in the classroom, individual intervention, and referrals to support outside the school, such as, psychosocial support (Barry et al., 2017). Downes (2020), in his discussion of 'concentric and diametric spaces' in relation to agency, states that ELET and behavioural issues such as resilience or bullying are usually tackled as a separate issue, rather than looking at the whole environment, including the students' family support (or lack thereof), school support (or lack thereof), and the environment. The below extracts evidence this:

> We are going through a very rough patch at home. We're separating, and for him, it's very tough. His father just left. His behaviour changed ever since, but so did mine. I told them at school, but he's expected to behave normally. How can he? We're both very sad. I know he shouldn't be violent. I'm worried too. We all show sadness in different ways. (Eemer, PI)

> I know they blame me for his behaviour, but it's not easy to deal with it. I'm not sure what to do anymore. They always tell me he's not behaving well. I'm not at school. At home, I have my ways, but I'm not at school.
>
> **R:** What are your ways? Like, did you seek professional help?
>
> No, but we are on a waiting list. I ignore him when he screams or shouts. It can get bad, but then he calms down. I know he's not happy about being like that. (Jade, PM)

Eemer's and Jade's children are experiencing a lack of wellbeing at home which is impacting their wellbeing at school. I therefore relate this to the conversion factors within the CA, and argue that, if support is not given to empower conversion factors, it would impact both their freedom and achievement. The above excerpts of teachers and parents indicate that support needs to be given not only to the students experiencing a lack of wellbeing, but also to parents and teachers who have to deal with it in order to develop skills that target students' wellbeing and develop their agency.

Furthermore, the greater COVID-19 situation has not helped. A public health emergency of international concern was declared by the World Health Organisation in January 2020 (Clemens et al., 2020). Social distancing was one of the key measures adopted by countries worldwide as a mitigation measure to limit the spread of the virus. Working practices, daily routines such as shopping, and education provision were impacted during periods of general lockdown or individual lockdown. Interaction with other people was very limited thereby affecting each individual's wellbeing because of a lack of support that had been offered before the outbreak of COVID-19. Findings indicate that COVID-19 measures have highlighted a direct relationship between family wellbeing and student wellbeing.

I therefore argue that, using the CA framework to develop the capability to be educated in relation to ELET and therefore placing ELET risk factors as functionings, while identifying limiting factors that negatively impact conversion factors, mainly parental and educator engagement, can lead to an innovative and more socially just way to develop policy recommendations that minimise ELET risk, as will be discussed next.

5.3 **The Implications of the Capability of Being Educated in relation to ELET: Conversion Factors**

Commim et al. (2011) argue that children's functionings and "their capability set, may be limited by their social and physical environment" (pp. 8-9). Through empirical research, Hart and Brando (2018) similarly discuss that children's agency should be a defined role within education. While agreeing with Hart and Brando's (2018) arguments of the importance of children's agency, I argue that the capability of being educated in relation to ELET for children cannot be viewed without a main conversion factor that emerged in this study, that is, parental engagement, particularly for those hailing from a disadvantaged background, as discussed in the previous section. Parents, however, are not the only salient adults in children's lives.

Hart and Brando (2018) also mention school as a place that could develop (or not) children's agency. I argue that teachers, in this case, and their engagement

with disadvantaged children and families can impact their agency to develop capabilities and functionings. Figure 5.2, adapted from Hart (2019) and Sen (2009), depicts these two main conversion factors emerging from this study about the capability of being educated in relation to ELET.

Figure 5.2 illustrates that, in order for students to develop the capability of being educated in relation to ELET, parental and educator engagement are main conversation factors. It is within this stance that an unjust issue was identified. Parental agency in disadvantaged families might be limited because of a lack of parental capabilities and functionings brought about by mainly diverse capital, thus impacting agency. This type of limited parental agency might be perceived as an issue by educators, and could affect not only parental engagement, but also the educators' own engagement with disadvantaged children. While policy might be pushing forward a 'whole-school approach' (MFED, 2015; DEIS, 2017), educators themselves might still perceive ELET indicators, namely, absenteeism, academic achievement, and wellbeing, as a lack of parental interest. This is why the discussion will continue by identifying limiting factors in disadvantaged families and the capability to be educated in relation to ELET. Inequalities were identified in this study using Bourdieu's (1986) notions of habitus, capital, and field that might in turn impact conversion factors because of parents' limited agency, capabilities, and functionings.

	Freedom	Achievement
Wellbeing	*Wellbeing Freedom* The capability to being educated in relation to *ELET – Policy – Opportunity strategic actions for students*	*Wellbeing Achievement* The functionings to successfully complete compulsory schooling: *Absenteeism, Academic Achievement, Education Wellbeing*
Agency	*Agency Freedom* The opportunity to follow goals within schooling and beyond that they value – *Policy Opportunity Strategic Actions for Students, Families and Educators*	*Agency Achievement* The opportunity to achieve goals within schooling and beyond that they value – *Policy Opportunity Strategic Actions for Students, Families and Educators*
	Students' capital and habitus impacted by Conversion Factors	
Conversion factors	*Parental engagement* Capital, Habitus, field + capability set	
	Educators' engagement Capital, Habitus and field + capability set	

Figure 5.2 The Implications of Being Educated in relation to ELET: Conversion Factors

5.4 **Inequalities that Impact the Conversion Factors, Limit Students' Agency, and Increase ELET Risk**

According to both Bourdieu and Sen, the process of choice and freedom is impacted by internal and external factors (Hart, 2019). This section focuses on family disadvantage as an inequality (internal and external factors) that impacts conversion factors. This inequality increases ELET risk through Bourdieu's (1990) "practical sense" (p. 89), and influences negatively the capability to be educated in relation to ELET. Parents' 'habitus' (Bourdieu, 1990), or in this case, their choice (or not), but in both cases impacted by family disadvantage of supporting their children in being social agents, has an impact on both the 'fields' of school and home (Bathmaker et al., 2013; Ingram, 2011; Ingram and Tarabini, 2018; Reay, 2018; Tarabini et al., 2019). Parents' habitus, which is shaped by their own experiences, impacts their decisions on their children's education (Bourdieu, 1998). Indeed, Kelly's and Anne's disclosures below demonstrate that both find it hard to actively engage in their child's schooling experience because of their own negative educational experience:

> I was bullied at school, but my parents forced me to go, even when I cried my heart out. That's why I don't force Carl to go. I'm not fussed about him going to university or anything. I just want him to be happy, and if he's not at school, I won't force him. (Kelly, PI)

> I hate seeing him upset. I know what it's like. I wasn't good for school, and I think he's like me. I don't want him to go and get more upset. I had a very hard time at school. I simply hated it. I just wanted to work, and that's what I did. (Anne, PM)

Since 'field' is "the specific structure of peculiar social worlds" (Bourdieu, 1998, p. 138), engaging in their child's education can be impacted by the different environments found both at school and at their home. Disadvantaged backgrounds and their structure would often differ greatly from school structures and systems, which would in turn limit parents' active engagement. John and Jade explain how their view on school as a place that is not suited for them limits their engagement:

> 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. (John, PI)

> I always hated school. There are too much rules. I think it's very rigid. Like, even today, if I need to ask something as I don't understand what I have to do for Alex (her son), I'm not sure how to ask. It's like it's too complicated.
>
> **R:** How is it complicated?
>
> Well, if I want to tell you something, I just say it. In school, you have to follow…what do you call them…a certain way? A system? …even to speak or say something…you can't just say it…it tends to be too confusing at times. (Jade, PM)

Active parental engagement as social agents is however not only limited by the differing structures of field and habitus, but is also limited by capital (financial, cultural, and social), which was found to be a main inequality in this study. In order for parents to be social agents and support their children to also be social agents, they require different types of capital (Tarabini et al., 2019). In the case of minimising the risk of ELET, parents need to have financial resources to seek academic support services if their children are not doing well at school. They need to have social capital to recognise any issues that arise during their children's compulsory journey and seek the relevant support. Parents also need cultural resources, that is, the necessary literacy skills, including digital ones, to be able to support their children throughout their compulsory schooling journey.

The sections below summarise findings on how a lack of any type of parents' capital in Malta and Ireland has not only impacted their own agency, but increased their children's ELET risk, thus also limiting their children's agency. I therefore argue that parents' lack of any type of capital limited their agency similarly in both countries and impacted the capability of being educated in relation to ELET, both before and after COVID-19. In turn, this also lowered the children's chance of being active social agents within this capability.

5.4.1 **Financial Capital as an Inequality that Limits Parental Agency and Impacts Students' ELET Risk**

The role of parental agency within educational social structures such as schools was identified and linked to parental engagement as one of the main themes in this study. Bourdieu (1989) maintains that the role of agency also depends on capital and the different fields which might manifest as a constant struggle of

recognition. A growing body of literature shows that parents who find it harder to engage in their children's education are those who hail from a disadvantaged background, which is also defined as 'working class' (Ingram, 2011; Ingram and Tarabini, 2018), and hence, have limited capital. Similarly, the way parents manifested (or not) this engagement in this study was found to be according to the capital they had, including financial capital. Parents who have limited financial capital, such as housing issues, low income, and rely on benefits, felt less autonomy, and thus, they engaged less in their children's education as they had other priorities, like food and housing:

> I'm not saying I'm not worried about their school progress, but honestly, my priority is to have food on the table. It's not easy. I do work, but between bills and school stuff, I prefer to pay bills. (Sam, PM)

> 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 grand for food. That's what worries us most. It's like, first, there's food and a home. (Eemer, PI)

The priority of food and basic needs was felt even more strongly following the onset of COVID-19. A number of parents became unemployed or started to depend on government benefits (Eivers et al., 2020; Rahman et al., 2021; Ross et al., 2021). Most school management teams felt that basic needs were a priority which needed to be dealt with immediately following school closure:

> We had families who lost their jobs and ended without income. Our priority was to make sure they all got their basic needs. (SMTI)

> It was our priority to make sure that those children that usually got support from school like breakfast or lunch would still get it at home. We knew that COVID made things worse for those families who already had financial issues. Thinking that our children could go hungry made us try to reach out to those families first. (SMTM)

Parents who had already had financial issues before COVID-19 found it harder to cope during school lockdown:

> I'm not sure how we survived the first part of it. Having the kids home and trying to think how to bring money home (pause) not knowing exactly what's going to happen…I always worked in a bar…it didn't

> pay much, but it was enough…suddenly ending with no income and knowing that your family depends on you… it was tough…
>
> **R:** What about school? The fact that school was closed, did it bother you in any way?
>
> Well, at least, at school, they had lunch. At home, I had to provide it. (Maddie, PI)
>
> It's really hard. Having them home not knowing what to do, what comes next. The shop where I work is still closed. I get some increased benefits, but it's not enough. Being home all day with three kids, you need more food. More than before. No one seems to realise that. (Anne, PM)

This priority has impacted the parents' agency in engaging with the children's educational process, often impacting the functionings within the capability of being educated in relation to ELET. Deprived of the capability of basic needs, Anne's and Maddie's predicaments highlight how the priority was to act on that, but not knowing exactly how to achieve it made them feel helpless and with limited freedom. Dreze and Sen (1989) assert that we should aim for "the capability to avoid undernourishment and escape deprivations associated with hunger" (p. 13). COVID-19 accentuated the basic need for food and the lack of capability to be free from hunger also due to financial capital as a main conversion factor. Sen (1999) observes that, in a daily routine, in order to survive, people might mentally normalise the injustices they live in on a day-to-day basis:

> Our mental reactions to what we actually get and what we can sensibly expect to get may frequently involve compromises with a harsh reality. The destitute thrown into beggary, the vulnerable landless labourer precariously surviving at the edge of subsistence, the overworked domestic servant working round the clock, the subdued and subjugated housewife reconciled to her role and her fate, all tend to come to terms with their respective predicaments. The deprivations are suppressed and muffled in the scale of utilities (reflected by desire-fulfilment and happiness) by the necessity of endurance in uneventful survival. (pp. 21-22)

I therefore argue that COVID-19 challenged the normalisation of daily social injustice for disadvantaged families and their children following the unprecedented event of lockdown and school closure, and everyone was forced to stay for periods of time at home (Armitage and Nellums, 2020). Disadvantaged

parents were consequently forced to deal with other priorities, rather than focusing on their children's education. Consider the issue of housing, where some families would be simply grateful to have a roof provided for them. During lockdown, having limited space for a bigger family was an issue they reflected upon. Housing arrangements and limited space might have impacted students' agency to complete online work. Housing and the space to be free to do what one chooses were, apart from food, also another accentuated basic need that emerged:

> We never thought about how small our place was until we spent a whole month inside. Being five and having just two rooms didn't leave us much space to do what we wanted to do.
>
> **R:** Like?
>
> Imagine, we want to work and the children want to play or watch TV or do school stuff and we're in the same room all the time. It was okay for the first days, but after that, it was quite uneasy. (Ruth, PM)
>
> It's just the four of us, and we usually manage quite well, but lockdown was nasty. We had to think of things to do, and the space is not great, you know. I was home all day and the kids were home all day. That wasn't really working.
>
> **R:** Why? What wasn't working?
>
> I was nervous most of the time and so were them. We've only got one room, so it's not like you can shut the door and lock them out for a couple of minutes. (Elva, PI)

School closure worldwide was followed by the setting up of an online schooling system in order for schooling provision to proceed, thus giving rise to further diverse changes and evidence of inequalities (Eivers et al., 2020; Kaden, 2020; Ross et al., 2021). While some educators focused on basic needs, such as food and the issue of school closure not offering daily support, such as the provision of free lunches, others felt that the priority was setting up an online school system in order to provide education and access for all:

> For some children, school is their home. It was our priority to get them back to school, if not physical, in an online system. For some, it worked, but I think, the ones we did not want to lose were lost. (SMTM)

> Getting students online was very challenging, but we tried to get everyone connected. Building a connection with the most disadvantaged wasn't easy. (SMTI)

The unjust issue of school being free and equal for all by providing the opportunity of free education in a school has been an open debate within a CA approach (Unterhalter, 2013; Walker and Unterhalter, 2007). The challenges and inequalities experienced by disadvantaged families in relation to online schooling (and consequently free schooling) were felt even more during COVID-19. The following excerpts are representative of this:

> Not all families had laptops or digital devices. Some didn't even have internet to begin with. Initially, it was a mess. (Alannah, TI)

> Few children showed up online the first weeks of going online. Some didn't have internet, others claimed not to have a device. (Juliana, TM)

> We don't have a computer at home. We have internet on our phones, but that's it. We never needed internet in the house for anything, really. (Paula, PI)

> Online school was a problem for me. I didn't have good internet at home. Just the basic. I had it on my phone. But you couldn't log in from the phone. You needed a laptop. (Kate, PM)

This implies that, although school was meant to be open for all students during online learning, disadvantaged students were limited because of their parents' lack of financial capital. This limited their freedom and opportunity to achieve the functionings of attending school, academic achievement, and wellbeing. Sen's (1993) initial writings discussing equality use the term "basic capability" (p. 40) in relation to food, housing, and education. The absence of these capabilities, or what Sen (1993) defines as "capability failure" (p. 40), which impact functionings, were all identified in this study as being affected by conversion factors such as financial capital both before and after COVID-19. While keeping an open interpretation of the term, Sen (1992) refers to basic capabilities as the "inability of individuals and communities to choose some valuable beings and doings that are basic to human life" (p. 109). Robeyns (2017) however suggests that Sen limits the use of 'basic capabilities' as an assessment of extreme poverty and inequalities in his later writings. Robeyns (2017) discusses that "the capability

approach is not restricted to poverty and deprivation analysis but can also serve as a framework for, say, project or policy evaluations or inequality measurement in non-poor communities" (p. 96), which is the case in this study.

I therefore argue that, although this study was carried out in two countries considered as high-income countries, the theme of the lack of basic needs such as food, housing, and free education provision (accentuated by COVID-19) was found to have increased inequalities among disadvantaged families "both for survival and the avoidance of poverty" (Robeyns, 2017, p. 96), thereby affecting children's capability to be educated in relation to ELET since their parents had other priorities such as basic needs (food and housing) which might have limited the children's own agency in participating in education, hence limiting their freedoms and opportunities. This, however, was not limited to lack of financial resources only. It further transpired that parents' social and cultural capital were two main inequalities that impacted conversion factors, which will be discussed in the next section.

5.4.2 **Social and Cultural Capital as a Conversion Factor for Parental Agency and Its Link to Students' ELET Risk**

Bourdieu (1989) discusses how the role of agency is manifested differently in diverse fields and social structures. In the case of education, it implies a power struggle, in the sense that it depends on how stakeholders involved, such as teachers and senior management teams, value their capital. Research shows that class matters in education as students and their parents hailing from disadvantaged backgrounds might not only be treated differently, but also feel that they are treated differently (Ghate and Hazel, 2002; Ingram, 2011; Ingram and Tarabini, 2018; Reay, 2018; Tarabini et al., 2019). Take John's and Sue's extracts below who both lack cultural capital:

> I never finished school. I don't feel comfortable speaking to teachers or going to school for meetings. I feel we speak different languages. (John, PI)

> Whenever I have a school meeting, I panic. I feel I'm going to get the blame for not being good enough myself. I know it's not about me…it's about Rita, but I'm not good at this new teaching methods.

R: What do you mean?

I never passed in exams myself, so I can't help her much. I tell her to pay attention at school. Like I panicked when we got the phonics file. I wasn't sure what it was. Even this abacus method. It confuses me. (Sue, PM)

According to Bourdieu (1986), cultural capital achieved through the process of schooling is one of the most powerful assets within the field of education to gain recognition. While Bourdieu discusses the concept of capital as a way of being advantaged within a social setting, Sen discusses the notion of capability as freedom to achieve what one values (Hart, 2019; Robeyns, 2017). In relation to cultural capital and parental engagement, John's and Sue's extracts point out that, not completing school themselves limits their freedom to actively engage in their child's schooling. Other examples of the lack of cultural capital can be seen in the extracts below that also demonstrate that parents who lacked cultural capital felt more disadvantaged during COVID-19 in relation to their children's online educational experience:

I'm not very good with computers. School going online was a nightmare for me. Lots of passwords and stuff. (Casey, PI)

I'm okay with using a smart phone, but doing stuff online on a laptop is hard.

R: Why is it hard?

I find it hard to understand what I have to do. I'm not good with digital things. I never needed to use a computer. I'm not good with them. (Jade, PM)

A growing body of research discusses how today's education, where digital skills are growing and becoming more essential, can be directly linked to cultural capital or a form of capital in itself (Ragenda et al., 2020; Choi et al., 2021; Straubhaar, 2021). Kapitzke (2000) defines digital skills as 'technical cultural capital', while Straubhaar et al., (2021) define them as 'techno-capital'. I however argue that digital skills should be considered as part of cultural capital as students and their parents need digital skills to meet educational standards, as was the case during COVID-19. Take the situation of Casey and Jade above. The fact that they themselves as parents lacked digital skills was detrimental to their

children as it deprived them of the benefits of online education during COVID-19. Teachers also argued that the parents' lack of digital skills could have been a cause of parents not supporting their children to engage in online learning during COVID:

> I had a couple of students who initially did not attend online school, even though I know they were given a device to do so.
>
> **R:** Why do you think was that?
>
> Well, we sent written instructions through email of how to log in on the school system, but not all were able to follow it. I know my colleagues called them to explain, but it took a lot of time for some to actually get used to the system of simply logging in. (Corrine, TM)
>
> I know for a fact that a lot of parents had issues to connect to the system. What might seem simple for us as we do it on a day-to-day basis seemed like a daunting step for some parents. (Aigneis, TI)

On the other hand, Ruth, who similarly found issues in supporting her children during online learning, sought support within her social networks:

> I am not a digital expert. I use the computer at work, but I'm mostly good with the work portal. I had problems to understand exactly how they could follow the lessons.
>
> **R:** So, did you manage to find a solution?
>
> Yeah, I asked for help from my friend at work. She is very good with computers. She helped me over the phone, and I got them all settled.
>
> **R:** Why didn't you ask the school to help you?
>
> To be honest, I was a bit embarrassed. I wasn't sure we could ask and who to ask. I hadn't logged in on the portal before and we should have. It was my first time using it – as there was no choice with COVID and school was closed. I didn't want them to think that I didn't care or to think badly of me. So, I asked my friend. (Ruth, PM)

Exploiting her social network acquired from her work environment, Ruth managed to activate her social capital in order to support her children in attending online schooling. Social capital can improve children's educational process if parents have relationships that facilitate the process. Bourdieu (1986) refers to social capital as those people who have quality social networks and are able to

use these to support them in achieving their desired goals. This can be linked to their agency, which Sen (1985) describes as “effective power” (p. 209) (freedom to achieve). The parents in this study who did not complete education themselves and did not work were found to have limited social capital which, in turn, impacted more their capability and functioning to engage in their children’s educational process. The excerpts below strikingly emphasise how parents with limited social capital might have fewer opportunities to find support:

> It is very hard to help her at school. I’m not good at school and don’t have anyone to ask. (Kate, PM)
>
> We both haven’t finished school ourselves, so it is not easy to help them when they ask.
>
> **R:** Do you have anyone to ask for help if needed?
>
> Not really, no. I wouldn’t know who to ask, except the teacher. But you need appointments, so I tend to not ask. (Eemer, PI)
>
> During lockdown, it was worse than usual. Usually, I could write notes to the teacher. When everything was locked, I just didn’t know what to do or who to ask if I had a problem. (Sam, PM)
>
> It’s not easy when you don’t have an answer to his question. I tell him ask the teacher, but sometimes, he just wants me to help. Like, when school was closed, it was more difficult. You couldn’t just ask the teacher. There was no one we could really ask. (Kelly, PI)

These extracts thus highlight how parents who have limited financial and cultural capital due to limited or no academic achievement have fewer opportunities to have social capital and are less able to seek support through their resources. Consequently, this limits the support that students might get both at school and at home, and impacts the capability of being educated in relation to ELET. I however argue that, although parents with limited forms of capital are at a disadvantage, the mere possession of capital is insufficient. Ruth, for example, was able to help her children because she had the capability to take advantage of support within the field of work and convert it to support within the field of home (as help for her children). Lareau and Horvat (1999) similarly state that:

> First, the value of capital depends heavily on the social setting (or field). Second, there is an important difference between the

> possession and activation of capital or resources. That is, people who have social and cultural capital may choose to activate capital or not, and they vary in the skill with which they activate it. Third, these two points come together to suggest that rather than being an overly deterministic continual process, reproduction is jagged and uneven and is continually negotiated by social actors. (p. 38)

This implies that families with similar resources might support (or not) their children in ways they think are best. Consequently, I would argue that parental engagement depends on parents as agents (social actors) and their ability to engage within the fields of home and school. This is impacted by both their capability set and resources, hence the varied forms of capital they possess. Parents might opt to use financial capital (if they have it) to compensate for a lack of cultural and social capital, which is Sam's case below. However, Elva would not use any financial capital for that, as shown in the below extracts:

> **R:** Would you send your children for private tuition if needed?
>
> If money wasn't an issue, I would. But they are too expensive. (Sam, PM)
>
> I can't afford it. 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. (Elva, PI)

The findings reported in this section strongly indicate that limited financial, cultural, and social capital had a strong impact on parental agency before and after the start of COVID-19 within both the school and home setting, as depicted in Figure 5.2. Capital limits parents' agency in their capability to engage in their children's learning. I also argue that capital is not the only identified inequality factor since parents' own habitus and the diverse fields of school and home can limit parents' freedom to actually choose (or not) to engage in their children's education. In relation to agency, findings point out that limited parental agency might increase the risk of ELET, and consequently, the capability and functionings of students to be educated.

5.5 **Children's Limited Agency within the Capability of Being Educated in relation to ELET**

Bourdieu's notions, that is, financial, cultural, and social capital, as well as the individual's habitus and field can be identified as inequalities in relation to parental and educator engagement. The CA has been found useful in education as it moves away from an outcome-based evaluation of education (Dreze and Sen, 2013; Hart et al., 2014). This is why this study innovatively attempts to evaluate the phenomenon of ELET through the CA lens by evaluating conversion factors in order to offer opportunities that empower agency and freedom. Hart and Brando (2018) state that:

> By going beyond an outcome-based understanding of schooling, focusing rather on the processes whereby children flourish and the opportunities that the school offers students to be and to become what they value and to what they aspire, a capability approach provides relevant guidelines for alternative education policies that put the children (in all their facets) at centre stage. (p. 294)

This implies that children should be viewed "as socially competent agentic actors in their own right" (Hart et al., 2014, p. 22). While recognising that children are social agents, Sen (2007) points out that, "while exercising your own choices may be important enough for some types of freedoms, there are a great many other freedoms that depend on the assistance and actions of others and the nature of social arrangements" (p. 9).

Biggeri et al., (2011) also suggest that, in the case of children's functionings and capabilities, they:

> may be restricted due to their capacity, or be limited by their social and physical environment. Indeed the ability to convert resources and commodities into capabilities and functionings depends on individual and social conversion factors and often to an even greater extent, on their parents' or caregivers' capabilities. (p. 83)

A socially just educational system within the capability approach (CA) therefore needs to cater for all individual needs in order for students to develop their capability set, abilities, and agency, and recognise that these may change over time (Brando, 2020; Ballet et al., 2011; Comim et al., 2011). Brando (2020) adds that:

> In short: the fact of being or not a child is not a sufficient condition for justifying the restriction of freedom; it is your particular position in the process of capability-formation (regardless of age or any other factor), which frames and determines the way you ought to be treated. (p. 260)

Similarly, I argue that, for all children to be capable social actors from a Sen-Bourdieu Analytical Framework (SBAF) perspective, they should not be limited by family disadvantage and its implications as an inequality within the capability of being educated in relation to ELET. Sen (2009) contends that "…the ability to achieve what we value, but the idea of freedom respects our being free to determine what we value, and what we decide to achieve" (p. 232). The capability of being educated in relation to ELET implies that students are free to take decisions on what they value, for example, attending school or not, or choosing subjects they want to learn in order to achieve the necessary academic requirements to pursue a career or further their education they would value after completing their compulsory schooling. This could, however, be considered an issue as children may not always be perceived able to choose what is right for them or might not even have that possibility (Sen, 2007), as discussed in the sections above. This is also exemplified in the following extracts from Juliana's and Rhiona's interviews, class teachers who observed that children might be impacted by their parents' decisions and do not have the possibility of choice:

> Most students who don't show up at school are backed up by their parents' decision of not sending them as they don't realise how important school is. Some would think that, skipping school a couple of times is just fine. They just don't think it's a big deal… (Rhiona, TI)

> Children tend to struggle in school if they do not have support at home. It's like you can spot the difference of those students who have supportive families and those who don't. What hurts me most is when we offer support for the child, and the parents would decline it as they are in denial.
>
> **R:** What kind of support?
>
> Like, when a child has a learning difficulty and we want them to be assessed or something, some parents would actually refuse that. They'd actually decide they don't need it and (the child) will just grow up to not have that learning difficulty anymore. I find that very upsetting. (Juliana, TM)

These extracts and the preceding sections show that children can depend on their parents' decisions and what they consider of most value in issues related to education. In two different scenarios, one happening in the Irish context and one in the Maltese context, the children's ability to be free to decide what they value was influenced by their parents' limited agency due to disadvantage. This can impact a child's capability to attend school, academic achievement, and educational wellbeing. Therefore, a policy measure that targets both children's agency and parental agency within the school and home context is imperative, thus impacting the child's capability to successfully complete compulsory schooling and decreasing risk of ELET, as shown in Figure 5.2.

Sen's (1999, 2004) approach implies that a capability emerges from a practical opportunity, while a functioning is the actual achievement of what they wish to be or do. In the above extracts from Juliana's and Rhiona's interviews, the parents' decisions of not accepting support or not offering it could decrease the practical opportunity for the child to have the educational capability and functioning to be successful at school, and hence, is more at risk of ELET. Should we solely focus on outcomes which, in relation to ELET, would imply successfully achieving (or not) upper secondary education, we would be limiting the evaluation of equality in each individual child's difference in agency and freedom. I thus argue that, in order to develop the capability of being educated in relation to ELET, school support targeting achievement only is insufficient. Support within the field of school and home should also focus on parents' agency to develop the conversion factors of parental and educator engagement thereby generating opportunities for students to achieve the functionings of attending school, achieving academically, and enhancing their educational wellbeing (Figure 5.3). Figure 5.3 therefore explains how a policy measure should target opportunity development to increase children's agency within the capability of being educated in relation to ELET.

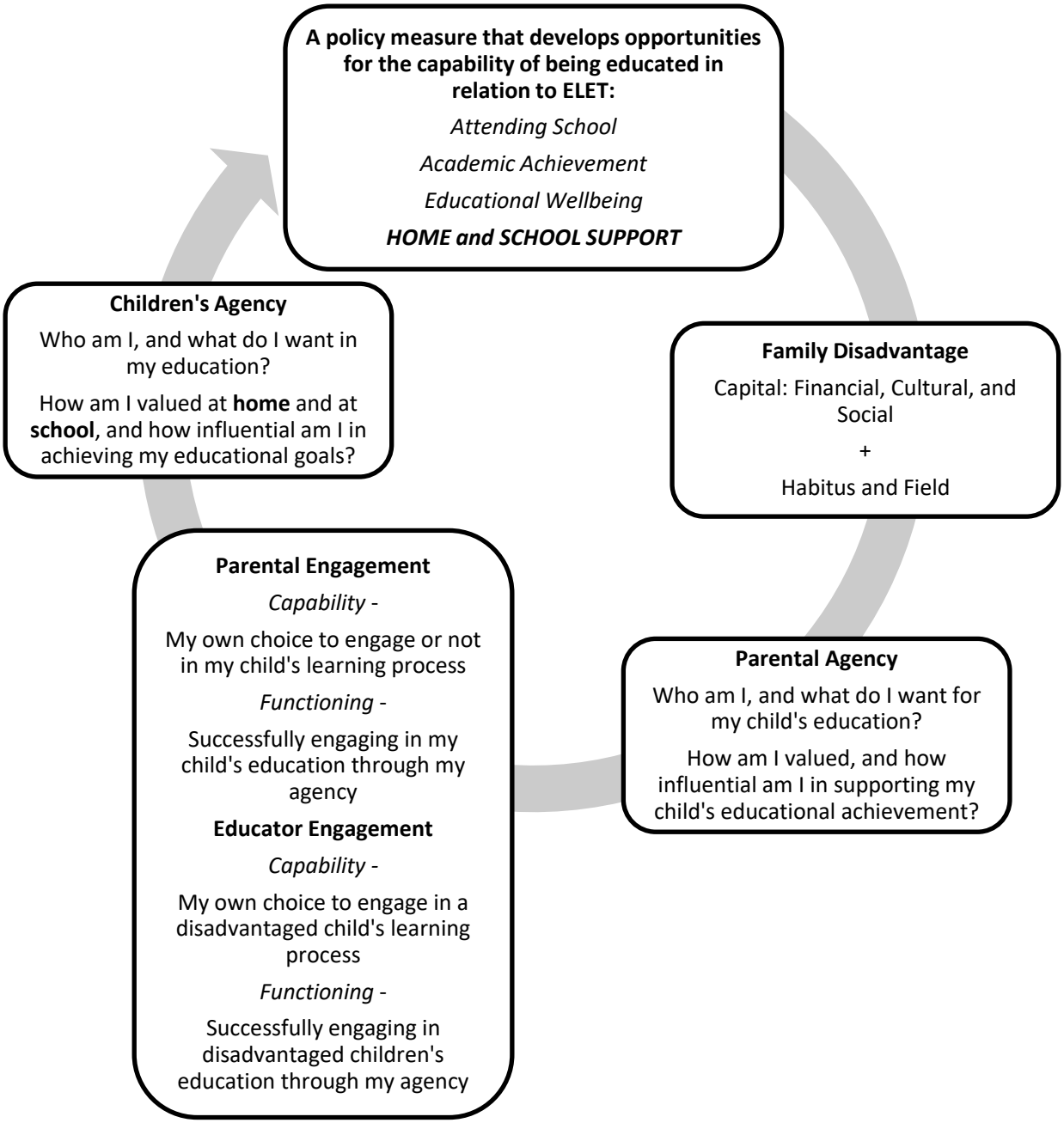


Figure 5.3 Children's agency within the capability of being educated in relation to ELET

5.6 **Conclusion**

This chapter discussed the unjust case of family disadvantage in relation to ELET and children's agency. While this chapter did not aim to compare or contrast the two diverse contexts of Ireland and Malta, but rather to explore the possibility of policy learning and borrowing, similar findings within both contexts suggest that

inequalities brought about by family disadvantage such as lack of capital impact this capability, hence increasing the risk of ELET. Through the SBAF lens, I have argued that the capability of being educated in relation to ELET cannot be solely viewed as achieving upper secondary education certification or not. Children's agency within this capability can be limited by lack of support within both the school and home context, and consequently, parental and educator engagement (or lack thereof) can be viewed as vital conversion factors. In the next chapter, I will therefore present and discuss findings of the HSCL case in Ireland that was specifically developed to target parents' agency in relation to ELET as well as parental and educator engagement. Although both the Irish and Maltese contexts yielded similar limitations related to family disadvantage, differences were identified in tackling conversion factors (parental and educator engagement) given that no such programme exists in Malta. Recommendations and implications emerging from this will also be discussed in relation to the diverse contexts and the capability of being educated in relation to ELET.

Chapter 6: **An Opportunity to Develop Agency within the Capability of Being Educated in relation to ELET: Policy Implications**

6.1 **Introduction**

The preceding chapter presented and discussed findings that highlight similar inequalities within both contexts limiting parental agency (thus impacting parental and educator engagement) in order to develop recommendations for policy learning and borrowing of the HSCL. It was thus argued that limited parental agency due to disadvantage is a limiting factor that might in turn impact disadvantaged children's agency within the capability of being educated in relation to ELET. This chapter now presents findings emerging from the HSCL programme that is a support programme within the Irish educational context. The HSCL programme recognises the unjust case of disadvantaged children in relation to ELET, and attempts to develop real opportunities for students by targeting conversion factors, mainly parental engagement. Findings indicate that, by doing so, educator engagement is also targeted indirectly through the HSCL programme. This chapter thus presents and discusses findings emerging from the HSCL case, and offers recommendations for the Maltese context that does not provide such an opportunity for the inequalities discussed in the first chapter within the capability of being educated in relation to ELET. This is done by developing policy recommendations in an attempt to answer the question: How can we support parents' agency to develop real opportunities for disadvantaged children's capability to be educated in relation to ELET?

6.2 **The Irish Context: Developing Opportunities through the HSCL**

The HSCL programme attempts to address the educational inequalities emerging from family disadvantage by working directly with parents to develop real opportunities for parental engagement (DEIS, 2017). I argue that the case of the HSCL programme that attempts to develop parental agency in order to enhance the students' capability of being educated in relation to ELET is good practice for policy implications and recommendations within contexts such as the Maltese one that do not offer such an opportunity. The HSCL programme can therefore

be viewed as a unique example of good practice within the European context that attempts to support disadvantaged parents (and hence develop the parents' capabilities and functionings) in order to enhance children's agency. In fact, the main aim of this policy is:

> one that seeks to promote partnership between parents and teachers. The purpose of this partnership is to enhance pupils' learning opportunities and to promote their retention in the education system. In addition, the HSCL Scheme places great emphasis on collaboration with the local community. The HSCL Scheme is the pioneer in involving the school in the life of the community and involving the community and its agencies in the life of the school. (DEIS, 2014, p. 2)

This programme specifically targets disadvantaged families, and hence, tries to minimise the limiting factors discussed in the previous chapter brought about by limited capital and diverse habitus and field (Bourdieu, 1986). This runs in parallel with two other programmes supporting disadvantaged students (DEIS, 2017, 2019, 2021), namely, the School Completion Programme (SCP) and the Educational Welfare Services (EWS). Although these three programmes are independent of each other, they run in parallel. The following chapter attempts to discuss how a programme such as the HSCL can be developed as an opportunity to foster agency within disadvantaged educational contexts. Although the HSCL is an organised intervention measure that supports disadvantaged parents, it also aims to impact children's agency through increased parental agency. The HSCL's policy objectives indicate that it attempts to support the students' functionings discussed in the previous chapter (attendance, achievement, and wellbeing) by supporting parents through targeted opportunities. This is done by primarily placing an educator as an HSCL coordinator in disadvantaged schools. A policy manager, explains that:

> the successful fruition of this project is in no small measure due to the outstanding work that these Coordinators do in building and sustaining positive relationships with parents and to the strong partnership that is being built between home, school and community. (Cited in DEIS, 2019, p. 13)

This programme, that started as a pilot to be later developed as a national policy for disadvantaged schools in primary and post-primary schools, has been

running for over twenty years in poverty and high migration areas in Ireland (DEIS, 2014), and is unique in nature in Europe. I opine that, albeit this should not be the case since a whole-school approach (working together with students, parents, teachers, and the community) is thought to be a needed strategic action within the policy field of students at risk of ELET (European Commission, 2019), we can learn through this policy, while taking into account the different contexts it could be developed for (Verger et al., 2018; Zajda, 2015; Phillips, 2015; Moyson et al., 2017; Burdett and O'Donell, 2016). Within the Maltese context, for example, parental empowerment and engagement are thought to be a priority within the first ELET policy (MFED, 2015), as cited below. However, there is no similar programme set up in practice, as discussed in a recent research project report carried out within the Maltese context (Eivers, 2019).

> This strategic plan entices schools to enrol parents as partners in their children's education at this early stage in their formal education, and to see them as major stakeholders in the effort to reduce ESL. This needs to be done by educating parents in order to facilitate their supportive role in the education of their children both at school and at home. The reaching out to parents from a low socio-economic status will help to reduce ESL and promote social mobility. (MFED, 2015, p. 31)

More recently, a programme is currently being piloted and evaluated to support migrant parents (mainly third-country nationals) in eliminating language barriers in schools to be able to engage within the school community. However, no nationwide strategic action has been developed yet for all students hailing from disadvantaged backgrounds. Similarly, the new Maltese ELET policy, despite not specifying how, does suggest a specific strategic action to develop this, stating that:

> One approach that needs to be strengthened in Malta is the whole-school, compensatory, and system-wide initiatives. While MFED endorses whole-school approaches to tackling ESL, the perspective of the contractor and many stakeholders interviewed during the SRSS project is that there is little evidence of the adoption of whole-school approaches within schools or colleges. Introducing a whole-school approach to ESL prevention and improving student engagement more generally is the way forward, as well as specific initiatives targeting parental engagement and involvement. In the case of schools with a relatively high number of at-risk students, support should include,

> amongst other factors, facilitation of parental engagement in their children's learning. (Spiteri and Farrugia, 2021, p. 16)

Taking into consideration the policy aim of implementing a whole-school approach to parental engagement and the relevant missing practice gap, and using Alkire's (2008b) "evaluative analysis" (p. 9), I identified the main features of the HSCL programme that emerged in this study and linked them to the features of agency as described by Sen (Alkire, 2008). Since the programme targets parents' agency, I identified HSCL opportunities that were linked to Sen's features of agency (Alkire, 2008), and discussed their impact on the students' capability of being educated in relation to ELET through the HSCL. In order for children to develop their own agency in attending school, achieving academically, and their wellbeing, parental and educator engagement are fundamental, hence why I previously argued that they are conversion factors within the capability of being educated in relation to ELET. Parental agency is therefore fundamental to minimise ELET risk. For disadvantaged parents to be actively engaged, they have to be "given the opportunity – in shaping their own destiny" (Sen, 1999, p. 53) and that of their children. For development and poverty reduction activities to promote agency, "the people have to be seen… as being actively involved—given the opportunity—in shaping their own destiny, and not just as passive recipients of the fruits of cunning development programs" (Sen, 1999, p. 53).

This requires attention to the processes by which those outcomes are attained, particularly the extent to which different groups of people are able to engage actively and freely. Alkire (2008) suggests that: "Capabilities, like budget sets, convey information on the range of valuable opportunities that a person enjoys. In addition to capabilities or opportunity freedoms, development also should advance process freedoms" (p. 3).

It is within this view that findings and discussion of the HSCL programme will be expanded below. Using Sen's features of agency, hence targeting development within opportunity and process freedoms (Alkire, 2008), I will attempt to draw upon findings emerging from the HSCL programme in order to develop policy recommendations that could impact children's agency within the capability of

being educated in relation to ELET. This will be followed by implications and recommendations within the Maltese context.

6.2.1 **Agency Goals, Values and Assessment: The Provision of Educators who Liaise between School and Home**

In the previous chapter, I discussed how the functionings of school attendance, academic achievement, and educational wellbeing can be developed if both students and their parents are not limited by diverse capital to be able to value the capability of being educated in relation to ELET. I further argued that this does not solely depend on the child's agency, but also on the parents' agency. Findings emerging from the HSCL programme indicate that setting up a system that has an educator directly responsible for parental agency can aid in giving value to parents' values and their assessment in order to provide a more socially just support system and reduce inequalities arising from family disadvantage (Borg et al., 2015; Ingram and Tarabini, 2018; Lareau, 2015). Consider the below extracts:

> 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 made a plan. 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. (Elva, PI)
>
> I was so glad when Ms Charlene called me. She helped us so much. I know I can call her if I'm worried for Carl. When he doesn't go to school, she checks on us.
>
> **R:** How?
>
> She would ask me if he's sick or if I'm sick. If something happens at school, I tell her, and she helps me to explain to the teacher.

R: How do you feel about that?

Oh, my mind's at rest. My experience at school was awful. It's like when Carl doesn't want to go, I'm okay with it. But having Charlene there at school is great as I know she'll call me if something's not right. I don't feel judged. It's really great help for me. (Kelly, PI)

Kelly's and Elva's experience is similar to the other parents' experiences within the Irish context. Although most of these parents spoke about feelings of helplessness and not knowing how to act or engage when issues arose, such as the case of absenteeism, having the HSCL coordinator in the school was a turning point for both the parents and students involved. This is because the HSCL coordinator acted as a replacement to 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, as well as a better understanding of the agents' value and assessment (Alkire, 2008). This is explained further in the below excerpt:

I'd say that home visits are very helpful to understand what is going on with the child at home. We try to visit as often as possible, especially when there are issues.

R: What do you do when you go for a home visit?

The first thing is to get to know them. Drink a cup of tea. Chat. And then, just like that, they open up as, sometimes, you're the only support they've got. I've learnt a lot from home visits. Sometimes, being a teacher, you don't have the time to actually understand what your students are going through. You're busy with curriculum and all the other stuff that goes on in class, you know? So, visiting their home is actually an eye opener. You get to see the reality which you wouldn't see within a class, and I think, in my case, I changed.

R: How?

Well, it's the way you see things. Like, you would get in touch with their difficulties. We tend to be privileged in so many ways; yet, we don't realise it. Like, my main job is to work with the parents…but we also

hold meetings with the Principal, and we call the class teacher in to discuss what's going on at home. We don't even disclose the full details, but sometimes, the reality is so harsh that even they change their perception of the child and family.

R: So, would you say this helps the child too?

Oh, absolutely. The child is better supported at school because we work together with the family and teachers to work on a plan. The teachers would be more understanding, and in most cases, would alert us faster when the child is struggling, so we take action. (Niamh, HSCLI)

Niamh explained that the HSCL coordinator acts on the parents' agency by listening to their voices and consequently respecting their values. The parents' own agency is developed through the gained capital of the HSCL coordinator thereby affecting parental engagement. Through home visits, the HSCL coordinator is able to identify family values and the needed support (lack of capital) which the parents could use in order to support their children, as well as school support (lack of capability set) that might be needed for the children to be included in an equitable way (Unterhalter, 2009). Consequently, I argue that, through the HSCL programme, not only is parental agency developed, thus impacting their engagement, but also educator engagement as they are in a better position to assess the agents' values, both the parents' and the children's (Alkire, 2008). Niamh and other HSCL coordinators divulged that support in classrooms tends to be adapted for disadvantaged children once they identify home inequalities. This can only be done because of the respect they develop through home visits for the parents' values and the bridge they manage to build between school and home due to their role as HSCL coordinators. The below extracts are further examples of this:

R: Do you think your work as an HSCL coordinator helps the child, the parent, or both? And how?

I'd say both. We support the parents by listening to them and trying to understand their background and personal fears or problems. I share the information with the Principal, and together, we decide what to share with class teachers. The teachers then would be more understanding. Say, for example, there's a missing homework and the teacher knows that child is currently homeless or they're really struggling at home, the approach usually changes. We would be there

> mainly because the child would be struggling in school or doesn't show up. Those are our priority cases, but we do try to make contact with all families within the school. That's why home visits are really helpful. (Ethna, HSCLI)
>
> Definitely both. If the child is experiencing issues at home, they will struggle at school. I try to understand what the family needs are to make things easier for them, so the child can feel better too. Home visits are a great help. You get information which you wouldn't get from a regular meeting. The range of needs would vary. Sometimes, it means just helping them out in applying for support for their child. Other times, you get cases of abuse, where you have to alert welfare. Most would lack skills. But in the end, we always discuss their child's school progress or issues. (Mairin, HSCLI)

I therefore argue that, although from a policy perspective, the HSCL programme and thus, the role of the HSCL coordinator, were developed as a support for disadvantaged parents, they are also impacting the children's agency within the capability of being educated in relation to ELET. This emerges as a striking difference from the Maltese context, where parents and teachers do not have such an opportunity, thereby perpetuating the risks of inequality within the capability of being educated in relation to ELET due to the limiting factors. Findings clearly indicate that the HSCL coordinator's support in developing the parents' agency and engagement is impacting the children's functionings of attending school, academic achievement, and wellbeing. The extent of the functioning of academic achievement in particular is, however, unclear in this study's findings as more research is needed to uncover this. Parents and teachers, however, clearly discuss that, through the HSCL coordinator, support was clearly an opportunity for both to engage in the children's capability of being educated in relation to ELET, including academic achievement. Another strong implication that emerges is that the HSCL offers support that is coming from an educator in the school, rather than outside support, as would be in the case of a social worker who would visit homes. Although other out-of-school services might be needed, the fact that the first point of reference is available at school from an educator was found to be essential:

> **R:** How do you think that your role is different from that of outside support, such as, social workers visiting the home?

> Oh, it's very different. Parents tend to trust teachers more. We can build a proper relationship as we're there to help. (Máirín, HSCLI)

> Well, here, having welfare knocking at your door is not always perceived positively. A teacher is seen more as a friendly figure. (Éimhear, HSCLI)

> The fact that they know us and we're teachers makes a big difference. They open up to us. Most cases I meet would be hesitant in speaking to social workers. (Niamh, HSCLI)

> It is quite different as we are their point of reference. Like, we would report to welfare if needed, but we try to give them the support they need before that. (Ethna, HSCLI)

Although teachers might be seen by parents as a point of reference, class teachers might be limited in their understanding of disadvantaged children due to limited access to information about the field of home, and have time constraints due to curricular demands, as opposed to HSCL coordinators who give specific support within this area. Although this perception emerged within both the Maltese and Irish contexts, within the latter, class teachers could liaise with the HSCL coordinators, thus feeling more empowered to tackle disadvantage, as opposed to class teachers in Malta, who felt mostly helpless, and found it hard to minimise educational inequalities that might arise. This often led to most teachers in Malta participating in this study perceiving the parents as not being engaged. Below are examples from the two contexts that summarise this:

> If I don't get support from parents, there is not much I can do. Time with the students is what it is, and the curriculum is too vast. I can't keep the others back because some parents are not interested in their child. (Jeannine, TM)

> The HSCL (coordinator) is great support for me. It's not easy in class to deal with students experiencing family difficulties, but knowing a lot of things would be tackled with the HSCL, I can focus on other work in class. (Alannah, TI)

I therefore argue that, having an educator at school who liaises directly with families by being their point of reference in schools, organising family home visits, and keeping active communication to try and understand their values and needs in order to discuss this with class teachers was found to be a direct link in impacting parents' and educators' agency. This also acts as the development of

an early warning system (EWS), which I previously discussed in Chapter 2 as being an essential tool in schools to build a whole-school approach. Acting on these main conversion factors eventually developed the students' agency within the capability of being educated in relation to ELET. Home visits by educators and the HSCL coordinators themselves were therefore found to be a major tool to decrease the school-home gap because of diverse values. As discussed above, the HSCL educator can discuss with class teachers, SMT, and a psychosocial team what support is needed for the family in order to also minimise achievement gaps and poor attendance. Depending solely on the class teacher, who sees children only in class, and relies on information within the field of home based on the limited time during parents' meetings, might further increase the gap (Spiteri, 2020; Day and Hong, 2016). Teaching in disadvantaged areas might need further support, such as the HSCL programme, as well as policy and practice change (Karlıdağ-Dennis et al., 2021; Ayaz and Karacan, 2021).

Moreover, although the HSCL's structure of home visits was limited due to COVID-19, this study endorses Ross et al. (2021), who highlight that coordinated support through the HSCL was essential during a time of crisis, such as, school closure. Similarly, parents in this study found HSCL support as essential help during the pandemic, despite the absence of home visits (Spiteri, 2020). Instead, contact was made through meetings at a distance in organised contact points that catered for basic needs. The below extracts from parents evidence this:

> It wasn't like before, but thanks to her (HSCL coordinator), we got kids lunches, and she helped us in a couple of other issues. (Sinead, PI)

> I'm not sure how I'd have coped without Ms Elly (HSCL coordinator). I don't have family to help, so she was great. (Paula, PI)

> We were really lost. I wasn't sure what was going on at school. Ms Claire was a blessing. She got us food and masks. We talked about school and online, and she helped me with school stuff. (Casey, PI)

During COVID-19, the HSCL coordinators not only helped to provide basic needs, but also acted as an organised point of reference to the parents in disadvantaged areas. They were additionally essential in identifying financial capital inequalities (no laptop for online schooling) and limited cultural or social

capital (lack of digital skills to use online school programmes or keep safe during COVID-19) that impacted children's capability of being educated in relation to ELET. Although Malta offered multiple support during COVID-19 (Vassallo et al., 2021), including financial capital, such as digital devices and free internet, given that no HSCL programme is present, I argue that support was scattered and might not have reached all disadvantaged students. Having a whole-school programme such as the HSCL programme can target equity support according to the families' needs in order to ensure timely coordination and that the parents' voices and students' needs are met (Spiteri, 2020).

This section thus discussed how the HSCL programme through the role of a designated educator supported disadvantaged parents and their children more effectively through a whole-school approach before and after COVID-19. Consequently, Figure 6.1 depicts the first policy recommendation targeting the capability of being educated in relation to ELET.

RCM 1 The provision of an educator who liaises between school and home and supports an Early Warning System (EWS)

A designated educator who gives support within a school context by working directly with parents and also visits disadvantaged families in their homes, or in a safe place chosen by the parents and educators, can help to develop an understanding of their values and bridge gaps between school and home. This support should be prioritised as the role of this coordinator can consequently increase parents' agency and engagement by valuing the parents' values and capabilities, and assessing the students' values and needs within a disadvantaged context. This can help to minimise inequalities within both the school and home context, within regular schooling, and during a time of crisis such as a pandemic as it would support the development of an Early Warning System in schools.

Figure 6.1 Policy Recommendation 1[3]

6.2.2 **The Agent's Effective Power, Direct Control, and Responsibility – The Development of Structures that Empower Parents by Enhancing Capabilities**

[3] RCM – Recommendation

In order for parents to have ‘effective power’ and ‘direct control’ (Alkire, 2008) in their children’s capability of being educated in relation to ELET, policies and practice need to offer opportunities that develop capabilities. If the agent’s resource set is limited, agency would be limited. In this case, parental agency, and hence, engagement in their children’s school attendance and achievement, would be limited if they have limited capital as this impacts their capability set. An HSCL policy manager, explains:

> The successful fruition of this project is in no small measure due to the outstanding work that these Coordinators do in building and sustaining positive relationships with parents and to the strong partnership that is being built between home, school and community. (Cited in DEIS, 2014, p. 13)

Through the support of the HSCL coordinators, and the relationship they build with parents, training is developed for parents by directly involving them in order to include their voices and values thereby enabling parents’ effective power and direct control. This contradicts Malta’s context which was also quite evident during the observation sessions, where training sessions for parents are found within an already organised programme for parental sessions which might not meet the needs of those hailing from disadvantaged backgrounds. This, I argue, could increase the parental inequality gap due to the lack of participation because of an already evident lack of capital or diverse class (Reay, 2000; Hornby and Lafaele, 2011).

I therefore believe that, in order to develop favourable structures, parents need to have the opportunity to choose if they want to support their children or not according to what they value and given the opportunity to participate actively in this. The HSCL was found to develop social and cultural capital through specific programmes in the school that are targeted and designed according to the parents’ values, thus enhancing this opportunity. Apart from interviews, it was evident through observation sessions that training for parents was also organised by parents together with the HSCL coordinators. Below is an extract following an observation session and interviews on teaching literacy skills to students. This programme is organised together with the parents. Parents who would have

already participated in the training would help to deliver the training sessions for other parents.

> **R:** Do you only do training sessions for literacy skills?
>
> Not really. 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.
>
> **R:** Can you explain the healthy eating part please? How does this help in lunches?
>
> 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. The keep-fit sessions are sessions to get to build a relationship with them. They help me to build an open-door policy which is mostly important. (Mairin, HSCLI)

Most training sessions in the HSCL programme do not follow a set programme, but are developed according to parents' needs identified by the HSCL coordinator in the school. However, there are some set training programmes that are offered, for example, those targeting students' literacy and students' transition in post-primary education, whose aim is to increase parental agency in targeting academic achievement, for example, in the case of literacy, and educational wellbeing, for example, in the case of transition. Despite being set, these programmes were directly developed by HSCL coordinators, and parents are actively involved even in the delivery of these sessions. Similarly, Malta offers a number of literacy sessions for parental agency development (in order to support children's capabilities in literacy) (MFED, 2015; Spiteri, 2020). Nonetheless, a major difference in the literacy sessions for parents within the Maltese context is that these are not linked to other training sessions such as other parental capabilities, as found within the HSCL programme described by Mairin above. Another example is that the training programme for transition within the Maltese context tends to be more informational (limited to one or two sessions) (MFED, 2015), as opposed to a full training programme developed and delivered by disadvantaged parents themselves with the support of HSCL educators within the Irish context (DEIS, 2019). Therefore, the two main identified differences

between the training sessions are that, within the Maltese context, they are not designed according to the parents' voices and needs, and they are not linked to other needed capabilities. This limits parents' effective power and direct control within their agency, as opposed to the HSCL which uses parental agency as a strength, as can be seen in the following extract from a training programme of transition: "The strength of this programme by way of impact and sustainability has, I believe, been due to the fact that parents themselves have been involved in all stages of design, training and delivery in the schools" (DEIS, 2019, p. 13).

I therefore argue that the HSCL programme that includes parental empowerment training programmes can be viewed as a real opportunity for agency development within the CA framework (Robeyns, 2017). In fact, a striking difference between training organised through the HSCL in the Irish context and that within the Maltese context was that most teachers in Malta complained that some parents did not attend information sessions or training sessions. They often perceived this as parents who "needed it the most" (Corinna, TM) since their children would have issues at school (e.g., not attending school, academic difficulties, or issues of wellbeing). The below extracts are an example of this:

> The school has literacy information sessions, but the ones that should come don't come. (Sharon, TM)

> He's been going to nurture group (support programme for behaviour), but when the SMT called in parents, they didn't attend. They never show up, even when we have meetings. (Ami, TM)

> It's always the same. The ones who need these sessions most are the ones not to come. (Eileen, TM)

The difference was also felt during COVID-19, when training provided by the HSCL was stopped. HSCL coordinators felt that it was an issue because they viewed training as an opportunity for parents to be empowered. It was additionally a missed opportunity for effective continuous communication, as is explained in the below excerpts by two HSCL coordinators:

> It's a shame we could not do training during lockdowns. It had a great effect on how we could communicate to parents. Suddenly, there was

> a gap. Calling or emailing is simply not the same. I didn't find it effective. (Niamh, HSCLI)
>
> I used the phone mostly, but it's not the same as having them around at school. It felt differently.
>
> **R:** Would you say that not having training was a kind of barrier to usual communication in providing support?
>
> Yes, I'd say it definitely was a barrier. Some parents just shut down. At least, in our case, we did meet them at the drop-off point for food, but at a distance. (Ethna, HSCLI)

This opposes the Maltese context as, although teachers spoke about the lack of contact with students, none mentioned the lack of communication or training sessions with parents. The impact of the HSCL support through training in schools was therefore found in this study as acting as a link between school and home in order to increase effective power and direct control. The HSCL allows for an open-door policy as, through the HSCL room, parents have a safe place in the school which is linked to their field of 'home'. This encourages them to build their own agency through the opportunities in the school, such as, the training programmes they help to organise themselves and participate in. There is no evident parental outreach within the Maltese context, but rather, scattered intervention programmes, such as training provided by different institutions, rather than by schools and their specific context, thus limiting the participation of the most disadvantaged parents. Although parental training programmes have more recently extended beyond literacy skills, targeting also other academic areas within the Maltese context, these require certain pre-owned cultural and social capital, which would limit the participation of those parents who do not already have such capital (Reay, 2000, 2018).

According to Alkire (2008), the “responsible agent” (p. 5) should also be able to assess their own responsibility in delivering agency in a given situation. In the case of parental agency and engagement within the capability of being educated in relation to ELET, parents, particularly those hailing from a disadvantaged background, should be assessed according to the context of the real options they have because of their capability set. Therefore, in order for parents to have direct control and effective power, opportunities need to be designed with their specific needs in mind and within the context of their children’s school. These training programmes should not be scattered, but organised in a manner that targets the limitations they experience due to disadvantage. Consequently, Figure 6.2 depicts the second recommendation for policy implications for parental agency and the capability to be educated in relation to ELET.

RCM 2 The development of structures that develop parents’ capabilities and empower their agency

Schools should be made more accessible to parents, and include a space for parents to feel safe in the school and the established contact of the HSCL coordinator. Parents should take an active role in the design of training which should focus on developing their capability set, as happens within the HSCL programme. This, however, should not depend on the class teachers, who are already trying to create a positive environment in the classroom for students, but should be undertaken by the HSCL educator, who could develop programmes that target parents’ real needs. Developing parents with the right social and cultural resources could in turn impact students’ attendance, achievement, and wellbeing.

Figure 6.2 Policy Recommendation 2

6.2.3 **The Agent’s Wellbeing, Self and Others – Designing a Whole-School Approach to Support Students, Parents, and Teachers**

Wellbeing within an agency framework according to Sen implies an individual who is free to develop their own and others’ capabilities and functionings according to their values (Hart, 2012, 2019). In the case of students’ capability of being educated in relation to ELET, this implies that parents’ and educators’ wellbeing is also essential in order for them to support the students’ agency development, as discussed previously in Chapters 3 and 5. Findings indicate

that, within the HSCL programme, parents' wellbeing was one of the priorities in this strategy thereby affecting students' wellbeing. Consider the below extracts:

> I am really grateful for the support I received. I wasn't feeling well. It was a really bad moment. She organised free counselling sessions for myself. Claire also listened to me when needed.
>
> **R:** Has this helped in any way to support your children better at school?
>
> Yes, it did as I felt better. Counselling helped me a lot, so I started to feel better. At home, I was better. I didn't sleep all the time, so I could look after them more. They noticed too. (Casey, PI)
>
> I'm not sure how this would have ended if it wasn't for Luna. She's helped me loads. I feel much better with her help.
>
> **R:** Has this helped in any way to support your children better at school?
>
> Sure. We talk about school and how I can help them more. But she helped me to work on myself. I had some problems. I'm better now as she helped me. She was there at the start of his first grade. It's been four years now. She's like family to us. (Sinead, PI)

The above extracts show how the HSCL coordinator supports the parents' wellbeing thereby acting on the children's wellbeing. When the HSCL coordinator cannot give support directly, such as in the case of psychological support, they would still support by helping parents to apply for the necessary support which would be accessible to them. This also applies to lack of financial capital, where the HSCL would support parents to apply for free support for their children. However, it is evident that the support needed for parental agency cannot be given solely by the HSCL coordinator, who has to seek support from the community in order to support parental agency. The HSCL coordinator indeed liaises with two other programmes, namely, the School Completion Programme (SCP) and Educational Welfare Service Statutory (EWS) (DEIS, 2018). This implies that the HSCL coordinator does not act solely as the link between school and home, but also with the community and other services being offered. As an educator, the HSCL coordinator acts as a direct link with social welfare. Support within this scenario might be more effective than independent support provided in other contexts, such as in Malta (MFED, 2015; Eivers, 2019; Spiteri, 2020,

2021) which, despite providing welfare support, there is no such link between home, school, and welfare. Likewise, having support programmes that target solely a lack of financial capital, such as providing breakfast and lunches (though essential for basic capabilities and wellbeing), I argue, would not develop the capability to be educated on their own.

Other stakeholders therefore, particularly within the welfare system, need to play an active part in order to have enabling systems that are conducive to wellbeing. This can be achieved through the stable link between school and home provided by the HSCL programme that works with other stakeholders that provide strategic actions within other policies, such as, social welfare. As discussed in previous sections, for example, parents' wellbeing might also be impacted by a lack of financial capital. Unless this is targeted too, the HSCL coordinator might not be able to offer the right support. Below is one such example:

> The Principal gives us a budget, but sometimes, it is not enough. We have to organise training and use it for emergencies, but it is not always possible to support everyone. Sometimes, resources are limited. It gets very frustrating when you want to support a family, but have no resources available. (Niamh, HSCLI)

This, however, was not always the case as other HSCL coordinators felt they had enough material resources to support families they met:

> I think it depends on the Principal, but in my case, I receive enough funds to be able to carry out training and support families. I would definitely say the budget is sufficient. (Ethna, HSCLI)

Apart from resources, HSCL coordinators also mentioned their own wellbeing, and how they find that they, at times, lack support even though they receive initial training and have support programmes set up. Following initial training, the HSCL programme offers support to coordinators through two clusters, namely, the family cluster and the local cluster (DEIS, 2017). The family cluster meets once every one or two weeks and should be timetabled. It consists of peer support offered by other HSCL coordinators within the same area. The local cluster is a wider group of HSCL coordinators meeting between five and seven times yearly, and consists of structured meetings with a wider group of HSCL coordinators

working in other areas. HSCL coordinators in this study found this support to be very valuable. Findings however indicate that teachers' and educators' wellbeing in dealing with disadvantage might at times be neglected. Teachers too need to be offered training opportunities and a psychosocial team that supports their wellbeing in dealing with disadvantage (Thompson, 2017; Okkolin et al., 2018). The below extracts exemplify this:

> **R:** Is there anything you would actually change within the HSCL programme? For example, add something to it? Or change the way something is set up?
>
> I think what is neglected is our own wellbeing. Sometimes, it can get rough. Meeting with other HSCLs in my area is great support, but not enough. (Marian, HSCLI)
>
> I don't think we receive sufficient training. You tend to learn along the way. (Ethna, HSCLI)
>
> I'm not sure if others feel the same, but I think I wasn't trained enough for the actual job. I did get training, but I think, job shadowing should be a must before the start of this programme.
>
> **R:** Is job shadowing a must?
>
> No, but the HSCL before me took me on a couple of visits before the start of it, and for me, that was the ideal training. It was only possible because the Principal allowed it.
>
> **R:** Do you receive any training or support during your job?
>
> Yes, we meet up, and that's great. We discuss issues together and organise training together. But I think specialised support would also help. (Eimhear, HSCLI)

Similarly, within the Maltese context, class teachers divulged that they often find themselves in situations that they were not trained for, such as, dealing with violence or abuse. This situation was also similar during the COVID-19 lockdown, when teachers felt that many different demands were made on them which impacted their wellbeing. Mary's extract below is an example of this:

> Teaching during COVID-19 lockdown was a total nightmare. I was expected to take care of my young children and teach 6 years through a laptop. I ended up exhausted, but no one ever asked how we were coping. (Mary, TM)

Some HSCL educators, despite having had training for their specific role, expressed how limited their initial training had been, adding that they often built skills during their years in the role. However, the HSCL team get weekly peer support as part of their job, which was found to be essential for their own wellbeing, albeit insufficient. However, during COVID-19, this was found to be a much needed support for their wellbeing as, despite online, they met regularly and gave support to each other. It is therefore recommended that training for those who would be HSCL educators would run in parallel with support programmes. This would be done through peer support, ongoing specialised training, and wellbeing support by psychosocial experts within the different areas, such as, counselling or specialised coaching sessions. Policy strategies that target ELET should consequently be developed not only around students' wellbeing, but also around parents' and educators' wellbeing in order for them to be able to cater for themselves and others. Acting on conversion factors (Hart, 2019; Biggeri et al., 2011; Hart and Brando, 2018) would minimise inequalities for children's agency to develop the capability of being educated in relation to ELET. Therefore, Figure 6.3 summarises the third policy recommendation emerging from this study.

RCM 3 Designing a whole-school approach to support students', parents', and educators' wellbeing

A whole-school approach to support implies that wellbeing support is provided not only to students, but also to parents. This can only be achieved if there is a concrete link between school, home, and the community, such as, the HSCL coordinator. Appropriate budget should be allocated to schools for such support. Educators' support should also be planned through specialised training, such as, peer support, ongoing training, counselling, or coaching sessions by professionals. The capability of being educated in relation to ELET implies that students', parents', and educators' wellbeing should also be prioritised within the school community.

Figure 6.3 Policy Recommendation 3

6.3 The Maltese Context: Contextual Challenges and Opportunities

The above sections discussed three main policy recommendations to develop the capability of being educated in relation to ELET in a more socially just manner. This was achieved by analysing the case of the HSCL as a programme that provides support to disadvantaged families within the Irish context. This programme attempts to minimise inequalities between disadvantaged students and those who are not by identifying and giving support to disadvantaged parents. Within an SBAF lens, the HSCL support can be viewed as first identifying disadvantaged students' inequalities within the fields of school and home (through Bourdieu's factors, such as, lack of capital, as discussed in the previous sections), and consequently, supporting them within both fields by addressing parents' needs in developing their agency and capabilities and by taking an active role in liaising between school, home, and the community. This programme was found to be unique within the EU, whose aim is to attempt to minimise inequalities within the capability of being educated in relation to ELET. This is now followed by implications and recommendations specific to their related Maltese contextual challenges and opportunities.

6.3.1 Identifying Educators within Malta's Educational System who Liaise between School and Home in a Time of Teacher Shortage

Although Malta is registering an increase in qualified teachers (NSO, 2020), it has in the last two scholastic years experienced an issue in the provision of class teachers (Cordina, 2021). This has also impacted the support provided as teachers who were previously giving support (e.g., literacy or nurture for wellbeing) were called to teach a classroom (Cordina, 2021). The HSCL within the Irish context identifies class teachers as the ones taking the role of the HSCL coordinators. This presents a contextual challenge within the Maltese context as, given the need for more teachers in classrooms, it is not possible to offer an HSCL programme by selecting a class teacher. I, however, argue that a Learning Support Educator (LSE) can be given the role of a HSCL coordinator since the Maltese context has a robust system of inclusive support for students with different needs in place, albeit limited to severe learning difficulties and disabilities (Eivers, 2019). LSEs provide one-to-one student support or shared student

support in classrooms which, I believe, is a limited view of inclusive support, and should therefore be extended to develop more inclusive systems, such as, the HSCL that targets family disadvantage. A learning support educator could be provided in each school to take up the role of the HSCL coordinator to liaise between home, school, and the community. Similar to the HSCL in Ireland, the LSE should have at least five years of experience working in that school, and despite qualified in inclusive training, should undergo initial training for the specific role. The LSE terminology could also be slightly modified to HLSE (Home Learning and School Educator) or HSE (Home and School Support Educator) in order for the role to be clearer in practice. In order for home visits to be provided, a pilot study could take place first in the early years of schooling where structures are more flexible. A review needs to be done for a full rollout of home visits and the HSE/HLSE's role on a national level.

6.3.2 **Providing Budget, Space, and Targeted Training to Develop Parents' Agency and Capabilities within the Maltese Context**

Schools in Malta should have a designated budget for the identified educator to use in developing support training programmes for parents in the school. A space should also be allocated in the school, thus serving as a safe space for parents to feel welcome at school. Malta does not offer an open-door policy in schools for parents, as indicated in a recent review (Eivers, 2019). A designated area could make the parents feel more part of the school community, and retain the safe culture of schools within Malta's context. Training should firstly target the development of parental agency and capabilities to enable parents to engage in their children's education. This can be done if the designated educator takes time to get to know the parents within the school and home environment before developing any kind of training that attempts to develop capabilities.

6.3.3 **Liaising with Nurture Group and Learning Zone Educators to Support Students', Parents', and Educators' Wellbeing**

In the Maltese primary and post-primary sectors, there are two main out-of-class wellbeing support programmes: nurture groups and learning support groups (MFED, 2020). Teachers work together with students in order to support their wellbeing. However, they only provide support within the school context. These

teachers should liaise with the designated educator in order to provide support to parents, thus enabling parental wellbeing in order for children's wellbeing to improve holistically. The designated educator should also be given support through the provision of continuous training and peer network that meets fortnightly throughout the scholastic year. An emotional support programme could also be provided through after-school sessions to all educators in schools. Initial job shadowing could be addressed by providing training in Ireland to designated educators.

6.4 Concluding Implications: Developing Support for the Capability of Being Educated in relation to ELET in Malta and Beyond

To summarise, this chapter first identified three main policy recommendations emerging from the HSCL case by discussing the development of possible opportunities to reduce inequalities within the capability of being educated in relation to ELET (discussed in Chapter 5). Given policy borrowing and learning implications, this section seeks to identify and provide recommendations for contextual challenges within the Maltese context. It is hoped that these policy recommendations and implications within the Maltese context enable the conversion factors of parental and educator engagement to be developed through an opportunity in practice similar to the HSCL experienced within the Irish context.

Chapter 7: **Conclusion**

7.1 **Introduction: Summary of Main Research Findings**

Within an educational system, social justice can be evidenced through opportunities offered to all students, irrespective of their background (Karlıdağ-Dennis et al., 2021; Cin et al., 2020; Spiteri, 2020; Ingram, 2011, 2018; Tarabini and Ingram, 2018; Cin and Walker, 2016; Reay, 2018). Malta has significantly lowered its ELET rate during the last ten years, but in the latest social justice index report within the EU and OECD, it still ranked 34th out of 41 countries in education (Hellmann et al., 2019). This implies that students hailing from disadvantaged backgrounds are experiencing lack of equity opportunities within Malta's context, as was evidenced (albeit limited) in some studies (Borg et al., 2015). The research questions identified in this study have supported the emerging findings of two main conversion factors within the capability of being educated in relation to ELET: parental engagement and educator engagement. Conversion factors might be limited due to family disadvantage which was explored through Bourdieu's notions of capital, habitus and field and Sen's agency and capabilities. This study has consequently sought to provide policy borrowing recommendations (Verger et al., 2018; Zajda, 2015; Phillips, 2015; Sabatier, 2005; Spillane et al., 2002) by analysing the HSCL through the SBAF to support these conversion factors and limit inequalities due to family disadvantage. These recommendations could be employed within different educational contexts in order to target these conversion factors (Figure 7.1).

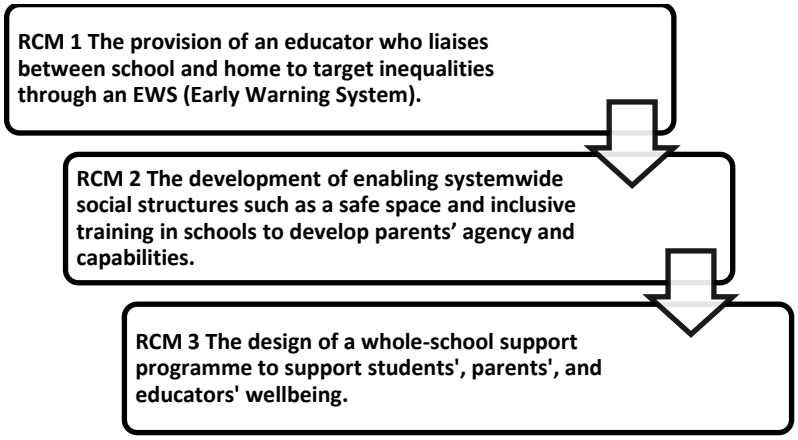


Figure 7.1 The capability of being educated in relation to ELET: Summary of policy recommendations

Using the SBAF framework (Hart, 2012, 2019), contextual recommendations for policy borrowing and learning within the Maltese context were drawn up. Figure 7.2 illustrates and summarises an example of how these recommendations can be mapped out within a specific context such as Malta (Figure 7.2) by providing not only support in schools, but also within the home environment to develop an early warning system (EWS). This is directly linked to one of the strategic actions in Malta's new ELET policy, namely, "a whole school approach to parental engagement" (Spiteri and Farrugia, 2021, p. 19). It is hoped that this study contributes to the development and implementation of a strategic action that expands the students' agency and capability of being educated in relation to ELET to increase social justice within Malta's educational context. Moreover, this can be the start of the development of an EWS in Malta which, to date, is non-existent.

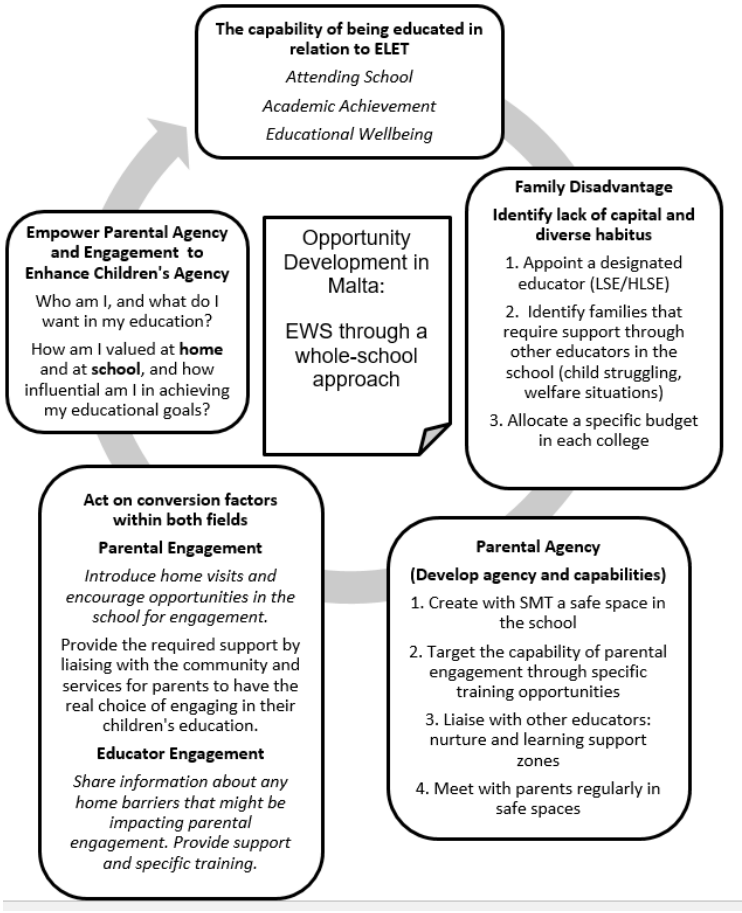


Figure 7.2 Using the SBAF to develop an equity-based policy opportunity to tackle family disadvantage and ELET in Malta

7.2 **Contribution to Knowledge**

This thesis makes an empirical substantial contribution to knowledge since it may well be the first in Europe to use the SBAF to investigate the relationship between ELET risk factors and a prevention policy that targets parental agency and development of capabilities and therefore furthers our understanding of this relationship in several ways. These can be grouped together under two main substantial contributions to knowledge, the first being within an identified ELET literature gap of studies within the early and primary years of schooling in relation to ELET and family disadvantage. The second within policy and practice on ELET by developing recommendations for policy borrowing and implementation within the Maltese context. Figure 7.3 summarises these contributions which are also further discussed below.

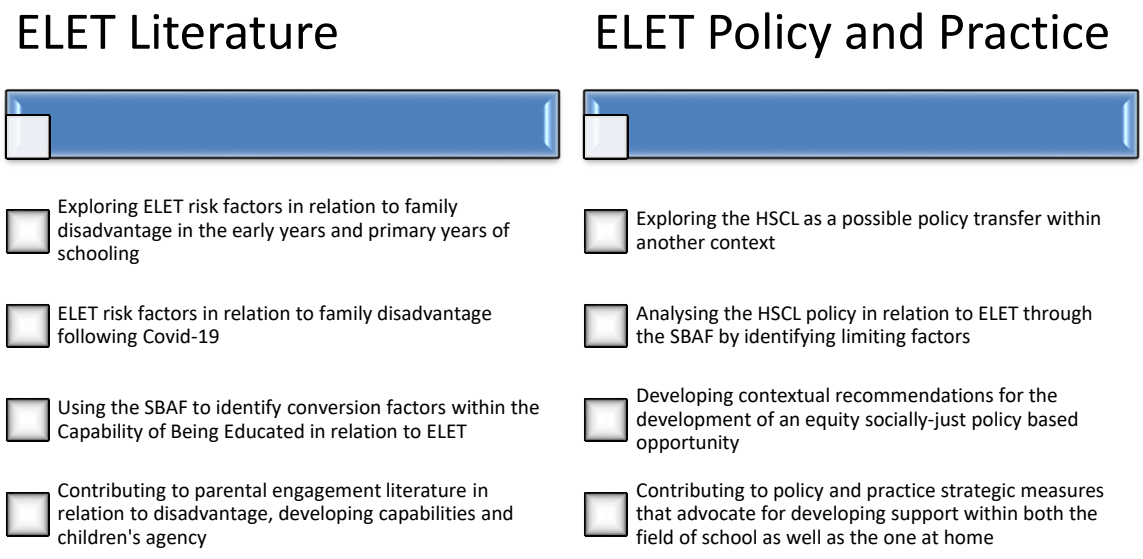


Figure 7.3 Summary of Contributions to Knowledge

7.2.1 **Contributing to Literature on ELET**

Literature within the area of ELET often only focuses on upper secondary and higher education students due to the definition of ELET including only those who have obtained their upper secondary education certificate or not. This study has instead contributed to this gap by looking at schooling as a process that starts from the early and primary years. Previous studies on ELET, mainly focused on risk factors of students who do not proceed to higher secondary education and hence tend to have more limited job opportunities, often identifying family disadvantage as a main limiting factor (Van Praag et al., 2018; Nouwen et al., 2016; Van Caudenberg et al., 2017; Ingram, 2011). More recent studies tend to also focus on identifying inequalities due to personal, social and institutional factors causing ELET (Borg et al., 2015; Downes, 2013, 2020; Downes and Cefai, 2016). This study, has built on this literature and contributed by uniquely exploring the relationship of family disadvantage and inequalities within the Capability of Being Educated in relation to ELET. This can be useful to other researchers and policy makers, that want to explore the relationship of these risk factors within this Capability in order to develop early warning systems and a whole school approach to tackle ELET by minimising educational inequalities.

There is limited evidence, if any, of research that focuses on prevention measures and their implications starting from the early years and primary years of schooling. To date, there is no such research in Malta, particularly since literature on ELET is quite limited. This study might also be one of the first studies that explores ELET through the SBAF (Hart, 2012, 2019) within Europe. This has supported the analysis of a prevention measure in disadvantaged settings and its relationship with ELET. The use of SBAF has not only supported the identification of ELET risk factors within diverse contexts, but has also allowed to identify conversion factors that impact children's agency within the capability of being educated in relation to ELET. Hence this study contributes also to a growing body of literature that discusses enabling factors and systems for children to be active social agents (Biggeri et al., 2011; Brando, 2020; Hart and Brando, 2018).

Few studies within the ELET field, have been able to link parental engagement, or lack thereof, within the first years of schooling, to an increase risk of ELET (Donlevy et al., 2019; Eivers, 2019). Identifying parental engagement and educators' engagement as two main conversion factors in relation to ELET risk and limiting factors, can support the analysis and development of strategies to prevent ELET and will surely support multiple stakeholders who are working within the field including educators and policy makers.

Exploring ELET through a social justice theory has therefore allowed for a deeper understanding not only of inequalities experienced within the 'field' of school by those at risk of ELET due to disadvantage (Bourdieu, 1997; Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977; Reay, 2004 a, b), but also of inequalities experienced within the 'field' of home and their link to capabilities and agency (Sen, 1985; Hart, 2019). In fact, it also contributes to literature on parental engagement within both ELET literature and social justice theories. While some theories suggest that parental engagement can exacerbate inequalities between those that are at a disadvantage and those that are not such as parents hailing from different social classes (Reay, 2018; Laureau and Weininger, 2003) this study contributes to knowledge by exploring a specific parental engagement programme developed and implemented for disadvantaged parents. Therefore, it may well be one of the

first studies that, rather than exploring parental engagement, or lack thereof, as a possible inequality in education, it attempts to also analyse the possibility of developing disadvantaged parents' agency and capabilities to increase opportunities that are more socially just for disadvantaged students starting from the first years of schooling (Epstein, 2005, 2018; Conaty, 2002).

Within a broader perspective, this study is also contributing to literature on educational disadvantage in times of Covid-19 and beyond. Emergent research is currently raising the alarm that Covid-19, might have increased the gap for disadvantaged students (Eivers et al., 2020). This study supports these claims and calls for researchers and policy makers to take immediate action in order to make sure that the gap between disadvantaged students and not, does not grow wider.

7.2.2 **Developing Equity-Based policy opportunities within ELET policy and practice**

Studies that focus on concrete policy actions that can be developed to target ELET risk factors hardly exist (Donlevy et al., 2019; Tarabini and Ingram, 2018; Tarabini and Jackovkis, 2021). This study aimed to fill this research gap and explored ELET through the SBAF to not only identify the risk factors at a much earlier stage than secondary education, but also to analyse the possibility of developing a policy preventive strategic action that could be borrowed and developed within another context. This study could very much be the first to explore the possibility of borrowing the HSCL as a prevention and ELET strategic action within another context.

It hence further contributes to policy learning and borrowing theories (Phillips, 2015; Philips and Ochs, 2003; Sabatier, 2005) in education by identifying policy recommendations through a social justice theory, that of the SBAF (Hart, 2012, 2019). This can support researchers and policy makers within other contexts that attempt to tackle ELET through the development of an equity-based policy opportunity that complement the SBAF. Another main contribution is that it provides an example of policy recommendations developed through a socially just research-driven approach through the SBAF to first learn about the HSCL

and then decide whether or how to borrow it (figures 7.2, 7.3.). In fact, this study is unique within the Maltese context where to date no such policy practice exists and ELET literature is scarce and mostly focuses on ELET risk factors within upper secondary and higher education (Borg et al., 2015; Eivers, 2019). Taking a socially just research-driven approach followed by policy borrowing and learning processes of already existing support systems such as the HSCL, as was done in this study, could support the development of much needed equity-based policy actions in education (Donlevy et al., 2019; Eivers, 2019).

Whilst family disadvantage is considered a limiting factor within ELET literature (Borg et al., 2015; Calarco, 2014; Donlevy et al., 2019; Tarabini and Ingram, 2018; Tarabini and Jackovkis, 2021) concrete prevention strategies within both the school and home environment, to minimise this inequality from the first years of schooling were found to be lacking within policy and practice (Conaty, 2002; Donlevy et al., 2019). This study might well be one of the first to provide insights into inequalities regarding family disadvantage through the SBAF lens and how to tackle them in practice, by looking at parental engagement as a conversion factor within the capability of being educated in relation to ELET. Developing support measures that solely target the school environment while excluding the home environment might perpetuate and increase these inequalities. I have argued that a strategic measure that targets both the school and home environment within policy and in practice, can support the conversion factor of parental engagement by developing capabilities and agency not solely of parents but also of children. This could be very valuable knowledge for educational practictioners such as teachers, heads of school and school principals.

7.3 **Recommendations and Implications: Merging Policy and Research**

Based on this study's findings, several recommendations for policy implementation and research can be proposed. The first is that the EU ELET definition should not limit data that is only collected for those aged between 18-24 years and only hold lower secondary qualification. More research should start from the early years of schooling in order to identify limiting factors, such as, family disadvantage. This could aid policymakers and practitioners in providing

support to minimise inequalities, rather than allow for them to keep increasing. Although the EU does recommend devising policies using prevention, intervention, and compensation pillars (Downes et al., 2019), more research tends to be conducted within the compensation pillar, that is, when students have only obtained a lower secondary certificate and cannot proceed to post-compulsory education. This highlights a main research gap that needs to be addressed, such as, limiting factors pertaining to each context in the early years of schooling. Perhaps if the ELET definition is amended to reflect the journey of the student that starts from an early age, more research linked to ELET would be encouraged within prevention and intervention stages, hence at an early stage of schooling, thus limiting the inequalities experienced by disadvantaged students and families.

The second recommendation is that limiting factors emerging from this study within the capability of being educated, mainly absenteeism, achievement, and wellbeing, cannot be solely dealt with through school support. Support should be provided both within the home and school context. Class teachers cannot target inequalities alone. They need the support of other educators and also parents. Parental engagement should not target solely middle-class families, but should be developed to increase the capabilities of those parents who do not have similar capital, thus preventing further inequalities. Policies that recommend parental involvement and limit it to parent-teacher conferences and training sessions might further increase inequalities between middle-class students and those who are not (Reay, 2018). Findings from this study show how a programme such as the HSCL is an example of good practice of how family disadvantage can be tackled both at school and at home. Findings also point out that, even though such a programme is in place, inequalities still exist, but are minimised, as opposed to contexts, such as Malta, that do not offer such a programme to target family disadvantage. More research could be carried out in order to identify the extent to which such programmes that target parental engagement are also supporting factors, such as, achievement and aspirations (Hart, 2019). This was another identified research gap since there are limited studies that analyse good

practice of developing parental capabilities to expand their agency and that of their children in relation to achievement, aspirations, and ELET.

The third and final recommendation pertains to policy borrowing and learning in practice within the field of ELET. Taking into account the criticism and literature gaps in understanding policy borrowing and learning (Verger et al., 2018), which can be perceived as limitations in policy change, this study recommends to complement Phillips' (2015) model by merging a policy learning and policy borrowing process through a specific socially just research-driven approach and developing recommendations for the limiting factors arising from ELET. This can be done by considering the context from the initial stages, not only of the countries involved, but also of the specific subject, that is, ELET. Policies that are research driven through a learning process, rather than simply borrowed, could ensure greater success within the diverse contexts. Consequently, I contend that, for a policy borrowing and learning model to be successful, specific guidelines need to be in place for the specific country's problem, not merely its context. Building upon Phillips' (2015) 'Policy Borrowing in Education: Composite Model', and developing an 'ELET: Merging Policy Learning and Borrowing to promote equity and change', policymakers can learn and develop recommendations from other EU countries' good practice in the field of ELET to initiate change in their own country.

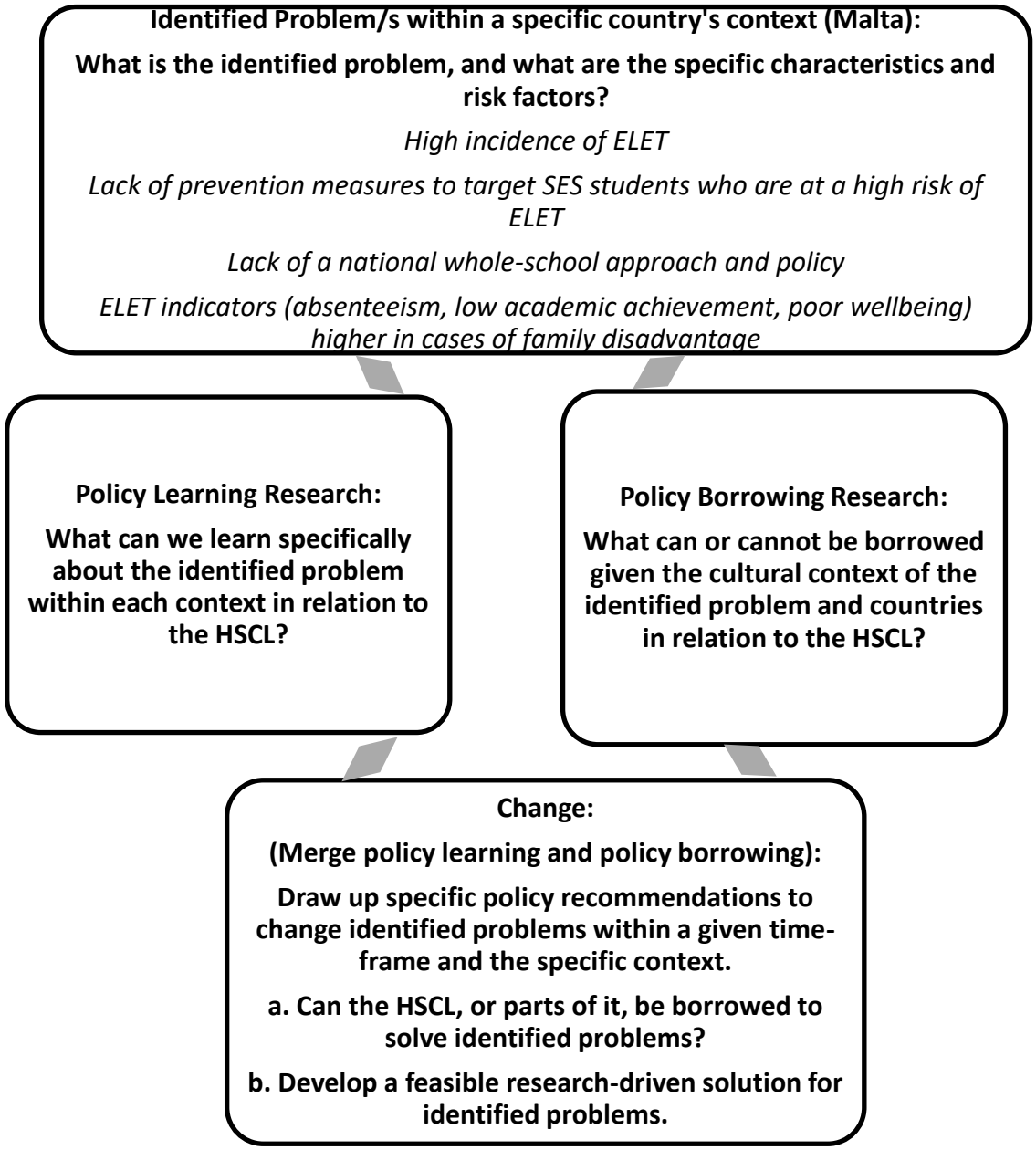


Figure 7.4 ELET: Merging Policy Learning and Borrowing to promote equity and change through the HSCL programme

7.4 **Limitations**

The main limitation in this study is that, given that it is a qualitative study, more research would be needed in order to make further generalisation claims. For example, this research cannot conclude that expanding disadvantaged parents' capabilities increases students' achievement as a quantitative approach would

need to be undertaken for such a claim. Nor does this study claim that the three limiting factors in the capability to be educated in relation to ELET are the only limiting factors within this capability. Other contexts within or outside the EU might have other limiting factors (other than absenteeism, academic achievement, and wellbeing), such as, gender, which is a strongly recognised ELET marker in other countries (Karlıdağ-Dennis et al., 2021; Cin et al., 2020). While EU statistics point out that more females than males obtain upper secondary qualification, other countries might have more females who are not even allowed to attend school due to cultural issues, hence a diverse habitus, field, or capital. Although a diverse sample was selected for this study, gender issues did not emerge within both contexts, which could be a limitation in itself. This could however lead to another study within other contexts that investigates limiting factors within the capability of being educated in relation to ELET. This could indicate other factors impacting this capability, including gender issues.

Another limiting factor was the COVID-19 pandemic as the mitigation measures impacted the methodology, thus necessitating the development of another data collection phase. Given the circumstances, this study has however contributed to emerging literature on the impact of COVID-19 on inequalities in education (Spiteri, 2021), and will hopefully inspire other researchers to follow suit.

Given that the HSCL programme runs in parallel with another two programmes (SCP and the EWS), other research is recommended to better understand how the capability of being educated in relation to ELET can be developed through these programmes as well. Although this research can be considered limited as it did not look into these two other programmes, it was a conscious decision because these were only developed after more than ten years that the HSCL programme was set up and evaluated. Additionally, since a great part of the research was carried out in another educational context other than my own, I might have overlooked some important factors within that context. However, the nature of my work and extensive research carried out prior to this study within the Irish context have enabled me to obtain a better understanding of the culture within this context.

7.5 **Final Concluding Reflections**

I embarked on this study with the aim of developing support for disadvantaged students at risk of ELET in Malta. Despite the supporting theories on the importance of both children's agency and those advocating for parental engagement, I was aware that parental engagement policy initiatives can exuberate inequalities. Through this study, I have become more aware of social injustices in developing policies for the most disadvantaged by listening to the voices of parents and educators. I am now a greater advocate for research-driven policies derived from the voices of the most vulnerable, which is how a major part of the second recently launched ELET policy in Malta was developed. The new policy aims to develop strategic actions that target not only attainment, but also the agency of students, parents, and educators by developing practical opportunities to develop their capabilities (Spiteri and Farrugia, 2021). It has always been my aim to bring change within policy and practice in order to develop more socially just practices within education. Thanks to this study, a research project at my workplace was launched in 2021 in the hope of developing and transforming support to minimise inequalities by targeting conversion factors (parental and educator engagement) within the capability of being educated in relation to ELET.

8. References

Abrica, E. J. (2018). How to measure student success? Toward consideration of student resilience as a metric of success in institutional accountability frameworks. *Community College Journal of Research and Practice*, *42*(7-8), 569-573.

Alexiadou, N., Helgøy, I., & Homme, A. (2019). Lost in transition–Policies to reduce early school leaving and encourage further studying in Europe. *Comparative Education, 55*(3), 297-307.

Alkire, S. (2005). Why the capability approach? *Journal of Human Development*, *6*(1), 115-135.

Alkire, S. (2008). *Concepts and Measures of Agency. OPHI Working Paper 9*. University of Oxford.

Alkire, S., (2008b). Using the capability approach: prospective and evaluative analyses. In *The Capability Approach: Concepts, Measures and Applications* (pp.26-50). Cambridge*:* Cambridge University Press. 2008.

Alkire, S., Oldiges, C., & Kanagaratnam, U. (2021). Examining multidimensional poverty reduction in India 2005/6–2015/16: Insights and oversights of the headcount ratio. *World Development*, *142*, 105454.

Andresen, S., Diehm, I., Sander, U., & Ziegler, H. (Eds.). (2011). Children and the Good Life: New Challenges for Research on Children. *Children's Well-Being: Indicators and Research*, *4*. Springer.

Armitage, R., & Nellums, L. B. (2020). Considering inequalities in the school closure response to COVID-19. *The Lancet Global Health*, *8*(5), e644.

Ayaz, A., & Karacan Özdemir, N. (2021). A case study of a Turkish vocational high school, and the challenges for teachers. *Journal of Vocational Education & Training*, 1-20.

Bademci, H. Ö., Sakmar-Balkan, E., Karadayı, E. F., Cefai, C., Alkan, C., & Warfa, N. (2020). Inclusive education and early school leaving in Bulgaria, Italy, Malta, Romania and Turkey comparative study. *Pastoral Care in Education*, *38*(2), 174-186.

Ball, S. J., Maguire, M., & Macrae, S. (2000). *Choice, Pathways and Transition Posts*. London and New York: Routledge.

Ballet, J., Biggeri, M., & Comim, F. (2011). Children's agency and the capability approach: A conceptual framework. In *Children and the Capability Approach* (pp. 22-45). London: Palgrave Macmillan.

Barry, M. M., Clarke, A. M., & Dowling, K. (2017). Promoting social and emotional well-being in schools. *Health Education*, *117*(5), 434-451.

Bathmaker, A. M., Ingram, N., & Waller, R. (2013). Higher education, social class and the mobilisation of capitals: Recognising and playing the game. *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, *34*(5-6), 723-743.

Biggeri, M. (2007). Children's valued capabilities. In *Amartya Sen's Capability Approach and Social Justice in Education* (pp. 197-214). New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Biggeri, M., Ballet, J., & Comim, F. (2011). *Children and the Capability Approach.* New York: Palgrave Macmillan US.

Biggeri, M., & Santi, M. (2012). The Missing Dimensions of Children's Well-Being and Well-Becoming in Education Systems: Capabilities and Philosophy for Children. *Journal of Human Development and Capabilities, 13*(3), 373-395.

Bonvin, J. M., & Galster, D. (2010). Making them Employable or Capable? Social Integration Policies at a Crossroads. In H. U. Otto & H. Zieglar (Eds.), *Education, Welfare and the Capabilities Approach: A European Perspective* (pp. 71-84). Opladen & Farmington Hills: Barbara Burdich Publishers.

Boonk, L., Gijselaers, H. J., Ritzen, H., & Brand-Gruwel, S. (2018). A review of the relationship between parental involvement indicators and academic achievement. *Educational Research Review*, *24*, 10-30.

Borg, C., Camilleri, K., Caruana, V., Naudi, M., Vella, M. G., & Raykov, M. (2015). *Early School Leaving and Wellbeing in Malta and Beyond: A Statistical Analysis.* Malta: The President's Foundation for the Wellbeing of Society.

Borgna, C., & Struffolino, E. (2017). Pushed or pulled? Girls and boys facing early school leaving risk in Italy. *Social Science Research*, *61*, 298-313.

Borgonovi, F., & Pál, J. (2016). *A Framework for the Analysis of Student Well-Being in the PISA 2015 Study: Being 15 in 2015. OECD Education Working Papers*, 140. Paris: OECD Publishing.

Borrill, J., Lorenz, E., & Abbasneiad, A. (2012). Using qualitative methods to explore non-disclosure: The example of self-inquiry. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 11, 384–398.

Bourdieu, P. (1972). *Outline of a Theory of Practice*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Bourdieu, P. (1984). *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Bourdieu, P. (1986). The forms of capital. Handbook of theory and research for the sociology of education. JG Richardson. *New York, Greenwood*, *241*(258), 19.

Bourdieu, P. (1989). *La Noblesse d'Etat. Grands Corps et Grandes Ecoles*. Paris: Minuit.

Bourdieu, P. (1990). *The Logic of Practice*. Stanford University Press.

Bourdieu, P. (1997). The Forms of Capital. In A. Halsey, H. Lauder, & A. Stuart Wells (Eds.), *Education: Culture, Economy and Society* (pp. 46-58). New York: Oxford University Press.

Bourdieu, P. (1998). *Practical Reason: On the Theory of Action*. Stanford University Press.

Bourdieu, P., & Passeron, J. C. (1977). *Reproduction in Education, Society and Culture*. London: SAGE Publications Ltd.

Bower, H. A., & Griffin, D. (2011). Can the Epstein model of parental involvement work in a high-minority, high-poverty elementary school? A case study. *Professional School Counseling*, *15*(2), 2156759X1101500201.

Brando, N. (2020). Children's Abilities, Freedom, and the Process of Capability-Formation. *Journal of Human Development and Capabilities*, *21*(3), 249-262.

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, *3*(2), 77-101.

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2013). *Successful Qualitative Research: A Practical Guide for Beginners*. Sage.

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2018). Using thematic analysis in counselling and psychotherapy research: A critical reflection. *Counselling and Psychotherapy Research*, *18*(2), 107-110.

Brewer, M. L., Van Kessel, G., Sanderson, B., Naumann, F., Lane, M., Reubenson, A., & Carter, A. (2019). Resilience in higher education students: A scoping review. *Higher Education Research & Development*, *38*(6), 1105-1120.

Bryman, A. (2015). *Social Research Methods* (5th edition). Oxford University Press.

Burdett, N., & O'Donnell, S. (2016). Lost in translation? The challenges of educational policy borrowing. *Educational Research, 58*(2), 113-120.

Burke, C. T., Emmerich, N., & Ingram, N. (2013). Well-founded social fictions: A defence of the concepts of institutional and familial habitus. *British Journal of Sociology of Education, 34*(2), 65-182.

Busuttil, L., & Farrugia, R. C. (2020). Teachers' response to the sudden shift to online learning during COVID-19 pandemic: Implications for policy and practice. *Malta Review of Educational Research, 14*(2), 211-241.

Buzzai, C., Sorrenti, L., Tripiciano, F., Orecchio, S., & Filippello, P. (2020). School alienation and academic achievement: The role of learned helplessness and mastery orientation. *School Psychology*, *36*(1), 17.

Cabus, S. J., & De Witte, K. (2015). Does unauthorized school absenteeism accelerate the dropout decision? Evidence from a Bayesian duration model. *Applied Economics Letters*, *22*(4), 266-271.

Calarco, J. M. C. (2014). Coached for the Classroom: Parents' Cultural Transmission and Children's Reproduction of Educational Inequalities. *American Sociological Review*, *79*(5), 1015-1037.

Camilleri, L., Cefai, C., & Cooper, P. (2011). Social, emotional and behavioural difficulties in Maltese schools: A multilevel model. *Journal of Research in Educational Sciences*, *2*, 3-15.

Camilleri Grima, A. (2016). Bilingualism in education in Malta [Editorial]. *Malta Review of Educational Research*, *10*, 177-179.

CEDEFOP. (2016). *Leaving Education Early: Putting Vocational Education and Training Centre Stage. Investigating Causes and Extent*, *1.* [Online] Available at: http://www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/publications-and-resources/publications/5557

Cefai, C., Cooper, P., & Camilleri, L. (2009). Social, emotional and behaviour difficulties in Maltese schools. *International Journal of Emotional Education*, *1*, 8-49.

Cefai, C., Bartolo, P. A., Cavioni, V., & Downes, P. (2018). *Strengthening Social and Emotional Education as a Core Curricular Area across the EU: A Review of the International Evidence.* NESET II report. Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union.

Chen, L., Gunderson, L., & Seror, J. (2005). Multiple perspectives on educationally resilient immigrant students. *TESL Canada Journal*, 55-74.

Choi, J. R., Straubhaar, J., Skouras, M., Park, S., Santillana, M., & Strover, S. (2021). Techno-capital: Theorizing media and information literacy through information technology capabilities. *New media & society*, *23*(7), 1989-2011.

Çiftçi, Ş. K., & Cin, F. M. (2017). The effect of socioeconomic status on students' achievement. In E. Karadag (Ed.), *The Factors Affecting Student Achievement* (pp. 171-181). Cham: Springer.

Çiftçi, Ş. K., & Cin, F. M. (2018). What matters for rural teachers and communities? Educational challenges in rural Turkey. Compare. *A Journal of Comparative and International Education*, *48*(5), 686-701.

Cin, F. M. (2017). *Gender Justice, Education and Equality: Creating Capabilities for Girls' and Women's Development*. Springer.

Cin, F. M. (2017). Understanding Context: Political History, Gender Politics and Education Provision in Turkey. In *Gender Justice, Education and Equality* (pp. 47-74). Cham: Palgrave Macmillan.

Cin, F. M., & Walker, M. (2013). Context and History: Using a Capabilities-Based Social Justice Perspective to Explore Three Generations of Western Turkish Female Teachers' Lives. *International Journal of Educational Development, 33*(4), 394-404.

Cin, F. M., & Walker, M. (2016). Reconsidering girls' education in Turkey from a capabilities and feminist perspective. *International Journal of Educational Development*, *49*, 134-143.

Cin, F. M., Karlıdağ-Dennis, E., & Temiz, Z. (2020). Capabilities-based gender equality analysis of educational policy-making and reform in Turkey. *Gender and Education*, *32*(2), 244-261.

Clemens, V., Deschamps, P., Fegert, J. M., Anagnostopoulos, D., Bailey, S., Doyle, M., Eliez, S., Hansen, A. S., Hebebrand, J., Hillegers, M., Jacobs, B., Karwautz, A., Kiss, E., Kotsis, K., Kumperscak, H. G., Pejovic-Milovancevic, M., Christensen, A. M. R., Raynaud, J-P., Westerinen, H., & Visnapuu-Bernadt, P. (2020). Potential effects of "social" distancing measures and school lockdown on child and adolescent mental health. *European Child & Adolescent Psychiatry*, *29*(6), 739-742.

Coburn, C. E., Hill, H. C., & Spillane, J. P. (2016). Alignment and Accountability in Policy Design and Implementation: The Common Core State Standards and Implementation Research. *Educational Researcher*, *45*(4), 243-251.

Cohen, G. A. (1993). Equality of What? On Welfare, Goods, and Capabilities. In *The Quality of Life*. (pp. 9–29). Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Cohen, L., Manion, L., & Morrison, K. (2018). *Research methods in education* (8th edition). London: Routledge.

Comim, F., Ballet, J., Biggeri, M., & Iervese, V. (2011). Introduction—Theoretical foundations and the book's roadmap. In *Children and the Capability Approach* (pp. 3-21). London: Palgrave Macmillan.

Conaty, C. (2002). *Including All: Home, School and Community United in Education*. Dublin: Veritas Publications.

Cordina, J. (2021). Primary school teacher shortage leading to loss of services. *Newsbook*. [Online] Available at: https://newsbook.com.mt/en/primary-school-teacher-shortage-leading-to-loss-of-services-upe/

Creswell, J. W., & Creswell, J. D. (2018). *Research Design: Qualitative, Quantitative, and Mixed Methods Approaches* (5th edition). Sage Publications.

Creswell, J. W., & Poth, C. N. (2017). *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design: Choosing among Five Approaches.* Sage Publications.

Crotty, M. (2003). *The Foundations of Social Research: Meaning and Perspective in the Research Process.* Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications Inc.

D'Angelo, A., & Ryan, L. (2018). RESL. EU-Reducing Early School Leaving in the EU: The UK context. *Impact, 2018*, *4*, 64-66.

Darmody, M. (2012). Institutional habitus and secondary school transitions: Comparative study of Ireland and Estonia. *Research in Comparative and International Education, 7*(4), 530-546.

Day, C., & Hong, J. (2016). Influences on the capacities for emotional resilience of teachers in schools serving disadvantaged urban communities: Challenges of living on the edge. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, *59*, s115-125.

Deakin, H. and Wakefield, K. (2014) 'Skype interviewing: reflections of two PhD researchers', Qualitative Research, *14*(5), 603–616.

Debono, J. (2020). Removal of MATSEC fees prove to be no game-changer in less affluent south. *Malta Today*. [Online] Available at*:* https://www.maltatoday.com.mt/news/national/100546/removal_of_matsec_fees_prove_to_be_no_gamechanger_in_less_affluent_south#.YbH6eNDMJPY

DEIS. (2014). HOME SCHOOL COMMUNITY LIAISON Scheme 2014*. Delivering Quality of Opportunity in Schools.* Department of Education and Skills, Ireland. [Online] Available at: https://www.tusla.ie/uploads/content/HSCL_Information_Booklet_-_FINAL_AMENDED_VERSION_-MAY_2014_(2).pdf

DEIS. (2017). DEIS Plan 2017. *Delivering Quality of Opportunity in Schools.* Department of Education and Skills, Ireland. [Online] Available at: https://www.education.ie/en/Publications/Policy-Reports/DEIS-Plan-2017.pdf

DEIS. (2018). Home School Community Liaison Scheme: Assignment of Home School Community Liaison Coordinators within DEIS Schools. Circular 0058/2013. *Delivering Quality of Opportunity in Schools.* Department of Education and Skills, Ireland. [Online] Available at: *https://circulars.gov.ie/pdf/circular/education/2013/58.pdf*

DEIS. (2019). HSCL Parent Transfer Programme. *Delivering Quality of Opportunity in Schools.* Department of Education and Skills, Ireland. [Online] Available at: https://www.tusla.ie/uploads/content/My_Child_My_Vision_Second_Edition_2019.pdf

DEIS. (2021). Updated Guidance on Continuity of Schooling: Supporting pupils at risk of educational disadvantage for post-primary schools. *Delivering Quality of Opportunity in Schools.* Department of Education and Skills, Ireland. [Online] Available at: https://assets.gov.ie/73318/9a09648b30054daa98d9fd703bf264ae.pdf

Denscombe, M. (2007). *The Good Research Guide*. New York: Open University Press.

Denzin, N. K., & Lincoln, Y. S. (Eds.). (2008). *Collecting and Interpreting Qualitative Materials* (3rd edition). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Denzin, N. K., & Lincoln, Y. S. (Eds.). (2011). *The Sage Handbook of Qualitative Research.* Sage Publications.

Dolowitz, D., & Marsh, D. (2000). Learning from abroad: The role of policy transfer in contemporary policy-making. Governance*. An International Journal of Policy and Administration*, *13*(1), 5-24.

Donlevy, V., Day, L., Andriescu, M., & Downes, P. (2019). *Assessment of the Implementation of the 2011 Council Recommendation on Policies to Reduce Early School Leaving.* Final report. Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union.

Downes, P. (2013). Developing a Framework and Agenda for Students' Voices in the School System across Europe: From diametric to concentric relational spaces for early school leaving prevention. *European Journal of Education*, *48*(3), 346-362.

Downes, P. (2014). *Towards a Differentiated, Holistic and Systemic Approach to Parental Involvement in Europe for Early School Leaving Prevention*. Paris: European Union, European Regional Development Fund, Urbact Secretariat.

Downes, P. (2016). Developing a framework of system change between diametric and concentric spaces for early school leaving prevention. *Educational Philosophy and Theory, 48*(9), 899-914.

Downes, P. (2020). A Spatial Turn for Constructivism: Concentric and Diametric Spatial Systems Framing Meaning for Exclusion and Inclusion to Challenge Failure Identity. *Constructivist Foundations*, *15*(2), 98-100.

Downes, P., & Cefai, C. (2016). *How to Tackle Bullying and Prevent School Violence in Europe: Evidence and Practices for Strategies for Inclusive and Safe Schools.* Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union.

Downes, P., Nairz-Wirth, E., & Rusinaite, V. (2017). *Structural Indicators for Inclusive Systems in and around Schools*. Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union.

Doyle, G., & Keane, E. (2019). Education comes second to surviving: Parental perspectives on their child/ren's early school leaving in an area challenged by marginalisation. *Irish Educational Studies, 38*(1), 71-88.

Drane, C. F., Vernon, L., & O'Shea, S. (2021). Vulnerable learners in the age of COVID-19: A scoping review. *The Australian Educational Researcher*, *48*(4), 585-604.

Dreze, J., & Sen, A. (1989). *Hunger and Public Action*. Clarendon Press.

Dreze, J., & Sen, A. (1999). India: Economic development and social opportunity. *OUP Catalogue*.

Drèze, J., & Sen, A. (2013). *An Uncertain Glory*. Princeton University Press.

Dunlop, C. A. (2017). Policy learning and policy failure: Definitions, dimensions and intersections. *Policy and Politics*, *45*(1), 3-18.

Dyson, A., & Squires, G. (Eds.). (2016). *Early School Leaving and Learners with Disabilities and/or Special Educational Needs: A Review of the Research Evidence Focusing on Europe.* European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education. Odense, Denmark.

Dyson, S., & Brown, B. (2005). *Social Theory and Applied Health Research*. Berkshire: Open University Press.

Eivers, E. (2019). Reducing early school leaving in Malta. Report for the Ministry of Education and Employment. [Online] Available at: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/341650167_Reducing_early_school_leaving_in_Malta_Report_for_the_Ministry_of_Education_and_Employment

Eivers, E., Worth, J., & Ghosh, A. (2020). *Home Learning during COVID-19: Findings from the Understanding Society Longitudinal Study.* National Foundation for Educational Research. Slough: NFER.

Epstein, J. L. (2005). Attainable goals? The spirit and letter of the No Child Left Behind Act on parental involvement. *Sociology of Education*, *78*(2), 179-182.

Epstein, J. L. (2018). *School, Family, and Community Partnerships: Preparing Educators and Improving Schools*. Routledge.

European Commission. (2015). *Education & Training 2020. Schools Policy. A Whole School Approach to Tackling Early School Leaving Policy Messages.* Brussels: Directorate-General for Education and Culture. [Online] Available at: https:// ec.europa.eu/education/sites/education/files/document-library-docs/early-leaving-policy_en.pdf

European Commission. (2019). *Centralised Monitoring and Early Identification of Students at Risk of Early School Leaving (ESL): Recommendations to ESL Prevention in Malta 2019*. Ministry for Education, SRSS Project, Deliverable 4, Unpublished Report. Floriana, Malta.

European Commission, EACEA, EURYDICE and CEDEFOP. (2014). *Tackling Early Leaving from Education and Training in Europe: Strategies, Policies and Measures.* Luxembourg: Publications of the European Union. [Online] Available at: https://eacea.ec.europa.eu/national-policies/eurydice/content/tackling-early-leaving-education-and-training-europe-strategies-policies-and-measures_en

European Union Council. (2021). Council Resolution on a strategic framework for European cooperation in education and training towards the European Education Area and beyond (2021-2030). *Office Journal of the European Union*, 1-66. [Online] Available at: https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=OJ:C:2021:066:TOC

EUROSTAT. (2019). *Glossary: Early Leaver from Education and Training-Statistics Explained.* [Online] Available at: https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php/

EUROSTAT. (2021). *Early Leavers from Education and Training*. European Commission. [Online] Available at: https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php/Early_leavers_from_education_and_training

Faas, D., Darmody, M., & Foley, H. (2019). Post-school transitions in Ireland: A case study of Russian-speaking students. *Comparative Education*, *55*(3), 326-346.

Ferguson, B., Tilleczek, K., Boydell, K., & Rummens, J. A. (2005). *Early School Leavers: Understanding the Lived Reality of Student Disengagement from Secondary School*. Final Report. Toronto.

Ferreira, F. H., & Gignoux, J. (2008). *The Measurement of Inequality of Opportunity: Theory and an Application to Latin America*. The World Bank.

Fleming, B., & Harford, J. (2021). The DEIS programme as a policy aimed at combating educational disadvantage: Fit for purpose? *Irish Educational Studies*, 1-19.

Forestier, K., & Crossley, M. (2015). International education policy transfer – Borrowing both ways: The Hong Kong and England experience. Compare. *A Journal of Comparative and International Education*, *45*(5), 664-685.

Forestier, K., Adamson, B., Han, C., & Morris, P. (2016). Referencing and borrowing from other systems: The Hong Kong education reforms. *Educational Research*, *58*(2), 149-165.

Frisby, B. N., Hosek, A. M., & Beck, A. C. (2020). The role of classroom relationships as sources of academic resilience and hope. *Communication Quarterly*, *68*(3), 289-305.

Furey, E. (2019). *Building Educational Partnerships: An Illustration of the Disparities between Policy and Practice of the Home, School and Community Liaison Programme through an Exploration of the Challenges that HSCL Coordinators Experience in Its Implementation*. Doctoral dissertation. NUI Galway.

Garbacz, S. A. (2019). Enhancing family engagement in school-wide positive behavioral interventions and supports. *Intervention in School and Clinic, 54*(4),195-203.

García-Crespo, F. J., Fernández-Alonso, R., & Muñiz, J. (2021). Academic resilience in European countries: The role of teachers, families, and student profiles. *Plos One*, *16*(7), e0253409. [Online] Available at: https://journals.plos.org/plosone/article?id=10.1371/journal.pone.0253409

Ghate, D., & Hazel, N. (2002). *Parenting in Poor Environments: Stress, Support and Coping*. Jessica Kingsley Publishers.

Gibbs, G. R. (2007). Analyzing Qualitative Data. In U. Flick (Ed.), *The Sage Qualitative Research Kit* (pp. 3-16). California: Sage.

Glazer, J. L. (2009). How external interveners leverage large-scale change: The case of America's choice, 1998–2003. *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, *31*(3), 269-297.

Goertz, M. E. (2006). Policy analysis: Studying policy implementation. In J. L. Green, G. Camilli, & P. B. Elmore (Eds.), *Handbook of Complementary Methods in Education Research* (pp. 701-710). New York: Routledge.

González-Rodríguez, D., Vieira, M. J., & Vidal, J. (2019). Factors that influence early school leaving: A comprehensive model. *Educational Research*, *61*(2), 214-230.

Green, A. J., & Holloway, D. G. (2007). Transcultural knowledge and skills transfer: Issues arising from evaluation processes. *Journal of Vocational Education & Training*, *59*(1), 19-37.

Grimaldi, E., & Landri, P. (2019). Tackling early school leaving and the governing of educational transitions in Italy. *Comparative Education,* 1-18.

Guba, E. G., & Lincoln, Y. S. (1998). Competing paradigms in qualitative research. In N. K. Denzin, & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *The Landscape of Qualitative Research: Theories and Issues* (pp. 195-220). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

Hammersley, M., & Atkinson, P. (2007). *Ethnography: Principals in Practice* (3rd edition). New York: Routledge.

Hanafin, J., & Lynch, A. (2002). Peripheral voices: Parental involvement, social class, and educational disadvantage. *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, *23*(1), 35-49.

Hannon, C. (2020). *Capital, Capabilities and Culture: A Human Development Approach to Student and School Transformation*. Malaga: Vernon Press.

Hart, C. S. (2012). *Aspirations, Education and Social Justice: Applying Sen and Bourdieu*. London: Bloomsbury.

Hart, C. S. (2018). Miseducation: Inequality, education and the working classes. *International Studies in Sociology of Education*, *27*(4), 445-448.

Hart, C. S. (2019). Education, inequality and social justice: A critical analysis applying the Sen-Bourdieu Analytical Framework. *Policy Futures in Education, 17*(5), 582-598.

Hart, C. S., & Brando, N. (2018). A capability approach to children's well-being, agency and participatory rights in education. *European Journal of Education*, *53*(3), 293-309.

Hart, C. S., Biggeri, M., & Babic, B. (Eds.). (2014). *Agency and Participation in Childhood and Youth: International Applications of the Capability Approach in Schools and Beyond*. London: Bloomsbury.

Heck, R. H. (2004). *Studying Educational and Social Policy: Theoretical Concepts and Research Methods*. Mahwah: Lawrence Erlbaum.

Heineke, A. J. (2015). Negotiating language policy and practice: Teachers of English learners in an Arizona study group. *Educational Policy*, *29*(6), 843–878.

Hellmann, T. H., Schmidt, P. S., & Heller, S. M. (2019). *Social Justice in the EU and OECD. Bertelsmann Stiftung Index Report 2019.* [Online] Available at: https://www.politico.eu/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/Social-Justice-Index-2019.pdf

Hesse-Biber, S. N. and Leavy, P. (2006), *The Practice of Qualitative Research*. Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications.

Hornby, G., & Lafaele, R. (2011). Barriers to parental involvement in education: An explanatory model. *Educational Review*, *63*(1), 37-52.

Hulme, R. (2005). Policy transfer and the internationalisation of social policy. *Social Policy and Society*, *4*(4), 417-425.

Ibrahim, S., & Alkire, S. (2007). Agency and Empowerment: A Proposal for Internationally Comparable Indicators. *Oxford Development Studies, 35*(4), 379-403.

Ingram, N. (2011). Within School and Beyond the Gate: The Complexities of Being Educationally Successful and Working Class. *Sociology*, *45*(2), 287-302.

Ingram, N. (2018). *Working-Class Boys and Educational Success*. Palgrave Macmillan UK.

Ingram, N., & Tarabini, A. (2018). Conclusion: Social inequalities in educational choices, transitions and aspirations in Europe. In *Educational Choices, Transitions and Aspirations in Europe* (pp. 205-214). Routledge.

Jury, M., Smeding, A., Stephens, N. M., Nelson, J. E., Aelenei, C., & Darnon, C. (2017). The experience of low-SES students in higher education: Psychological barriers to success and interventions to reduce social-class inequality. *Journal of Social Issues, 73*(1), 23-41.

Kaden, U. (2020). COVID-19 school closure-related changes to the professional life of a K–12 teacher. *Education Sciences*, *10*(6), 165.

Kapitzke, C. (2000). Information technology as cultural capital: Shifting the boundaries of power. *Education and Information Technologies*, 5(1), 49-62.

Karacabey, M. F., & Boyacı, A. (2019). Individual and Institutional Factors Contributing to School Dropouts. *Kastamonu Eğitim Dergisi*, *27*(3),1047-1057.

Karlıdağ-Dennis, E., Temiz, Z., & Cin, F. M. (2021). Hegemony and the neoconservative politics of early education policymaking. *Children's Geographies*, 1-14.

Karlıdağ-Dennis, E., Hazenberg, R., & Dinh, A. T. (2020). Is education for all? The experiences of ethnic minority students and teachers in North-western Vietnam engaging with social entrepreneurship. *International Journal of Educational Development, 77*, 102224.

Karnieli-Miller, O., Strier, R. and Pessach, L. (2009), 'Power Relations in Qualitative Research'. *Qualitative Health Research*, 19 (2), 279-289.

Kvale, S. (2006). Dominance Through Interviews and Dialogues. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 12(3), pp. 480-500.

Kerbaiv, D., & Bernhardt, A. (2018). Parental intervention in the school: The context of minority involvement. In *Parents, Their Children, and Schools* (pp. 115-146). Routledge.

Labour Market and Information Society Statistics Unit. (2021, September 20). *NSO News2021_168.* National Statistics Office. [Online] Available at: https://nso.gov.mt/en/News_Releases/Documents/2021/09/News2021_168.pdf

Lanzi, D. (2007). Capabilities, human capital and education. *The Journal of Socio-Economics*, *36*(3), 424-435.

Lareau, A. (2011). Invisible inequality. *Sociology of Education: A Critical Reader*, 359-388.

Lareau, A. (2015). Cultural knowledge and social inequality. *American Sociological Review*, *80*(1), 1-27.

Lareau, A., & Elliot, B. W. (2008). Class and Transition to Adulthood. In A. Lareau, & D. Conley (Eds.), *Social Class: How Does It Work?* (pp. 118-151). New York: Russell Sage Foundation.

Lareau, A., & Horvat, E. M. (1999). Moments of social inclusion and exclusion race, class, and cultural capital in family-school relationships. *Sociology of Education*, 37-53.

Lareau, A., & Weininger, E. (2003). Cultural capital in educational research: A critical assessment. *Theory and Society, 32*(5–6), 567-606.

Lareau, A., Elliot, B. W., Dalton, C., & Velez, M. (2011). Unequal Childhoods in Context: Results from a Quantitative Analysis. In A. Lareau (Eds.), *Unequal Childhoods: Class, Race, and Family Life* (pp. 333-341). University of California Press.

Lareau, A., Weininger, E.B. and Cox, A.B. (2018). Parental challenges to organizational authority in an elite school district: The role of cultural, social, and symbolic capital. *Teachers College Record*, *120*(1), pp.1-46.

Lee, S. A. (2018). Family structure effects on student outcomes. In *Parents, Their Children, and Schools* (pp. 43-76). Routledge.

Lessmann, O., Otto, H. U., & Ziegler, H. (Eds.). (2011). *Closing the Capabilities Gap: Renegotiating Social Justice for the Young*. Verlag Barbara Budrich.

Lester, J. N., Lochmiller, C. R., & Gabriel, R. E. (Eds.). (2017). *Discursive Perspectives on Education Policy and Implementation.* Springer.

Lewis, J., & West, A. (2018). Learning from Others: English proposals for early years education and care reform and policy transfer from France and the Netherlands, 2010-15. *Social Policy & Administration, 52*(3), 677-689.

Malen, B., Croninger, R., Muncey, D., & Redmond-Jones, D. (2002). Reconstituting schools: “Testing” the “theory of action”. *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, *24*(2),113-132.

Marsh, J. (2012). The micro politics of implementing a school-based bonus policy: The case of New York City's compensation committees. *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, *34*(3),164-184.

Merriam, S. B., & Grenier, R. S. (Eds.). (2019). *Qualitative Research in Practice: Examples for Discussion and Analysis.* John Wiley & Sons.

Meyer, H. D., & Benavot, A. (2013). PISA and the Globalization of Education Governance: Some Puzzles and Problems. In H. D. Meyer, & A. Benavot (Eds.), *PISA, Power and Policy: The Emergence of Global Educational Governance* (pp. 7-26). Didcot: Symposium.

MFED. (2015). *A Strategic Plan for the Prevention of Early School Leaving in Malta.* Ministry for Education, Floriana Malta. [Online] Available at: https://epale.ec.europa.eu/en/resource-centre/content/elet-symposium-early-leaving-education-and-training-conference-proceedings

MFED. (2020). *ELET SYMPOSIUM, Early Leaving from Education and Training: The Way Forward and Conference Proceedings.* Ministry for Education, Floriana Malta. [Online] Available at: https://epale.ec.europa.eu/en/resource-centre/content/elet-symposium-early-leaving-education-and-training-conference-proceedings

Molla, T., & Pham, L. (2019). Capital, capability and educational justice. *Policy Futures in Education, 17*(5), 575-581.

Moyson, S. (2016). Policy learning over a decade or more and the role of interests therein: The European liberalization policy process of Belgian network industries. *Public Policy and Administration, 33*(1), 88-117.

Moyson, S., Scholten, P., & Weible, C. M. (2017). Policy learning and policy change: Theorizing their relations from different perspectives. *Policy and Society*, *36*(2),161-177.

Muller, C. (2018). Parent involvement and academic achievement: An analysis of family resources available to the child. In *Parents, Their Children, and Schools* (pp. 77-114). Routledge.

Nouwen, W., & Clycq, N. (2019). The Role of Social Support in Fostering School Engagement in Urban Schools Characterised by High Risk of Early Leaving from Education and Training. *Social Psychology of Education, 22*(5),1215-1238. doi:10.1007/s11218-019-09521-6.

Nouwen, W., Van Praag, L., Van Caudenberg, R., Clycq, N., & Timmerman, C. (2016). *School-Based Prevention and Intervention Measures and Alternative Learning Approaches to Reduce Early School Leaving*. University of Antwerp.

Nussbaum, M. (2004). Beyond the social contract: Capabilities and global justice. An Olaf Palme lecture, delivered in Oxford on 19 June 2003. *Oxford Development Studies*, *32*(1), 3-18.

Nussbaum, M. (2006). Education and Democratic Citizenship: Capabilities and Quality Education. *Journal of Human Development, 7*(3), 385–395.

Nussbaum, M. (2011). *Creating Capabilities. The Human Development Approach*. Cambridge, Massachusetts and London, England: Harvard University Press.

NSO. (2020). *Annual Report*. Malta: National Statistics Office.

Öckert, B. (2021). School absenteeism during the COVID-19 pandemic–How will student performance be affected? *Swedish Children and Youth during the COVID-19 Pandemic*, *37*.

OECD (2018), *Equity in Education: Breaking Down Barriers to Social Mobility, PISA*, OECD Publishing, Paris. https://doi.org/10.1787/9789264073234-en

Okkolin, M. A., Koskela, T., Engelbrecht, P., & Savolainen, H. (2018). Capability to be Educated—Inspiring and Inclusive Pedagogical Arrangements from Finnish Schools. *Journal of Human Development and Capabilities*, *19*(4), 421-437.

Park, S., Stone, S. I., & Holloway, S. D. (2017). School-based parental involvement as a predictor of achievement and school learning environment: An elementary school-level analysis. *Children and Youth Services Review*, *82*, 195-206.

Parker, P. D., Jerrim, J., Schoon, I., & Marsh, H. W. (2016). A multination study of socioeconomic inequality in expectations for progression to higher education: The role of between-school tracking and ability stratification. *American Educational Research Journal, 53*(1), 6-32.

Paterson, L., & Iannelli, C. (2007). Social Class and Educational Attainment: A Comparative Study of England, Wales, and Scotland. *Sociology of Education, 80*(4), 330-358.

Peck, J., & Theodore, N. (2015). *Fast Policy. Experimental Statecraft at the Thresholds of Neoliberalism.* Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.

Pham, L. (2019). Capital and capabilities in education: Re-examining Australia's 2015 PISA performance and context assessment framework. *Policy Futures in Education, 17*(5), 599-617.

Phillips, D. (2015). Policy borrowing in education: Frameworks for analysis. In J. Zajda (Ed.), *Second International Handbook on Globalisation, Education and Policy Research* (pp. 137-148). Netherlands: Springer.

Phillips, D., & Ochs, K. (2003). Processes of policy borrowing in education: Some explanatory and analytical devices. *Comparative Education*, *39*(4), 451-461.

Pitman, T., Roberts, L., Bennett, D., & Richardson, S. (2019). An Australian study of graduate outcomes for disadvantaged students. *Journal of Further and Higher Education*, *43*(1), 45-57.

Popovici, M. (2019). Research on the Factors Leading to Early School Leaving. *Educația Plus*, *23*(SP IS), 147-151.

Ragnedda, M., Ruiu, M. L., & Addeo, F. (2020). Measuring digital capital: An empirical investigation. *New Media & Society*, *22*(5), 793-816.

Rahman, R., Ross, A., & Pinto, R. (2021). The critical importance of community health workers as first responders to COVID-19 in USA. *Health Promotion International, 36*(5), 1498-1507.

Rambla, X. (2018). The Politics of Early School Leaving: How Do the European Union and the Spanish Educational Authorities 'Frame' the Policy and Formulate a 'Theory of Change'. *Journal of European Integration, 40*(1), 83-97.

Reay, D. (2000). A useful extension of Bourdieu's conceptual framework? Emotional capital as a way of understanding mothers' involvement in their children's education? *The Sociological Review*, *48*(4), 568-585.

Reay, D. (2004a). 'It's all becoming a habitus': Beyond the habitual use of habitus in educational research. *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, *25*(4), 431-444.

Reay, D. (2004b). Education and cultural capital: The implications of changing trends in education policies. *Cultural Trends*, *13*(2), 73-86.

Reay, D. (2005). Beyond Consciousness? The Psychic Landscape of Social Class. *Sociology, 39*(5), 911-928.

Reay, D. (2012). What would a socially just education system look like?: Saving the minnows from the pike. *Journal of Education Policy*, *27*(5), 587-599.

Reay, D. (2018). Working-class educational failure: Theoretical perspectives, discursive concerns, and methodological approaches. In A. Tarabini, & N. Ingram (Eds.), *Educational Choices, Transitions and Aspirations in Europe* (pp. 27-43). Routledge.

Reay, D., David, M., & Ball, S. (2001). Making the difference? Institutional habituses and higher education. *Sociological Research Online, 5*(4).

Reuge, N., Jenkins, R., Brossard, M., Soobrayan, B., Mizunoya, S., Ackers, J., & Taulo, W. G. (2021). Education response to COVID 19 pandemic, a special

issue proposed by UNICEF: Editorial review. *International Journal of Educational Development*, *87*, 102485.

Robeyns, I. (2005). The Capability Approach: A Theoretical Survey. *Journal of Human Development, 6*(1), 93-117.

Robeyns, I. (2017). *Wellbeing, Freedom and Social Justice: The Capability Approach Re-Examined*. Open Book Publishers.

Ross, C., Kennedy, M., & Devitt, A. (2021). Home School Community Liaison Coordinators (HSCL) perspectives on supporting family wellbeing and learning during the Covid-19 school closures: Critical needs and lessons learned. *Irish Educational Studies*, 1-8.

Rubin, H. J., and Rubin, I. S. (2012). *Qualitative Interviewing. The Art of Hearing Data*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Rumberger, R. W., & Lim, S. A. (2008). Why Students Drop out of School: A Review of 25 Years of Research. *California Dropout Research Project Report, 15,* 1-130.

Ryan, S. (2021). Promising Partnership Practices to Support Children's Learning. In A. Leavy, & M. Nohilly (Eds.), *Perspectives on Childhood* (1st edition, pp. 67-81). Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing.

Sabatier, P. (2005). From policy implementation to policy change: A personal odyssey. In *Reform and Change in Higher Education* (pp. 17-34). Dordrecht: Springer.

Sadovnik, A. R. (2007). Qualitative research and public policy. In F. Fischer, G. J. Miller, & M. S. Sidney (Eds.), *Handbook of Public Policy Analysis: Theory, Politics, and Methods* (pp. 417-428). Boca Raton: CRC Press.

Sahin, S., Arseven, Z., & Kiliç, A. (2016). Causes of Student Absenteeism and School Dropouts. *International Journal of Instruction*, *9*(1), 195-210.

Saito, M. (2003). Amartya Sen's capability approach to education: A critical exploration. *Journal of Philosophy of Education*, *37*(1), 17-33.

Schiller, W., & Einarsdottir, J. (2009). *Listening to Young Children's Voices in Research–Changing Perspectives/Changing Relationships*. [no publisher].

Schraad-Tischler, D., & Schiller, C. (2016). Social Justice in the EU–Index Report 2016. *Social Inclusion Monitor Europe.* European Commission.

Sen, A. (1980). Equality of what? *The Tanner Lecture on Human Values*, *1*, 197-220.

Sen, A. (1985). Well-being, agency and freedom: The Dewey lectures 1984. *The Journal of Philosophy*, *82*(4), 169-221.

Sen, A. (1987). The standard of living (Vol. LXXXII). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Sen, A. (1992). *Inequality Re-examined.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Sen, A. (1993). Capability and well-being. In M. C. Nussbaum, & A. K. Sen (Eds.), *The Quality of Life* (pp. 1-445). Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Sen, A. (1997). Editorial: Human Capital and Human Capability. *World Development, 25*(12), 1959-1961.

Sen, A. (1999). Commodities and capabilities. *OUP Catalogue*.

Sen, A. (1999). *Development as Freedom* (Kindle Ed.). Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Sen, A. (2003). Development as Capability Expansion. In S. Fukuda-Parr et al. (Eds.), *Readings in Human Development* (pp. 41-58). New York: Oxford University Press.

Sen, A. (2004). Capabilities, lists, and public reason: Continuing the conversation. *Feminist Economics*, *10*(3), 77-80.

Sen, A. (2007). Children and human rights. *Indian Journal of Human Development*, *1*(2), 235-245.

Sen, A. (2009). *The Idea of Justice*. London: Allen Lane.

Sen, A. (2010). The place of capability in a theory of justice. In H. Brighouse, & I. Robeyns (Eds.), *Measuring Justice* (pp. 239-253). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Smyth, E., McCoy, S., & Kingston, G. (2015). *Learning from the Evaluation of DEIS.* Dublin: ESRI.

Spillane, J. P., Reiser, B. J., & Reimer, T. (2002). Policy implementation and cognition: Reframing and refocusing implementation research. *Review of Educational Research*, *72*(3), 387-431.

Spiteri, P. (2020). *Introductory Chapter: ELET – The Way Forward. Conference Proceedings.* Malta. November 2019. [Online] Available at: https://epale.ec.europa.eu/en/resource-centre/content/early-leaving-education-and-training-unit-webinar-presentation-conference

Spiteri, P. (2021). A widening inequality gap: Reducing educational inequalities in Europe by reaching out to students and families at risk during a time of crisis and beyond. *Education in an Altered World*. Bloomsbury, in press.

Spiteri, P., & Farrugia, A. (2021). *The Way Forward: Early Leaving from Education and Training*. Ministry for Education, Floriana Malta. [Online] Available at: https://meae.gov.mt/en/Public_Consultations/MEDE/Documents/ELET%20POLICY%20Document.pdf

Stake, R. E. (2005). Qualitative Case Studies. In N. K. Denzin, & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *The SAGE Handbook of Qualitative Research* (3rd edition, pp. 443-466). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Stone, D. (2012). Transfer and translation of policy. *Policy Studies*, *33*(6), 483-499.

Stone, D. (2016). Understanding the transfer of policy failure: Bricolage, experimentalism and translation. *Policy and Politics*, *17*(1), 55-70.

Straubhaar, J., Tufekci, Z., Spence, J., & Rojas, V. (2021). Digital inequity in the Austin Technopolis: an introduction. In *Inequity in the Technopolis* (pp. 1-32). University of Texas Press.

Stringer, E. T. (2013). *Action Research*. Thousand Oaks: Sage.

Sturges, J., & Hanrahan, K. (2004). Comparing Telephone and Face-to-Face Qualitative Interviewing: A Research Note. *Qualitative Research*, *4*(1), 107-118.

Tarabini, A., & Ingram, N. (Eds.). (2018). *Educational Choices, Transitions and Aspirations in Europe: Systemic, Institutional and Subjective Challenges*. Routledge.

Tarabini, A., & Jacovkis, J. (2021). The politics of educational transitions: Evidence from Catalonia. *European Educational Research Journal*, *20*(2), 212-227.

Tarabini, A., Curran, M., & Fontdevila, C. (2017). Institutional habitus in context: Implementation, development and impacts in two compulsory secondary schools in Barcelona*. British Journal of Sociology of Education, 38*(8), 1177-1189.

Tarabini, A., Curran, M., Montes, A., & Parcerisa, L. (2019). Can educational engagement prevent Early School Leaving? Unpacking the school's effect on educational success. *Educational Studies*, *45*(2), 226-241.

Terzi, L. (2005). Beyond the dilemma of difference: The capability approach to disability and special educational needs. *Journal of Philosophy of Education*, *39*(3), 443-459.

Terzi, L. (2007). The capability to be educated. In *Amartya Sen's Capability Approach and Social Justice in Education* (pp. 25-43). New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Thompson, I. (2017). *Tackling Social Disadvantage through Teacher Education*. Critical Publishing.

Tivaringe, T. (2019). The social unemployment gap in South Africa: Limits of enabling socio-economic redress through expanding access to higher education. *Education Policy Analysis Archives, 27*, 155.

Turcatti, D., Montero-Sieburth, M., & Chaudhry, R. (2020). *An In-Depth Review of the Literature on 'Best Practices' for the Prevention of Early School Leaving in Schools with Intercultural Contexts.* London, UK: International Association of Intercultural Education (IAIE).

Tusla Child and Family Agency. (2018). Home Page. [Online] Available at: https://www.tusla.ie/

UNESCO. (2017). More than one-half of children and adolescents are not learning worldwide. UIS Fact Sheet No. 46.

Unterhalter, E. (2003). Crossing Disciplinary Boundaries: The potential of Sen's capability approach for sociologists of education*. British Journal of Sociology of Education, 24*(5), 665-669.

Unterhalter, E. (2009). What is equity in education? Reflections from the capability approach. *Studies in Philosophy and Education*, *28*(5), 415-424.

Unterhalter, E. (2012). Inequality, capabilities and poverty in four African countries: Girls' voice, schooling, and strategies for institutional change. *Cambridge Journal of Education, 42*(3), 307-325.

Unterhalter, E. (2013). Educating capabilities. *Journal of Human Development and Capabilities*, *14*(1), 185-188.

Unterhalter, E. (2017). Negative capability? Measuring the unmeasurable in education. *Comparative Education*, *53*(1), 1-16.

Unterhalter, E. G., Ladwig, J., & Jeffrey, C. (2014). Aspirations, education and social justice: Applying Sen and Bourdieu. *British Journal of Sociology of Education, 35*(1), 133-145.

Van Caudenberg, R., Van Praag, L., Nouwen, W., Clycq, N., & Timmerman, C. (2017). *A Longitudinal Study of Educational Trajectories of Youth at Risk of Early School Leaving.* [Online] Available at: https://www.uantwerpen.be/en/projects/resl-eu/deliverables/resl-eu-publications/

Van Praag, L., Nouwen, W., Van Caudenberg, R., Clycq, N., & Timmerman, C. (Eds.). (2018). *Comparative Perspectives on Early School Leaving in the European Union*. Routledge.

Vassallo, J., Doublet Meagher, G. L., Zammit, N., Grech, L., Refalo, E., German, E. J., & Grech, L. (2021). Students' and Parents' Perspectives on Emergency E-learning in Kindergarten and Compulsory Education. *Malta Journal of Education.* Malta: Institute for Education.

Verger, A., Altinyelken, H. K., & Novelli, M. (Eds.). (2018). *Global Education Policy and International Development: New Agendas, Issues and Policies.* Bloomsbury Publishing.

Wacquant, L. J. (1989). Towards a reflexive sociology: A workshop with Pierre Bourdieu. *Sociological Theory*, 26-63.

Weinmann, T, Thomas, S, Brilmayer, S. (2012) Testing Skype as an interview method in epidemiologic research: response and feasibility. *International Journal of Public Health* 57(6): 959–961.

Walker, M. (2006). *Higher Education Pedagogies. A Capabilities Approach*. Maidenhead: Open University Press.

Walker, M. (2012). A capital or capabilities education narrative in a world of staggering inequalities? *International Journal of Educational Development, 32*(3), 384-393.

Walker, M. (2019). Defending the Need for a Foundational Epistemic Capability in Education. *Journal of Human Development and Capabilities*, *20*(2), 218-232.

Walker, M., & Unterhalter, E. (2007). *Amartya Sen's Capability Approach and Social Justice in Education*. Springer.

Walker, M., & Unterhalter, E. (2007). The capability approach: Its potential for work in education. In *Amartya Sen's Capability Approach and Social Justice in Education* (pp. 1-18). New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Warin, J. (2017). Creating a whole school ethos of care. *Emotional and Behavioural Difficulties, 22*(3), 188-199.

Watts, M. (2006). What Is Wrong with Widening Participation in Higher Education? In J. Satterthwaite et al. (Eds.), *Discourse, Resistance and Identity Formation* (pp. 169-184). Stoke-on-Trent: Trentham Books.

Watts, M. (2007). Capability, Identity and Access to Elite Universities. *Prospero, 13*(3), 22-33.

Watts, M. (2012). The Ethics of Widening Participation: The Funding of Higher Education. In F. Su, & B. McGettrick (Eds.), *Professional Ethics: Education for a*

Humane Society (pp. 138-152)*.* Newcastle Upon Tyne: Cambridge Students Publishing.

Watts, M., & Bridges, D. (2006). The Value of Non-Participation in Higher Education. *Journal of Education Policy, 21*(3), 267-290.

Weir, S. (2006). *A Report on the Procedures Used to Identify Post-Primary Schools for Inclusion in the School Support Programme Under DEIS.* [Online] Available at*:* http://www.erc.ie/documents/procedures_for_selecting_post-primary_schools_for_deis.pdf

Weir, S., Kavanagh, L., Moran, E., & Ryan, A. (2018). *Partnership in DEIS Schools: A Survey of Home-School-Community Liaison Coordinators in Primary and Post-Primary Schools in Ireland.* Dublin: Educational Research Centre.

Wesselink, A., Colebatch, H., & Pearce, W. (2014). Evidence and policy: Discourses, meanings and practices. *Policy Sciences, 47,* 339-344.

Wilson, S., & McGuire, K. (2021). 'They'd already made their minds up': Understanding the impact of stigma on parental engagement. *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, *42*(5-6), 775-791.

Wood, P., & Warin, J. (2014). Social and emotional aspects of learning: Complementing, compensating and countering parental practices. *British Educational Research Journal, 40(*6), 937-951.

Yazan, B. (2015). Three approaches to case study methods in education: Yin, Merriam, and Stake. *The Qualitative Report*, *20*(2),134-152.

Yin, R. K. (2014). *Case Study Research: Design and Methods* (5th edition). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

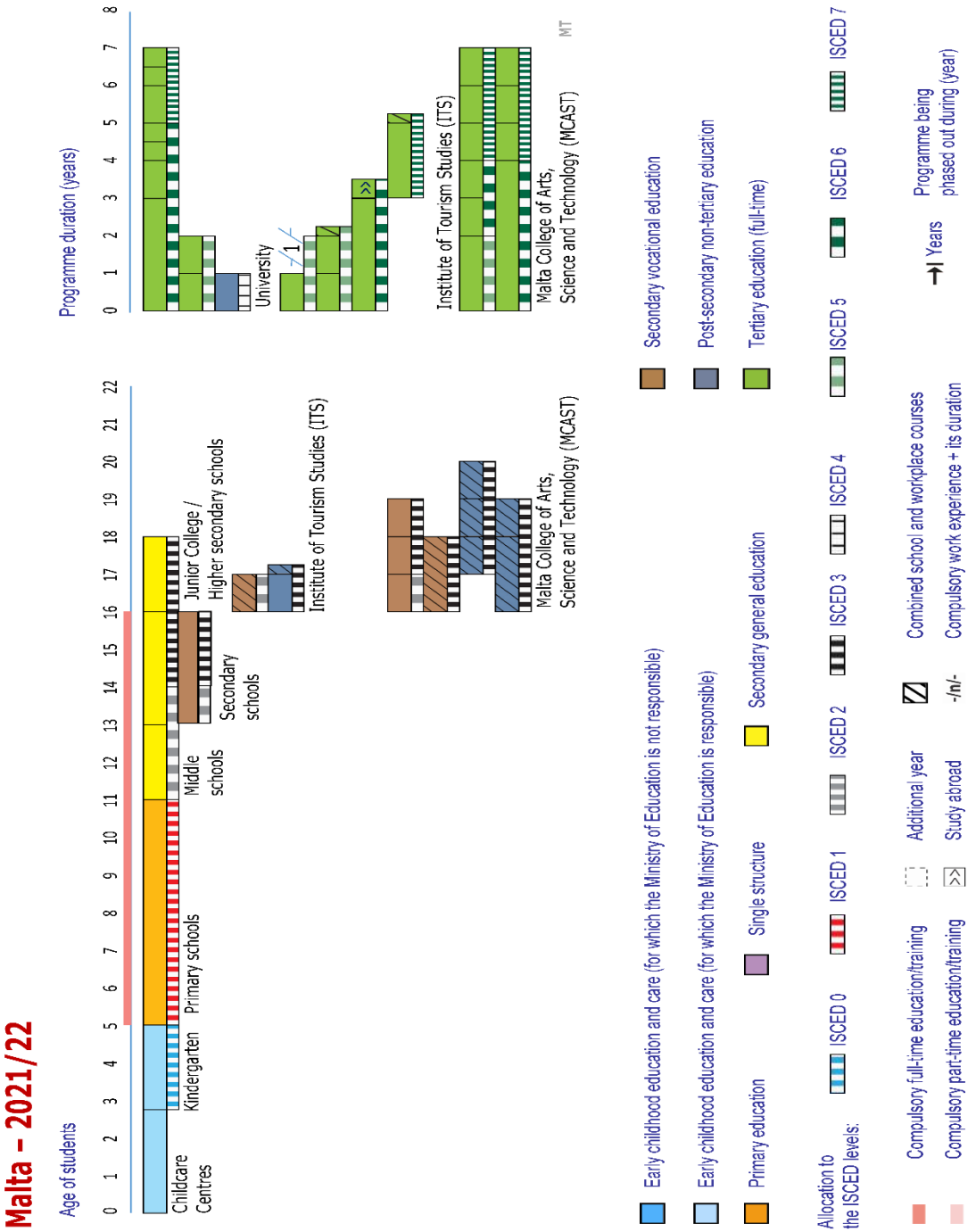
Yin, R. K. (2018). *Case Study Research and Applications. Design and Methods*. London: Sage Publications.

Young, M. D., & Diem, S. (2014). Putting critical theoretical perspectives to work in educational policy*. International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education, 27*(9), 1063-1067.

Zajda, J. (Ed.). (2015). *Second International Handbook on Globalisation, Education and Policy Research* (2015 edition). Dordrecht, Netherlands: Springer.

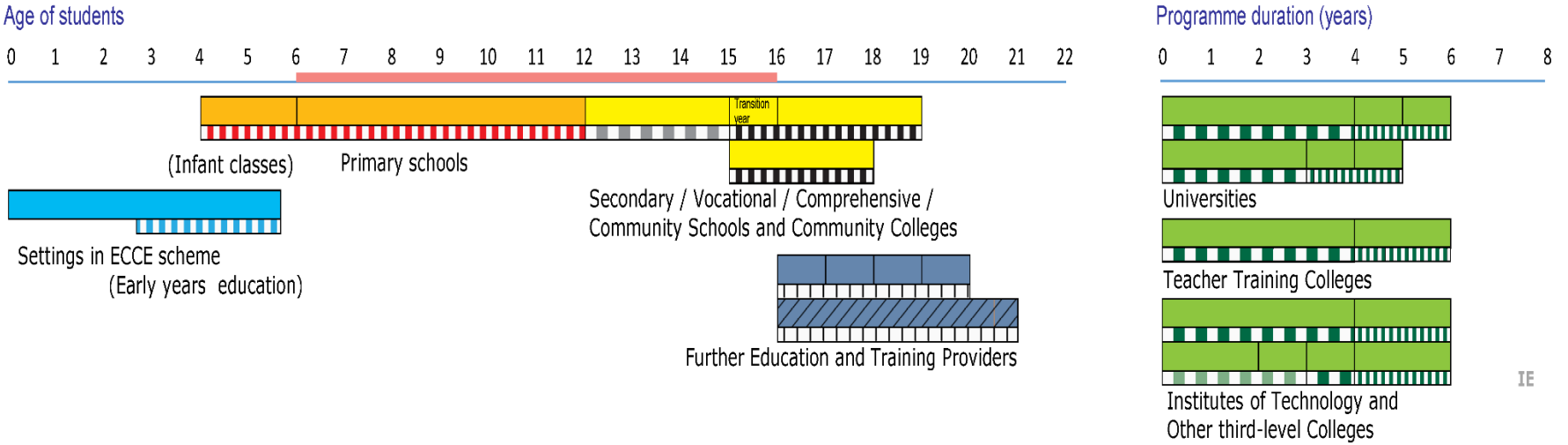
9. Appendices

APPENDIX A: Education Process and Structures in Malta and Ireland[4]



[4] European Education and Culture Executive Agency, Eurydice, Baïdak, N., De Coster, I., Sicurella, A. (2021) *The structure of the European education systems 2021/22*. Publications Office.

Ireland – 2021/22



Early childhood education and care (for which the Ministry of Education is not responsible)

Early childhood education and care (for which the Ministry of Education is responsible)

Primary education

Single structure

Secondary general education

Secondary vocational education

Post-secondary non-tertiary education

Tertiary education (full-time)

Allocation to the ISCED levels: ISCED 0 ISCED 1 ISCED 2 ISCED 3 ISCED 4 ISCED 5 ISCED 6 ISCED 7

Compulsory full-time education/training

Compulsory part-time education/training

Additional year

Study abroad

Combined school and workplace courses

-/n/- Compulsory work experience + its duration

Years

Programme being phased out during (year)

APPENDIX B: Participant Information Sheet and Consent Form

Lancaster University

Participant information sheet

Project Title: **"Bridging the home and school educational inequality gap:** ***Merging Policy Learning and Borrowing to promote equity and a social justice change in ELET*** **(Early Leaving from Education and Training).**

For further information about how Lancaster University processes personal data for research purposes and your data rights please visit our webpage: www.lancaster.ac.uk/research/data-protection

My name is Pamela Marie Spiteri I am a PhD student at Lancaster University and I would like to invite you to take part in a research study about bridging the home and school educational inequality gap in order to prevent early leaving from education and training.

Please take time to read the following information carefully before you decide whether or not you wish to take part.

What is the study about?
The study will first evaluate how the HSCL (home school community liaison programme) in Ireland, supports the link between school and home in cases were students come from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds. Secondly this study will attempt to assess the feasibility of a possible similar model for Malta through policy borrowing and learning procedures.

The project will take place over 18-24 months and should you agree to participate, the data collection stage should begin on a date to be confirmed once all the responses have been received.

Why have I been invited?
You have been invited in this study as you work in a school or live in an area with potential high at risk factors of early leaving from education and training for students.

I would be very grateful if you would agree to take part in this study.

What will I be asked to do if I take part?

If you decided to take part, this would involve the following:

- You will be asked to take part in an interview during the period of January – June 2020. Dates and times will be decided once all participants' individual circumstances have been considered and arrangements can be made accordingly.
- Interviews will last between 30 min to 1 hr.

- You will be asked to sign a consent form which will be stored by me as the lead researcher together with this information sheet. You will be given a copy of both of these documents for your reference.
- There are no right or wrong answers but rather participants are asked to be as honest as possible in their answers.

What are the possible benefits from taking part?
Taking part in this study will allow you to share your experiences of different educational inequalities you might have witnessed or suffered and possible strategies of how you might have overcome some obstacles. If you take part in this study, your insights will contribute to the development of a possible model that will be used to minimise educational barriers that might be brought about due to children's socio-economic disadvantaged backgrounds.

Do I have to take part?
No. It's completely up to you to decide whether or not you take part. Your participation is voluntary.

What if I change my mind?
If you change your mind, you are free to withdraw at any time during your participation in this study. If you want to withdraw, please let me know, and I will extract any ideas or information (data) you contributed to the study and destroy them. However, it is difficult and often impossible to take out data from one specific participant when this has already been anonymised or pooled together with other people's data. Therefore, you can only withdraw up to 8 weeks after taking part in the study.

What are the possible disadvantages and risks of taking part?
I do not foresee any risks except perhaps some slight discomfort when questioned about personal experiences. However, it is hoped that issues can be discussed openly, honestly and professionally. It is anticipated that each interview might take up to 1 hour of your time. Following the transcripts I might get back to you should I need to clarify anything you said during the interview.

Will my data be identifiable?

Interviews will be transcribed by myself as the researcher. The original recordings will only be accessible by me in my capacity as the researcher and will be digitally stored and encrypted.

I will keep your name and other information about you that can identify you confidential, that is I will not share it with others and will remove any personal information from the written record of your contribution.

How will we use the information you have shared with us and what will happen to the results of the research study?
I will use the information you have shared with me for research purposes only. This will include; my PhD thesis and other publications such as journal articles or books chapters. I may also present the results of

my study at academic conferences, lectures and/or policy-making debates within my remit at work as an education officer for preventing early leaving from education and training.

If any other use was to be suggested, you would be asked for written permission first.

When writing up the findings from this study, I would like to reproduce some of the views and ideas you shared with me. I will only use anonymised quotes from your responses. Although I will use your exact words, you will not be identified in any publications.

If anything you share with me during the interviews suggests that you or somebody else might be at risk of harm, I will be obliged to share this information with Dr Melis Cin. If possible I will inform you of this breach of confidentiality.

How my data will be stored

Your data will be stored in encrypted files (that is no-one other than me, the researcher will be able to access them) and on password-protected computers. There will be no hard copies of data stored. I will keep data that can identify you separately from non-personal information. In accordance with University guidelines, I will keep the data securely for a minimum of ten years.

What if I have a question or concern?

If you have any queries or if you are unhappy with anything that happens concerning your participation in the study, please contact myself via e-mail p.spiteri@lancaster.ac.uk and/or Dr Melis Cin, m.cin@lancaster.ac.uk Educational Research, County South, Lancaster University, Lancaster, United Kingdom, LA1 4YD

If you have any concerns or complaints that you wish to discuss with a person who is not directly involved in the research, you may also contact:

Dr Jo Warin j.warin@lancaster.ac.uk
Educational Research
County South
Lancaster University
Lancaster
United Kingdom
LA1 4YD

This study has been reviewed and approved by the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences and Lancaster Management School's Research Ethics Committee.

Thank you for considering your participation in this project.

CONSENT FORM (adult participants 18+)

Lancaster University

Project Title: Bridging the home and school educational inequality gap: *Merging Policy Learning and Borrowing to promote equity and a social justice change in ELET* (Early Leaving from Education and Training)

Name of Researchers: Pamela Marie Spiteri
Email: p.spiteri@lancaster.ac.uk

Please tick each box

1. I confirm that I have read and understand the information sheet for the above study. I have had the opportunity to consider the information, ask questions and have had these answered satisfactorily	☐
2. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time during my participation in this study and within 8 weeks after I took part in the study, without giving any reason. If I withdraw within 8 weeks of taking part in the study my data will be removed. If I am involved in an interview and withdraw after 8 weeks my data will remain part of the study. I understand that the data collected during the interview is part of the ongoing conversation and cannot be destroyed.	☐
3. I understand that any information given by me may be used in future reports, academic articles, publications or presentations by the researcher/s, but my personal information will not be included and I will not be identifiable.	☐
4. I understand that my name/my organisation's name will not appear in any reports, articles or presentation without my consent.	☐
5. I understand that interviews will be audio-recorded and transcribed and that data will be protected on encrypted devices and kept secure.	☐
6. I understand that data will be kept according to University guidelines for a minimum of 10 years after the end of the study.	☐
7. I agree to take part in the above study.	☐

_____ _____ _____
Name of Participant Date Signature

I confirm that the participant was given an opportunity to ask questions about the study, and all the questions asked by the participant have been answered correctly and to the best of my ability. I confirm that the individual has not been coerced into giving consent, and the consent has been given freely and voluntarily.

Signature of Researcher /person taking the consent_____ **Date** _____ Day/month/year

One copy of this form will be given to the participant and the original kept in the files of the researcher at Lancaster University

APPENDIX C: Observation Forms

Semi-Structured Observation Form (Parents' Training Session)

DATE:_____ LOCATION: _____

TIME START:_____
FINISH: _____

Aim :_____
(Why are parents participating in training session?)

No. of parents attending _____

No. of educators attending _____

Who is leading training session? Parent/Educator/Both _____

Other Participants: _____

SUMMARY OF ACTIVITIES OBSERVED

Activity	Parent Role (Leader/Listener/Observer….?)	Parent Feedback (Questions/Comments) (Active/Passive/Reluctant/Engaged…?

Notes (Capabilities/Functionings/Agency/Limiting Factors):

Semi-Structured Observation Form (Educators' Training Session)

DATE:_____ LOCATION: _____

TIME START:_____
FINISH: _____

Aim :_____
(Why are educators participating in training session?)

No. of parents attending _____

No. of educators attending _____

Who is leading training session? Parent/Educator/Both _____

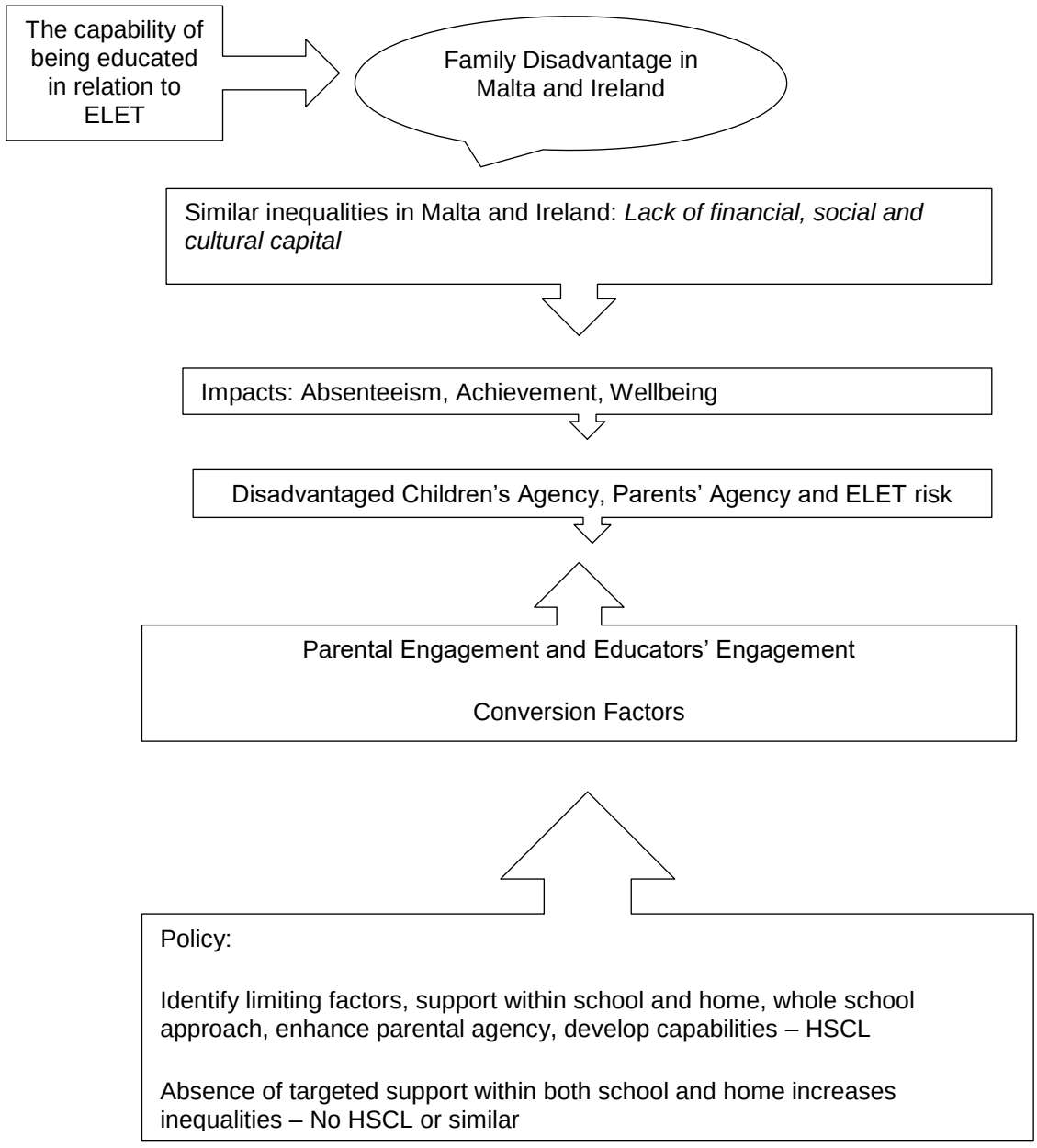
Other Participants: _____

SUMMARY OF ACTIVITIES OBSERVED

Activity	Educators' Role (Leader/Listener/Observer….?)	Educators' Feedback (Questions/Comments) (Active/Passive/Reluctant/Engaged…?

Notes (Capabilities/Functionings/Agency/Limiting Factors):

APPENDIX D: Final Thematic Web (abridged)



List of most used Abbreviations

CA	Capability Approach
DEIS	Delivering Quality of Opportunity in Schools (Ireland)
ELET	Early Leaving from Education and Training
ESL	Early School Leaving
EU	European Union
HSCL	Home School Community Liaison
MFED	Ministry for Education (Malta)
SBAF	Sen Bourdieu Analytical Framework