Discourses We Live By
Narratives of Educational and Social Endeavour

Edited by Hazel R. Wright and Marianne Høyen

What are the influences that govern how people view their worlds? What are the embedded values and practices that underpin the ways people think and act? Discourses We Live By approaches these questions through narrative research, in a process that uses words, images, activities or artefacts to ask people – either individually or collectively within social groupings – to examine, discuss, portray or otherwise make public their place in the world, their sense of belonging to (and identity within) the physical and cultural space they inhabit.

This book is a rich and multifaceted collection of twenty-eight chapters that use varied lenses to examine the discourses that shape people's lives. The contributors are themselves from many backgrounds – different academic disciplines within the humanities and social sciences, diverse professional practices and a range of countries and cultures. They represent a broad spectrum of age, status and outlook, and variously apply their research methods – but share a common interest in people, their lives, thoughts and actions. Gathering such eclectic experiences as those of student-teachers in Kenya, a released prisoner in Denmark, academics in Colombia, a group of migrants learning English, and gambling addiction support-workers in Italy, alongside more mainstream educational themes, the book presents a fascinating array of insights.

Discourses We Live By will be essential reading for adult educators and practitioners, those involved with educational and professional practice, narrative researchers, and many sociologists. It will appeal to all who want to know how narratives shape the way we live and the way we talk about our lives.

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10. Irish Students Turning First-Year Transition Obstacles into Successful Progression

Vera Sheridan

Vera Sheridan provides a comprehensive overview of the literature on student retention and progression before discussing the narrative accounts of four Irish students who successfully continued their studies after failing in the first year, seeking to understand how this was achieved.

Significant levels of research into student progression during the first year of higher education exist internationally (James, Krause & Jennings, 2010; Tinto 1994, 2006; Yorke & Longden, 2008). A key theme to emerge from such studies is that there is no one single factor that affects the first-year student experience but a combination of academic, social, economic and personal factors that contribute to successful progression in higher education. Academic support (Leese, 2010) and social support, as from family and friends (Wilcox, Finn & Fyvie-Gauld, 2005), affect retention, as do economic factors (Bozick, 2007) including working while studying (Curtis & Shani, 2002). Particular student characteristics, such as social class and belonging (Ostrove & Long, 2007), being the eldest in the family (O'Shea, 2007), being a mature student (Reay, Crozier & Clayton, 2010) and coming from a minority (Carter, 2006) can also influence student outcomes and retention rates.

Retention and progression — these two terms are used together regularly — present as indicators of student success, often in large-scale institutional or national surveys. A limited, statistical definition
of retention/progression rates, however, suggests a one-dimensional model, whereas for Ashby (2004) retention is multidimensional and contains institutional, student and employer aspects. The institutional dimension presents the indicators used to measure retention, and, with the expansion of higher education, high drop-out rates serve as indicators of institutional performance. The student dimension broadens the definition of retention as it includes the results of student feedback from withdrawal, course and satisfaction surveys. The employer dimension represents value for money, such as the contribution of skills to employability. The student dimension involves failing in first year, with failure here referring to not passing assignment/s. However, if the characteristics of retention/progression are multidimensional, failure to progress could equally be interpreted as being multidimensional, composed of academic, social, economic and personal factors. Consequently, the focus in this study is on the student dimension of retention and initial failure in first year, in a qualitative study of school leavers grounded in the Irish higher education context.

Intermittent research into retention or non-completion in Ireland has involved a single institution (Baird, 2002; Blaney & Mulkeen, 2008) or a particular higher-education sector, such as institutions of technology, which have experienced high dropout rates (Eivers, Flanagan & Morgan, 2002). The Higher Education Authority produced the first comprehensive study (Mooney et al., 2010) of retention/progression across the entirety of the Irish higher-level sector, followed by Frawley, Piggott & Carroll’s (2017) report. In this report, on average fifteen per cent of new entrants are no longer present one year later across all higher education sectors. There is a rise in non-progression from nine per cent to eleven per cent across the universities from 2007–2015. A similar trend for university arts/social sciences is present in this period with non-progression rates rising from nine per cent to twelve per cent so that retention and non-progression warrant further investigation.

In the Irish context, academic performance is a greater indicator of successful progression from first year to second year than age, gender or social class and Mooney et al. (2010) point to the central role played by Leaving Certificate\(^1\) results in progression by emphasizing the:

\(^1\) End-of-school examinations that enable entry to higher education.
importance of students’ ability in meeting the academic demands of higher education. The results (of the Leaving Certificate) also highlight the importance of academic preparedness prior to entry and adequate learning supports on entry to higher education as students who fail first year and have to repeat are more likely not to progress to second year. (Mooney et al., 2010, p. 45)

Academic performance relates to the high percentage of students from the professional and managerial classes who are more likely to enrol in university than students from working-class backgrounds, for instance, despite the abolition of fees in 1997. Participation levels among students from highly professional families have reached a virtual saturation point while students from the other end of the social spectrum have not increased in numbers as significantly, despite the expansion of higher education from twenty per cent participation in the 1980s to fifty-four per cent by 2003 (McCoy & Smyth, 2011). Thus, further expansion relies on an increase in student participation from more disadvantaged groups. One of the aims for sectoral reform is to increase capacity ‘while at the same time enhancing diversity’ (HEA, 2016, p. 78) which would indicate ongoing concern with retention in a more diverse student body.

University entry procedures in Ireland link the number of course places to a points system: the results of the Leaving Certificate, the terminal secondary school examinations by subject, determine university entry through the number of points attained and the number of points required for a specific course. Mooney et al. (2010, p. 45) point to the central role of Leaving Certificate results ‘in meeting the academic demands of higher education’ and as ‘academic preparedness prior to entry’. During the first year of a three-year undergraduate course, non-progression is due to factors such as making an uninformed decision regarding course choice (Mooney et al., 2010), a difficult transition (Sheridan & Dunne, 2012), assessment in university (Fleming & Finnegan, 2011) and the cost of living (McCoy & Smyth, 2011), particularly accommodation. Fleming and Finnegan (2011) advocate listening to students about their experiences as their narratives are not simple, one-dimensional accounts but are complex and multi-layered. They point towards an in-depth approach to retention, as in this qualitative study with first-year students who overcome obstacles to proceed to subsequent course years.
Theorizing Transition

There is no one first-year experience, but rather a multiplicity of experiences (Harvey & Drew, 2006; Pitkethly & Prosser, 2001) which relate to the interactions between a higher-level institution and its students. Such interactions are themselves grounded in the particular sociocultural contexts of each university (Pitkethly & Prosser, 2001). Students begin the process of reconceptualizing the self in the break from home accompanied by homesickness and the weakening of old friendship ties leading to a realignment of friendships, including eventual break-up with boyfriends or girlfriends (Chow & Healey, 2008). A body of research has emerged which has shifted attention to Bourdieu and relates to the embodiment of social and cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986) and of habitus or the ‘sense of one’s place’ in social space (Bourdieu, 1989, p. 19). Such research has focused on institutional habitus (Reay, Crozier & Clayton, 2010: Sheridan, 2011), the role of habitus in retention (Thomas, 2002), social class (Reay, 1998; Quinn, 2004), gender (David et al., 2003) and cultural capital (Longden, 2004) in relation to early departure. Reay (2004) has critiqued what she considers to be an over-reliance on Bourdieu, particularly when research merely references habitus rather than working fully with the concept.

Higher education research has also turned to anthropology, to the concept of liminality as part of rites of passage (Turner, 1967; Van Gennep, 1960), which occurs as movement from membership of one group to another as from youth to adult status. This movement occurs across three stages: separation, transition and incorporation as an adult into society in accordance with its norms and beliefs. Each of these three stages involves different patterns of interaction between the individual and others where separation is the detachment, via decreasing interaction, with the group that is being left behind and where the individual is known. To enter a new group, a border is crossed, which includes a period of transition where the individual begins to act in new ways according to the norms of this new group. This second stage is critical as the individual is in the process of acquiring new knowledge to carry out the demands of the new role in the group but, simultaneously, is still a stranger who can feel isolated and untethered from the norms.
and beliefs of the past and future full membership of the new group. Consequently, this transitional stage carries all the dangers of departure from the group before achieving incorporation or full competency of group membership. Following incorporation, the individual can return to previous relationships with others having achieved the status of full member of the new group.

Turner (1967) considered the process of transition, the second phase of Van Gennep’s (1960) rites of passage, to be transformative and termed the sociocultural properties of this second phase as ‘margin’ or ‘limen’. The liminal individual is invisible by neither leaving nor fully becoming so that the individual has a physical but no social reality. The individual’s condition ‘is one of ambiguity and paradox’ being ‘neither one thing nor another’ (Turner, 1967, p. 97). Turner characterizes the ‘peculiar unity of the liminal: that which is neither this nor that, and yet is both’ (ibid., p. 99) where an individual is in a position to think about society so that liminality becomes ‘a stage of reflection’ (ibid., p. 105) of this ‘betwixt and between’ period (ibid., p. 110). Studies on identity/ies in higher education draw on liminality in examinations of student-hood (Field & Morgan Klein, 2010), liminal identities in lifelong learning (Field, 2012), the positions of graduate teaching assistants (Winstone & Moore, 2017), doctoral students (Keefer, 2015), and teaching and learning (Cook-Sather & Alter, 2011). Liminality continues to inform education, such as the threshold concepts of student learning, according to which upsets to familiar understandings can open a portal to new ways of thinking, which subsequently lead to alterations in a learner’s subjectivity or story of the self (Land, Rattray & Vivian, 2014). There are critiques of the ambiguous nature of the threshold concept resulting in different understandings of the theory (Rowbottom, 2007). The linear progression contained in the concept of liminality is also questioned, as liminality does not necessarily result in a simple transition from one status to another but can, instead, develop into a reconciliation of different cultural values as in biculturalism (Uttal, 2010).

Tinto (1988) applies a rites of passage approach to retention by focusing on a student’s transition from school to university as it involves some separation from the past to result in successful incorporation into the new community of the university. Difficulties encountered in the transition process in the rites of passage:
are as much a reflection of the problems inherent in shifts of community membership as they are either of the personality of individuals or of the institution in which membership is sought. (Tinto, 1988, p. 442)

In effect, the transition is multi-layered in terms of relationships such as friends, family and home, and Tinto characterizes the physical and social parting from these relationships as painful or at least disorientating. Transition can involve stress, a sense of loss and bewilderment, and a student can withdraw from university early in first year without support. In the liminal space, Palmer, O’Kane & Owens (2009) view student transition as the transformative space betwixt and between home and university where students forge a sense of belonging to life at university. They critique theorizing of student first-year experience that omits the social aspect of transition and also ignores the student voice in the first few weeks of university, both of which are prominent in this research.

**Method**

The research poses the question: in what ways do students who fail in first year manage to resolve this experience to continue successfully with their studies?

This study focuses on the subjective understanding of life experience in the shifting story of the self (Bruner, 1990), in which narrative provides a meaningful sequence of events in a social context (Elliot, 2005). A small group of students, who failed a first-semester module, each wrote an essay reflecting on this failure for their repeat assessment. This assignment produced rich, autobiographical reflections on the issues these students considered significant to their lack of success in their first year. The interviews follow up four of these students who subsequently progressed successfully. Each interview revisited the concerns voiced in the reflective essay to see if and how these concerns, which had inhibited connecting with the academic and social life of the university, had been resolved. The interviews occurred in the first semester of either the second or third year, depending on progression. Consequently, the data spans a period of approximately two and a half years and presents an in-depth perspective on how students who did
not begin well turned a negative experience into a successful navigation of their undergraduate course.

Out of six possible participants, three young women, Laoise, Caomhe, Saoirse and one young man, Fiachra, gave permission to use their reflective essay as a source of data; they have been given atypical Irish names for anonymity. They can be considered an opportunistic sample (Onwuegbuzie & Leech, 2007) emerging from an ongoing study, approved by the university’s Ethics Committee, on transition to higher-level education (see Sheridan & Dunne, 2012). My email request for participation came a year after the official promulgation of student results so that there was no pressure to participate and the four students gave permission for face-to-face interviews with one email interview.

Data Analysis

Following West in Merrill & West (2009), a biography was created for each of the four participants from the reflective essays to provide the personal context for the stumbling blocks to progression. Secondly, taking a liminal perspective, each data set was analysed thematically (Plummer, 2001; Riessman, 2008) resulting in a table of themes and their categories for each data set. Overlapping themes were merged to create the set of themes that affect the transformation process from school leaver to successful first-year undergraduate and these are:

- Interpersonal relations: friendships, working with others.
- Personal development: being too young/maturity, responsibilities, motivation.
- Balancing competing demands: paid employment, balancing work and college, managing stress, values.
- Learning: autonomy, group work, presentations, timetable, difference between school and college, uncertainty in first semester.

The individual biographies detail how aspects of these themes coalesced in first year to produce failure, followed by the management of failure as it was transformed into successful progression.
Laoise had no other responsibility at school apart from working to achieve the highest points possible in her Leaving Certificate examination. She considered herself to be mature and discovered her personal drive at the age of fifteen when she decided on a particular university course following sensible advice provided by her school’s guidance counsellor. She successfully completed her Leaving Certificate but decided that at seventeen she would be too young to go to university. Instead, she gained another qualification through further education and saved up money so that she was ready to leave home and set up on her own in her first year at university. She would seem to possess qualities to become a successful first-year undergraduate, but found that already being in a relationship held her back to some extent in finding new friends or engaging in campus activities. Laoise referred to a protracted ‘in-between’ stage regarding her friendships as she did not live on campus or commute regularly:

I think I was in that awkward limbo [...]. I still connected to my own friends but I still connected to my college friends and I was kind of in-between the two and obviously I’m still like that; I’m still talking to people from home but I definitely have made connections.

Laoise refers to being ‘in-between’ the old and the new with regard to friends and feeling lonely as she drifted away from secondary-school friends without having made new ones at university.

She had to contend with stress from trying to manage her personal finances and finding accommodation to share with people she liked. During her first year she moved regularly into different accommodation as a cost-saving measure and worked at night as her parents were not able to contribute towards university costs. As well as these upsets, Laoise struggled with non-compulsory attendance and felt that she had no routine. She found it hard to balance paid employment and living costs with academic work and felt that the ensuing tension affected her first year:

It definitely did sacrifice first year, I can say it absolutely did, but it was just ... it was a solution that I came to, was to find somewhere with
cheaper rent and to not get myself into debt, and ... I’m still trying to find that now, where to find cheap rent ... First year I was working nights to try and get in eight hours and that wasn’t a solution either and now I’m room sharing and that’s still not a solution but I think again it’s just a life experience; it’s that difficult for a student, you know, scraping the money together.

Laoise prioritized leaving university debt-free so that financing her studies played a critical role in her life, despite entering first year with some savings, and regardless of its effect on her learning and assessment outcomes.

Caiomhe

Accommodation and interpersonal relations also affected Caiomhe as she went to school in a town where people knew each other; she enjoyed the closeness of being surrounded by family members living nearby, knowing her neighbours and having plenty of friends. She shared an apartment with friends in first year, but felt homesick, distanced herself from university social life and began to stay alone in the shared apartment watching television even as she saw her roommates go to classes regularly, make friends and enjoy academic life. She felt unsafe in the area of Dublin where she was living, and told family this when she returned home at weekends, resulting in Caiomhe travelling back to university on Monday mornings and missing classes. The more her friends began to enjoy college life, the more entrenched her distancing routine became: she did not even seek help for her dyslexia. She was not enjoying some of the modules she had chosen; she thought they were ‘pointless’, not ‘proper’ subjects and it appeared so easy to do well that it would be impossible to fail assignments.

Living away from home raised questions about her social values and sense of self:

... it was just a big shock I think because the place where I lived in first year I didn’t get to know any of my neighbours, [...] when I was signing into the lift going up and down to my apartment I didn’t talk to that person and have never in my life had that, even like when I’m walking along the streets in __________ when I see somebody I automatically say ‘hello’ and then go ‘oh God, they don’t know you, they think you’re
weird’, but it’s just the way that I’ve grown up with that and it stuck with me the whole way along.

Not being able to manage the changing nature of interpersonal relationships inter-linked with personal responsibility in her academic work, such as becoming involved with group-work assignments, so that each negative reaction reinforced the distancing from the academic and social life of the university. The lack of experience of working with others in group work became an impediment, and led to not being able to manage disagreements tactfully and to increasing absence:

I kept dodging them and didn’t go and then have people getting angry at me and then you fall into a cycle and keep continuing and then if people say ‘oh, I don’t want to work with Caiomhe because she’s… She doesn’t meet or she doesn’t do what she has to do to pull her weight in the group’, it really was a cycle and I had to work so hard to pull that around because I had got that image in first year.

Overall, interpersonal relationships presented immediate hurdles which appeared insurmountable and led to disengagement and withdrawal. Caiomhe had felt ‘untouchable’ having gained her place at university but seriously underestimated the level of academic commitment she had to make. She realized that she had to change:

I was just so lost; I was devastated and I remember telling my parents and them being so angry with me and me just covering it up and saying I didn’t like my course but I’d never really given it a chance so I didn’t know whether I liked it or not … that day when I saw them [her results] I thought to myself ‘you need to get your act together, you need one shot at this and you know you haven’t given this course a chance’ … those exams stuck with me for so long because I had to wait the whole summer, […] it was constantly at the back of my mind so I just had to pull up my socks and I did in fairness, I did do it but knowing that those repeats were still coming I found that I didn’t actually break free from it at all until I actually passed them and I got into second year.

At that point Caiomhe considered that her first year was not only about meeting academic challenges but that ‘it has also given me an education on life’.
In school, Fiachra considered the careers guidance to be poor, particularly as he was not sure what he wanted to do, and he chose a college course solely because of its title without investigating further. He spent two months in his first college and, despite his parents’ anger, he dropped out and then lived through some months of sheer boredom as he had nothing to do until he was offered an outdoor job. While working he began a thorough search for another course, found one of interest and even consulted a friend who had completed the same programme. Unfortunately, he had a relationship break-up in first year and withdrew into himself.

Fiachra prioritized the creation of friendships, which provides a reason for being on campus:

if you don’t make friends straightaway you’re not as inclined to come in, cos you don’t have someone to talk to cos even if you have friends coming in that are in other courses, you are more inclined if you make friends straightaway in your class you are more inclined to come in [...] instead of just being on your own.

Attendance affected the possibility to make friends as Fiachra, like Caomhie fell into a cycle of non-attendance that became a self-fulfilling habit of absence:

Even at first I think it was the thought of just ‘ah I’ll skip this class it’s only one day, it’s only a couple of hours’ and then I’d made a habit of that so that was the worst part of it.

As material was available through Moodle, the virtual learning platform, Fiachra felt he could do everything on his own, but did not complete assignments on time as well as not attending classes. He failed core modules and said:

Some of my funds for college that I saved up from work have to go towards exam repeats and I have learned a valuable lesson, that not going to class and handing mediocre assignments up end in disaster and unnecessary stress.

Consequently, he felt that he had paid the price for non-attendance in first year even if he had come to appreciate the social aspect of his
university life where he ‘enjoyed the night life without ever going too overboard like many other students usually do’.

Saoirse

Saoirse had made the transition from primary to secondary school with many of her friends and was anxious about beginning university life alone, as her friends had chosen other colleges. She made friends quickly by joining different societies so that ‘the social life of college very quickly proved to be much busier and exciting than that of my school one’. She found the cost of college surprising — the expense of food and transport and the price of course books — as she was used to spending money only at the end of the school week. Saoirse considered herself fortunate that her parents could subsidize her, though she did work six hours a week and felt it ‘was perfect for me, any more would have been overwhelming in my opinion’. She did find the commute to college difficult as she was used to strolling down the street to school, whereas travelling to university involved plenty of waiting around in between taking two forms of transport.

She struggled with the academic side of university life, as she had enjoyed a highly structured day in secondary school where her work was routinely checked. Her learning was based on how to answer a question to obtain the highest marks in her Leaving Certificate, an education practice of which she is now highly critical, as she no longer equates that type of learning with acquiring knowledge. Saoirse found a vast gap between school and university, particularly coping with independent study:

This whole concept of having to do your own independent study is really something I found challenging, in contrast to school homework and that feeling of completion I would feel after a few hours of homework done. With college work I find this feeling of completion as such is a much harder or sometimes merely impossible emotion to reach.

She found constructing an essay problematic with regard to selecting sources, being unsure who to cite despite having reading lists for her modules. Saoirse felt ‘weary’ as she was unable to cope with the ‘sheer volume of theorists and philosophers’.
Resolving Failure

Commonalities in the factors impeding a successful first year and resolutions to the crisis of failure experienced by these four students arise in this study. Failure can be overturned to create a successful university experience, as Saoirse explains that she ‘love(s) being in university, I loved my course, I didn’t want to fail so I realized I had to get my act together’.

Contributing to this realization came an understanding of having to work to belong to a community rather than remaining on the sidelines, as Saoirse says:

The importance of feeling like you belong, I feel in a big university a sense of belonging helps with your university work. After making friends I can remember making study groups.

The sense of belonging implies an emergence from the liminal state as each student worked through a combination of social, academic, economic and personal factors contributing to failure to transform failure into success. Personal development and interpersonal relations, planning — as in balancing competing demands — and developing autonomy as a learner contribute to this success.

Personal development, i.e., increasing maturity and a sense of responsibility, lead Fiachra to realize:

It’s up to yourself to go in whereas in school you’re made go in and so I think that at the start just maybe the freedom was like too much because I just ended up staying in bed all day... but then as I got older, like this year, I think it was just a fact that it’s well, it’s up to me to do it obviously grow up a bit more instead of staying in bed all day.

Fiachra approaches his experience as part of ‘growing up’, in which motivation and maturity become ongoing processes, so that some aspects of the transformation process of liminality appear to extend into the future. Students like Laoise also emphasized the value of experience such as paid work while studying:

I think that it’s really important for people to work through college to develop as a person because if you go straight from primary school, secondary school to college and you haven’t worked a day in your life, I think you’d be quite naïve to the real world.
The experience of failure transformed Caoimhe as she realized that her immature understanding of university life came from discourses shaped by fantasy:

I pictured it like an American high school the way you see on TV shows and it’s just so laid back and nobody cares and everyone is brainy anyway it doesn’t matter, you made it to college so you have to be smart you know, but it’s not like that at all.

Understanding does not, however, negate strong previously held values and attachments, so that Caoimhe, who had felt the separation from familiar surroundings so keenly, shared a house with friends in her second year and felt that she was ‘at home away from home’. She had found a way to reconcile her value system in her new environment.

Planning and balancing competing demands do not always become easier over time. The pressure of having to self-fund does not disappear; rather the nature of such pressure changes over time and becomes manageable, as Laoise says:

It’s just a life experience, it’s that difficult for a student, you know, scraping the money together. It would definitely be easier if I had more support from home of course, if they were able to fund me and my education, through a bit of cash here and there but it’s not the way it is, and again [...] I have a lot more experience and it’ll definitely stand to me but it’s still a struggle.

Vestiges of liminality can remain as unfinished business as Laoise refers to never accomplishing ‘one of those golden weeks where you’ve gone to every lecture; I still haven’t; I’m in my final year and I’ve still always missed one here and there’. She does, however, attend sufficiently to be successful.

Finally, from engagement with and subsequent experience of academic approaches to learning, students like Caoimhe critique a secondary school system that did not foster learner autonomy:

I think teachers need to let students do things by themselves because they look over your shoulder, they’re constantly on your back, pushing you, you know to do the best you can which is great but people also need to learn for themselves and you’re not going to do that because when you get to college you don’t have that person behind you pushing you to do well all the time; you have to go out and do it by yourself.
Their critiques included the role of the Catholic Church in education, the quality of guidance counselling, the lack of interaction with male pupils so that they could articulate their feelings and a distressing lack of involvement with mental health issues. In effect, the lack of confidence of these students to approach lecturers or student support to help resolve a multiplicity of problems in first year becomes understandable if no one listened to their views at secondary level.

**Discussion and Conclusion**

Field and Morgan-Klein (2010) argue that liminality applies to the entire period of studenthood as it is a temporary state with a clearly defined entrance and exit where a student achieves the status of graduate and moves into the labour market. In this study, students emphasize community and belonging and have no enjoyment of being ‘betwixt and between’. The liminal space, where transformation occurs, does not appear to be a fixed period, such as being restricted to first semester. The period of transformation extends beyond the boundary of the first year into the holiday period, when repeat examinations take place instead of satisfaction with progress. Only then is transformation complete, enabling successful progression to occur. Nor is incorporation achieved with a total success rate, such as achieving a hundred percent rate of attendance, as a student can succeed with less. Finally, while transformation in the liminal period implies progress towards a new state, the process involves an accommodation between the old and the new, such as reconciling the values of the ‘home’ place with those of the new environment. In this study the liminal phase does not appear to flow in a linear direction but rather appears to be an uneven process that produces change leading to success.

In this study, failure is not only an academic matter but is affected by a range of contributory factors, which points towards a definition of failure as being multidimensional. In the Irish context, academic preparedness has been stressed as being the most significant factor to affect retention and progression (Mooney et al., 2010). However, this qualitative study points towards a more complex situation involving guidance at secondary level, the effects of the Leaving Certificate on academic preparedness for higher-level education, financial
support, as well as personal factors including the changing nature of friendships, relationship break-ups and making new friends. Mooney et al. (2010) emphasize the role of guidance counsellors in aiding students to make informed choices about future study and there is evidence in this research that there is variation in the quality of such counselling. Neither class nor gender formed part of this study, which was composed of school leavers, and Mooney et al. (2010) do not consider them to be as significant as academic preparedness with regard to progression.

Finally, Mooney et al. (2010) state:

It is essential that all students leaving the second-level system are fully equipped for higher education in terms of academic preparatory, knowledge and understanding of course content and the requirements of the course, and an understanding of potential career paths. (Mooney et al., 2010, p. 45)

Evidently, this is not the case for the students in this study from their critique of teacher-centred learning focused on maximizing Leaving Certificate points. 71% of Irish higher-education academics consider students to be ill-prepared for higher-level study (Slowey, Kozina & Tan, 2014) and over half of academics find attendance is in decline. First year can confer anonymity instead of individuality (Pitkethly & Prosser, 2001) in institutions of mass education where fifty-nine per cent of academics teach in increasingly large classes (Slowey, Kozina & Tan, 2014). Academic-staff-to-student ratios increased from 1:15.6 to 1:20.6, while academic staff numbers have decreased since 2008 (HEA, 2016). Thus, there is pressure on the quality and funding of courses which can impact on future educational outcomes. At the same time there are policy recommendations that the higher-education sector should expand further because of the demand for skilled graduates: ‘under-participating sectors of society can be mobilized to access education’ (HEA, 2016, p. 10), which would indicate future deep engagement with a more diverse body of students with regard to retention and progression.
References


