Seeing the Wood from the Trees: A Critical Policy Analysis of Intersections between Social Class Inequality and Education in Twenty-first Century Ireland

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Abstract

This paper is a critical policy analysis of intersections between social class inequality and education policy in Ireland. The focus is upon contemporary policy and legislation such as The Irish Constitution and equality legislation; social inclusion policies such as the DEIS scheme; literacy and numeracy policy documents; as well as current government policy statements on education. It utilises Stephen Ball's policy analysis tools of *policy as text*, *policy as discourse* and *policy effects* to examine the social, cultural and political constructs of policy and legislation influencing social class inequality in education in Ireland (Ball, 1993). The focus is upon the refusal to name social class as a significant issue despite the weight of evidence showing the key influence class position and access to economic and cultural resources has on one's educational opportunities, experiences and outcomes. The approach taken here is discursive in the sense that the documents are the data and the findings are infused with detailed theoretical discussion of contemporary issues around inequality in education in Ireland. The analysis finds that the absence of social class in official policy and legislative discourses is indicative of a growing neoliberalisation of education policy in Ireland where increased foci on international comparisons and a consumer-driven philosophy of educational provision militate against equality for students from lower socio-economic groups.

Keywords: Critical policy analysis, Educational inequality, Social class and education, Irish education policy.

Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to examine intersections between social class inequality and Irish education policy through an analysis of the experiences and effects of national policy and legislation at a local level. I intend to examine the discord between policy and practice in the application of the Irish Constitution- Article 42 and DEIS (Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools) policy documents. I will also cast this critical lens towards some

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other relevant legislation and policy documents including some of the recent Equality legislation enacted in Ireland; the Education section of the government's *Government for National Recovery 2011-2016* and Ireland's literacy and numeracy strategy entitled *Literacy and Numeracy for Learning and Life* (including an earlier draft document that was released into the public domain). These documents have been chosen as representative of current policy in the area of education in particular and of equality issues in general. They are sociocultural artefacts that mediate practice and the dynamic functioning of society and therefore they need to be viewed critically. The focus here is on the dialectic and mediated nature of "power relations" that play out in the field of education in Ireland (Foucault, Faubion, Gordon, Rabinow, & Hurley, 2000).

In the contemporary Irish context, education policy is experiencing a golden age of generativity as the system continues to assume, and be consumed by, a directive stance on education and the work of schools generally. Irish education policy began to address educational disadvantage form the time of the *Investment in Education Report* (Government of Ireland, 1965). There have been several interventions in recent decades such as *Giving Children an Even Break, Breaking the Cycle and the Disadvantaged Areas Scheme* amongst others. These schemes were amalgamated in 2005 under the umbrella banner of Delivering Equality in Schools (DEIS). There have been some benefit to these policy changes in terms of DEIS[1] interventions for disadvantaged schools, continued discussions on pluralism in education through a national discussion forum and the Education (Admission to Schools) bill addressing equality (2015). However, it continues to be argued that these policy interventions view educational disadvantage in isolation and due regard must be paid to the fact that educational disadvantage is intrinsically linked to material poverty and wider economic inequalities in Irish society. The purpose here is not to deconstruct these policy artefacts for critique's sake but rather to emphasise the continuing disparity in terms of educational experiences and outcomes across social class strata in Irish society. For example, there is a significant disparity between students from middle-class schools who applied for higher education (94%) compared to half of the students from working-class schools (McCoy, Smyth, Watson, & Darmody, 2014). This recent Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI) report provides significant evidence for the classed outcomes of education for young people in Ireland. Ireland leads Europe in terms of percentages of young people entering higher education and yet the problem remains that the balance is tipped heavily in favour of the middle-classes (O'Connor & Staunton, 2015). This paper will focus upon a variety of textual artefacts drawn from legislation, education policy and government policy documents in order to offer an exposure of the construction of inequalities through Irish education policy and legislation.

Ireland, like many other countries in our globalised society, has become infused with neoliberal ways of doing education where the focus appears to shift from a narrative of equality and opportunity towards a narrative of global competitiveness, performativity and the 'freedom' of the individual to succeed and fail (Lynch, 2014; Lynch & Moran, 2006). Education policy and the intersection with various school choice agendas, as evidenced in a later analysis of the Irish Constitution, is a significant actor in the processes of class inequality in education (Cahill & Hall, 2014). The purpose here is to unfold the layers of policy that enable inequalities to flourish on the Irish educational landscape through a critical policy analysis of relevant legislation and policy. It is intended that his article will

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[1] DEIS (Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools) is the current phase of intervention relating to disadvantaged schools at primary and post-primary level. There are 194 DEIS schools at post-primary level and 657 primary schools serviced by the scheme through a variety of extra supports and interventions intended to address equality of educational opportunity. It was instigated in 2005 and is due for governmental review in 2015.

use the critical policy analysis lens to re-position social class as an important conceptualisation in the educational equality debate and emphasise the centrality of class position to "equality of condition" in educational terms (Lynch & Baker, 2005). Social class recognition would re-assert the causality of such issues as material poverty to educational performance and the position of individuals and schools within performative measures of achievement (Beckett, 2014). In fact, in the Irish situation, material poverty continues to divide society. O'Connor and Staunton (2015) also emphasise the continuing growth in income inequality and the concomitant effects this has on educational opportunities and attainments for the working classes. This growing income inequality is a feature of societies infused with neoliberal approaches to public policy where the influence of the market is held above such things as the educational opportunities of the less wealthy in society.

Lynch and Lodge (2002, p. 38) refer to Bourdieu (1996) when they state that "class stratifications are made effective through legitimating discourses of rights and duties, abilities and talents". In this paper, I will explore some of the guiding legislation and pertinent policy documents that operate in the field of school stratification, choice, freedom and equality of opportunity. Lynch and Lodge (2002, p. 39) make it clear that issues of class are discussed in Irish policy and yet that they are almost always discussed euphemistically. They continue to point out that:

> Euphemisms for class such as 'disadvantage', 'weak students', or in the adult education sector especially, 'community groups', remove class issues from their relational power and economic contexts and make mobilising for change around class all the more challenging.

(Lynch, 2000; Lynch & Lodge, 2002, p. 39)

Therefore, the focus here is upon disarming the euphemisms of class through interrogating the macro periphery of societal and ideological actions in order to expose the influence of wider policy on the lived experiences of people. This position is well supported by Ozga (1990, p. 359), as cited in Ball (2006, p. 43), who emphasises the necessity of bringing "together structural macro-level analysis of education systems and education policies and micro level investigation, especially that which takes account of people's perceptions and experiences." Furthermore, this piece will interrogate and expose the underlying "neoliberalness" of how particular policies are enacted in the sphere of Irish education

The implicit nature of neoliberal market policy is evidenced through its existence in practice but its absence in written policy. There are very real consequences of neoliberal implicitness as it functions in our society and more specifically in our education system. O'Sullivan (2005, p.174) recognises that the ideology of the market "is lived rather than named in its infusion of what have become unremarkable practices and expectations in the relationship between education and its public". It is this notion of a "lived", or almost latent, neoliberalism that creates the ideal conditions for hegemonic inequality to flourish. There is similar recognition of burgeoning neoliberal inequality, with particular reference to the Irish education market, in Lynch and Moran (2006). This ideological landscape impinges upon all aspects of life in Ireland. The following section of the paper will outline the conceptual tools deployed in the policy analysis that follows.

Critical policy analysis as methodology

Critical policy analysis refers to a form of education policy studies where the focus is upon exposing inconsistencies between what policy says and what policy does, particularly in terms of power relationships in society (Diem, Young, Welton, Mansfield, & Lee, 2014). The focus is often upon exploring how marginalised groups come to be marginalised through

policy and how existing unequal distributions of wealth and capital (economic, cultural and social) can be maintained through policy. It is akin to critical discourse analysis in that there is an emphasis upon "the cultural and historical acts of meaning making (Rogers, Malancharuvil-Berkes, Mosley, Hui, & Joseph, 2005, p. 369). In this sense all discourses, written, spoken and otherwise enacted are analysed as arenas of power and power struggles. Habermas (1970, p. 368), as cited in Cohen et al (2007, p. 389), states that the meaning of utterances can be viewed as either "the locutionary aspect – what is being said" or "the performatory content – what is being done or achieved through the utterance". This dichotomy is pertinent to the interpretation of the constitutional and policy documents being analysed here. I am aware that any discourse analysis is in itself a discourse and as such the need for critical reflexivity as an integral element of the research process. Therefore, my interpretation of a discourse is also a (re)constructing feature of the discourse ad infinitum. All documents, even foundational legislation, are a product of social interaction in a contextualised place, space and time. A document is constructed and created and at all times it reflects the subjectivity of its author(s) as well as the multifarious cultural and political positions of a particular historical juncture.

Central to this study is Stephen Ball's analytical toolbox where policy complexity is viewed in terms of *policy as text*, *policy as discourse* and *policy effects* (Ball, 1993).The approach to power utilised in Ball's work is similar to the interwoven and tapestried interconnectivity of that forwarded by Foucault. Power is not a singular entity employed by the dominant to oppress the other. It is a negotiated interaction between parties as they form and inform policy discourses. Ball (2006, p. 44) quotes Codd (1988, p. 239) who defines policy as "both contested and changing, always in a state of 'becoming', of 'was' and 'never was' and 'not quite'. Therefore, we must remain vigilant to the fact that interpretation is always subject to situated contextualisation in time, space and place. The micro-produced, meso-negotiated and macro-enacted framework provided below is useful in order to emphasise the socioculturally entwined nature of policy-making, enactments and outcomes.

Micro-produced text. The first strand of this framework considers the micro-produced text. This is the policy document, the piece of legislation, the interview transcript or the observational record in its linguistic essence. At this level, I consider Ball's *policy as text* (Ball, 2006, p. 44).This means that texts are negotiated documents produced through consensus and contain the results of negotiated micro-political mediations. Through analysis of the linguistic nuances, shape and statement of text we can produce meaning on a micro-level.

Meso-negotiated text. At this meso level, Ball refers to *policy as discourse* where policy is recognised as a negotiated discursive space infused with the ideologies and grand narratives of both the constructors and consumers of policy. Meaning is produced between the text, the people and their interpretations. Ball (2006, p. 48) draws upon Foucault in his construction of *policy as discourse* where power and knowledge are infused with the world. Policy and legislation are negotiated products of people, communities and ideological positions. As Ball (2006, p. 50) states:

> *We do need to recognise and analyse the existence of 'dominant' discourses, regimes of truth, erudite knowledges - like neo-liberalism and management theory- within social policy.*

In essence, Ball is highlighting the need for critique and awareness of the social positions mediated by policy and legislation. . He foregrounds policy as artefacts that are always situated and always infused with the wider narrative negotiations of negotiated discursive spaces.

Macro-enacted text. The macro-enacted text refers to how, as I have already discussed above, texts are imbued with their producers, interpreters, societal standpoints and ideological discourses. These texts then play out in the enacted-world where they are again subject to legitimation by the same actors who produce, interpret and most importantly who are laid subject to their implications. This is the sociocultural world of negotiated and mediated meanings. For Ball (2006, p. 51), this is the *context(s) of practice* and *policy effects* where:

> *First order effects are changes in practice or structure (which are evident in particular sites or across the system as a whole). And second order effects are the impact of these changes on patterns of social access and opportunity and social justice.*

In this current study, these sociocultural effects of policy on issues such as access to education, equality of educational opportunity and social justice are integral. The effects of policy in this macro-enacted space are simultaneously the micro-world of sites of policy enactment such as schools, family homes and communities. This is the analytical space of sociocultural practice - the enacted world of the policy or the act of legislation or of socio-political discourses. It is the space of action and interaction where the micro worlds of text production and negotiation play out in the real world and in the real lives of social actors. In effect, these discourses, and their textual artefacts, mediate the world for the social actor.

As a methodological approach, this critical policy analysis addresses some key aspects of legislation and policy impacting upon enactments in the education field. The above analytical tools are deployed in conjunction with close readings and electronic searches of the focus policy documents and items of legislation. The ensuing findings and discussion section treats each document in turn and applies the analytical frames detailed above in order to construct an empirical picture of the inequalities, enacted and potential, in twenty-first century Ireland.

Findings and Discussion

Questioning the Constitution

The Irish Constitution (1937), specifically Article 42 which refers to Education and Article 45 which refers to Social Policy, is integral to this critical policy analysis. It provides the framework through which "choice ideology [that] legitimates class reproduction and silences class dissent" is legitimated in Iris society (Lynch & Moran, 2006, p. 222). Choice is enshrined in Article 42.3.1 and 42.4, respectively, as a founding tenet of the Irish Constitution. It states that:

> *the state shall not oblige parents in violation of their conscience and lawful preference to send their children to schools established by the state, or to any particular type of school designated by the state*

and

> *when the public good requires, provide other educational facilities or institutions with due regard, however for the rights of parents, especially in the matter of religious and moral formation*

("Irish Constitution," 1937)

If we analyse the Constitution of Ireland as a text then it is a product of its time. It is concerned with the primacy of the parent and the family and the fact that religious and moral freedom must be provided and safeguarded. These are all commendable. O'Sullivan (2005) makes several references to the versatility that has been attached to Article 42. He suggests that the safeguarding of parental choice enshrined in the constitution has been

manipulated by theocentric, mercantile and modernist actors in the educational sphere. The "shared vocabulary" of our constitution allows "mercantilists" to instil choice and competition through the primacy of parental choice and responsibility, while the "theocentric" movement would use the very same words to protect religious patronage of primary and secondary schools (O'Sullivan, 2005). Texts such as the Constitution, and indeed all legislative and policy documents are produced and situated within a context. Therefore, their deployment in a situated time and condition context may alter significantly from the intended purposes. These texts are constantly mediated by situated cultural, social, historical and political contexts at any given point in time.

Therefore, once we look into this text as a modern text in the situated contextualisation of the present, there is strong evidence of metamorphosis and contestation. It becomes the tool of neo-liberal choice advocates and is increasingly used to protect class positions and to stimulate social reproduction through schooling. It can be argued that informed and "capital conscious" middle-class parents use the Irish Constitution, a document designed to protect the rights of all citizens, to create systematised class stratification in schools through choice. The discourse surrounding school choice is one of "success", of "what is best", of "rights", and of "ethos". It is a contextualised and contested discourse that deploys this "shared vocabulary" as a subjective policy-shaping tool. The context is that of a modern education marketplace where capitals, in the Bourdieusian sense, are traded on the floors of schools. Lynch and Moran (2006) point out that a "quasi market" situation has emerged through the wider European policy contexts of market ideology and the intensity with which the middle classes have courted educational success as a primary mode of maintaining class advantage. They also highlight the collaborative role of the schools in creating and maintaining classed identities that become reified artefacts of the system. Schools actually produce highly refined cultural scripts of which middle class parents are adept interpreters. Such practices may be embodied in cultural tools such as school fees, cost of uniforms, compulsory school tours, expensive equipment, being located away from public transport and many other "unintentional" exclusive practices. Such practices are legitimated through official and unofficial interpretations of the Irish Constitution as a document that promotes choice, and all the associated neo-liberal market implications, rather than as a democratic document intended to promote equality and protect all citizens of the state.

Thus, as Foucault's interpretation of power reflects, it is only once the Constitution is refracted through modernity and the dominant ideology of the market ideal that the meaning of policy emerges. Essentially, this represents Foucault's "bottom-up" model of power where it is not the Constitution itself wielding the power over the community but rather how the people are interpreting and using it in their own power struggles (Mills, 2003, p. 34). What is aspired to in the Constitution is irrelevant once it has become enacted in the hands of the power-brokers – the people. However "the people" that get heard or "get spoken" in such policy discourses are also relevant actors in the game. As Ball states, "only certain voices can be heard as meaningful and authoritative" (Ball, 2006, p. 49). In the case of education and the effects of school choice, the voices that get heard are the voices of the middle-class parents. The ideology of the market, as legitimated by the Constitution, is the dominant cultural paradigm in educational contexts and further afield. Giddens (2009, p.91) sees ideology as "values and beliefs which help secure the position of more powerful groups at the expense of less powerful ones". Such ideological domination is "internalized hegemony" (Rogers et al., 2005, p. 368). This definition draws on Gramsci's (Gramsci, Hoare, & Smith, 1971) conceptualisation of "cultural hegemony" where the ideology of the dominant class seeps through society as a culturally and socially accepted normality. We could view the dominance of the market paradigm in modern western culture as one such example of" internalized hegemony" (Rogers et al., 2005). In such a space, alternatives to

the market paradigm are never allowed to enter the discourse, on a serious level at least, and as such remain beyond the consciousness of the population.

The constitution is *policy as text* in a variety of ways. It is a text that speaks differently depending on the situated context of its time, space and place. In the present it is being used by the middle classes as a means to provide opportunities for class separation and stratification. In the past it was used to provide educational opportunity for all. It is, therefore, also a *policy discourse* where the subjectification of voice projected by the policy can become dominant. For example, the discourse of choice with its constitutional *imprimatur* would seem to have become an all-pervasive and infallible truth that dare not be questioned. This is the ultimate end of any critical analysis, to question anything that seems to be beyond question. In this sense, a critical policy analysis of the Irish Constitution encourages us to question its relevance in changed times and invigorates us to strive for the reawakening of an equality of opportunity debate around schooling and educational opportunities. The final element of Ball's analytical framework refers to *policy effect*. The effects of marketisation and neo-liberal choice ideologies, despite their appeal to the political machinery of the state often serve to widen the gap between the classes. Such practices operate within the ideological hegemony of class domination and the maintenance of a classed status quo.

DEIS and the "social context effect"

The second text to be analysed here is the national policy document, *DEIS: An Action Plan for Educational Inclusion* (DES, 2005). This policy document makes reference to "the multiplier effect" where disadvantaged communities become exponentially disadvantaged as the density of disadvantage becomes greater (DES, 2005, p. 27). This is an interesting element of the discourse around equality of educational opportunity in Ireland. The document connects this to what Weir and Archer (2005, p. 67) refer to as "the social context effect" where "the disadvantages associated with poverty are exacerbated when large proportions of pupils in a school are from poor backgrounds". The recognition of socially constructed levels of inequality is important in terms of this study. It signals that on a policy level we are aware of the issues and how they spread beyond the educational sphere into such areas as environmental issues regarding housing and planning. Any intervention, of course, would mean disrupting the status quo of classed schooling that does exist in this country, particularly in urban contexts. The social composition of schools would have to come under the microscope and free choice, the mainstay of the market paradigm, may need to come under closer scrutiny. If society is serious about improving equality of educational opportunity then such radical moves must be made. We cannot expect isolated and situated contextual interventions to suffice when the issue is societal and systemic. Such discussions have become part of the discourse since the introduction of the Education (Admission to Schools) Bill (2015) which does address various issues around payment of fees and preferential treatment based on ability, family, ethnicity, religion and other equality grounds as outlined in the existing Equality and Equal Status Acts. The Bill states that it "aims to strike the right balance between school autonomy and fairness".

Extensive support for this "social context effect" is provided by Thrupp, Lauder and Robinson's (2002) review of research in the area of school composition and peer effects. They cite significant research from the UK, USA and New Zealand as evidence in a contested sphere of research. The fluid and fractious nature of school compositions makes data both malleable and mutable, nevertheless the thrust of the majority of research in this area supports the cultural and social reality of composition effects on schools. Their review of research in the area of school compositional effects or "social mix effects" shows quite forcefully that segregationist practices of allowing middle class and working class schools emerge has deleterious effects. Thrupp et al (2002, p. 499), citing Parr and Townsend (I. A.

G. Wilkinson et al., 2000), emphasise that "school mix appears to impact on school processes in numerous ways so as to cumulatively drag down the academic performance of schools in low socioeconomic settings". Therefore, international research in the field of school choice and "social mix" issues consistently finds fault with continued segregationist practices. These practices seem to manifest themselves in the more informal subterfuge of choice and division practices in Ireland. A recent report on DEIS in schools reported that in the interests of "image management" some schools admitted to "using DEIS resources to attract pupils from more affluent backgrounds" (Weir, McAvinue, Moran, & O'Flaherty, 2014, p. 29) This is a disturbing corruption of the policy and an unintended *policy effect* that serves to exemplify the corrosive nature of neoliberalised schooling where the image and cohort composition of the school become as important as the educational practices therein.

This DEIS policy document, in common with almost all policy documents, refuses to name social class as an issue. Problems relating to inequitable educational opportunity are often referred to under the umbrella of "disadvantage" and "social inclusion". Wouldn't it be interesting, on a polemic level, if this discourse was turned on its head and we began to refer to, and measure, levels of advantage and social exclusion? In Ball's framework for policy analysis this DEIS document is of interest when examined in terms of *policy as discourse*. The "meaningful and authoritative" voices of the policy text have spoken (Ball, 2006, p. 49). Their subjectivity, from the middle-class viewpoint is to measure the deficits and disadvantages of the "others".

This point regarding measurement is important in the context of the DEIS policy document. Measures and measurements are of paramount importance in these documents. Tellingly, this policy introduced "progress reporting on the implementation of school action plans which will operate on a three-year cyclical basis" (DES, 2005, p. 12). Such measurement only exists on an official level of policy in this document. It is only required of schools who are given DEIS designation. This is important. It has been recognised that "disadvantaged" students do attend schools that do not have DEIS status and yet the measurement of reading ages and the documentation of interventions were not required in these other schools until the introduction of the National Strategy for Literacy and Numeracy in 2011. This suggests that such documentary evidence and "progress reporting" fulfils a school effectiveness measure as well as a record of student-centred intervention. The cynics amongst us might view this as political chicanery where the "performative content" of school effectiveness and the measurement of intervention effectiveness outweigh the "locutionary" aims of the policy which is, ostensibly, to improve equality of educational opportunity in schools. Latterly, with the introduction of the National Strategy for Literacy and Numeracy, these testing regimes have become national and cross-sectoral and therefore have become part of practice in DEIS and non-DEIS schools alike.

In a *policy as effect* approach to this text, it becomes clear that the wider sociocultural influence of the testing regime of DEIS serves to further marginalise student populations from the non-DEIS norms where standardised testing is not a central element of programme implementation. Kitching (2010, p. 222) aligns such measurements with "technologies of surveillance" which "equate social progression with economic progression". Essentially, such policies serve to preserve the stable centre of middle class advantage and perpetuate the projection of cultural and social deficits on to the working class other who is constantly construed as resisting society's efforts at *fixing* through targeted intervention. For example, the DEIS plan involves the systematic establishment of baseline data in terms of literacy and numeracy. It demands that every child in the school be assigned a reading age and then an intervention would be implemented and the reading age would improve. Kitching (2010, p. 222) also highlights the fact that these testing practices were exclusive to DEIS schools and not applicable to the normalised world of middle class advantage. Such practices represent

a medical metaphor of intervention for working class communities where they are seen as an illness to be treated so that society can be 'well' again. Such dehumanisation is also evident in the language of "multiplier effects" and "social context effects", as outlined in the above analysis.

Tormey (2010, p. 194), cites Mac Ruairc's (2009) study of standardised testing where the outputs-led measurement of educational attainment marries social policy optics with "managerialist" undertones that are typical of the neo-liberal political wave. Ball (2006, p. 61) describes such policy practice as *policy entrepreneurship*. It is rooted in the discourse of educational reform where:

> *Social contexts and social demographies are stripped away to 'expose' and position schools in isolation; to be inspected, evaluated and compared by the 'difference' they make...........The gaze of research has shifted once more, away from the pathologies of the home, the workings of capital, and political biases and distortions, to land upon the skills and competencies of teachers and headteachers.*

(Ball, 2006, p. 61)

These comments expose the decontextualisation of educational reform through supposedly value-neutral policy documents. It is clear from this analysis that they are steeped in the language of school effectiveness and not too far removed from the genesis of a decontextualised blame culture where schools and teachers are vilified for educational failure and inequalities of educational opportunity. O'Sullivan (2005, p. 306) points out how such conceptualisations of disadvantage lead to the construction of the "distant other" who would become the focal subject of Diane Reay's (2007) "middle-class imaginaries" and the pathology of poverty that underscores many interventionist strategies.

However there is potential for the growth of dialogical power in a Foucauldian sense. The policy-makers can be seen as the power- holders however there is scope for resistance and for power to emerge in the resistance to such stratagems. Hopefully within these spaces of engagement between policy-makers and the actors, the discourse of DEIS will alter towards a pupil-centred policy and agent engagement where the focus is not on statistical production but on initiating societal, communal and individual change.

New "technologies" of inscription and control

The relevance of measurement with regard to literacy and standardised testing has become an even more integral part of the educational landscape in recent times. It is a "technology" in the Foucauldian sense because it instantiates possibilities for inscription and control of people. The Programme for International Student Assessment (2009) indicated a significant disimprovement in Ireland's comparative international position regarding literacy and numeracy. The ensuing "perfect storm" of concerns with education reflected "perfectly" the presence of neoliberalism and the influence and concern with global position in Ireland (Conway, 2013). Subsequently, in 2012, Ireland's position improved significantly. The focus here is not to discuss Ireland's performance on these tables but to interrogate the meaning in terms of the interaction between policy and social inequality.

The result of these moments is the evident penchant for all things "literacy", particularly those things that are available for measurement and comparison. This section uses *Literacy and Numeracy for Learning and Life: the National Strategy to Improve Literacy and Numeracy Among Children and Young People 2011-2020.* This policy document heralded the implementation of standardised tests at primary and post-primary level in order to measure the competencies associated with literacy and numeracy. Several stakeholders and commentators, whilst agreeing with the underlying aims of the document, have criticised its lack of focus on what literacy actually is and how it is to be improved. Instead the

document focuses on the elements of standardised testing that will be used to measure progress. Again the political eye remains firmly trained upon issues of school performance and teacher effectiveness. These are important issues that should be important elements in addressing issues regarding literacy attainment, however they are not the only, or indeed the most important, strategic considerations. Apple (2005, p. 13) comments that rigorous regimes of standardised testing often serve as "devices to re-stratify a population" and "enhance the chances that the children of the professional and managerial new middle class will have *less competition* from other students". I will not argue the motivations or intentions of such documents here but other studies have shown the deleterious effects for working class populations when measurements of skills borne out of middle class culture and standards are imposed upon populations (Gillborn & Youdell, 2000). Such measurements and comparative data productions do provide elements of threat and danger, particularly for working class schools and communities. Such threats are clearly evidenced in such documents as comparative league tables produced annually now in our national media. Without dwelling on the purport or import of league tables too long, they do serve to show that any attempt at the crude measurement of school performance through results in exams, or indeed standardised tests, is inherently fraught and very damaging to the students in these schools. Schools with working class populations will inevitably under-perform in comparison to their middle class peers, for a complexity of reasons, not least the culturally and socially situated nature of psychometric standardised testing (Elwood & Murphy, 2015). In the context of *policy as text* the literacy and numeracy strategy document is borne out of interests in improvement. However, as with every socially and politically constituted text, the *policy as discourse*, the policy statement does risk objectifying those who are not performing in terms of literacy and numeracy as failures, not just on an individual level, but at the level of representing Ireland in the global competitions such as PISA, PIRLS (Progress in International Reading Literacy Study) and TIMSS (Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study).

Programme for Government 2011-2016

The current coalition government, (conjoining a traditional right wing party with a traditional left wing labour party in an unlikely marriage of convenience) entered governance with a new strategy for education amongst many other areas. Whilst the general aims and visions of this strategy are laudable and focused, I am concerned here with their paradigmatic orientation and some of the dangers implicit in neo-liberal market-driven policies. I am looking at this document from the point of view of equality of educational opportunity. I consider what sections of the population it focuses on. I look at particular agendas at work within the text. I will use Ball's policy analysis framework again in my analysis of this policy text.

As one would expect in a policy document such as this, there are strong echoes of our constitution in relation to the primacy of parental choice in the school system. The documents states that:

> *The system for evaluating schools will be reformed so parents have access to more information when choosing a school for their family.*

(Ireland, 2011, p. 40)

The tone and content here is that of the neo-liberal competitiveness strain where schools are viewed almost as private entities battling it out for a market share. It is the world of inter-school competitiveness where schools are measured against each other in order to compete for pupils; the right pupils. Therefore the *policy effect* is to increase competition in line with market principles, however the *policy as text* emphasises "access to information" as the key point. The availability is obviously a key point for parents when choosing a school

but it may be more fruitful to examine the levels of equality with regard to the access to information rather than just focusing on building the competitive attitude of schools. It has been well documented that there are differential levels of access to information regarding school choice amongst different class groups and this issue is not addressed here. It is important to recognise here that this document addresses what Stephen Ball and Carol Vincent (1998, p. 380) term "cold knowledge" or "official knowledge" that is very much the preserve of the middle-class choosing population. Therefore rather than improving equity for working class populations such "official knowledge" may only serve to increase the inequality in terms of school choice. Therefore the *policy effect* serves the strain of competitive individualism that is such a common feature of unequal societies. This statement needs to be taken in the context of the opening paragraph of the education section of this document which states that:

> *Education is at the heart of a more cohesive, more equal and more successful society.*

(Ireland, 2011, p. 39)

Research in this area would suggest that improvements in educational standards may be as a result of lower levels of inequality in a society rather than it being a case of improving educational standards in order to lessen inequality (R. Wilkinson & Pickett, 2009). Wilkinson and Pickett make strong distinctions between countries where rising levels of inequality show detrimental effects on educational standards and, conversely, show that countries that prioritise lessening inequalities register improved educational standards. The Irish document *Government for National Recovery 2011-2016* names Finland as the educational model it wishes to emulate. It is important to note here that the Finnish model of educational provision is a comprehensive model where tracking, streaming and inter-school competitiveness are minimised in favour of community-based comprehensive education for all, regardless of social class. This point does not sit well with the competitive neo-liberal strains highlighted through educational standards in this document. Increasing emphasis on measurement and standards as extrinsic motivators for schools only serves to exacerbate difference and further exclude those on the margins from education. The UNICEF (2002, p. 20) report entitled *A League Table of Educational Disadvantage in Rich Nations* points out that "Irish children whose parents are high-earning professionals have a 90 per cent chance of progressing to further education – as opposed to a 13 per cent chance for children whose parents are in an unskilled manual occupation". This is the crux of where we are with regard to education and social class in a contemporary urban Irish context. There are vast disparities between schools, communities, families and individual circumstances that are infused with social class issues that remain side-lined in favour of discussions about standards and interventions. What is required is a large scale re-evaluation of Ireland's adoption of the "mercantilist paradigm" in order to judge what serves the country's aims best (O'Sullivan, 2005). Therefore the essential disjoint between purport and practice is quite striking here. The document lays out its primary aims as those of societal cohesion and equality and yet continues to map out a future engaged in fostering extreme competitive situations amongst educational institutions.

The document also prioritises performance on international comparative tables, particularly the OECD Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA). The implicit danger here is that the league table becomes the goal and not the focus on student learning that may be required to equip them as engaged citizens in society. Such sacrifices are clearly evidenced in the government's plans for literacy development, as discussed earlier, where the focus is on providing time to improve literacy standards rather than creating a paradigmatic shift in educational provision where literacy and numeracy are seen as central functional strands of all school-based activity. The difficulty, of course, lies in the priorities of a product-driven education system where an exam-led upper tier negates the

possibility of prioritising skills over knowledge. The educational outlook purported by this government document is unashamedly that of education as a servant of the economy where the expectation is that targets will be met in order to boost international profile. Such policy moves only serve to create even greater differences between school settings, particularly in terms of their social class compositions.

By applying Ball's framework to this document, it is clear that the *policy as text* is well motivated and rational in terms of aiming for an increase in standards. However, the sociocultural purport of the *policy as discourse* becomes problematic in terms of the apparent contradictions emergent between encouraging an economy-driven marketised education system despite stating an overall vision for a cohesive and more equal society.

Equality legislation

As part of my macro-analysis of influential policies and legislation in the field of social class and educational inequality, I conducted numerous electronic surveys and searches of recent equality legislation. I surveyed both the Equality Act (2004) and the Equal Status Acts (2000, 2004). Both documents lay claim to comprehensive legislation for protecting people against discrimination. Interestingly, The Equality Act (2004) covers nine central areas of potential discrimination. These are age, gender, religion, race, sexual orientation, marital status, family status and membership to the Traveller community. From the point of view of this study social class is an absent category here. In fact it is an absent category throughout Irish legislation. In the Equal Status Acts (2000, 2004) the phrases "social class" and "class" do not appear anywhere. This fact was confirmed by close reading of the text and by conducting electronic searches of both documents.

"Disadvantage" is a term commonly used in Irish policy documents to signify something approaching social class difference. It does appear three times in the document. It is never used as a descriptive noun, as it often is in relation to educational policy. It is used as a verb to qualify discriminatory acts. For instance it is used in section 3.2 (c) in the context of defining discrimination as:

> *where an apparently neutral provision puts a person referred to in any paragraph of section 3(2) at a particular disadvantage compared with other persons, unless the provision is objectively justified by a legitimate aim and the means of achieving that aim are appropriate and necessary.*

As Spring (2007, p. 7) points out, "disadvantage" is often used as a categorical label that only serves to "distance those on the margins" from the powerful core of policy making. Reference is also made here to the necessary shift in discourse towards an understanding of educational equality in a broader context of social equality as opposed to damaging segregationist labelling that often serves to reify the working class other as opposed to positively influence educational, social, cultural and political experiences of the marginalised.

The Education Act (1998), similarly, makes no mention of social class or class in this context (although it is mentioned ten times in reference to class of schools or classes as in groups of students). "The correction of educational disadvantage" is referred to within the act which again infuses it with the language of the negative and distanced other that is deficited and in need of correction. This act defines educational disadvantage in similarly deficited language:

in this section "educational disadvantage" means the impediments to education arising from social or economic disadvantage which prevent students from deriving appropriate benefit from education in schools.

(Education Act Section 32.5 (a))

The definition is dominated by words such as "impediments", "disadvantage" and "prevent". This language is important as the *policy effect* is disempowering and objectifying. It talks of those who are not experiencing equality of educational opportunity as objectified others rather than as citizens of the state who this act of parliament should represent. Such language in official policy has far-reaching consequences as it contributes to the construction of deficited "cultural models" that become reified throughout our society (Gee, 2011, p. 174). This reification of inequality becomes almost self-constitutive in the sense that "the disadvantaged" become a recognisable entity that are different, othered, objectified and often vilified. This returns us to the "euphemisms" pointed out by Lynch and Lodge (2002) and the *policy effect* of writing social class out of legislation. Such discourses also run the risk and often legitimate *abjection* as defined by Kenway, Kraack and Hicky-Moody (2006, p. 120) in Youdell (2011, p. 42):

Abjection invokes the process whereby that or those named unclean are reviled, repelled resisted. But the 'abject' does not respect such expulsions and boundaries and so constantly threatens to move across boundaries and contaminate.

This *abjection* is mediated in the world by class-based derogatory naming, discrimination and differential judge mentalism and treatment.

The absence of class from official legislation and policy documents has been suggested as an element of post-colonial societies. Martin Thrupp (2006, p. 1394) focuses on the post-colonial nature of New Zealand and attributes the absence of an engaged class and education debate to a "long held ideology of classlessness means that education policy has only recently begun to discuss the class and ethnic segregation of school intakes". This commentary, in tandem with the evidence above, could apply equally to Ireland as a post-colonial nation state.

However, as O'Sullivan (2005, p. 195) correctly points out, the omission of class from official discourse is not new in an Irish educational context. He makes similar reference to the "exclusion of class as a theme in state discourse" by instantiating the absence of social class from the 1992 Green Paper on education. He states that:

In it, social class does not figure as a means of conceptualising differences in the experiences, inequalities, or culture of pupils that were deemed relevant to benefiting from education.

(O'Sullivan, 2005, p. 195)

Such refusals to acknowledge class at a societal and political level contributes then to the hegemonic dominance of the market paradigm that presents, albeit convincingly, that we are all equal in the eyes of the market.

Conclusion

The purpose of this paper was to treat documents produced on a societal and political level as intrinsically important to the conceptualisation of social class in an Irish educational context. They serve to proffer a picture of the current societal and political context for the study, and most particularly to contextualise the lived world of policy practices in the education sphere as well as to interrogate wider legislative influences on class formation through education policy and practices in twenty-first century Ireland. Ball's analytical tools

were useful in the analysis of these texts in order to offer some exposures of how they can be taken up and construed differently depending on social, political, cultural and historical contexts. Indeed Ball (2015, p. 307) comments that "policy discourses and technologies mobilise truth claims and constitute rather than reflect social reality." There is significant evidence here for further consideration of social class inequality in an Irish context. There are very definite economic inequalities evident throughout Irish society and the challenge to policy makers and educationalists is to deconstruct current practice, to reach beyond our current paradigms of thinking for the purpose of equalising opportunity and condition in Irish education. This is not just an educational concern; this is an equity and social justice issue that is a necessity in a country that claims democracy and inclusion as central tenets of its being. Our policy makers need to be more conscious of social class inequality in education and beyond if we are to truly achieve societal equity and justice we so often purport to aspire to in our policy and legislation. The continued absence of class from legislation and policy only serves to reproduce existing inequalities by legitimating a naïve policy perspective where class is rendered invisible and therefore irrelevant.

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