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Choosing schools: explorations in post-primary school choice in an urban Irish working class community

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Abstract

This paper examines post-primary school choice processes in the urban Irish working class community of Portown. There is an awareness here of hegemonic neoliberal ideals and how school choice becomes a significantly classed space characterized by market ideologies and structural inequality. This critical ethnography explored the world through participant observation, semi-structured interviews over a three year period. The data examined here is drawn specifically from investigations into school choice processes. It deploys identity theories as thinking tools to examine the classed nature of engagement with school choice markets. The findings delineate three distinct groups of choosers in this school community: passive transitioners, active choosers and second-schoolers. The findings of the study reveal the entwined and co-constructed nature of identity and social class as well as examining the role played by school choices and differential access to economic, cultural and social resources in these processes.

Keywords: school choice; social class; neoliberalism and Irish education; educational inequality.

Introduction

This paper examines the lived experiences of working class students and their families as they engage with post-primary school choice processes in an Irish educational landscape increasingly infused with neoliberal values. It is a context where market principles of free choice and competitive individualism are increasingly being superimposed upon the education system (Lynch & Moran, 2006). The context of the paper is to examine the latent hegemony of class practices in the area of school choice whereby the access and possession of knowledge about schools and schooling, as well as the access to resources such as cultural, economic and social capitals are inequitably distributed amongst the population. Throughout

this paper, there is an implicit awareness of the underlying structural inequalities of the Irish population in terms of economic capital and the concomitant effects on access to cultural and social capital (Baker & Lynch, 2005). Structural economic inequality is intricately bound up with the social and cultural tool-kits needed for school success. This class inequality results in significantly lower outcomes for students from working class backgrounds in Irish education (Smyth & McCoy, 2011).

The background to school choice in Ireland is rooted in the Irish Constitution. 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

(Ireland, 1937)

The text 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. O'Sullivan (2005) suggests that the safeguarding of parental choice enshrined in the constitution has been manipulated by theocentric and mercantile actors in recent Irish educational history. Religious affiliation (theocentrism) and the primacy of the market in our contemporary collective psyche (mercantilism) have emerged as significant influences on school choice discourse. Furthermore, school choice has long been a feature of the Irish educational landscape at post-primary level with an unspoken classness constituted through choices of

traditional single sex religious schools, community schools, vocational schools (latterly community colleges) as well as thriving fee-paying and private school settings.

There is a vast international literature on the subject of school choice (Ball, Bowe, & Gewirtz, 1995; Lauen, 2007; Lynch & Moran, 2006; Reay & Lucey, 2000; Thrupp, 2010). This paper builds upon other significant Irish studies of schooling where school choice appears as an emergent issue (D. Byrne & Smyth, 2010; Lynch & Lodge, 2002; Lynch & Moran, 2006; O'Brien, 2003; OECD, 2012). Many international studies of school choice have focused particularly on issues of race and gender (Cooper, 2005; Gillborn & Youdell, 2000; Reay & Ball, 1998) but this study maintains a narrowed focus on social class in order to both highlight it as a specific issue and to make explicit connections between access to wealth and resources and school experiences of students. Neoliberal choice patterns in aspects of modern life has been discussed by contemporary social theorists (Apple, 2001; Giddens, 1991; Lynch, 2006; O'Sullivan, 2005) and throughout this critical ethnography the discourses of choice, sameness, difference, consumerism, individualism and desire are interwoven with the experiences and talk of the participants. This paper juxtaposes the taken-for-granted sameness purported by hegemonic neoliberalism with the reality of differential experiences amongst members of the community in a version of reality that is deeply rooted in social class distinction and structural inequalities such as access to wealth and resources. Therefore this study contributes to this field by offering an exploration of the choice strategies deployed in a working class Irish urban community.

Theorising choice and classed identities

Throughout this study, sociocultural theory, drawn primarily from Dorothy Holland and her colleagues, is fused with the critical theoretical work of Beverley Skeggs through the

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common ground of Bourdieusian theory (Bourdieu, 1977; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990; Holland, Lachicotte Jr., Skinner, & Cain, 1998; Skeggs, 2004). Holland et al. (1998, pp. 151-152) conceptualise the *figured world* as the "field of power" within which constructions of identity act, interact and play out. They cite Bourdieu's *habitus* as an enaction of the *figured world* and the negotiation of identities as Bourdieu's *game* (Holland et al., 1998, p. 158). This means that it is through participation in a world with particular designs, structures, constraints and opportunities that identities become positioned. Identities are construed as relational and there is specific awareness of relative positions through social divisions such as "gender, class, race, ethnicity- that separate those who are routinely privileged from those who are not" (Holland et al., 1998, p. 151). Such theoretical constructions are relevant throughout the data phases of this study as the participants articulate their positions in the world. This sociocultural theoretical positioning is used here to provoke discussion around societal constructions of Portown and the concomitant identity actions which ensue for the participants. The identity *inscription* process is deeply embedded within the dynamic power relations at work between social class groups as "class is a form of inscription that shapes bodies in the making of strata and behaviour" (Skeggs, 2004, p. 12). Bourdieu's conceptualisation of *habitus* also emerged as influential. *Habitus* is the internalised history of oneself in practice, or in the words of Bourdieu (1977, pp. 78-79), "history turned into nature" or "the unconscious part of ourselves". In this paper, Adams' (2006) conceptualisation of *a hybridised habitus* is also a useful tool as participants narrate their engagement with school choice processes. *Hybridised habitus* builds upon Bourdieu's concept in order to include the reflexive agency of the individual actors. This is particularly important here to avoid the persevering, and obstinate, objectification of working class engagements with education).

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Perceptions of sameness revolve around the growth of the neoliberal project described by Apple (2006, p.68) to explain how "school-mediated forms of class privilege" serve to create and recreate "hierarchy and division" within a society. This study takes the view that there are structural societal inequalities which also contribute to class differences, many of which are shrouded in the "cloak of sameness" (Oakes, 1985) cast over contemporary Irish society. Furthermore, Weis (2008, pp. 293-294) argues that "the real class position" of people often mitigates against the achievement of what she refers to as "the freedom dream". Other researchers have pointed to the disparity between choice knowledge of middle-class and working-class choosers (Ball, 2003; Brantlinger, 2003; D. Byrne & Smyth, 2010; Crozier et al., 2008; Reay, 2007). Lynch and Moran (2006, p. 222) vehemently emphasise that "choice ideology legitimates class reproduction and silences class dissent by fostering illusions of opportunity". There is recognition here, in an Irish context, that opportunities are neither spread equally across the strata of society nor are the naïve notions of "meritocratic individualism" expunged from social thought (Lynch & Moran, 2006, p. 222). In such a cultural space, "a mercantile reconstruction of education....is lived rather than named in its infusion of what have become unremarkable practices and expectations in the relationship between education and its public"(O'Sullivan, 2005, p. 174). The voice of Bauman's view on the globalized world as one where "all of us are doomed to the life of choices, but not all of us have the means to be choosers" (1998, p. 86).

Ball and Vincent's (1998) conceptualisation of the social field of school choice as "grapevine" knowledge or "hot knowledge" is a particularly useful tool to examine the classed nature of school choice. They define "the grapevine as "the impressions and experiences of friends, neighbours and relatives in their choice-making" (Ball & Vincent,

1998, p. 378). Importantly, Ball and Vincent argue that school choice does differ by social class membership but that educated choice is not entirely exclusive to the middle class. They make the point that (although in the context of 1990s England) that "recession, 'unmanaged congestion', has transformed education back into a positional and oligarchic good and heightened middle-class anxieties about their children's futures" (Ball & Vincent, 1998, p. 393). This comment is particularly relevant to the Ireland of today and to the context of this study as one situated in an urban working class community in a recessionary. Other studies have outlined the differentially classed nature of both parental knowledge and parental input into educational decisions for their children as middle class parents continuously emerge with "greater 'insider' knowledge of the education system" (Ball, 2008; D. Byrne & Smyth, 2010, p. 59). These "inputs", to draw again on the business and production metaphor, are crucial factors in issues of school stratification along lines of social class and the *figured worlds* of schools in communities such as Portown.

The physical and metaphysical spaces of the Portown Community School and surrounds

Portown centres on a strong working class core where a significantly high proportion of the area is occupied by social housing schemes. Large private housing estates and once-off houses ribbon along the Eastern side of the area. This side of the community is decidedly middle-class, spacious, well-serviced with parks and populated by maturing trees. As one participant in the study observed, "you always know you are in the posh part when the parks have nice trees". One road acts as a main artery through the community. This road also acts as a *maginot* line between middle class and working-class areas of the community. This separation appears to manifest itself physically and psychologically. It acts as a liminal space

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or a boundary between worlds. The social housing estates are formed by line after line of terraced red-brick two-storey houses. The private housing areas composed of some semi-detached estates, interspersed with one off housing and large areas of park land. There are significant differences between the two adjacent areas with the social housing areas displaying features such as wall murals, graffiti, public art, a playground and several poorly maintained public amenity spaces. These spaces are physical enactments of the boundaries created by structural inequalities in Irish society much like those described by Southerton (2002) as "boundaries of 'us' and 'them'.

Third level enrolment figures, compiled in the crudest of league table instruments by national media, do signal that there is a very significant decline in the numbers of students opting for third level from the school. This decline coincides with a continuing decline in the number of students attending the school from middle class areas of the community. Such declines are evident across many DEIS school settings and are suggestive of how education and choice can be used as a signifier of distinction and difference in a distinctly classed manner. The figure has dropped to an all-time low of twenty-eight per cent of students enrolling in higher education. Such statistics and figures feed the *figured world* surrounding the school and further vilify the space as unworthy. The shift in balance between this school and neighbouring schools in more middle class areas is borne out throughout. The increasingly classed nature of school composition cannot be ignored in the study.

The present school population is almost entirely working class in terms of income, employment, housing and education levels. For instance, the examinations secretary in the school confirmed that over the last ten years the number of students on medical cards (and thus exempt from examination fees) was between eighty and ninety per cent. This signals that

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the school cohort is indeed experiencing inordinate levels of poverty despite the existence of a significant middle class cohort (up to fifty per cent) in the community but not in the school. It signals the middle-class movement that is suggested throughout the literature as a constitutive factor in the developing narrative of "demonised" school spaces inhabited by working class students who "fail" to operationalise the choices that are supposedly freely available to be made (Andre-Bechely, 2005; Ball, 1993, 1997, 2003, 2008; Ball & Vincent, 1998; B. Byrne, 2009; Crozier et al., 2008; Lauen, 2007; Lynch & Moran, 2006; Reay & Ball, 1998; Reay & Lucey, 2000). This "failure" is interrogated here in terms of discussions that take place in interviews and in participatory observation situations around choosing a school. The parental interviews are particularly relevant here and many of the central choice motives defined by Lynch and Lodge appear throughout (2002, pp. 38-48).

Research methodology

This critical ethnography occurred over a three year period from 2009-2012 and it adopted a critical constructivist approach to the study (Kincheloe, 2005). Data was constructed in this study through semi-structured interviews with thirty participants from Portown Community School. They were predominately parents, teachers and students of the school and they were interviewed in both individual and focus group interviews. Participant observation was also a very significant data construction tool in the study. Over the course of the three years, the school community and environs were observed and recorded in observation journals throughout the critically reflexive process of the study. Interview participants were invited to participate in the study as we had decided to employ "purposeful sampling" (Seidman, 1991, p. 52) in the construction of the research group. The participants were intended to represent different aspects of the community. The critical stance adopted in

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this research demanded that this research allowed all voices to be heard. Therefore, the students who have been interviewed were also selected on the grounds of ethnicity, gender, special educational needs and social class. The priority throughout the study was to contribute to the development of what Scott (1990, p. xii), as cited in Mills (2003, p. 41), calls a "critique of power spoken behind the back of the dominant" or a revelation of the "hidden transcript". In order to provide meaningful thematic analysis of transcribed interviews, observations and reflections, the data was subjected to "meaning coding" (Kvale, 2007, p. 105). Coded data was continuously categorised and revisited during the analysis process, however this coding and categorisation never became restrictive to emergent themes from subsequent data. From an ethical perspective, we were keenly aware of sensitivities of personal, familial and social natures due to discussing school choice and identity as an issue that may reflect either positively or negatively upon the individual. The priority was to maintain the dignity of participants whilst also attempting to inspire a sense of agency around their own identities. Some participants were too quick to denigrate their community, their school and, by implication, themselves. We endeavoured to ensure that students felt empowered, engaged and able to take some positives from the research process. Realisations of inequalities, of difference and of othering can open up new motivations or indeed invoke a sense of despair and confusion. The intention was that participants would leave the process with a sense of the possibilities for their own futures.

Findings and discussion

In this section of the paper a series of telling cases have been extracted from the data in order to explore key themes around choice process in the working-class community of Portown. The findings begin with an excavation of the discourse of competitive

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individualism whereby the infusions of neoliberal ideologies around choice and distinction emerge as important actors in the construction of classed positions. The typology of choice which then emerges focuses on resistances through passivity, loyalty to the local school and an interesting body of students who move school during their post-primary years referred to here as "second-schoolers". Each group offer further understandings of the choice process and the centrality of classed identity constructions to the issue.

Telling case: it's up to each individual

The following interview excerpt is drawn from an interview with Norma, a mother of three children who is an active member of many school committees. Norma is viewed as a successful and proactive parent in this school environment who is aware of the nuances of school choices and school differences.

> *N: Em…. you would, you'd hear talk at the school gates, you know like "god I wouldn't send them here, I wouldn't send them there" but, em, I always felt it was up to the child themselves.*
>
> *I: Ya?*
>
> *N: And it was up to the parents that were sending them there. Because I just have this thing that they're all going to sit the same exam at the end of the year no matter what school you go to - at the end of three years and six years. And it's up to each individual and each family how, you know, how they're going to do.*

This brief statement by the parent on school choice decisions reveals some very interesting strands. Initially, there is the negative "school gates" perception of the school where she is encouraged to send her children elsewhere. The *figured world* of the school is rendered

explicitly and definitively for many of the parents interviewed in this study. Another mother, Michelle, recounts a similar encounter at a primary school gate and comments that "

it's out there that this place is dog rough and it's only the kids who don't get in anywhere else that come here". The narrative of the *figured world* surrounding the school is infused with negativity and yet many of these parents, who are aware of the school, admirably refuse to accept it.

Norma also introduces the agency of the child and the notion of sameness. "It was up to the child themselves" suggests the collaborative nature of the school choice process where parents and child negotiate but it also refers to the culture of individual responsibility bred by the pervasiveness of the neoliberal discourse of schooling and competitiveness. In this culture, the individual is responsible for their own success and failure and the child must take responsibility for their own future opportunities. This is the classic neoliberal discourse of sameness where competitive individualism treats everybody equally in a "deraced, declassed, and degendered" society (Apple, 2006, p. 32).

Norma substantiates this notion of sameness in her belief that "they're all going to sit the same exam at the end of the year no matter what school you go to". The nuanced awareness of middle-class choosers would refute this notion of sameness in action, if not in words. Brantlinger's (2003) study reveals how middle-class parents sell the story of sameness in schools as a complex cover story for the inequitable opportunities being delivered along social class lines in American schools. This study finds a similar discourse of sameness being used to legitimate school stratification. Furthermore, the voices of the working-class participants are perpetuating the narrative.

It must also be acknowledged that these parents are invested in the local school. They have chosen to send their children there, thus it is their natural instinct to defend it against

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criticism and attack from other sources, particularly other parents who have chosen to ignore

the local school. For example, in Penny's interview, she discusses this tension between

parents around choice and the differences between schools:

> *P: I did and I didn't, because I was called a fool. You'd meet people, like, at the school gate and, em, like "are you mad sending your child up there?" and "he's brainy, would you not send him somewhere else?" I just said no, I just went with my natural instinct that the kids could leave the door in the morning the house and be in school in five minutes. So, em, I just went with my own feeling, I was looking at it from a sensible point of view. That was my initial reaction. So, em, I mean like, at the time when the kids started school I wasn't driving. But even now I wouldn't be in a position to have.. I couldn't afford a second car. So em.. like I mean, this craic of paying out €50 for a bus every week or paying bus money to get in and out of town, I just don't agree with it. When there's a perfectly good school on your doorstep, I just don't agree with it.*

Penny expands upon the criticism she receives from other parents and how the local school is

being figured as an unsuitable place for "brainy" kids by other parents. Furthermore, the

parent is being figured as somewhat incompetent and naïve with regard to the educational

choices being made.

The above extract also contains an undercurrent of the financial and practical

influences on school choice where having access to private transport remains a central

consideration. Such decisions also represent a *hybridised habitus* and the importance of what

he terms "resourced" and "unresourced" choices (Adams, 2006). In this instance, the

practical and financial concerns about going elsewhere to school leaves the parent with an

"unresourced" choice, one in which she is also reflexively aware of her limitations.

Therefore, the identity formations of participants, as this exploration of school choice

amongst parents illuminates, although agentic and reflexive, are also limited by social class

structures. Penny and Norma are reflexively aware of their choices and yet they are limited

by their place in society. They represent a *hybridised habitus* (Adams, 2006) because they are

aware of their own agency in society and nevertheless still trapped by social, cultural and

financial constraints. We now turn to the distinctive choice patterns which emerged, namely:

passive transitioners, active choosers and "second-schoolers".

Passive transitioners and "disenfranchised" parents

Passive transitioners are the cohort of students who, with their families, transfer to

second level schooling with minimal engagement with the choice processes discussed above.

Such pathways through the education system are not uncommon in an Irish urban working

class context such as this one (D. Byrne & Smyth, 2010; Lynch & Lodge, 2002). Byrne and

Smyth's (2010, p. 59) study states that "working-class parents are somewhat more likely to

see the choice of a post-primary school as a 'natural follow-on', relating to where they live

and which primary school their child attended".

Telling case: passive transitioners

Consider the following extract from an interview with a female teacher in the school:

> *T: I think the perception of the school tends to prevent them from sending their children here. I think there is a perception that we deal with children who have difficulties very well but we're no longer perceived as an academic school so for that reason they'll send their children for their academic education as they see it. There's also the perception that we have some tough children. Amm, that will prevent some of them from coming here and I find, sadly, that a lot now of the students who come here, and when I say a lot we would average seven or eight every year, who choose this school because they have chosen no other school because if there weren't a home school person or somebody in their school to pursue them to choose a school they wouldn't choose any secondary school, they would fall between the cracks really.*
>
> *I: So they're not choosing.*
>
> *T: So they're not choosing at all, we would always get upwards of seven of those every year.*

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The group of students discussed here are considered to represent one section of the "passive transitioners". They are the students who are already disengaging from schooling. They are not engaged in the market-aware active choice processes of other social groupings. This teacher sees this group as possibly falling "between the cracks" and as objects of pursuit by school and social authorities. These families are enacting resistance to the enforced societal discipline of schooling. Their families are consistently on the margins of society in terms of employment and engagement with education. Other studies have outlined the differentially classed nature of both parental knowledge and parental input into educational decisions for their children as middle class parents continuously emerge with "greater 'insider' knowledge of the education system" (D. Byrne & Smyth, 2010, p. 59; Reay, Crozier, & James, 2011).

Telling case: "disenfranchised parents"

"Disenfranchised parents" is an interesting phrase that emerged during an interview with Elaine, a female teacher (31) who has been teaching in the school for eight years. She is proud of her own working class roots and her biographical experiences of education in a working class neighbourhood are elided and interspersed into the data. The following extract discusses school choice amongst the families of Portown:

> *I: Do you think, then, that school choices and the whole idea of the market and an educational market place – does that have an effect on schools?*
>
> *E:Yeah, I think it probably has a bigger effect, ya know, because people do have more choice now. Like, do you know the way you see, ya know, an awful lot of people from Portown going to Hillview and going to Riverside.*
>
> *I: Yeah.*
>
> *E: And that has had a very negative impact, I think, on this school.*
>
> *I: Yeah, yeah.*

> *E: Because what you, I think… not what you are left with, because that sounds really negative… The type of children you have here are the ones whose parents are not informed about choice and don't have the resources to engage in the choice process, ya know?*
>
> *I: Ya.*
>
> *E: Em… So… not that it's great, ya know … Not what you're… you see… not what you're left with but… I suppose you have… kids, not… I don't know how to phrase this now, like, but……it's not like a lower class or something like that, it's… you get an awful lot of disenfranchised parents I'd say here, and children.*

Elaine's choice of language here is interesting. "Disenfranchised" creates strong connotations of control by a more powerful other. It also has connotations of the vocabulary of the market. This statement colludes with the literature and intimates on how the world of school choice is mapped by acts of *symbolic violence* where class fractions are divided by what they know and how they operationalise their cultural and social capitals (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990). The language of class difference also emerges as an issue here for Elaine. She doesn't want to label people as "lower class" and yet there are these connotations evident in her performed speech here. She settles on "disenfranchised", uncomfortably, as her chosen appellation. The "disenfranchised", for Elaine, are those outside the choice system, those with less knowledge to choose, those who come to the local school simply because it is the local school. Consider the following excerpt from our interview:

> E: *Not the typical working class I think in a way, because ... em… I think they … if they could they'd make the choice or they have made the choice to send them somewhere else, ya know?*
>
> I: *If that choice was available do you think that the student body here would choose to go elsewhere?*
>
> E: *I think a lot of people have, in the area. Those who have the resources and the knowledge about choice have sent their children to other schools. I think they have.*

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Elaine also highlights the disparity between different fractions of the community and how resources and knowledge regarding school choice and educational trajectories are different. As Hanafin and Lynch (2002) point out much of the debate around social class and education focuses on the deficits and advantages of the various actors while conveniently ignoring the place of the school and policy in the creation of differential knowledge. Elaine highlights this sense of being "peripheral voices" (2002, p. 35) in education and she later refers to the school cohort as people on "the edges of society". This point is also emphasised by Byrne and Smyth (2010, p. 59) who recognise the peripheral nature of working class students with regard to the choice system as they comment on the fact that they are more likely to see their second level "choice" as "natural follow-on". As Elaine points out, they are definitely not entering onto the process on an equal level in terms of knowledge of the system. On the other hand, many parents in this community make active decisions in terms of school choice.

Active choosers - "the school of the parish"

The issue of proximity to the local school emerged as a particularly important element of the choice process on geographical and psychological grounds for both parents and students. This extract from the parent interview with Norma highlights the importance of the local school.

Telling case: "The school of the parish"

> *N: Three children, yeah, and the three of them came here to this school. Why we picked here is because I always felt they should go to school in their community and be educated with their friends because I think they're… you know, they were … like, they grew up with them, so they should come to school with them. That's why I picked it. Now, I suppose Maria being the… having the girl first we went to Caman Convent (Voluntary Secondary Girls School) one night to see Caman Convent before we actually came here.*

> *I: Yeah.*
>
> *N: Now, she …. Em, I suppose I always wanted her to come here because it was the school of the parish.*

Throughout this study, there is evidence of loyalty to the locale and to the institutions therein. This is despite some strong sense of detachment, disidentification, embarrassment and escape that permeate the discourses surrounding the local school from certain sections of the local population. Norma refers several times to the local school as the "school of the parish" and she expresses how important it is to support it. Such communitarian values are a common feature amongst parents, like Norma, who choose to access the local school simply because it is the local school and they feel it needs to be used. Norma is a motivated and interested parent with high expectations for her children. She puts all the necessary conditions for success in place at home and yet she describes how at the time she "wasn't that clued in to points" ("points" here refer to the college entry merit system):

> *N: I think that time I wasn't as clued in to points and, d'ya know… I suppose really I probably didn't do enough homework on schools.*
> *I: Yeah, yeah.*
>
> *N: I think I just had this block that she was to come to the school of the parish. Maybe now that I'm more… gone through the system, d'ya know? Maybe I probably would look into it more now.*

On closer analysis, this extract reveals a sense of regret and a perception of self-naivety with regard to school choice. Norma intimates a critique of her own parenting through commenting that "I probably didn't do enough homework on schools". The use of "probably" and "enough" are key qualifiers here as they suggest elements of regret and dissatisfaction with how things have worked out in the present. This sense of regret prompts Norma's

thought that "I probably would look into it more now". The issue of not being "clued in to points" is relevant also. It has implicit judgemental content about the school. It implies that if she had been more "clued in" then she may have thought differently about school choice, that she may have chosen elsewhere. This sense of being "clued in" resonates with Bourdieusian theory and the interaction with Norma highlights the centrality of capitals and the enmeshed nature of cultural and social knowledge embedded in *habitus (Bourdieu, 1977)*.

The "school of the parish" does not hold the same attraction for many other parents in the locality. "Bussing out" of the locality is a significant feature of the morning movements in the community. From 8:00 a.m. onwards the children of the community can be seen dotted along the main arteries in a myriad of school uniforms; primary and post-primary. They await their buses. These families have chosen to be schooled outside the locality in single-sex schools, co-educational schools, Irish language schools, voluntary secondary catholic schools, etc. Interestingly, although the uniforms of fee-paying second level schools are visible in the community, they are not bussed out. They are driven in private cars. This is also interesting. These morning observations reveal rich and diverse social strata of wealth and ambition. As Lynch and Lodge (2002) also found, it is parents with the wealth to secure luxuries such as second cars and have only one working parent who are best positioned to send their children to schools outside the locality. Similarly, Byrne and Smyth (2010, p. 44) found that "those from higher professional backgrounds are significantly more likely to be attending a school outside their local area than those form other class backgrounds". In many of these cases the students leaving the community would be those considered to be in the higher echelons of local society and community. The peer effect of leaving the community for schooling is significant. Students understand the power of perception, the significance of

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social networks and the perception of particular schools in the wider world. The juxtaposition of those being "bussed out" and those choosing the "school of the parish" brings the classed nature of school choice into sharp focus throughout this study.

"Second-schoolers" and the politics of choice

Another interesting group who emerged during the research were students who had transferred into the school after initially choosing to attend a different school outside of their local area. The size of this group is significant and an analysis of school records revealed that almost ten per cent of the school population fell into this category of "second schoolers". This is an important finding of the study and one worthy of further investigation as between-school mobility is a largely under-researched area. The students transferred back to their local school for a variety of reasons including: attendance difficulties, transport issues, behavioural issues and "expulsions", difficulties settling in, peer group difficulties and financial circumstances. "Second-schoolers" represent active choosers who engaged in the school market as aggressive and active participants who were prepared to look beyond the geographical and social boundaries of Portown for their child's second-level education. One common denominator emerges amongst this group of students in the guise of extremely agentic and active parents who *are* hooked into the grapevine. However, although these parents may have access to knowledge in the choice process, they found that their other resources and *capitals* could not always sustain their choice to leave the local community and the local school. This was not always the case but it did emerge as significant for this grouping of parents and students. Consider the following excerpt, where George describes the school choice process.

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Telling case: second-schoolers

> *I: Did you think about choosing between schools then when you were in sixth class?*
>
> *G: I wanted to come here, Portown like, but my mam said 'no'. It was full of like pikies or something. She'd think I'd get in a load of trouble up here so she brought me out to Hill View. That's where my cousins went too.*
>
> *I: Okay so you also thought about coming here first day. Why do you think your mam didn't want to send you here?*
>
> *G: My dad came here and he said it was grand but she doesn't like the idea of Portown. You hear on the news that something happened in Portown and all that. She just doesn't like Portown.*

This extract describes how the family disengage from the local community because of the *figured world* of Portown. It is inscribed as dangerously other and as a place of marginalisation associated with the travelling community. People with seemingly middle class cultural preferences engage with the working class school as a place inhabited by the marginalised other and thus as a place where they do not see themselves or their offspring fitting in.

Similarly, the following excerpt focuses on Colin who comes to Portown as a second school. His narrative illuminates the schism between myth and reality as seen through the eyes of the "second-schooler".

Telling case: Coming back to Portown

> *I: Why had your parents chosen Hill View for you?*

> *C: It was closer and my Mam was thinking of sending me up here first day but I used to think Portown was all scumbags and travellers, that was before I came here, but from what you hear of Portown I was expecting this place to be full of them like when I was up in Hill View there was about 7 or 8 travellers there but when I 'd think of Portown Community School I'd think they were all travellers up there but then I came up and I met all the lads around here it turned out they weren't and I think it is a better school than Hill View like.*
>
> *I: Why would you have thought that about this school?*
>
> *C: When I'd be around the place and someone would be talking and say, "did you hear what happened in Portown there last night?" Or something like that. You just build up ideas in your head about what it could be like...................I judged it before I knew it like.*

Colin's story again emphasises the sense of othering and marginalised *inscription* being

constructed around Portown Community School, especially with regard to the travelling

community and the connotations that are associated with this population. However, Colin

continues to provide a picture of the reality of Portown Community School that paints a very

different picture than the fearful place he had constructed in his own mind:

> *C: If I was talking to someone on the computer and they asked you where you were going to school and you said up by Portown and they'd say" oh, sorry sham, it's all like scumbags and stuff up there".... but everybody's not a scumbag up here at all like but you're going to get people who think they're mad everywhere you go.*
>
> *I: And do you think that reflects on the school then or do you think like that about everywhere?*
>
> *C: Well I used to think it'd have an impact on the school as well until I came here and I found there wasn't anyone to be afraid of in this school and that the people were grand like.*

The lived world of the school and the figured space constructed for, and by, Colin are

different places. The deficit culture of the "scumbags" and the fear associated with spaces

such as Portown is quickly demystified for Colin and the experience of the school becomes

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much more positive as he assimilates himself into a new cultural space. In a sense, what is described here is a process of demystification and exploding the myths of this figured space. Overall, the "second-schoolers" function as catalysts. They do explode the myths and demystify the *figured world* of the school. Their stories serve the community well. They return to the "school of the parish" and they celebrate it through comparison with the faraway hills that didn't turn out to be greener after all.

Conclusion

Throughout this paper, the data is used to bring the world of school choice into view. The concept of school choice and the neo-liberal notion of education as a marketplace have contributed to the construction of a comparative and competitive environment around people's motivations and identity actions in the school sphere. How students and their families figure the world of the school and how they position themselves in relation to it are entwined constructions of class and identity. This study also reveals the non-uniform nature of school choice amongst this working class community. There are differential experiences and actions often based on knowledge and experience of the school choice *game*. Knowledge is not always enough; economic, cultural and social resources are also important elements in processes of stratification and distinction. The participants in the study construct the world of school choice in the situated context of an urban Irish post-primary school. The analysis of these situated stories reveals a nuanced world of choice, separation and stratification. The focus here is on school level constructions of identity and difference as they relate to school choice. The different types of school choosers that emerge throughout the study, "active choosers", "passive transitioners" and "second schoolers" reveal the complexity of the

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intersections between school choice, social class and identity formation. The stories of the "second-schoolers" are particularly important here as they de-camp from the local school only to return to demystify the *figured world* of middle class spaces as well as re-inscribing the local school in a more hopeful light. It is the bringing together of social strata through schooling which can break down barriers and allow opportunities for social mobility and cohesive communities rather than encouraging increasingly segregated and classed school environments through marketised and ultra-competitive cultures of choice.

The cultural hegemony of marketised, competitive, individualistic and product-based approaches to education serves to widen the gap between working class and middle class students. Therefore, there is a preservation of the status quo of class difference and a continuation of a class action that militates against social mobility. The students and their families in Portown are basing their educational choices and decisions on the available information. This is only problematic because there is an inequality of information regarding the marketised and competitive nature of schooling. It is hegemonic in the sense that the market is viewed as culturally "fair" and therefore there is little or no attention paid to the inequality of access to information and knowledge with which parents and students are equipped with upon entry into the field of choice. Finally, as O'Sullivan (2005, p.174) recognises, the ideology of the market "is a "lived", or almost latent, neoliberalism that creates the ideal conditions for hegemonic inequality to flourish. It is this latent hegemony that this paper has endeavoured to expose as a contributing factor to social inequality through education.

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