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## **Psycho-spatial disidentification and class fractions in a study of social class and identity in an urban post-primary school community in Ireland**

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This paper draws on a three year critical ethnography which interrogated intersections of social class, school and identity in an urban Irish community. The focus here is on the psycho-spatial disidentifications, inscriptions and class fractioning enacted throughout the school and community of Portown by a cohort of succeeding students from this predominantly working class community. This paper makes a significant contribution through a unique focus on the intersections between class, schooling and identity in the Irish context. Themes based around perceived distinction and differences serve to highlight the effects of pervasive neoliberal philosophies pertaining to the commodification of education and competitive individualism. Some participants in the study engaged in identity work enacting escape and difference from their working class community as artefacts of success. An angelicisation of the middle class habitus is engaged throughout as the participant identities are wrought from their experiences of school and community actions, interactions and perceptions. The central concern here is the interplay between social mobility, social class and student identity in an Irish urban environment.

**Keywords:** social mobility; psycho-spatial disidentification; neoliberalism and education; identity and education.

### **Introduction**

Drawing upon a wider three-year ethnographic study of school choice, social class and identity constructions in Portown Community School, a post-primary school in an Irish urban, predominately working class, community, this paper focuses upon disidentification

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within social class fractions and inscription as key elements of social stratification through education in post- Celtic Tiger Ireland. This paper shines a light upon the particular cohort of students who are, for a variety of reasons, succeeding in second level education. Specifically, the intent is to interrogate the interactions between social class, schooling and student identity constructions in an Irish community increasingly infused with the contestations of neoliberal choice processes as they play out in our everyday lives. This paper is significant as it explores intersections between school, place, identity and social class in an urban Irish setting. This is important as social class is often unspoken in Irish education, and indeed society, as it becomes clouded in the murky language of educational disadvantage. In order for social class inequality to be addressed it must first be recognised, and its processes deconstructed, this is the contribution of this paper as it unpacks the lived experiences of the participants in order to expose the processes of classed identity work in twenty first century urban Ireland. The intent is to address the issue of classed identity constructions through the voices of the participants at the centre of this study and therefore make a contribution to the Irish and international literature in the fields of intersection between class, identity and schooling. The ethnographic data at the centre of this study facilitated an emotional and fruitful research journey into the hearts and minds of participants which makes a significant original contribution to the field of research in the sociology of education. The study draws upon cultural sociological theories of disidentification, inscription and class fractions to elucidate psycho-spatial explorations of social class in an Irish suburb as participants in the study draw distinct lines between people, place and space through nuanced and classed distinctions. Studies of the social and cultural construction of class show similar patterns in the United Kingdom where working class students become positioned and ‘othered’ within schools and society, not only by middle class society but by intra-class fractions within working class society (Hollingworth & Williams, 2009; Nayak, 2006).

## **Contextualising disruptive identity moments in twenty first century Ireland**

Since late 2008, Ireland has been experiencing something of a collective reflection upon the connections between the moral, economic and social dissolution of the state and yet, as pointed out below by President Michael D. Higgins, the country (and Europe) remains firmly locked within the neoliberal paradigm of governance and perceptions of the social world.

*The public space in so many countries of the EU has been commodified, and it is as calculating rational choice maximizers, rather than as citizens, we have been invited to view our neighbours," he said.*

*That is the mark of our times, the hegemonic version, by which it is suggested, we live our lives together. Our existence is assumed to be, is defined as, competing individual actors at times neurotic in our insatiable anxieties for consumption.*

*(Higgins, 2012)*

The above extract from a presidential lecture by the Irish Head of State, President Higgins, at the London School of Economics in February 2012, sets the tone for this paper and strikes many of the keynotes addressed in it. It is in this context of the ‘individual competing actors’, the ‘hegemonic version’ of our society and the ‘commodified’ world of people as ‘rational choice maximizers’ that the student cohort of the school community at the heart of this study, Portown Community School, engage with the sociocultural world of local community, national and global society. The premise of this paper is that the collective hegemonic psyche of competition can lead to disruptive identity moments for students in lower income working class communities where disidentification from locality, background and peers can become as significant as identifying with locality, background and peers. The focus is upon how social class is pivotal to one’s own identity authoring, despite the noticeable absence of ‘class talk’ from the discourse of the participants (Bottero, 2004; Savage, Silva, & Warde, 2010) and indeed from the wider socio-political discourse. The intersections of intra-class fractions

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contribute to the identity work of students as they make various psycho-spatial identifications and disidentifications throughout their school lives and home lives. The students in this study come from a working class community and, despite many 'deficited' versions of working classness, they enact aspirational and engaging school identities fully capable and at times intent upon social mobility (O'Sullivan, 2005). Indeed, this study illuminates different experiences of class and therefore supports the theory of class fractions where relativist competition and comparison between participants becomes part of their identity-making frameworks. The disruptive identity moments visited in the data below highlight the nuances of performances and experiences of classed identities in this Irish urban context.

### **Social class, schooling and identity in Ireland**

Some Irish research has addressed the issue of social class and the identity constructions of students in the context of social inequality (Byrne & Smyth, 2010; Lynch & Lodge, 2002; Lynch & Moran, 2006) and gender (O'Brien, 2003). The emergent emphasis, as it is here, is on how increasingly market-oriented education environments serve to increase social class inequality in school whilst simultaneously contributing to the classed identity work of students. The differential experiences of students in schools based on the social mix of the school has also begun to be explored as significant in the outcomes for students, particularly in working class communities (McCoy, Quail, & Smyth, 2014). Although this study offers an insight into the sociocultural dynamics of intersections between class, school and identity, there is also an awareness of underlying economically produced and maintained inequalities that make social mobility unavailable to many children from working class backgrounds (Lynch & Baker, 2005; Wilkinson & Pickett, 2009). Lynch and Baker (2005, p. 132) comment that 'equality in education can only be achieved if we recognize the deeply integrated relationship that exists between education and the economic, political, socio-

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cultural and affective systems in society'. This paper interrogates the entwined nature of these systems as social class delineations play out within the intersections between education and the socio-cultural identity constructions of the participants.

### **Classed identities and school in broader contexts**

Internationally, the intersections between identity, social class and schooling have received far more attention. For instance, in the UK, there has been significant findings relating to the deficiated inscriptions and problematic identity constructions of students from working class communities (Reay, 2004b, 2006) where the researchers attempt to disrupt stereotypical representations of working class schools by using the real voices of students in the schools. Other studies reveal the problematic nature of classness in contemporary neoliberal society where working classness has become a euphemism for failure and disconnectedness, whilst middle classness has become associated with success and status (Sayer, 2005). Therefore, contemporary understandings of class do not use the traditional language of social classifications and categories but rather focus upon representations of status such as education, dress, accent, wealth, taste and all other forms of distinguishing people (Bennett et al., 2009). Mike Savage (2003, p. 536) sees the universalization of middle class culture as a process whereby 'those who live up to middle class norms see themselves as "normal" people while those who do not see themselves (and are seen by the powerful) as individual failures'. Similarly, Stephen Ball (2003, p.168) finds that 'class identities are always here relational, made by distinctions and classifications of self and others'. This idea is supported by Gillies (2005, pp. 843-844) who emphasises that 'middle-class selves are necessarily defined in relation to working-class inferiority, with claims to privilege founded on a notion of deserving individuality', a point further emphasised by Diane Reay (2007). Therefore, privilege and otherness are constructed relationally and positions are imposed

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upon others as a classed inscription (Skeggs, 2004). Rowe and Windle (2012) also point to the effect of marketisation and the operationalisation of middle class cultural capitals in the school choice arena. In essence, as Connell points out, in a neoliberal context education is used to stratify and as mechanism of “sorting” which is “an exercise of power that reproduces the privileges of dominant social groups over time” (Connell, 2013, p. 104). This study focuses on the Irish context with the intention of teasing to the surface the classed nature of identity work being performed by young people in an Irish school setting. In many respects, the data explored here expose the hegemonic nature of the class relationship and serve to evidence the intensity of latent social class separations in Irish society. In particular, the focus here is upon how processes of disidentification, inscription and class fractions operate to create class-based polarisations and distinctions between people within working class communities.

### **Conceptual framework: disidentification, inscription and class fractions**

Disidentification as an identity term has been used elsewhere to examine ‘some awareness of not being as a significant sign of being’ (Mac an Ghail, 2000, p. 93). It is also used in a similar context in O’ Brien’s (2003) study of girls and the process of transition to the post-primary school. Skeggs (1997) makes recognitions in her study of intersections between class and gender that (dis)identification in class contexts is a significant operant in the identity equation. Diane Celia Hodges (1998, p. 273) describes the ‘concept of nonparticipation’ as a “split between a person’s activities and their relations with participation, a rupture between what a person is actually doing, and how a person finds themselves located in the ‘community’.” Hodges (1998) correctly asserts, paradoxically, that ‘nonparticipation’ in a community of practice is actually participation. One cannot extract oneself from context. By choosing not to participate a person is actually taking significant

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constitutive action. Savage, Silva and Warde (2010) offer a most comprehensive discussion of disidentification whilst also raising key questions concerning what it means to identify and disidentify with and from social class groups. Similar to this study, their work reveals identification and disidentification as performed affiliations to being either middle class or working class.

I use disidentification to configure the space around a particular phenomenon that emerges in this study. Some participants, particularly those who perform their identities closer to a middle class 'habitus', express the desire to separate themselves from their peers and their communities (Bourdieu, 1977). These participants are engaged in a process of positioning themselves as the middle class other. Significantly, this disidentification is often narrated in relational terms. It is the comparison with peers and with their communities that initiates this relational disidentification. Wilkinson and Pickett (2009, p. 25) comment on the relational and comparative nature of inequality and hierarchy because 'what matters is where we stand in relation to others in our own society'. Difference is materialised through creating comparisons and distinctions between individuals and groups. Therefore, the data discussed below is an exploration of how people form their own positions (and dispositions) through performances of class and through habitual formations of distinctions and delineations.

In this study, participants speak of difference in terms of geographical, spatial, social, cultural and historical separations. The dynamic interactions between family and school emerge as significant in terms of identity and social class throughout the study. Participants operate on different levels of awareness regarding individual, familial and societal interactions between schools and themselves. Student participants produce complex and refined views of class differentials some of which will be explored in more depth below. Reay et al (2005, p. 36) explore how the family and the institution (in this case the school) are

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‘linked to wider socio-economic cultures through processes in which schools and their catchments mutually shape and reshape each other’. These sociocultural dynamic actions also emerge as central in this study and the data excerpts will serve to explore this theme in more depth.

Beverley Skeggs describes ‘class as a form of inscription that shapes bodies in the making of strata and behaviour’ (2004, p. 12). In a broader perspective inscription is, for Skeggs (2004, p.12), ‘not just discourse but a complex set of practices for the deployment and co-ordination of bodies’. She cites Lingis (1994) who views society as a complex network of inscriptions and classifications such as ‘hierarchy, class, race, sexuality and gender’. Skeggs (2004, p.14) states, through Bogard (1998), that it is ‘important not to confuse the process of inscription with the sign itself –which is the product of inscription’. It seems that the inscribed, the inscriber and what is inscribed are locked in a meaningful dynamic of making. What is made, works on the level of society and within the conceptualisation of self. In this study, inscription is used to explore the distinctions constructed between the students, their community and their school as they enact their own identities in a very classed and comparative way. Participants inscribe themselves and others with particular positions of educational success and failure which serve to locate them on a distinctly fractioned social class landscape. Intra-class fractions within this working class community also function to create distinctions and differences between one another using school performance and neighbourhood reputations as key indicators. This process of inscription, in an educational context, is epitomised and legitimated through the imprint of market ideology upon education practices.

These Bourdieusian notions of class fractions emerge also as many of the participants create fractions within fractions through self-distinctions and through inscriptions of others as

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different. This is similar to divisions in the working classes that Bauman, as referred to Hollingworth and Archer (2010, p. 597), has referred to as the 'deserving' and the 'undeserving' poor. Some fractions become inscribed as difficult, troublesome and deficated. Various cultural capitals are colonised for the purpose of creating distinctions and fractions within the community. This paper emphasises, as has other research (Ball & Vincent, 2007; Bourdieu, 1984; Vincent, Ball, & Braun, 2008), that no solidified or unitary class action can be discerned and that 'class fractions' mean that there is always space for agentic action for people. Reay et al (2005, p. 105) state that:

*Within the working classes there are different class fractions with differing priorities in relation to risk, challenge and fitting in. These solidarist and individualist fractions within the working classes result in differing priorities, attitudes and actions.*

This agency can also be counter-productive for the peer group of successful working class students as they can be further alienated through processes of disidentification and inscription. The dichotomous relationship between class fractions of the community appears to be a growing issue in the last ten years as education has become one of the central arenas of separation and distinction in an increasingly commodified neoliberal society. Some participants in this study certainly exhibit more middle class values and aspirations and the crux of the study is examining the identity work being performed within and about the education context for these students.

These processes of disidentification, inscription and fractioning result in psycho-spatial disruptions for people. They envision themselves as leaving and escaping from their area and going to 'a good area' as an enactment of success. This discourse of escape and leaving was also recognised by Hollingworth and Archer (2010, p. 592) where they found children who 'talked about dreams, fantasies and desires to escape' from their locality. Similar desires are

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muted by many of the senior cycle (students aged 16-19) participants in this study. They construct the negative landscape of their local place and express open desires to leave in order to protect themselves and their future families from the suffering of their upbringing and youth in Portown. Hollingworth and Archer (2010, p. 592) cite Lucey and Reay (2002) who found that ‘the construction of somewhere as demonised is highly dependent on the production of an opposite’ or a safe and comfortable place where one can imagine one’s idealised future. Of course education is commonly infused with the language of escape as it is seen as a vehicle for self-improvement, for moving on, for making oneself better. Therefore, discourses of escape have roots in the inherent aims of the neoliberal educational project anyway.

These three conceptual tools of disidentification, inscription and class fractions are used throughout the thematic findings of this study to further excavate the experiences and identity work of the participants.

## **Methodology**

This article draws upon data generated during a three year critical ethnography focused upon a school in a working class community in an Irish city. Kincheloe and Steinberg (2007, p. 80) describe critical ethnography as ‘providing participants with a coherent voice.....with real and valid experiences, moving away from the subject in the placement of the all-too-often removed definitions of “otherness”’. It is this foregrounding of participant voice and making real the sometimes unreal world of educational statistics, the policy documents, the ‘removed definitions’ and the ever-evolving treatment plans for the pathologised ‘other’ of the DEIS (Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools) school that inspires this research. DEIS is the title given to schools qualifying as disadvantaged and are supported through a programme of preferential resources to offset social disadvantage. This programme has been

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in place in the Irish primary and post-primary school systems since 2005 and provides additional supports and interventions to nearly 850 schools, almost 200 of which are post-primary schools. It followed on from various interventions to target educational inequality in Irish society.

The ethnographic data was generated through forty-six semi-structured interviews with students, parents and teachers. There were thirty individual students interviewed drawn from across the student body of the school. There were representative proportions of students based on gender, diagnosis with special educational needs, students who have immigrated from another country to Ireland and ethnic background. The vast majority of the student participants come from working class families although three of the students hail from a more middle class setting where parents are in stable employment and they live in privately owned houses. Interestingly, the voices of these middle class students are quite vociferous in the thematic discussions which follow in the findings of this paper. The class position of the participants in this study was assigned through an analysis of parental education history, parental occupation and the holding of a medical card. These details, as well as, whether or not the family were living in private housing were used to signal class position in the context of this study. Eight teachers and eight parents were also interviewed as part of the study. Focus groups and extensive participant observation were also used throughout the study. Data generated through participant observation was recorded in research journals at the time of observation or soon after as was practicable in given circumstances. However, as stated above, my interpretation of the observations and my participation, however peripheral or central on any given occasion, often had an influence on the data being generated. These journals formed an integral part of the ethnographic record.

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A system of 'purposeful sampling' (Seidman, 1991, p. 52) was used to recruit participants for the study. This approach allowed a certain flexibility and fluidity that is vital to a dynamic ethnographic research process. In practice this meant that some students were in fact selected and actively recruited for the study. The particular cohort focused upon in this paper is a subsection of the larger group and consist of a group of students who are experiencing school success. They are senior school students (16-18 years old) who have negotiated their way through the world of school and now sit on the cusp of higher education and further education. Some of the participants in this study, Michael, David, Andrew and Wayne, enact much more middle class sensibilities and yet they do not totally represent a middle class sample. They do live in private housing, they are not medical card holders and their parents are in regular full-time pensionable employment. As outlined in the data sections below their aspirant middle class sensibilities do contribute to, and enact, the processes of class fractioning, inscriptions and disidentification at the centre of this study.

### *Site of the study*

Portown Community School is an urban post-primary school in a major Irish city with a student population of just under four hundred students. It is a multi-denominational, co-educational setting which espouses and practices values of equality and inclusion. In terms of gender, the school is three quarters male and one quarter female. In fact the female enrolment has been steadily diminishing in recent years. Anecdotally, teacher and parent participants attribute such demographic changes to the increasing competitiveness of the school choice environment and to the external perceptions of Portown and the school. Nevertheless, the school has a well-founded reputation for its inclusiveness and its pro-active inclusive policies. Difference is respected in all its forms.

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The immediate locality of the school is that of a working class suburb where there is a very large proportion of social housing. The adjoining area, or 'old Portown' is largely a middle class area where private housing dominates the landscape. They are two halves of the one moon and their dichotomous geography seems to play out in the tensions and divisions that emerge within the community in this study. Interestingly, only a minority of students from 'Old Portown' currently attend the school. Geographically, socially and culturally there are issues that can be gathered together under the umbrella of social class in this community. The school reflects this class divide as the population of the school is almost exclusively working class in composition. The dichotomous relationship between class fractions of the community appears to be a growing issue in the last ten years as education has become one of the central arenas of separation and distinction in an increasingly commodified neoliberal society. School management and senior staff members report very distinctive changes in the class make-up of the school population in the last decade. Many bemoan what is often described as 'the mix' in the school which refers to the benefits of having a larger cohort of middle class students in the school.

In the sections below, each theme is exemplified through vignettes of ethnographic data referred to here as telling cases. The themes expanded upon below are: class fractions and school ambition; psycho-spatial disidentification; and the construction of the angelicised other.

### **Class fractions and school ambition**

The undercurrent of the neoliberal project is infused throughout the voices and experiences documented throughout this study. Several participants make very astute observations regarding the stratification of school populations through attrition. School

ambition is used as a tool of distinction to inscribe those with and without ambition. Consider the following comment from Andrew who says ‘because like in the earlier years all the people come in like... you get all the different types... as the years go on some of them leave like, most of them are messers like’. The point is made that the school accepts everybody in the beginning but that as the years pass, those who are least able to maintain pace drop out or are asked to leave. ‘Messers’ is used across interviews as a generic term for students who are not very motivated and, as Andrew says in the same interview, they ‘are just willing to accept what they have and take like an average job and just work in MacDonalds’. There are obvious distinctions being made here between self and others. The stereotypical judgementalism that often infuriates the boys later in the same interview (not reported here) is being enacted upon others by themselves through such assumptions related to the ‘messers’ and therefore producing further fault lines amongst the class fractions of this community. This process of distinguishing oneself from one’s peers in this community emerges as a significant point of interest in this study. The following case, an individual interview with Michael, an aspirant middle class student, describes some of the class tensions inherent in the place.

***Telling case: ‘that little black cloud’***

*I: Do people make any assumptions about you because of where you go to school?*

*M: .....Portown it’s just the kind of scumbag rumours going around. They’re never true. It’s like that little black cloud following you around.....It is a fair point, personally I don’t believe it but I don’t take any offence to it. If that’s what they were brought up believing then so be it. Like personally I’m not actually from Portown so....[ long pause]*

*I: Where are you from then?*

*M: I'm from Market Town ( a rural town over thirty miles from the city), like I wasn't actually born in Portown so I don't really take much notice of it.....It's not about me.*

*(This student was not born in the local area but has lived there since before his second birthday)*

This short extract is drawn from a participant interview with a senior cycle student where clear differences and distinctions are drawn between self and Portown. This participant is representative of what might be described as a middle class fraction in the research sample. He comes from a traditional family unit who occupy private housing and where one parent is in secure, well-paid employment. The family present as socially and politically aware and they seem to display the understandings and desire to create cultural capital for themselves. Reay, David and Ball (2005, p. 96) state that 'we make the educational choices we do, not despite class but because they express our classed differences from others'. In this instance the student has inscribed himself as a future university student who disidentifies himself from many of his peers through familial history and place.

The central point that emerges here is the familial and historical basis for difference. The participant narrates a world where his locality is figured through the metaphor of 'a little black cloud' that follows him around. There is an obvious awareness and complex understanding of the inscriptive process of society. This participant continues to construct a defence against any attempt to inscribe him in terms of social class and yet he also assumes a self-identified position as other. He invokes familial history and place of birth as safeguards against any localised inscription. Michael continues to explain that he was born in a rural

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town and had 'only' moved to Portown just before his second birthday. At the time of the interview the student is seventeen years old. He refuses to accept the place as part of himself or even himself as part of the place. Michael invokes disidentification as both a defence mechanism against inscription and as a self-positioning tool. The rural town represents a multivalent cultural capital that can be deployed to situate identity in a reflexively positive light for the participant. This attachment to, and detachment from, place is intriguing. Essentially, this experience represents the significance of psycho-spatial attachments and detachments that operate as identity actions and signifiers for participants. Place is used to inform class representations of the self and others. This also operates within the fractional level of the local where delineations and inscriptions are created for various micro-cultural localities within the community.

The disidentification evident in Michael's geographical and psychological distancing of the self is borne of his sociohistorical self. Hodges (1998, p. 283) questions how 'an individual's historical-cultural baggage is evoked and shifting, displaced and continuous through participation'. In this sense, it is only through Michael's participation that he invokes his familial history as a comparative tool used to differentiate, decouple and disidentify himself from his community. This is a sociocultural dynamic of identity construction in action. His identity work takes place within the neoliberal context, where educational success is one of the bars by which the good citizen is measured and if you don't meet the criteria then you are subject to the demonisation and pathologisation that emerges throughout this study and others like it (Brantlinger, 2003; Hollingworth & Archer, 2010; Lucey & Reay, 2002).

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### **Psycho-spatial disidentification**

Throughout this ethnographic research the theme of geographical delineations and places as classed spaces emerge very distinctly. Such findings agree with much of the international literature in the field as all participants make distinctions between areas of the community (Butler, Hamnett, Ramsden, & Webber, 2007; Reay, 2004a, 2007). As the study progressed, such territorial and spatial inscriptions developed as intrinsically linked with the self-positioning of participants and to their positioning of others.

One element of this critical ethnography was observing the meso-world of the community in action. Prompted by discussions with parents and their interviews, I undertook some observation outside the school gate. One parent had commented in an interview that the ‘road up there divides Portown’. She was referring to the fact that the road seems to signify a dividing line between private housing estates and ‘the parks’ which are all social housing estates. My observations revealed that there is indeed a striking sense of separation and segregation symbolised by the long, wide road. Symbolically, this wide road in close proximity to Portown Community School, doesn’t even have a pedestrian crossing as the young people from ‘Old Portown’ across the road do not tend to go to school in the local community. Therefore, it serves as a symbolic reminder of the separations and segregations that can exist within a small community. Many of the participants appear particularly aware of local geography and how it inscribes people in terms of social class. Intricate and hierarchical patterns of differentiation between areas and parks feature throughout the study. Places become important cultural artifacts deployed in the acts of psycho-spatial identity-making.

### ***Telling case: heaven and hell***

The following excerpt from an interview with Wayne reveals some very insightful constructions of these inscriptions of micro-localities and the psycho-spatial separations implied by them:

*I: What differences would you notice?*

*W: Mostly d'ya know from the parks it's like around Portown their home lives you know is that they'll walk around in their pyjamas. It's mostly like what I was saying about scumbags. They don't care about what happens. Their back garden would be like covered in like toys and rubbish. Like you go out to Hill View then it's just pure peaceful. There's nothing wrong with it at all, it's like heaven or something.*

*I: So what do you think of your area?*

*W: Ya. We live in like a country part. It's pure clean. There's nothing wrong with it at all. You can look over Portown then and there's like fires every night. There's always something going on over there and the homies over there would be connected to that.*

*I: And that would be different from your own? How would you see your own area then?*

*W: Like respectful. It's like everyone knows each other, everyone likes each other. They're all like happy and getting along.*

Wayne makes very clear psycho-spatial distinctions between particular areas of the community. He views the locality from his vantage point on a hill across a small valley from 'the parks'. He constructs the parks as dysfunctional zones where the inhabitants are portrayed as lazy and apathetic. He uses an analogy between what he perceives as the

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peaceful tranquillity of his middle class estate as 'like heaven or something' and thus creates a heaven and hell dichotomy that has roots in social class inscriptions and distinctions. These parks are constructed as noisy and unruly; as places where there are fires burning all the time and 'there's always something going on over there'. It is not like the idealised space where he lives where 'they're all happy and getting along'. Wayne is engaging in constructions of identity through the psycho-spatial interpretations of place. His construction of the parks as unkempt and chaotic allows him to take up a position of privilege in his refined and peaceful locality. These are the localised hierarchies and stratifications that divide the leafy suburbs of the middle classes from their constructions of the working class other and their 'unruly places' (Reay, 2007). He is constructing identity through the use 'them' and 'us' as social class delineators (Southerton, 2002).

This inscription and positioning of 'the parks' emerges as a prevalent theme throughout the study. There are distinct cultural patterns of behaviour and expectations being constructed by participants. Wayne's stark nomenclature is also constructed by many other participants. For example, Shannon, a female student participant, talks about the social divisions in Portown:

*S: Ya Portown is very grouped, in other places they all come together and have a laugh. Portown is very segregated..... It depends on what area of Portown you come from.*

*I: What would the different areas be?*

*S: Down by the parks, the red houses would be very rough and then up by the Tower that would be very posh, they'd all be into their sports and stuff like that and nobody would hang around with each other. It is all where you are from.*

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Shannon is also pointing to social class segregation between ‘the parks’ and the ‘posh’ areas. She inscribes the kids from the middle class community as ‘into their sports’ as a symbol of their difference or, in Bourdieusian terms, their distinction.

One teacher participant emphasises this sense of geographical separation whilst discussing friendships between students from more and less affluent parts of the community:

*They’re allowing them into their environment, yeah, exactly. And, ya know, they’re then subject to scrutiny by their peers in the community saying ‘what are you doing playing with Kevin (a student from a poorer area)? He’s from the other side of the tracks’. And in Portown it’s nearly... it’s very obvious what the other side of the tracks are. Because you can look where the house that he lives in and the house that I live in are two totally different worlds, completely.*

In this extract the teacher emphasises the sense of difference between private housing and ‘the parks’. The distinction is geographical on one level and psycho-spatial in the sense that place, identity and social class become inextricable and socially constructed identifiers. Such identifiers are pointed to throughout these interviews as significant of worth or ‘value’ in a Skeggsian sense. Skeggs (2004, p. 2) attributes value as anything worthy of cultural, social and economic exchange. Valuing is intrinsic to the process of cultural class production as people, their place, their behaviours and their status are in a constant state of negotiation and judgement. Therefore, the centrality of place as a psycho-spatial constructor emerges and it serves to portray the centrality of place and space in identity construction. Disidentification and negative inscriptions initiated negative comparisons with other sectors of society and some students verbalise and enact escape as the answer. This sense of difference from the middle class other will be explored in more detail below.

### **The construction of the angelicised other**

This paper shows how middle class and neoliberal discourses of place and school appear to have significant sociocultural constitutive effects on the identities of working class students. Some participants undertake significant work in the construction of, what is termed here, the angelicised other. The conditions that serve to vilify one school space also contribute to the creation of a privileged and successful school space as a counterpoint. In other words, there is a process of idealisation of middle class spaces that serves to be reflexively constitutive for those who inhabit working class spaces. Take the following example as a case in point where a group of students are discussing a fee-paying school in a neighbouring middle class suburb:

*Seamus: You should see the stuff they have. They have these mad uniforms with blazers and everything and they're so close to town, they can go in for their lunch and everything. I'd love to go there. There's a fella in my park and he goes there.*

*David: What is it? Where is it?*

*Seamus: It's a school but it's not like here. You have to pay about €3500 to get in and you have to pay for your own books as well. You do really well out of it. My mam wants to send me there.*

*David: Why?*

*Seamus: So that I can get a good job. I'd love to be there. They're so cool.*

In this extract, Seamus is describing a school world that is alien to the other students. They haven't even noticed that the school exists but Seamus soon constructs it as a place of success

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and exclusivity. Seamus exudes veneration for the fee-paying students that places them on a pedestal above himself and his peers. In this instance, Seamus is contributing to his own positioning, and his school's positioning, through his elevation of the fee-paying other. He is aware of the advantages and the attractions of the fee-paying school and yet he is not in a position to access this choice for a number of reasons. The practicalities of the financial costs are one central reason but there is also a cultural division which is enacted by his peers in this extract. David is unaware of the privileged context of the fee-paying school. It is completely other and alien to him (and the other students present during this interaction) and therefore does not feature on his cultural radar as any different from the school that he is in. Seamus is using his knowledge of this other school to create a distinction between himself and his peers. He is building cultural capital that is not valued by his peers and yet it is contributing to his understanding of social mobility and the practicalities of movement between social classes. Seamus is making the connection between school choice and future opportunities in a very Bourdieusian manner. They understand the cultural and social capitals which can be garnered from the fee-paying setting and yet they do not have the economic capital required to buy into the market. This vignette highlights the construction of intra-class fractions as various cultural and social positions are invoked to construct difference.

The following extract is drawn from an interview with Seamus' mother on choosing a school for her son:

*P: Yeah. Seamus didn't even want to go here.*

*I: Didn't he?*

*P: No, Seamus was on a six month trial here but now doesn't want to change.*

*I: Yeah.*

*P: He wanted to go to [name of school] because that's where all his friends were going.*

*I: Right, ok, yeah.*

*P: But we told him that for one thing, travelling in the morning, he'd have to go on his own. And it's too far, he'd have to leave earlier in the morning and he wouldn't get home till late by the time he'd homework and that done.... there was all these things. Em... and then Kevin and Michelle (his siblings) kinda like were upping this place and telling him all the good things that went on here and ... now he's decided that he wants to stay here himself, so...*

It becomes clear here that Seamus has different ideas about his school of choice but that these choices are tightly restrained by the resources available to the family. Even in his earlier conversation with his friends, the financial implications of the fee-paying school are to the forefront of his mind. The issues of travel and time emerge as relevant here also. The kernel of these extracts is that some students and their families are aware of other schools and what they may offer in terms of social and cultural capital. However, they are restricted by circumstances of class in terms of economic and domestic resources. Such findings exist in other studies, internationally and nationally (Lareau, 2003; Lynch & Lodge, 2002).

This angelicisation of other places, and the implications for Portown, also play out in the field of academic performance. Neither the parents or the students participating in this study made reference to the school league tables that now appear annually in national

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newspapers. However, some participants do make distinctions with regard to projected results and where students go to school.

### ***Telling case: looking to the angels for salvation***

The following extract is from an interview with David, a fifth year student with high academic ambition:

*I: What do you think about schoolwork and school in general?*

*D: It's going along grand... thinking about going to [name of grind school] or [name of grind school] or somewhere. There's nothing wrong with the school, it's just that with some of the people in my class, I don't feel I could go as far as I can go. And I feel if I was around people who were more motivated I feel I could get more out of my Leaving Cert because I want to go as far as I can go because it is the rest of my life that is depending on this.*

*I: I'm very interested in what you said there. Can I just ask you a couple of things? What do you mean by "the other people in your class"?*

*D: Just some people I feel aren't as motivated to get what they want out of life, that some of them just come in here to get off the road or something..... but I would feel that..... like I want to be a teacher and I am going for 500 points and I don't think everybody in my class is going for 500 points. It's nothing bad against them. It's fine if they want to do something then they should only do the amount of work that they feel that they need to do but I'll be going for that and I don't think that much teaching can get done there.*

*I: You don't think that much teaching can get done here is it?*

*D: Well if you're in a group of people who are motivated to do something then they'll pull you along with them but if you're in a group that is not as motivated as you, you kind of sink down to their level so I don't think that's going to happen to me but I want to go before that does happen to me.*

In this instance, David is considering leaving Portown Community School in order to attend a private fee-paying 'grind' school that focuses entirely on the Leaving Certificate examination and the achievement of points towards higher education entry. He maps out both schools almost as polar opposites in terms of school culture and in terms of the qualities, and lack thereof, he inscribes upon them. David speaks of his fellow students in Portown as lacking in motivation to succeed and comments that he doesn't want to 'sink down to their level'. Therefore he positions his fellow students as failures in the school game and that if he wants to succeed then he needs to change schools to where he will be amongst like-minded 'motivated' students. On a sociocultural level, there is an impact here. Every action has a communal impact. The movement of a so-called 'motivated' student has consequences in terms of peer effect and also in terms of how the school is inscribed. The movement of a successful, and capital infused student such as David serves to solidify the divide. The action mediates the present and future choices of other parents and students. David moves and yet his move has a ripple effect of encouraging the movement of other similarly motivated students to enrol elsewhere. David's case exemplifies how the place and the students can be inscribed negatively by themselves and others.

### **Conclusion:**

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This paper interrogates the impact on the subjectivities of participants based on their psycho-spatial disidentifications. Importantly, the findings direct our attention to some of the constructions of place, person and community which can perpetuate disidentifications from working class communities as well as highlighting the focus on social mobility from a particular fraction of this working class community. Such disidentifications and disengagements can have very negative effects on school composition, school perception and student identity construction in working class areas despite having positive effects for some of these students themselves. There are very significant influences of neoliberal practices in education evidenced throughout this research but most particularly in the penchant for distinguishing oneself and making oneself better through competitive individualism. The students at the centre of this study enact an othering of working class communities and schools as they are seen as symbols of failure. Students seek to disidentify and to separate in order to connect with the perceived success of the middle class. In this context, the ideas of escape and moving away dominate the psychological landscape for these succeeding students as they position themselves as successful, and therefore *other*, from other students in their school community. The hegemonic nature of the neoliberal psyche has motivated these students to position others as failures in comparison to their own success. In some way, they are entranced by the lure of individual success and the well documented vogue of competitive individualism (Bauman, 2011; Harvey, 2007). These motivations and aspirations are important and essential for these students and they are to be lauded for these efforts and abilities. The drive to better oneself is not where the issue is with these students but rather within the process of disidentification and subsequent othering of their peer groups and communities. The various angelicisations and denigrations feeding the identity work of the participants in this study emerge as socially constructed classed interactions. These classed constructions also serve to shine a torch upon neoliberal competitive individualism as it

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emerges in the identity ‘constructions of these students. The focus on ethnographic data here allows for a closer analysis of the identity work amongst the participants and as such offers a fresh perspective on issues at the intersection of class, school and identity in Ireland. Schools could be spaces designed to break down barriers and allow opportunities for social mobility and cohesive communities’ (Cahill & Hall, 2014, p. 395) rather than facilitative spaces for distinction and separation through social class distinction. Students in this working class community are constructing positions within the global neoliberal paradigm as they choose to disidentify from their communities and schools. This is because of a latent belief that success is attached to escape and flight (Ball & Vincent, 2007; Connell, 2013). Above all, the portrait of Irish urban schooling constructed in this paper reflects President Higgins’ commentary on the “insatiable anxieties of consumption” that continue to feed upon our education systems and endemic cultures of social stratification and separation (Higgins, 2012). The learning for Irish education, and indeed society, is that we need to be careful about how we construct success. This paper evidences that working class students do succeed and we, as a broad educational community, need to ensure that success is not shaped by the disidentification from, and inscription of, working class peers and communities. Success and achievement should focus on communitarian collaboration and unity that benefits all of society as opposed to allowing the few to climb upon the shoulders of the many.

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