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School Markets and Educational Inequality in the Republic of Ireland

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Summary

Educational inequality is a persistent feature on the landscape of Irish educational history, and it remains a significant issue in the early part of the 21st century. There have been significant efforts at school reform in recent decades to intervene in a system that continues to provide significantly different outcomes based on socioeconomic position and background. These differentiated outcomes continue to be exacerbated by structural inequalities in the lives of people as well as by an increasing focus on neoliberal market principles in education. Interschool competition, particularly at the postprimary level, has fueled an ever-increasing marketplace where schools vie for desirable middle-class students through media-published school league tables. Indeed, this competitive landscape is partly constructed by an intense and high stakes race for third level places in Ireland.

Nevertheless, significant policy measures have also been aimed at leveling the playing field and providing opportunities for people in communities that are more marginalized in terms of economic status and educational outcomes. Some of these policy interventions have had some impact in terms of retention in postprimary school, including the Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools program; curricular interventions into education such as the Junior Certificate Schools Programme; the Leaving Certificate Applied Programme; and the allocation of additional teaching resources to schools experiencing marginalization. Schemes such as the Higher Education Access Route and the Disability Access Route to Education have also done important work in terms of ameliorating opportunities for students from

marginalized economic groups and students with disabilities, respectively. However, there are overarching sociopolitical ideologies that work to maintain educational inequality in Ireland, such as the significant impact of neoliberal choice policies on schools in communities experiencing poverty and educational marginalization. These neoliberal ideas are characterized by increasing focus on outcomes, testing and assessment, school and teacher accountabilities, within-school and between-school competition in terms of admissions policies, and "syphoning off" high-achieving students (academically, musically, sports, etc.), and they often manifest in blunt instruments such as school league tables. These policies often benefit citizens with wealth and cultural capital who use their position to distance themselves educationally from the complexity and diversity of everyday society in favor of academic and cultural silos that work to reproduce advantage for the elite sectors of society.

Keywords

educational inequality, marketisation of education, school league tables, school choice in Ireland

Introduction

Educational inequality is a persistent feature on the landscape of Irish educational history, and it remains a significant issue in the 21st century. The global shift toward competitive, aggressive, and marketized versions of education have left their mark on Ireland. Ireland in the 21st century is a small yet voracious player on the stage of globalization in all its constituent forms: economically, politically, culturally, and educationally. This article situates Ireland's recent educational history in the context of marketized reforms to provide a wider context for the discussion on Ireland's experiences with inequality in education.

Specifically, the article presents an overview of how educational inequalities are created and reproduced through school reform policies throughout the Western world; provides a historical context for school reforms in Ireland; and addresses the specific issues of school choice, school league tables, and the reproductive nature of educational inequality in Ireland. Central theoretical concepts that will inform the discussion draw upon Pierre Bourdieu's conceptualizations of *capital* and *habitus* as the article works toward constructing a critical perspective on the school reform agenda in Ireland. Underlying these perspectives is an understanding that, as Lynch and Baker (2005) have emphasized, equality of condition should be sought in the way that "people should be as equal as possible in relation to the central conditions of their lives" (p. 132) The focus here is to examine some areas where education, particularly practices and policies around second-level schooling, has an influence on the development of inequality rather than moving toward equality of condition.

Historical Context of Irish Education

Ireland is a relatively recent nation-state in a modern context. The country achieved free state status from the British Empire in 1922, establishing its own independent constitution in 1937 and fully recognized independent republic status in 1949. These actions conferred republic status on 26 of the 32 counties on the island, with the remaining six counties constituting Northern Ireland, which remains within the jurisdiction of the United Kingdom. This article discusses experiences of education and schooling in the Republic of Ireland developed from the mid-1960s to the 21st century. Prior to the 1960s, schools were largely in the control of the Catholic Church, although the Vocational Education Act of 1930 did see the burgeoning of a state-run schooling sector. The first vocational schools were opened in 1938, predominantly in Gaeltacht (Irish-speaking areas of the country). Compulsory schooling

existed for those between the ages of 6 and 14. By the 1960s the country had begun to experience a period of protracted prosperity, and widening participation in postprimary education became a considerable focus to contribute to the growing industrialization of the economy. The *Investment in Education* report (1965) noticed considerable inequalities in terms of access and opportunities and the prevalence of early school-leaving in Ireland. The report was acted upon in 1966 by Minister Donagh O'Malley, who introduced free postprimary education for all child-citizens to improve access and participation and address the socioeconomic inequalities prevalent in the education system. This policy shift proved to be a central catalyst to the creation of opportunities in education for all members of Irish society. Prior to 1966, less than 60% of Irish 15-year-olds were still in school, whereas in the early 21st century that percentage has developed to more than 90% (Harford, 2018. Notwithstanding this impressive baseline statistic, there is a hidden element of inequality within it. Ninety percent of school-going children may complete senior cycle, but this profile is skewed in favor of the middle classes. Students from socioeconomically marginalized areas experience far lower completion and progression rates. The differential experiences of education by early school leavers in areas of economic marginalization has been shown to be characterized by stigma, cultural dissonance with school, and traumatic experiences sometimes stemming from the complexities of poverty (Doyle & Keane, 2019). The gap between middle-class and working-class schools in terms of school completion is currently 8.5%, which represents an improvement on a 16.8% gap in 2008 (Department of Education and Skills, 2017). Disparate levels of progression to higher education is also a feature of this inequality, with middle-class students far more likely to progress to higher education. While being primarily motivated by the requirements of an educated workforce to fuel economic expansion in Ireland, the seismic shift in policy and investment in education also created possibilities for working class communities that had been largely sidelined from the

postprimary school educational experience prior to 1966 (Loxley, Seery, & Walsh, 2014). Over the last 30 years or so, Ireland has shifted from a largely theocentric experience of educational practice to a more overtly marketized and commodified iteration of policy and enactment (Lynch 2006; O'Sullivan, 2005). O'Sullivan (2005) describes this Ireland as a liberal space that is "regulated by a society of private autonomous individuals interacting in competitive contexts and configurations" (p. 229). This considerable shift in focus has resulted in significant comparison and competition between schools, most particularly at the postprimary level. Certainly, the state-encouraged culture of competition is central to educational practice at individual, institutional, and state levels in 21st-century Ireland. This shift in policy paradigm has contributed to a shifting landscape of contradictions around the inclusion/exclusion nexus where ostensible policies of participation and difference through diversifying school choice have also contributed to increasing societal polarization in terms of social class, most particularly at the postprimary level (Cahill & Hall, 2014).

Although there has been undeniable progress in terms of widening participation in postprimary education in Ireland, there are still stark and stubborn inequalities in terms of opportunities, experiences, and outcomes for students from underserved social groups. It is a matter of fact that educational inequalities are intrinsically linked to, and caused by, structural economic inequalities between people (Lynch & Moran, 2006, O'Connor & Staunton, 2015). The following sections intend to unpack the dynamics of educational inequality in Ireland through the lenses of marketization, commodification, and competition as the intrinsic drivers of the neoliberal influences on educational policy and practice.

Interventions into educational inequality in Ireland have consistently focused on remediation at the level of the school through the provision of resources. The framing of how the state intervenes is important. Interventions have always been positioned in terms of reforming the experiences of school-goers rather than looking at the structural inequalities

that have produced differential outcomes based on access to economic capital and the resources required for successful schooling. Nevertheless, these interventions are still welcome as we struggle to deconstruct inequalities in our educational system. Of course, as was previously mentioned, an education system cannot stand apart from the constituency within which it serves and is produced. The wider structural inequalities in society make the pursuit of equality more difficult but not less necessary. The next section provides a social class perspective on educational inequality in Ireland.

A Social Class Perspective on Educational Inequality in Ireland

Social class is a fluid concept constructed from socioeconomic and sociocultural indicators; it is about wealth and poverty, but it is also about cultural identities. Working classness should be associated with values that are committed to working for a living, supporting community and family, and striving for the common good. Nevertheless, there is also the understanding that access to resources plays a significant part in opportunities for accessing, participating in, and benefiting from education and therefore the influences of material, cultural, and social resources do a play an important role in the construction of educationally privileged positions and identities in Irish society. I acknowledge that social class does not exist in a vacuum and that there are nuanced experiences of social class through myriad intersections with gender, race/ethnicity, disability, religion, and sexuality that are relevant to any experience of education in Ireland. Indeed, the intersectional recognition of diverse student cohorts is a vital element of research into experiences of schooling in Ireland in recent years. Devine and McGillicuddy (2016) found an absence of overt conscious thought about social justice and pedagogy as well as a lowering of expectations for boys from working class backgrounds.

These issues are recurrent findings in research relating to schooling in Ireland and both issues contribute to the inequality of opportunity based on social class position in our education system. As with other countries in the developed world, research evidence has pointed to direct links between poverty and opportunities for achievement in education (Wilkinson & Pickett, 2009). Similarly, here in Ireland, we have put far less focus on the root causes of poverty than we have on demanding the education system levels the playing field. The myth of meritocracy remains central to the discourse around school reform in Ireland with a steadfast belief in neoliberal principles in education whereby educational success is seen as equally open to everybody regardless of the cultural, social, and economic disparities between people, families, and schools. Lynch and Crean (2018) have emphasized that ideas such as equality of opportunity "need to be underpinned by the principle of equality of condition, especially equality of economic condition" (p. 140) and this is the kernel of educational inequality in Ireland. Education does not exist in a vacuum and wider life circumstances and conditions need to be addressed in order to provide more equal educational experiences for everyone.

In recent decades the Irish education system has continued to provide significantly different outcomes based on socioeconomic position and background. These differentiated outcomes continue to be exacerbated by structural inequalities in the lives of people as well as by an increasing focus on neoliberal market principles in education. Interschool competition, particularly at the postprimary level, has fueled an ever-increasing marketplace where schools compete for desirable middle-class students through media-published school league tables. In Ireland, these league tables are driven by the narrowly focused and funneled version of senior cycle education in Ireland where students compete with one another for limited places in third-level institutions based on their points in the Leaving Certificate Examinations. This has led to a significant "backwash" effect on classroom experiences

where test performance has become the primary function of senior cycle education (McCoy, Byrne, O'Sullivan, & Smyth, 2019). Neoliberal school reforms (assessment/testing, school choice/marketization, school and teacher accountabilities), as they have done elsewhere in the world, often serve to narrow the perception of the "good student" and the "good school" to the extent that schools become hives of extreme competition where actors vie for supremacy in the school game. Ireland is not alone in this maelstrom of neoliberal reform, indeed the speed of neoliberal reform may even be slower and less aggressive than it appears in some other countries. Perryman, Ball, Maguire, and Braun (2011) have reported on the constant tensions and contradictions between the beliefs of teachers and the incessant waves of assessment and testing that continue to infiltrate experiences of school in the United Kingdom. Similarly, Lingard, Martino, and Rezai-Rashti (2013) have continued to emphasize the Australian experience of neoliberal reform where accountability through testing has become the central mission of an education system concerned with global rankings and statistical comparisons of measurements of achievement. John Smyth (2012) has emphasized the extent of the challenge and damage instigated by neoliberal policies in education. Smyth drew on Australian research to map out the particular impact of this movement on "disadvantaged schools" whereas Lamb (2007) referred to a process of "ghettoisation" and "residualisation" of schools serving areas with high levels of poverty. Smyth recounted how aggressive market-based educational reforms have allowed for a "creaming effect" to take hold in Australian schools whereby those with the necessary capital find school opportunities beyond their localities while leaving behind the more disadvantaged students. In the United States, Diane Ravitch (2010)) has consistently reminded us of how neoliberalized education policies of choice, excessive accountability mechanisms, and a deliberate change in emphasis toward private sector influence in education have produced devastating outcomes for schools and communities at the margins of American society. The situation is not dissimilar in Spain.

Fernández-Mellizo and Martínez-García (2017) show how educational inequality and socioeconomic inequality continue to be inextricably linked, and indeed have grown in reciprocity. This article frames the recent Irish experience of educational reform and most particularly the impact it has had on the most marginalized communities on our little island on the western edge of Europe. The commonalities of experience with those outlined exemplifies the truly global reach of the education reform movement. Recent Irish educational history and experiences have washed back and forth on the waves of globalizing influences that have passed over it from Europe and the Unites States.

Interventions in Inequality

In Ireland there have also been significant policy measures aimed at leveling the playing field and providing opportunities for people in communities that are more marginalized in terms of economic status and educational outcomes. Importantly, the policy of choice has always been to intervene, to remediate, and to address the problem of educational disadvantage with very little recognition or acceptance of the fact that educational disadvantage is a symptom of deep structural inequalities very often borne out of the penchant for neoliberal ideologies and their progressive colonization of the educational sphere. Nevertheless, some policy interventions have had some impact, including the Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS) program; curricular interventions into education such as the Junior Certificate Schools Programme; the Leaving Certificate Applied Programme (LCAP); and the allocation of additional teaching resources to schools experiencing marginalization. Smyth, McCoy, and Kingston (2015) have compiled evidence to show this impact while noting improvements in retention rates in DEIS schools and rising performance in achievement scores in literacy and numeracy. Nevertheless, they also emphasize the centrality of the “multiplier effect” and that

interventions and performance indicators in areas experiencing multiple layers of disadvantage could not be expected to level the playing field, but merely show some positive outcomes for young people. Similarly, the LCAP, a program designed to intervene in terms of school retention at the senior cycle, has had complex outcomes for students. It does provide an outlet for school completion for students at higher risk for dropping out but it can also be problematic from an education progression perspective as it is directed more toward the employment market in terms of outcomes. This can lead to limitations in terms of earning potential and educational opportunities, and it also contributes to within-school stratification and tracking processes (Banks, Byrne, McCoy, & Smyth, 2010, 2014).

In terms of entry to higher education, the Higher Education Access Route and the Disability Access Route to Education have both introduced some opportunities for students from marginalized economic communities and people with disabilities, respectively. Nevertheless, there is a significant disparity in terms of opportunity and equality of condition for these students. Elaine Keane (2009, 2011) has written extensively on the experiences of students from less advantaged backgrounds in higher education.

There are overarching sociopolitical ideologies that work to maintain educational inequality in Ireland, such as the significant impact of neoliberal choice policies on schools in communities experiencing poverty and educational marginalization. These policies often benefit citizens with wealth and cultural capital (in relative and absolute forms) as they use their position to distance themselves educationally from the complexity and diversity of everyday society in favor of academic and cultural silos that work to reproduce advantage for the elite sectors of society. Frawley (2014) provides us with a clear and concrete example of the unequal nature of educational experience in Ireland by showing how a child attending an inner-city school with disadvantaged status has, as she describes, a 30% chance of leaving primary school with serious literacy difficulties and a 90% probability that they will not get

the opportunity to attend third level education. Byrne and McCoy (2017) have used Lucas's theory of "effectively maintained inequality" to emphasize how students who are socioeconomically advantaged have better progression rates (to higher education), even when they are "academically equivalent" to their less advantaged peers (Byrne & McCoy, 2017, p. 50; Lucas, 2001). Byrne and McCoy's work provides specific evidence on inequalities regarding progression and within-school tracking patterns, as well as a socioeconomic pattern regarding the uptake of higher-level mathematics in the senior cycle of secondary school.

Similar to other countries in the world, Ireland's education system is subject to effects of increasing movement toward marketization through school choice, school autonomy, school league tables, and a two-tier system of public and fee-paying school sectors, which produces unequal educational conditions and outcomes for young people.

School Choice and Bourdieuian Lenses

Educational opportunities in Ireland, as in other countries throughout the world, tend to favor those with more access to capital (economic, cultural, and social). The Bourdieuian frames of *cultural capital* and *habitus* serve as orientating concepts through which to explore the discussion of inequality as instantiated through the school choice mechanism of marketizing and commodifying and marketizing the postprimary education system in Ireland. Bourdieu's body of work makes a strong case for the reproductive function of education in terms of the stratification and segregation of education:

> Credentials contribute to ensuring the reproduction of social inequality by safeguarding the preservation of the structure of the distribution of powers through a constant re-distribution of people and titles characterized behind the

> impeccable appearance of equity and meritocracy. (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990, p. xi)

Cultural capital, as defined by Bourdieu (1984), comes in three forms: embodied, objectified, and institutionalized. Without belaboring the point, capital can become sedimented and part of how people represent themselves through their dispositions (embodied), represented by the cultural artefacts representing such dispositions (objectified), and connected to institutions, most particularly educational, that can confer capital through qualifications and association. Relatedly, the concept of *habitus*, and most particularly institutional habitus (Reay, David, & Ball, 2001), can serve us well in terms of understanding how inequality is manifested within the school system. Bourdieu defined *habitus* as "history turned into nature," whereby a person's characteristic way of being is a representation of their sociocultural past and present (Bourdieu & Nice, 1977, p. 78). Bourdieuian dynamics relating to the construction of capital and what Diane Reay and others have referred to as "institutional habitus" play a significant part in educational inequality through school composition (Reay, 1998; Reay et al., 2001). As a concept, institutional habitus allows us to move beyond the person as the unit of analysis and allows us to consider how wider social, economic, and cultural forces commingle to influence experiences and outcomes of students in schools. In the Irish context, institutionalized cultural capital comes to be through association with particular schools, colleges, and universities that could be regarded as "loaded" from a cultural capital perspective. It must also be noted that concepts such as familial habitus and institutional habitus are not without its critics. Notably, Atkinson (2011) argues that the concepts may ultimately be counter-productive as they may camouflage some of the nuance and complexity of reproductive theories of inequality. Nevertheless, I find them useful orientating tools in the examination of class-related inequalities in education in Ireland.

School choice is a field of international interest that offers multiple perspectives on choice as a function of inequality in education. Aggressive and advancing policies of promoting school choice have significant impact on the social mix of the school and contribute to the constitution of what was described earlier as "residualisation" and "ghettoisation" of school settings (Lamb, 2007). McCoy, Quail, and Smyth (2014) emphasized the importance of the school social mix, as opposed to an individual child's social class background, in the experiences and outcomes of primary school children. Basing their findings on an analysis of the large-scale *Growing Up in Ireland* study, McCoy et al (2014) noted that urban DEIS schools displayed the most significant achievement gap in terms of performance in English and mathematics, as well as noting that there was a "threshold" effect evident. This means that the "concentration of disadvantage beyond a certain point results in lower levels of achievement" (McCoy et al., 2014, p. 327). Of course, school composition is a complex phenomenon and is a result of a complexity of interacting factors, such as housing arrangements, economic policy, school choice patterns, and patterns of social class stratification. We know that some "top-down" policy positions on housing policy, maintaining income inequality and facilitating and encouraging interschool competitiveness contribute to this dynamic. However, there are also noticeable "bottom-up" phenomena instigated by the social and cultural dynamics of society where middle-class populations recognize and place increasing value on education as an economic, social, and cultural commodity that encourages people to make significant investments when it comes to school choice, sometimes at the primary level, but very evidently at the postprimary level. Essentially, policy development that allows, facilitates, and promotes between-school competitiveness in a marketized environment contributes to social, cultural, and economic stratifications within the education system that exacerbate rather than alleviate inequality and solidify boundaries between people.

The following sections develop this idea of how choice and individual action contribute to rooting deeper stratification and segregation in Irish society through the postprimary school choice system by examining how advantage is culturally constructed as well as exploring how material phenomena such as school league tables allow class stratification to occur.

Constructing Advantage

Schools and schooling contribute to the construction of privilege and advantage. We tend to focus on "educational disadvantage" in discussions of inequality in education, and sometimes leaving the construction of privilege and advantage in the background. Adam Howard's (2008) ethnographic study of privilege shows how advantage can be socially, culturally, and politically produced in our societies and that it requires "intentional efforts on the part of educators to confront and transform" practice in order to "interrupt privilege" and create more democratic and equal conditions for people within our education systems (p. 228). For instance, I have evidenced processes of "disidentification" as being as central to the processes of school choice as anything else (Cahill, 2018). Distinction and difference become accentuated through disidentification with an individual's peers locality, as they strive to stand apart from and move beyond their own spatial and sociocultural location. Indeed, it could be that this "collective hegemonic psyche of competition," inspired by neoliberal commodifications of education, serves to further stratify Irish society by encouraging separation, difference, distinction, and disidentification (Cahill, 2018, p. 60). The commodification of education has become endemic to Irish society and as such stands as an example of how wealth and capital can usurp a sociocultural space and infuse it with greed, unfair competition, and a deeply classed version of entitlement and belongingness. The

resistances of the wealthier classes to democratization, inclusion, and widening participation for all has been to develop further forms of exclusivity, exemplified by a fee-paying postprimary school sector that is both state-supported (the majority of teacher salaries in fee-paying schools in Ireland are fully state funded) and garners benefits from charging large fees for its students. The consequences are twofold: the school finds itself with large private budgets that can be used to enhance educational opportunity within the school, and the school becomes largely populated by wealthy, middle-class students with all of life's privileges and advantages concentrated within it. The fact that this two-tier approach to postprimary education is state-funded and state-supported indicates how educational inequality is an endemic feature of the sociopolitical landscape in Ireland. Brantlinger (2003) emphasized the hegemonic nature of class stratification and segregation through her exploration of the hierarchies that contribute to creating the norms that validate and justify privilege in America. Brantlinger (2003) recognized the deep hegemonic relationship between classes in terms of how even the socioeconomically marginalized groups in her study "had internalised negative views of themselves and believed that more affluent students were brighter and generally worthier of advanced school placement and better school outcomes" (p. 25). Although this research may be dated and was conducted in a different country, the echoes with Ireland are clearly discernible.

"Book Smart" and "Street Smart" as Euphemisms of Class in Schools

Like many other young people, Shane, a 16-year-old student, recognizes some school-orientated distinctions between being "book smart" and "street smart" (Cahill, 2012). Interestingly, the language employed by Shane in the following excerpt has emerged

elsewhere in the literature, most particularly through Hatt's (2007) investigation of the figured worlds of marginalized urban youth.

> People who go to school around the town area, they're better than us, they speak better and stuff and they have more money. We all talk the same and act the same. People just rub off on one another. You could say that we are street smart and they are like book smart. Now you could get the street smart people who could get 600 points in the Leaving Cert and still talk normal like us. (Cahill, 2012, p.180)

Shane's comments on the differences between places and schools are astute and formative on a number of levels. Essentially, he points to how people speak and their financial resources as signifiers of difference. Worryingly, he refers to these middle-class others as "better than us" but refutes this statement when he refers to the "street smart people who could get 600 points in the Leaving Cert." "Street smart" serves as code for students from working-class schools and therefore the "book smart" students are the middle-class others who are portrayed as successful students who are very capable of negotiating the educational minefield. There is an awareness of difference and yet there is an absence of language and conceptualizations to describe these differences. This absence is, in part, due to a continuing erasure of class issues from the social, political, and cultural landscape of the country. In many respects this erasure is rooted in the official world of policy and legislation where class discourse seems to be intentionally removed to allow the "cloak of sameness" to envelope education policy and school culture (Cahill, 2015; Oakes, 1985). *Erasure* is being used here in the sense that social class in the Irish political discourse often appears as *sous rature*, or there but not there (Derrida, 1998). This is a significant issue, not just in education, but in the wider political discourse in Ireland. Social class is often denied as a significant feature of Irish society and

yet instantiations of class-in-practice stratification exist despite the absence of the language of class in the wider discourse.

Shane also made a very astute reference to how "people just rub off on one another." Shane noticed that there is essentially a "social mix effect" in operation in peoples' interactions (McCoy et al., 2014). Shane's words encapsulate what we mean by institutional and familial habitus. It is this hiddenness of class practices within wider school reform policy that allows the maintenance of distance and educational inequality to flourish. In the Irish context, Smyth and Banks (2012) explored how institutional and familial habitus played an important role in the educational trajectories of postprimary school students. Their study recognized the contribution played by these concepts in decisions to pursue, and proceed to, higher level education. They noted that the middle-class school and working-class schools in their study contributed to different potential educational trajectories for students, with middle-class cohorts more attuned to the higher education pathway. However, their study also noted a strong presence of dissonance and agency on the part of the students, most particularly some of those students in the working-class school who were questioning their pathways and contradicting social reproductive theories of postschool transitions of working-class students.

As already mentioned, privilege remains a state-supported concept within the postprimary education system in Ireland. Courtois (2015) suggests that elite educational institutions have continued to resist democratization and continue to insist on moral superiority and resistance to diversity in terms of school composition. Some slight efforts have been made during the most recent period of recession to disrupt the reproduction of privilege through the education system with the introduction of an increased pupil-teacher ratio for elite school settings as well as a reduction in the capitation grant paid to these schools. Unfortunately, these moves do little or nothing to disrupt the overarching fact that

the state pays the greatest expense on these schools, the teachers' salaries, and therefore supports financially and philosophically the maintenance of elitism in postprimary education in Ireland. It may even be the philosophical support for school stratification that is the most damaging in the long run, as this notion of elite settings or developing institutional distinctions based on cultural and academic separatism has permeated throughout the "free" sector of Irish postprimary schooling. Distinction comes in many forms and fees are not the only financial barriers in schooling. There are also issues such as elaborate school uniforms, expensive extracurricular equipment, extravagant school trips, and varying levels of voluntary contributions that contribute to schools garnering distinction and elitism through their day-to-day practices (Courtois, 2017; Lynch & Lodge, 2002). Byrne and Smyth (2010) completed a relatively large parental survey in 2007 that provided rich data on the processes and practices of school choice in Ireland at that time. They noted that the children of higher professionals are "significantly more likely to be attending a school outside their locality" (p. 44). This study also provides significant insights into other policies and practices that contribute to schools as classed spaces, such as "creaming-off" talented students and having restrictive admissions policies. The Education (Admission to Schools) Act of 2018 addresses the fairness of admissions policies (See the section "Education (Admission to Schools) Act of 2018" for details.

School League Tables

Indeed, the hiddenness of class discrimination within Irish education policy and practice is a recurring theme. It is most evident within the existence of the school league table culture of the Irish postprimary education system. School league tables have emerged as a malignant force throughout countries with propensity for measurement and interschool competitiveness

(Perryman et al., 2011). In Ireland, school league tables are not supported by official state policy and yet they feature very powerfully in the national media, where postprimary schools are ranked based on the percentage of students who gain access to higher education institutions through the leaving certificate competition. National media outlets collate data based on third-level admissions to universities and institutes of technology and measure the percentage of students from each school who earn a place at these third-level institutions. These crudest of crude measures are then promoted as an indicator of school quality and schools are placed in rank order, nationally, regionally, and based on county. These league tables then operate to, within the marketized and commodified version of education, create further divides between families and communities under the guise of school quality. There is a significant impact in terms of diversity, and the lack thereof, in school cultures. Schools have become divided along the lines of social class, race/ethnicity, and often proportionality in relation to special educational needs. In other words, school league tables appear to have contributed to grouping and stratification among the postprimary school population. Although there is little current research available that reflects on the impact of school league tables in Ireland, there is significant research based in the United Kingdom and Australia to exemplify how these tables contribute to stratification among the school-going population (Angus, 2015 Gibbons & Telhaj, 2007). McCormack, Lynch, and Hennessy (2015) have reported on school league tables in the Irish context and noted that the majority of parents in their study did not value or support the publication of school league tables and were sufficiently sensitive to the potential contribution to elitism and class stratification being made by these media-published reports. Such sensitivities among the parental population is both heartening and welcome, particularly in the context of wider growth in comparative and competitive markets in education. Of course, the very existence of these comparative league tables is still a contributing factor to the maintenance of elite advantage and reproduction

through education in Irish society. The league tables offer the mechanism for class stratification as they align with school choice processes and favor middle-class populations who are mobile (in terms of private transport), financially secure (for paying fees, funding extracurricular activities, and uniforms), and experienced at cultivating cultural and social capitals that are synergistic with the institutional habitus of more elite school cultures. School league tables also provide parents with guilt-free choices as they justify elite schools by arguing that they are only doing what is best for their child, and who could argue with a parent acting in their child's best interests? However, the wider significance of stratification, segregation, and distinction through schooling may have deeper negative impacts on society. It is just another case of people thinking at an individualistic level without fully accepting the longer-term consequences of individual actions encouraged by the neoliberal world view. There has been movement in Ireland to address cultural reproduction through schooling in the form of the Education (Admission to Schools) Act of 2018.

Education (Admission to Schools) Act of 2018

The Irish government ratified new education legislation in the form of the Education (Admission to Schools) Act of 2018, wherein specific attention is paid to school admissions policy. The act provides for protection from discrimination at the point of school entry on grounds of gender, civil status, family background, sexual orientation, religion, disability, race (including the Traveller community), and special educational needs. Most important, both the National Council for Special Education and the Child and Family Agency can insist in enrollment where issues have emerged. There are also specific provisions regarding school waiting lists and enrollment that may have a potentially transformative influence on school choice processes. For instance, the act prohibits selection on the grounds of academic ability

or financial/occupational position of parents, and there is a 25% restriction on the allocation of a school place to the children of past pupils. The latter is intended to disrupt the cultural reproduction processes that exist, most particularly, within the postprimary education sector in Ireland (Ruddy, 2018, pp. 4–5).

Conclusion

This article offers a survey of the experiences of the Irish education system in light of the global movement in education reform in which the philosophies of neoliberalism have infiltrated the public space of schooling. Many reforms travel in the guise of a Trojan horse, whereby they purport to be instigating change for the benefit of the student, very often the most marginalized students, and yet the intervention results in solidifying boundaries regarding who benefits from education. In Ireland, unequal outcomes in education are intrinsically classed. Young people experience and benefit from education that is linked to their social, cultural, and economic experiences. It is important to remain vigilant and aware of how global education reforms influence policy, experience, and practices in schooling and education in Ireland in the 21st century.

The focus here has been on the particular intersections between social class and educational inequality, but there are other concerns contributing to experiences and condition of educational inequality in Ireland. The key issues influencing postprimary schooling in Ireland include the following: increasing dominance of the market paradigm through the commodification of education; the influence of global education reform policies (such as International Large Scale Assessments); state support of class stratification through state-supported fee-paying schools; and the freedom allowed to publish crude school league tables based on narrow indicators. There are other issues that align with the neoliberal ether of the

Irish postprimary education system that are also aligned with issues of exclusion and there are constant issues with regard to the provision for marginalized groups within the education system. For example, issues have arisen around enrollment and provision for the Traveller community, students with special educational needs, and students living in direct provision centers. These significant issues must be addressed to develop inclusive and just access to, participation in, and benefit from education in Ireland. Although marginalization and educational experiences have always featured prominently in Irish research, it is necessary to develop this area to create further impact and ignite policy change.

There is some strong large-scale empirical evidence on differential experiences of education based on social class position (mainly produced by the Economic and Social Research Institute), but it is necessary to develop research relating specifically to neoliberal policies in education and how developments such as marketization have had such a significant impact on schooling. Indeed, Geraldine Mooney-Simmie (2012) provides an important call to action in this regard:

> Education as a "public good" for liberation, freedom from oppression and the right to participatory democracy needs to be contested and presented as a strong counter-weight to the current international neoliberal agenda for education. (p. 508)

Education is intrinsic to life opportunities in 21st-century Ireland and we must strive as educators, and as citizens, to create conditions that allow for an equality of experience in school irrespective of material issues such as wealth and class position.

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