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Intersections of social class and special educational needs in a DEIS post-primary school: School choice and identity

Kevin Cahill

School of Education, University College Cork

ORCID iD*:* *https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3302-9550*

Twitter: @KevinCahill5

Abstract

This paper explores how special educational needs (SEN) and social class can become intertwined in post-primary school choice in Ireland. The paper draws on data generated during a three-year ethnographic study of a DEIS school. Data are analysed using Holland et al.'s (1998) *positional identities*, *authored selves* and *figured worlds* in order to examine how learner identities and school choice processes can become informed by emergent school cultures being formed and re-formed by neoliberal marketisation of education and how these actions are taken up in the identity work of young people and their families. Soft barriers and their contribution to aspects of school stratification by social class and SEN are explored. Finally, the paper calls for recognition of the responsibilities of every school to own diversity in their own settings.

Keywords: school choice; special educational needs; inclusive education; educational disadvantage in Ireland; school and identity; social class and education

Biographical note

Kevin Cahill is a faculty member in the School of Education, University College Cork. He teaches, writes and supervises research across the fields of inclusive education, sociology of education and pedagogy.

Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to explore intersections between social class and special educational needs (SEN) through the context of post-primary school choice in the Republic of Ireland. The paper draws upon data generated through a three-year ethnography of a DEIS[1] post primary school. Processes of choice and the development of market theories in education have become a significant feature of the educational landscape in twenty-first century Ireland (Cahill 2020). However, in the case of children and families who have been further marginalised due to the diagnosis of a SEN, then the subject of power also becomes an integral element of the conversation, where choice can be overridden by refusal to enrol. Indeed, any study of SEN and education is inevitably underpinned by discourses of power, control, insiders, outsiders and gatekeepers. Foucault has emphasised how some groups have been positioned by their capacity to "speak knowledgeably about 'others" and thus silencing them in the process (Ball 2012, 15). This subjectification is eminently evident at the point of moving from primary school to post-primary school in Ireland. Oftentimes for children and families associated with, or labelled as, special educational needs, this process becomes one where their vulnerabilities and exclusions come into sharp focus.

Research has focused upon the centrality of social class/ socio-economic status to how young people and their families navigate the fraught territory of choosing second-level schools (Lynch and Moran 2006; Cahill and Hall 2014). Indeed, Lynch and Moran refer to Ireland as a quasi-market in terms of education that is not as aggressively constructed as jurisdictions such as the United Kingdom and Australia where significant attention has been paid by researchers to the negative impact of the choice paradigm on equality of opportunity and equality of condition for students who may be marginalised on the basis of social class (Ball

[1] DEIS represents a policy intervention addressing educational disadvantage in Ireland. The acronym stands for Developing Equality of Opportuntiy in Schools, with DEIS being the Irish language word for opportunity.

and Vincent 1998; Connell 2013; Angus 2015). Angus (2015) has pointed particularly to neoliberal influences on the education landscape where the tenet of between-school competition for students is exacerbated by comparative league tables and websites that place schools in direct competition with one another. Connell (2013) referred to the sea-change in policy as the 'neoliberal cascade' and that metaphor is similarly relevant when applied to the Irish educational context.

O'Sullivan (2005) offered descriptions of the swing in Irish society, and most particularly schooling, away from a religious or 'theocentric paradigm' towards a 'mercantile paradigm' of educational provision, where competition has become the most significant factor, between students, between schools and even between nation-states in the form international educational achievement ranking tables. In recent years, the Irish post-primary sector has become far more aligned with market principles in terms of how educational choices are negotiated between schools and families. This negotiation would appear to be influenced by various factors, with issues such as social class and the diagnosis of special educational needs emerging as significant contributors to what choices are available to young people in their pursuit of post-primary education (Cahill & Hall 2014). Darmody and Smyth (2018) have illustrated how changing demographics and the religious identities of institutions have had a significant impact on the school choice process. Courtois (2015) makes mention of how ability can have an influence on admission and retention in elite school settings, while just a cursory glance at special class provision in the Irish post-primary sector indicates significant patterns. The prevailing pattern seems to be that schools who deem themselves to be more 'academic' are less likely to have special class provision. Doyle, Muldoon and Murphy (2020) have also documented how exclusionary practices in school enrolment have featured in the Irish education system. They make particular reference to the experiences of the Traveller Community, migrant students and children with SEN. There is

acknowledgement here of the impact of recent legislation, particularly the Education (Admission to Schools) Act (2018). Nevertheless, it would appear that the soft barriers at the centre of this article still feature prominently on the Irish education landscape.

Skerritt (2019) and Mooney-Simmie (2012) have discussed in more detail the presence an influence of neoliberal principles in Irish education.

In the following sections of this paper, I will outline what literature and policy is already saying about school choice, inclusive education and intersections between SEN and school choice processes. First of all though, I will outline the particular legislative and policy context of Ireland.

Legislation and policy relating to inclusion in Ireland

Ireland, like many countries, has a relatively recent history with the concept of inclusive education. Here the Special Education Review Committee (SERC) (1993) began thirty years of sporadic policy and legislative intervention. Significant moments came through the Education Act (1998) which gave statutory definition to Special Educational Needs (SEN); it was soon followed by the Equal Status Act (2000) and the Education (Welfare) Act (2000) both added to the rights of persons with disabilities within the education system. More change was promised through the Education of Persons with Special Educational Needs Act (2004) where the intention was to give statutory rights for supported inclusive education practices in mainstream schools. Unfortunately, important sections of this act still remain dormant, particularly those relating to individualised planning for students with SEN and the role of the Special Educational Needs Coordinator (SENCO) in schools. This was followed by the Disability Act (2005) which further developed the rights of children and families regarding inclusive education in Ireland. Most recently, the Education (Admission to Schools) Act (2018) has created a statutory footing for access to schools, including being able

to instruct schools to open special classes in order to accommodate applicants with, for example, requirements for an adapted educational experience due to an ASD diagnosis. More recently, there have been soundings towards developing a full inclusion model of provision here in Ireland (NCSE 2019), prompted by Ireland's delayed ratification of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD 2006). The convention was signed by Ireland in 2007 and ratified more recently, in 2018. Article 24 of the convention refers specifically to education and people's rights to an inclusive education in their respective communities. This legislative background is important in terms of situating discussions around the experiences of the children and families in this study, even though some of the later pieces have been enacted after the data were generated. Although, as will be explored forthwith, the decisions and barriers around inclusive education issues in this study are less about legislation and more about the soft barriers and positioning that takes place in relation to school choices.

Disproportionality, social class and special educational needs in school choice

Disproportionality may be defined as when:

> *membership in a given group, such as gender, race/ethnicity, or socioeconomic strata, differentially affects the probability of being labelled as having a disability and placed in special education* (Cruz and Rodl 2018, 50; Oswald, Coutinho, Best, & Singh 1999).

Similarly, Artilles and Bal (2008) have placed issues of disproportionality firmly in the debate of equity, SEN diagnosis and school experiences. Relatedly, intersectionality is an under-utilised lens in relation to Irish research and there is certainly a case for drawing upon it in relation to the intersections of class, race and gender in relation to the experiences of the Traveller community and SEN diagnosis in Ireland (Watson, Kenny and McGinnity 2017).

Although not the focus of this article, the experiences of the Traveller Community in relation to disability diagnosis aligns with the disproportionality research outlined here and is certainly an area worthy of further research in terms of exposing underlying diagnosis biases, as well as educational marginalisation. These concepts serve to frame this study in terms of their utility in understanding the experiences of marginalised economic communities.

Recent research in Ireland has focused on disproportionality as an important conceptual tool in terms of understanding SEN diagnosis and indeed school composition (McCoy, Shevlin and Rose 2020; McCoy, Quail and Smyth 2014). In terms of disproportional representation and diagnoses, Banks, Shevlin and McCoy (2012) recognised the very particular connections between Social, Emotional, Behavioural Difficulties (SEBD) and socio-economically disadvantaged young people and communities. Their work also points to a gender disparity in diagnosis with boys from economically marginalised communities more likely to be diagnosed. Their emphasis is placed in the possibility of over-identification of SEBD in disadvantaged school settings and how a bio-psycho-social model for understanding diagnosis is helpful in terms of explain the possible influences of the social world on the experiences and actions of the child in school settings.

School choice and intersections of social class and SEN

Internationally, there is a growing body of evidence regarding the interaction between greater school autonomy, school choice and the experiences of students with special educational needs. In Sweden, Magnússon (2020) has found that students with SEN diagnoses tend to cluster un particular school settings, therefore creating a *de facto* layer of segregation within the system. In Finland, Lempinen and Niemi (2018) emphasised the possibility of school stratification on SEN and social class, and argued for preserving provision within the

neighbourhood school to counteract such a phenomenon expanding. In the USA, Amanda Sen (2019, 473) has recorded evidence of how a school "'counsels out' students with intellectual disabilities and emotional or behavioral disorders, telling parents that their child's needs would be better met elsewhere". Indeed, Mawene and Bal's (2018, 326) systematic literature review on influences on school choice for parents of children with SEN shows that parents from "nondominant racial, linguistic and economic backgrounds are more prone to be vulnerable" when it comes to school choice processes. Their review drew largely on research conducted in the USA and the UK. Byrne (2013) conducted a detailed literature review which found that socio-economic status intersected with SEN in terms of awareness around school choice for children. He also noted that children made decisions based on the perceived inclusive culture of schools, perceptions about the school's ability to cater for their child's needs, as well as working off information garnered through their social networks and professional guidance. This is important as we already know that "hot knowledge" flows easier amongst more affluent networks of people (Ball and Vincent 1998). Bagley and Woods (1998) laid the groundwork for studies of school choice and SEN when they documented the increasing influence of the market, instantiated through school league tables in the UK, in terms of further marginalising children with SEN within the education system. There is also evidence within the Irish system for some segregation based on diagnosis, most particularly in relation to special class provision for children with ASD. A cursory examination of special class provision in Irish post-primary schools shows that a far larger percentage of schools with DEIS status have ASD classes in comparison to non-DEIS settings (see NCSE 2020). Of course, this could also be applied to school choice market dynamics where schools in socio-economically marginalised areas tend to be under-subscribed whilst more middle-class school settings tend to be in more demand (Cahill 2020). It is, however, not the case that only certain schools cater for SEN in Ireland but rather that there is a noticeable trend in the data. By

taking an intersectional perspective, then these connections and experiences become more accentuated as it appears that social class has a significant impact upon how students with special educational needs are received, admitted to and taught in post-primary school contexts.

Soft barriers to school enrolment

Rose and Shevlin (2021, 23) have reported that "parents were generally unhappy about the restricted choices they experienced in relation to accessing a suitable school for their child". This study has been designed to unpack this issue at post-primary level. McKeown (2020) has emphasised how 'soft barriers' particularly relating to issues such as school culture, ethos and representation of certain schools as 'academic', have proven particularly resistant to enrolling children with Social, Emotional and Behavioural Difficulties (SEBD). These soft barriers have emerged elsewhere in the literature. Armstrong et al. (2010, 4) reported that "the majority [of parents of children with SEN diagnoses] reported that finding a placement for their child had been easy, although a substantial minority (20%) reported difficulties". 20% of the cohort is in fact a significant number and one that partly prompted this current investigation. Access to education, particularly at post-primary level has not always proven to be straight-forward, most particularly for students with an autism diagnosis Indeed, the persistence of soft barriers remains evident within the system (ASIAM 2020). It would seem then that all SEN are not equal when it comes to school enrolment issues, with diagnoses such as ASD and SEBD experiencing particular difficulties in sourcing second-level school places.

Methodology

The participants in this study represent a strong working-class background, and despite some economic limitations the parents in the study also show astute awareness around creating the

best opportunities for their children. Data were generated through a three-year ethnographic study of a DEIS post-primary in an Irish urban city. The main data instruments were participant observation, individual semi-structured interviews and focus group interviews with students (n=30), parents (n=8) and teachers (n=8). Confidentiality and anonymity were maintained throughout the study and the research was conducted with full ethical clearance from the researcher's university. Full ethical approval was sought and granted from the Social Research Ethics Committee, University College Cork. Informed consent was achieved through providing information sheets on the study, as well as getting signed consent forms detailing understanding of the study. Information sheets and consent forms were also read for participants and time allowed for any questions relating to the study. Both parents/ guardian and child participants were asked to consent in writing. All participants were offered the opportunity to withdraw their data at any stage prior to the completion o the study. None did so.

Data were coded through processes of reading, re-reading, revised and categorised through themes. Data were analysed using 'meaning coding' throughout the generation and analysis process (Kvale, 2007, p. 105). *A priori* theoretical ideas informed the coding process although open coding was also used to allow emergent ideas to crystallise within the data analysis process. In terms of *a priori* codes, SEN diagnoses, positional identities of participants and figured worlds of school were among the codes used to analyse data.

Positional identities, figured worlds and authored selves

This paper is informed by *positional identities*, *figured worlds* and *authored selves* as constructed by Holland, Lachicotte Jr., Skinner and Cain (1998). These theories are very

useful in terms of understanding how participants in this study come to be marginalised in the school choice process. *Positional identities* are defined as:

> *the day-to-day and on-the-ground relations of power, deference and entitlement, social affiliation and distance – with the social- interactional, social-relational structures the lived world*
>
> (Holland et al. 1998, 127)

In other words, I am concerned with how people are positioned by themselves and others in the micro-interactions of their everyday experiences and perceptions. This positioning and identity work does not occur in isolated experience; it is always situated within the context of a figured world of experience, whereby the cultural construction of the activity contributes centrally to one's experiences. Holland et al., (1998, 41) defined the *figured world* as "processes or traditions of apprehension which gather us up and give us form as our lives intersect them". In these worlds, one would be forgiven for thinking that we are constantly being positioned in the absence of agency but this is not the case. It is contended that a *figured world* is "formed and re-formed in relation to the everyday activities that ordain activities within it" Holland et al. 1998, 53). Therefore, actors in *figured worlds* are being positioned and position themselves as simultaneous objects and subjects. Holland et al. (1998, 172) interrogate this sense of self- authoring (authored selves here) by drawing on Bakhtin to examine identity construction:

> *We also represent ourselves to ourselves form the vantage point (the words) of others, and that those representations are significant to our experience of ourselves.*

In other words, our authored selves are intertwined with how we are spoken about by others, the spaces within which we exist, and the positioning that takes place within that space.

These concepts are important in this paper as we move to exploring the generated data and how SEN and social class intersect to position people in the particular *figured world* of

choosing a post-primary school, the *positional identities* experienced by participants, and the *authored selves* that become evident to the researcher. These concepts will form part of the data analysis discussion that follows in this paper.

Site of the study

Previous papers by the same author have recorded other streams and themes within this dataset as well as providing detailed accounts of the site of the study – Portown Community School (pseudonym) (Cahill and Hall 2014; Cahill 2018; Cahill; 2019). This paper uses illustrative cases to provide a deeper insight into the thematic findings of the study. Briefly, the site of the study is an urban post-primary school in an economically marginalised community, with a DEIS designation. The community is very much a mixed community with some areas of private housing and more middle-class parents. Nevertheless, the school has become a school that largely serves the social housing estates in the community, being an example of how school markets have contributed to class stratification. At the time of the study, approximately 25% of the school would have SEN diagnoses. Given its DEIS status, wider social issues associated with poverty would also impact on the school: early school leaving, sporadic attendance issues, lower attainment in standardised literacy tests and lower than average parental engagement with the school.

Findings and Discussion

This section of the paper will focus on using illustrative cases from the wider dataset to exemplify instances of where SEN and school choice come into contact in this study

Illustrative case: "good with dealing with these kinds of children"

Consider the following excerpt from a parent interview, where the child has a sensory impairment with resultant speech and language difficulties. He uses significant assistive technology and has some associated behavioural issues. Gretta, Frank's mother, gives a brief account of her open night experience at Hillside, a school in a neighbouring suburb:

> *G: Well with his needs I'd have to go first. It wasn't my first choice, here.*
>
> *I: Ok*
>
> *G: It was Hillside. But when I went up for the open night, I just didn't like the Principal. It wasn't that I didn't like him from just looking at him. I asked him a question, I told him that Frank had needs and he said to me "This isn't the time or the place, we'd have to make an appointment"*
>
> *I: Right, ok*
>
> *G: So that was the end of Gretta then! Out the door below!*

This reported exchange is interesting from the point of view of school choice and students with special educational needs. It is an open night organised to attract a new cohort of students to the school. The Principal, intentionally or not, dismisses the enquiry quickly. Subsequently, in a casual meeting, this parent supplemented this interview exchange with an afterthought. She commented that she knew they "would look after him up here, especially with his type of difficulties" (referring to Portown Community School). Instances of referrals, refusals and the inclusive reputation of the school are common features of the narrative of school choice in this school.

Gretta's account of her encounter with the principal teacher of Hillside is very interesting. The principal is operating a social language of authority and control (Gee 2014). He makes it clear that he will set the agenda and the time and place to discuss Frank's issues. Gretta and Frank may not be desirable recruits. Frank has significant special educational needs including a sensory impairment and behavioural issues. Gretta picks up on the sentiment enacted in her

interaction with the principal. There are micro-actions taking place here that are forging the *positional identities* of the family and indeed the principal. The principal adopts a position of control and authority while the parent is left in deference. These are the "day-to-day" encounters that serve to position people. Gretta returns to the local school and dismisses Hillside as an option. In the following excerpt Gretta and I explore her concerns about Frank, his additional needs and Portown Community School after his first three months in the school:

> *I: Ok, ok. Em… what concerns did you have about Frank coming here?*
>
> *G: Well he'd be completely different to his brother, that was the experience I had. He needs assistance. He needs resource, which he has now and which all the teachers would know about, and I'm very happy with him coming here, like, very happy. And he has settled in and he's happy here, that's the main thing, like.*
>
> *I: Good, good. Em… and what hopes do you have now for his education?*
>
> *G: That he does the best of his ability that he can do. I wouldn't force him, now, into higher level or this level… once he's happy and he's able to do what he can do, that's all I expect from Frank.*

Gretta's comment regarding choice of levels, expectations and the primacy of Frank's happiness are interesting with regard to children with special educational needs and parental expectations. It appears common amongst parental participants to prioritise happiness over academic performance and expectations. Indeed, this is a tendency that schools need to remain vigilant about also. There has been some evidence to suggest that SEN diagnoses and indeed school serving marginalised communities need to stay constantly aware of maintaining high expectations for all learners (Rose and Shevlin 2021). Indeed, Gretta's case also points to the issue of parental expectations and how they can possibly play a role in school outcomes. Mihut, McCoy and Maitre (2020) have made further exploration of parental expectations and educational outcomes for children with a SEN diagnosis.

Throughout the study, instances of positioning the school as one that "looked after" students with special educational needs emerged as a central idea. During the study, it came to light that Portown Community School would soon have a unit attached for students with Autism (it now has two). It was pointed out that there is a significant proportion of students in the area in need of such a service. This is an instance of the school responding to the needs of the community in a proactive, inclusive and open-minded way. However, on further investigation, an interesting fact emerges about the larger environs of this community. There are already three other autism units with a three-mile radius of Portown Community School and they are all attached to DEIS schools. There are very few autism classes attached to schools other than those in the DEIS schools. This is interesting. It serves as another instance of how particular schools serving particular populations who may be considered 'other' than the norm become further othered through the extension of such practices. Portown Community School, and schools like it, serving working class populations, have high percentages of students with special educational needs, have many students who do not use English as their first language and often become the school of choice for any student who may not be considered "able" or "suitable" for other schools. Members of staff commented on how they feel positioned by other schools and the wider community as "good with dealing with those kinds of children". Again, from a *positional identities* perspective, the school and its members are being positioned in particular ways, as a school of diversity where all difference is welcome. This is not the problem as we may aspire t have a community where every school is a school of diversity. The problem lies in the actions of the other schools who are engaged in constructing the figured world of this school setting in order to 'offload' some complex students through the erection of soft barriers They do not feel any more capable than other teachers in other schools and they see such positionings as destructive to the "social mix" of Portown Community School. This connects to McCoy et al.'s (2014) study where

schools become positioned as particular types of schools thus influencing the heterogeneity of the student population. Several staff members commented on this issue during the course of this study and it is seen as one of the most important elements how the school is viewed in the wider community both in terms of how it is constructed in choice processes and how it is viewed in the professional educational sphere. Many of the teachers expressed that the position of the school as such an inclusive space is laudable however it is also true that such schools are putting extensive pressure on themselves in comparison to what might be considered the more "successful" and "traditional" schools. The teachers interviewed in this study valued the diversity of the school setting, and yet simultaneously expressed the challenges that diversity presented to them as education professionals.

Portown Community School serves the local community and yet when it comes to issues such as special needs it serves a much wider community. Consider this example: a boy who travels from a rural village more than ten miles from Portown. He is the only student from outside the immediate community at present in the school. The student passes four other post-primary schools on his route to Portown. His mother reports that Portown was considered the best place for him, considering his needs. The student presents with severe emotional and behavioural issues and therefore would be considered quite challenging. Teachers in the school point to such cases to explain how the school is extrinsically positioned within the wider community. The students of the school create similar positionings from within as will be discussed in the following illustrative case. The *figured world* of the school becomes apparent here as it is positioned through other schools as a particular type of school for particular students, unlike the referring schools, who are also positioning themselves.

Illustrative case: "the slow school"

A similar phenomenon emerges throughout the study with regard to perceptions of academic ability and Portown Community School. Participants readily designate the school as one populated by low-achievers and early school leavers. The deficited language of the "slow school", "slow learners" and the particularly derogatory use of "retards" stand out as the particular vocabulary of the positioning and identity work being referred to by the participants in the study, particularly the student body. Again, through deficited language the children were authoring themselves and the school, unfairly as less able than their wider per group. This was a function of how the competitive neoliberal culture of comparison had infiltrated their mindsets and their concomitant identity work as learners.

Many students gave examples of how the smarter kids in their primary schools were almost always the students who chose not to attend Portown Community School. This in itself is constructive of the identity of the majority of students who do attend Portown. They begin to position themselves as less able because of this phenomenon that is often referred to as "cream off" which leaves certain schools "catering to a student population with a significant degree of learning and behavioural difficulties" (Byrne & Smyth, 2010, 59).

This positioning does probably come from some level of awareness of the profile of the student cohort. On average, over a number of years, over one in four or over twenty-five per cent of the students have assessments for learning disabilities or they had been attending learning support classes in primary school. Students became aware that a significant proportion of their classmates may have exemptions from subjects like Irish due to specific learning disabilities such as dyslexia and other general learning disabilities. They were aware of the presence of special needs assistants (SNA) in many of their classes. They became experts at pinpointing the reasons for the presence of the SNA and what students that assistance may have been aimed towards in the classroom. This influenced their overall

perception of the school's position, and indeed their own position, in the larger educational sphere as a competitive marketplace. Therefore, their own language and expectations may have been unwittingly complicit in how they their *positional identities* and indeed the *figured world* of the school came to be in any given moment in time. One could argue that such constructions are attributable to a wider neoliberal discourse of competition and success measured through outcomes in state examinations (Curtin et al., 2020).

Illustrative case: People like us!

The following excerpt forms part of a wider observation from a classroom scene where the students began to interrogate me about my role and what led me to this position as researcher. They also began to intersperse comments about my research topic. The students begin by inquiring about my teaching biography:

> *Me: I did a degree and my teacher training and later on I did a postgrad in Learning Support….*
>
> *Shane: What does that mean? (referring to the Learning Support)*
>
> *Bruce [interjects]: For teaching people like us ya dope! (loudly and quite aggressively)*

This short scene was generated by the exchange between Shane and Bruce that constructed the deficit view of themselves and their school community. "People like us" is a loaded utterance in the context of identity work. They were authoring themselves in relation to their interaction with me, the researcher. This view surfaced quite regularly throughout the period of data generation. Participants presented very negative self-inscriptions of the school and the actors therein. Participants complained about being positioned by others as unworthy and lacking ability, and in this classroom interaction they apply that label of the bad or incapable student to themselves. Their *authored selves*, as Holland et al. (1998) purport are partly

refractions of how they are being positioned and constructed by the world around them. The discourse is becoming internalised, at least to some extent. There is a recognition here of the pathological nature to societal and political intervention into inequality. The context contributes to this self-image. DEIS schools are sites of intervention. Students are often wound in knots of intervention from Learning Support and Resource teachers, School Completion Programme workers, Home School Community Liaison Teachers, Youth and Community Workers, etc. There are multiple interventions by "fixers". The students often associated such interventions with being broken, in need of repair or somehow deficient. In such instances, the students' constructions of themselves were quite clearly mediated by the pathological societal view of these students. They reproduced a damaging and self-deprecating deficit discourse. It is an example of how the constructed *positional identities* can solidify and impact upon the perceptions and beliefs of the students. This sense of positioning the self as informed by larger societal discourses connects with some of the themes that emerge around school choice and special educational needs in this paper. Some participants engage in almost ritual self-deprecation which often only served to perpetuate the stereotypes that they were often struggling to disrupt.

Choosing the SEN school: an ambivalent inclusion message

A particularly interesting theme that emerges through a number of the adult interviews and the observational record is the positive reputation of the school in terms of special needs students. This is an ambivalent message from the point of view that participants identified this reputation in the wider community and they are aware of instances where students from outside the catchment area are applying because they have been referred through other schools. In effect such a discourse, from one perspective, reads as a celebration of good inclusive practice where the school's democratic and inclusive principles serve as positive

beacons attracting students to the school. From another perspective, a more critical and socio-politically aware one, it may be interpreted as yet another form of stratification, one functioning on the plane of special educational needs as well as social class. From this perspective yet another grouping who are marginalised in mainstream schooling and society appear as a prevalent element in schools such as Portown Community school.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the findings here illustrate that schools can become positioned in terms of school choice processes whereby they become schools of diversity and in one sense lifting the burden from allegedly more academic middle-class schools. This would appear to be a consequence of increasing neoliberalism and competition between schools in the education marketplace (Cahill, 2020). While schools such as Portown are very willing and happy to fulfil their missions as inclusive schools, there is a concomitant skewing of their intake in terms of greater numbers of students with SEN diagnoses Previous research has shown that children in socio-economically disadvantaged areas are more likely to be diagnosed with SEN and thus there may be related effects on school composition (McCoy, Banks and Shevlin 2012). This paper is suggesting that additional factors of school choice processes, soft barriers to other schools and the figured worlds of DEIS schools may also contribute to a stratified phenomenon in post -primary schools. This can have a very real impact in terms of how the school is ‘figured’ in the community as it does not feature highly on school league tables or other skewed measure of school success. Schools like Portown can be, wrongly, positioned as less academic and for ‘less able’ students which in itself means the school becomes more diverse than many of the middle-class schools in the wider community. School social mix then becomes an important consideration (McCoy, Quail and Smyth 2014). This can have a very significant impact in terms of how schools and young people construct, and

are constructed, in the wider educational landscape. This author believes it is time that all schools, regardless of privilege, wealth of student population, or perceived academic culture become more diverse school settings where authentic efforts are made to educate the entire community in inclusive settings. The theoretical framework used *positional identities*, *figured worlds* and *authored selves* in order to allow a micro-grained analysis that revealed the identity work and positioning taking place within the school community. Lastly, this research is currently being expanded into a wider investigation of school choice and SEN, with ap articular focus on parental perspectives on school choice and some deeper case study analysis of how families make school decisions for their children.

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