

Can a Meritocratic Education System Deliver Equality?

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Introduction

In Ireland, it is more difficult for the child of an unskilled manual labourer to reach university than it is in other European countries despite the existence of free primary school education which is, in theory, available to all¹. As everyone has access to education, the prevailing assumption is that innate talent and ability, combined with effort, will yield positive educational outcomes. Those who achieve the highest educational attainment are rewarded with status and higher incomes in adult life. This is described as a *'functionalist meritocracy'* where positions of status in the labour market, and attendant wealth, are rewarded on the basis of merit. However, this view atomises the individual on the basis of personal characteristics, ignoring their relationship to the social and economic institutions and structures that stratify society along class lines.

Tracing the historical development of the education system in Ireland documents the emergence of a highly centralised and standardised system. A highly competitive and individualistic emphasis is placed on pupil progression in the classical humanist tradition, while the assessment methodologies used for progression through the system are based on the belief that the *'intelligent'* and *'hardworking'* succeed in school². This high degree of centralisation and competition, in addition to the structural development of the system has created, over time, a two tier or strati-

fied system of education, which, it could be argued, is stratified along class or social group lines. While education for the masses underpinned the development of the National System established in 1831, it was not until the nineteen sixties and the introduction of free secondary education that the ideal of equal educational opportunity was extended to all.

However, following Marx it is argued that relational structural and institutional barriers exist which limit or define access to financial and cultural resources for certain social groups, thus contributing to persistent differences in educational outcomes between social groups or classes³. Equality of opportunity is mediated by these cultural factors. Through the education system and a *'culture for the masses'* approach, the culture of the dominant ruling class is popularised and legitimised, clashing within the education system with the culture of the working class⁴.

What had existed in Ireland up to the nineteen sixties was a church controlled system of primary education that was state funded but followed the denominational structures of the community. Influenced by the emerging Chicago School *Human Capital* paradigm, changes were introduced in the nineteen sixties which were intended to address regional and social inequalities in education and to provide for the needs of a growing technical economy. Concerned with processes and structures at the macro level of society, the functionalist model is that of a social system broken down into a

¹Clancy, 1982, 2005.

²Murphy, 2006

³Smyth & Hannan, 2000.

⁴Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977

number of subsystems, including the economy and education. Change in one part, it is argued, can lead to change in another part or the whole and education is seen as serving the needs of the economy⁵.

In 1954 a Council for Education report had described the function of education as:

The school exists to assist and supplement the work of parents in the rearing of children. Their first duty is to train their children to love and fear God. That duty becomes the first purpose of the primary school. It is fulfilled by the school through the religious and moral training of the child, through the teaching of good habits, through his instruction in the duties of citizenship and in his obligations to his parents and the community in short, through all that tends to the formation of a person of character, strong in his desire to fulfil the end of his creation.⁶

However, by 1965 the function of education had taken on a different tone:

A country must seek in designing its education system to satisfy, amongst other things, the manpower it needs for the future. If the range and levels of skills required to convert economic potential into economic achievements are not available, a country is unlikely to have the resources needed to provide education of the quality and

variety that is being increasingly demanded. As education is at once a cause and a consequence of economic growth, economic planning is incomplete without educational planning. Education, as well as having its own intrinsic values, is a necessary element in economic activity⁷.

Almost overnight the Irish education system shifted from what had been a *Theocentric* paradigm, concerned with religious and moral formation and extensive church influence and control, to a *Mercantile* paradigm, concerned with the needs of a capitalist economy but presented as a key requirement for promoting economic growth and eliminating social and regional inequalities in educational outcomes. The religious expertise that had informed policy goals was displaced from the nineteen sixties onwards by World Bank policy, OECD reports, EU funding protocols and whatever was deemed from time to time as 'best practice'⁸. The functional emphasis on equality of opportunity, one that is meritocratic that allows for social mobility but is not preoccupied by class, gender, or demographic factors that might affect educational outcomes creates a false conception that the wastes, inefficiencies and inequalities of the existing system will be addressed. In fact, and as will subsequently be argued, within the functionalist perspective and the capitalist economy a degree of wastage and inequality is inevitable. As these inequalities inevitably and perpetually fall to the least advantaged groups in society, the question that must be posed is whether a functionalist meritocratic system of education is capa-

⁵Drudy & Lynch, 1993.

⁶Ireland, 1954.

⁷Ireland, 1965.

⁸OSullivan, 2005.

ble of achieving its ideal: social integration and the dissolution of social hierarchies through the education system.

The Structural Development of the Irish Education System

The strong involvement of the catholic church in Irish education can be traced from the emergence of a system of Hedge schools in the 18 century. An illegal and secretive system of schooling, the Hedge schools emerged in response to the English Parish School Act of 1537, the aim of which was to anglicise the Irish by harnessing schooling in the support of Protestantism and loyalty to the crown⁹. New political and social values inspired by the French revolution, changing conceptions of childhood and the industrial revolution influenced belief in the provision of education for the masses and the role of the state in this regard. A state supported and controlled system of primary schools was established by a Board of Commissioners in 1831 with the aim of promoting literacy and numeracy, viewed as essential for industrial and economic progress. Pupils of different denominations were to be united in school for literacy and moral instruction, while attending separate religious instruction. However, strong church opposition to the emergence of denominational mixing in schools eventually forced the state to provide funding to denominational primary schools¹⁰.

In the Laissez Faire economic climate that prevailed, state support for primary education was justified, however, secondary education was viewed as a commodity which, if they saw fit, could be purchased by the middle classes. Secondary

education was provided for through private institutions varying enormously in quality and largely following the denominational divisions of the community. For the remainder of the century and until after the establishment of the Free State, efforts at increasing state involvement in education were fended off by the power play between economic, church and political interests. Emphasis was placed on subjects that were linked to traditional university study, careers in the church and in the professions as prizes for subjects such as Latin, influenced the curriculum. A highly competitive examination structure emerged and, as a result, the education of the academically weak as well as the less well off groups in society, suffered¹¹.

After the emergence of the Free State symbols of independence such as the Irish language influenced the curriculum, as the new governments energies were harnessed for a cultural revolution through the schools. The principles of Catholicism, Irish nationalism and a revived Gaelic culture were to be embodied in the education system¹². The establishment of a Department of Education under the Free State did little to introduce any fundamental structural changes. While Eoin MacNeill, Minister for Education in Dáil Éireann in 1924, had placed *Equality of Opportunity* and *Education in the National Interest* as the two overarching principles of education, the policies of the twenties, mostly curricular in nature, established a model of education which, with minor modifications, was to exist for another forty years. Reforms introduced practical subjects, examination reform and provisions for financial aid from the State. The system of private management, however, was left un-

⁹Lyons, 1971.

¹⁰Coolahan, 1981.

¹¹ÓBuachalla, 1988.

¹²Farren, 1995.

changed. Secondary education was not made free and this remained a serious barrier to the majority of children as it was available to only 8 percent of the cohort outside urban areas¹³. What existed essentially was a state funded but church controlled *Theocracy* which concerned itself primarily with moral formation and, for those who went on to the second and third levels, with preparation for employment in the professional classes.

From Theocracy to Functional-ist Meritocracy

From Catholic Emancipation onwards the catholic church dominated education and health provision. Education had been crucial to the intergenerational reproduction of Catholicism, contributing hugely to Irish nation building before and after independence. Catholic values became constitutionally enshrined. The key social doctrine encyclicals that set out a catholic welfare ethos, *Rerum Novarum* (1891) and *Quadragesimmo Anno* (1931) emerged in response to liberal and state socialist conceptions of social policy, which resisted unnecessary encroachment upon the family and the voluntary sector by higher institutions such as the state¹⁴. Both encyclicals offered fairly sophisticated engagements with liberalism and socialism that allowed for elastic thinking about how the state and other actors should address changing and social conditions. Irish education in the decades after independence was shaped by theological rather than economic goals. Post-independence *‘Irish-Ireland’* nation-building combined catholic conservatism with post-colonial economic

isolationism. The expansion of education from the nineteen sixties arguably fostered secularism amongst the first generation to benefit from free secondary education. In the longer term, this prompted a rise in an individualism more open to *neo-liberal* than *Theocentric* conceptions of education¹⁵.

A Dáil resolution proposed by Dr. Noel Browne, in relation to the school leaving age and educational access, provoked a debate that is credited with eliciting the first official signal of the changes which were to underpin education in the sixties. Debate in the Dáil in relation to education was no longer confined to the issue of the Irish language, and education policy began to occupy a more central place in government discussion¹⁶. In a significant sense, the influence of the catholic church in social policies was dramatically underlined in the controversy over the governments plans in 1950 for a comprehensive medical welfare scheme, more commonly known as the *‘Mother and Child Scheme’*. Church objections to certain features of this plan led to the resignation of first, Dr. Browne, by then Minister of Health, and subsequently of the coalition government itself. The first major state church conflict since the establishment of the state was a clear indication that the catholic church would not hesitate to exercise its considerable influence in opposing any attempt to introduce social legislation of a kind which it believed to transgress its teachings. However, the framework of influence within which the contemporary Irish education system developed was to be considerably altered as education was removed from the sacristy and placed in line with the need for eco-

¹³ÓBuachalla, 1988

¹⁴The concept of subsidiarity.

¹⁵Fanning & MacVeigh, 2007.

¹⁶Farren, 1995; ÓBuachalla, 1988.

¹⁷Farren, 1995.

conomic and technical change in Irish society¹⁷.

These changes need to be understood within the context of an attitudinal shift in public and political conceptions of the role of education in society, as internationally, human capital theory influenced the thinking of the relationship between education and the economy¹⁸. Irish political concern centred on whether economically, the nation would survive the fifties. In 1963, the *Second Programme for Economic Expansion* acknowledged that:

Improved and extended educational facilities help to equalise opportunities by enabling an increasing proportion of the community to develop their potentialities and to raise their personal standards of living. Expenditure on education is an investment in the fuller use of the countrys primary resource, its people, which can be expected to yield increasing returns in terms of economic progress.¹⁹

The impetus for deeper reform of the education system in Ireland came from the publication in 1965 of an OECD/Irish Government report on education entitled *Investment in Education*. The report, intensely positivistic, fact finding and analytical²⁰ documented social class and regional disparities in educational participation rates, and insufficient levels of manpower for economic development²¹.

¹⁸OSullivan, 2005.

¹⁹Ireland, 1964.

²⁰The report ran to 1,200 pages over two volumes, the majority of which contained dense statistical tables.

²¹ Ireland, 1965.

²² Breen et al, 1990.

²³From the *Irish Times*, 12 September 1966, p. 1. Cited in Ryan, L (1967), *Social Dynamite: A Study of Early School-leavers*. Christus Rex.

The OECD analysis, which found the Irish system to be grossly neglectful of the children of poorer classes in society, prompted a series of reforms including curricular change and the removal of second level fees in 1967. It was believed that the removal of second level fees would promote equality of educational opportunity for all²². As put in a 1966 *Irish Times* article:

Every year, some 17,000 of our children finishing their primary school course do not receive any further education. This means that almost one in three of our future citizens are cut off at this stage from the opportunities of learning a skill, and denied the benefits of cultural development that go with further education. This is a dark stain on the national conscience. For it means that some one-third of our people have been condemned the great majority through no fault of their own to be part-educated unskilled labour, always the weaker who go to the wall of unemployment or emigration.²³

Contrary to expectations, the removal of second level fees had the effect of reinforcing the influence of private second level education. What had emerged in the Irish Free State were powerful intermediate or middle classes who have continued since independence to dominate politics at both

local and national levels and this was only reinforced by the *meritocratic* system that came about as a result of the nineteen sixties reforms. Not only has this group benefited most from the education system over time, they are also strategically and powerfully located within the state civil service machinery, influencing educational policies in a very centralised system²⁴. The economic and social context within which educational choices take place is one of increasing social inequalities and social polarisation, where school becomes a space where the working classes are ‘out of place’ and relegated to the lowest rungs on the ladder of educational opportunities, life chances and social mobility²⁵.

Individualism in the Functionalist Meritocracy

Investment in Education amounted to a paradigm shift whereby a *Mercantile* paradigm broke with an earlier dominant *Theocentric* one²⁶. While *Investment in Education* did not aim to secularise education, the report advanced strategic goals that were at odds with the traditional Catholic ethos. In effect it replaced the theocratic expertise that dominated education policy with mercantile expertise: a utilitarian approach to education combined with the use of managerial indicators to measure and classify education outcomes. *Investment in Education* steered education policy on a new ‘mercantile’ cultural trajectory that continues to be followed.

Investment in Education and subsequent reports also emphasized a *Human Capital* education paradigm. This differed

from the mercantile one in its focus on the benefits to the individual rather than the economy. In this simplest of terms investment in education led to economic growth. At an individual level education was seen to deliver higher incomes and status. By expanding education provision the State could create more opportunity and maximise human capital. As put in the *Second Programme for Economic Expansion* (1964): ‘Since our wealth lies ultimately in our people, the aim of educational policy must be to enable all individuals to realise their full potential as human persons’. Such human capital perspectives imply a functional emphasis on equality of opportunity. However, the problem with this view is that it emphasizes the individuals ability as detached from the complexity of their social, institutional, economic and cultural environment.

The Problem with Functionalism

For functionalists, the great driver of change and development in modern societies was industrialisation which, together with attendant economic change, was thought to bring about change in other parts of the social structure. An ideal preparation for factory work was to be found in the social relations of the school²⁷. Occupational positions required ever more particular skills and those not possessed naturally could be acquired. A fundamental assumption was that fixed demand existed for skills of varying types. The basic determinant of who would be selected for which positions was based on an individuals ability to meet those skills, as

²⁴Lynch, 1982.

²⁵Reay & Ball, 1997

²⁶ OSullivan, 2005.

²⁷Bowles, 1977.

²⁸Collins, 1971.

demonstrated by the level of qualification achieved²⁸. Maturing industrial societies moved steadily towards meritocracy and certification as the principles of occupational placement in an ever more productive and efficient economic system of perpetual growth. Such societies would require greater rates of inter and intra generational mobility, gradually reducing the complement of unskilled, low paid and manual labour while increasing its sector of professional, technical and managerial occupations. This would serve an advanced technology and would deliver an ever higher per capita GNP²⁹. Education would play a crucial role in the formation of a more affluent and perhaps classless society, and the single most important determinant of a persons occupational destination³⁰.

While positions may have prestige, the question that must be posed is how individuals come to occupy these positions. It could be argued that it is because they have fulfilled the technical requirements demanded of each position. However, once in these positions they may exert a degree of control over the mechanisms of selection as they seek to protect their own interests. Although unequal distribution of power serves to maintain inequalities in education, their origins are to be found outside the political sphere in the class structure itself and in the class subcultures typical of capitalist society. Unequal education has its roots in the very class structure which it serves to legitimise and reproduce. Although functionalists address issues of inequality, there is an assumption that consensus around a shared set

of values (the values, ideas and interests of the ruling class) exists within society which are transmitted from one generation to the next, thus perpetuating class divisions and hierarchies. The education system plays a key role in this process³¹. Although education is presented as the great liberator of the people, it is in fact a mechanism of coercion, the basis on which the dominant group will then step into other state mechanisms of coercion: legislative, executive and administrative³². As Marx points out, the executive of the modern government is nothing but a committee designed to manage the privilege of the ruling class³³.

Education as an Agent of Class Divisions

The concept of equality of opportunity is firmly embedded within the functionalist perspective. However, functionalism views a degree of social and economic inequality as both inevitable and necessary to the proper functioning of society and the economy as a limited number of meritorious positions exist. Groups are defined by economic relationships which translate into closed class groups, with little chance for those born into particular groups to transfer out of them through educational channels. One of the main aims of the education system, therefore, is to select according to talent, to allocate to particular positions in the social and economic hierarchy and, as such, to facilitate social mobility. It is assumed that everyone has the chance to start from the same unequal position and to compete, using skill and effort, for the various social po-

²⁹ Gross National Product (GNP) is the market value of all products and services produced in one year by labour and property supplied by the residents of a country.

³⁰Halsey, 1977.

³¹ Bowles, 1977.

³²Holborow, 2012.

³³Molyneux, 2012.

sitions most suited to their talents. Those with the greatest amount of innate talent who apply effort will be rewarded with positions of prestige³⁴. All individuals are motivated to maximise their rewards but as power and privilege are both scarce commodities and determinants of wealth, there is an inherent conflict and struggle for power, wealth and prestige which is played out through organisations, especially where pro-achievement and pro-individualistic educationalists share the ideas and values of other elites³⁵. These educationalists come from particular social groups and are trained in institutions controlled by the dominant groups. Here they assimilate a pedagogic style and content which perpetuates the domain assumptions of the dominant class. Education will be most important where there is a cultural or domain assumption fit between those leaving school and those selecting for employment, as employers use education to select individuals who have acquired the dominant culture.

The social division of labour creates class subcultures. The values, personality traits and expectations characteristic of each sub culture are inter-generationally transmitted through class differences in family socialisation and through complementary differences in the type and amount of schooling ordinarily attained by children from various class backgrounds³⁶.

The differential socialisation patterns in schools attended by students of different social classes do not arise by accident. Rather, they stem from the fact that the educational objectives and expectations of both parents and teachers and the respon-

siveness of students to various patterns of teaching and controls differ for students of different social classes³⁷. School practices such as ability streaming, differential participation in after school activities, the attitudes of teachers and personnel all serve to perpetuate the stratification of educational outcomes along class lines³⁸. Perpetual educational disadvantage becomes an inherited position reflecting past prejudices and deliberately manipulated institutional structures, the burden of which is passed down from one generation to the next, what Marx describes as 'the muck of ages'³⁹.

If functionalist meritocracy is defined in terms of the distinction between ascription and achievement, using family background indicators for the former and education qualifications for the latter, both ascription and achievement forces can be evidenced at work in the passing of social opportunity and occupational status between generations. However, the dice of social opportunity has been weighted in favour of opportunity according to class - a game played through strategies of child rearing, mediated by schools through their certifying arrangements and personnel who are trained to mediate and channel so as to maintain, subconsciously perhaps, existing social relations. The instruments which are indispensable to success in the education system, for example modes of communication, are unequally divided between the children of different social groups. This is furthered by an education system that practices a particular type of pedagogy, with which children must already be familiar and it is children from the advantaged

³⁴Rottman et al, 1981.

³⁵Lynch, 1982.

³⁶Bowles, 1977.

³⁷Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977.

³⁸Lynch 1999.

³⁹Tucker, 1978.

classes that are most likely to be familiar with it. The professed ideal of equal access to educational opportunities for those of equal ability is not necessarily served, as the distribution of educational opportunities is conditioned by decisions and actions that effectively accommodate social class as well as other information about students⁴⁰.

Conclusion

The shortcomings of the meritocratic view are to stress the technical rather than the social relationships of production, and to present the economic role of education largely as the production of job skills. However in a capitalist economy it is from the social relationships of work that economic inequality and social immobility arise. Where education systems perpetuate the structure of privilege, they are powerless to correct economic inequality. In Ireland, the existence of a minority group in positions of power at the apex of the hierarchy, contrasts with the very large base of low income earners and those from the privileged groups in society continue to be over-represented at the third level of education⁴¹. By the end of the Celtic Tiger, Ireland ranked among the OECD countries with the highest levels of income inequality⁴². The latest available data on early school leaving demonstrates the persistence of social background as a contributing factor⁴³.

The meritocratic orientation of the education system promotes not its egalitarian function, but rather its integrative role, by reinforcing the domain assumptions and culture of the dominant group. Education

reproduces inequality by justifying privilege and attributing poverty to personal failure. More equitable schooling is unlikely to have an effect on more equitable distribution of income, most likely because structural factors are not considered. However, the modern liberal approach is to attribute social class differences to inequality of opportunity⁴⁴.

A major element in the integrative function of education is the legitimization of pre-existing economic disparities. Efforts to realize egalitarian objectives are not simply weak they are also in substantial conflict with the integrative function of education. The education system legitimates economic inequality by providing an open, objective and ostensibly meritocratic mechanism for assigning individuals to unequal economic positions. It fosters and reinforces the belief that economic success depends essentially on the possession of technical and cognitive skills skills which it is organised to provide in an efficient, equitable and unbiased manner on the basis of meritocratic principle. However, at the heart of the functionalist meritocratic model lies a fundamental contradiction: as a limited number of prestigious positions exist, only a limited number of people can occupy them, regardless of their abilities or efforts.

In fact, the social classes and hierarchies that exist in society are reproduced and maintained by social and economic institutions. Mobility between classes is constrained by economic, political and social institutions, such as education, which is an integral element in the reproduction of the prevailing class structure. The function of the education system is to reproduce the

⁴⁰Halsey, 1977.

⁴¹OConnell et al, 2006.

⁴²Nolan & Maitre, 2007.

⁴³Economic and Social Research Institute, 2009.

⁴⁴Bowles & Gintis, 1976.

culture of the dominant classes, thus helping to ensure their continued dominance and to perpetuate their covert exercise of power. Within this context a functionalist meritocratic education system, designed to serve the needs of a capitalist economy, will not in fact act as an instrument of social equalisation and redistribution.

Education can foster personal development and economic equality only under one condition: a social, economic and cultural revolution which will extend democracy to all parts of the social order. The functionalist liberal educational reforms of the nineteen sixties and the liberal individualistic education system that emerged had as its dual objective to stimulate economic activity and to reduce educational inequalities between the social classes. It has failed in these objectives because of its relationship with the fundamental characteristics of the capitalist economy. The existing social relationships of economic power are reproduced by the education system and this lies at the heart of the failure of the functionalist meritocratic educational creed to deliver a classless society.

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