Policy over Procedure: A look at the School Completion Programme in Ireland. Is this State led educational intervention for disadvantaged children merely philanthropic and can current Global and National Neo Liberal Policy trends in Education be overcome?

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Abstract

"An overview of contemporary curriculum discourse shows a worrying drift to the technical; in current curriculum debates, technique is winning out over substance, procedure over principles" (Looney 2001, p.149). As a project worker in the School Completion Programme in Ireland I ask what and who education is for and look at to whom and to what end current policy and practice benefit and where School Completion Programme fits into the debate. To counter the current trend of curriculum debates drifting to the technical, the development of a curriculum conscience is explored as well as offering Freirean type 'limit acts' in negating and overcoming, rather than passively accepting the given.

Key Words: *School Completion Programme, Policy, Curriculum of Conscience*

Introduction

The policy cycle has been historically and politically naïve in not taking account of the relative power of those involved in the process (Ozga 1990, Troyna 1994). Policy is orientated toward a goal or desired state, such as the solution of a problem (Birkland 2001, p. 8). The 'problem' that has required the attention of the policy makers in an Irish and European context is that of unemployment, economic stagnation and social cohesion. Their goals are the creation of a 'knowledge based economy' to meet

the economic needs of the European Union. In Ireland, the National Education and Welfare Board (NEWB) launched their strategic plan in 2010-2011, "Every Child Counts". Their vision echoed that of the European Union's Lisbon strategy. In the forward to the NEWB strategy document they state: "The Board views education as a key enabler to help children enjoy their childhood, realise their full potential and make a valued contribution to the economic, social and cultural life of their community" (NEWB Strategic Plan, 2010-2011 p. 4) The NEWB in 2014 has been incorporated by the newly formed Child and Family Agency TUSLA which is answerable to and funded by the department of health.

School Completion Programme

The aims of SCP are retention of students in school, improve quality of participation and educational attainment of targeted children, bringing together all relevant local stakeholders to tackle issues, influence policies relating to prevention of early school leaving and offering supports to prevent educational disadvantage.

What makes the School Completion Programme model unique is its 'bottom-up' approach, which allows Local Management Committees (school-based, community, statutory and voluntary interests), to put together plans and supports that target the needs of local young people at risk of early school leaving. SCP has been in existence since 2002. Currently there are 82 projects nationwide comprising 299 primary schools and 112 post-primary schools. Local Management Committees in each project area have worked diligently to put together retention plans supporting young people between the ages of 4 and 18 who are at risk of early school leaving.

Children are selected for the programme on the basis of 'targeting' children deemed 'at risk' of early school leaving based

on criteria such as; poor school attendance, participation and behaviour. These identification procedures are outlined clearly in the SCP guide on Student Referral Procedures (NEWB, 2003, P.13).

Interventions include after school, in school and out of school activities as well as holiday supports. Activities include homework clubs, breakfast clubs, healthy eating programmes, transition programmes for students moving to secondary school, self-esteem programmes and cultural awareness programmes. The aim of the programme is to have a positive impact on retention of young people at risk of early school leaving.

Literature Review & Theoretical Framework

In an international context critical educational scholars such as Michael Apple's theories on ideology and curriculum and the democratization of schooling, Paolo Freire's 'Pedagogy of the Oppressed', Maxine Greene who spoke of creating a 'wide awakeness' and Stephen Ball who has explored inequalities in society being replicated in education in the UK have shaped this article. In an Irish context Anne Looney supports Ball's theory of theoretical isolationism in saying that tackling educational disadvantage is not possible without first addressing wider inequalities in society.

A critical discourse analysis of SCP policy literature since its foundation in 2002 until now has reconfirmed Looney's hypothesis that technique is winning out over substance and in line with educational trends SCP is becoming more concerned with procedures over principles.

What & Who is Education For?

Ball contends that education policy direction displays "an uncanny concomitance with widespread middle-class concerns about

maintaining social advantage on the face of national and international labour market congestion"(Ball, 1998, p. 128). This prompts the questions; whose interests are being served when it comes to the implementation of these policies? Also, what is the future role of programmes such as the School Completion Programme (SCP) in light of these policy developments?

Choules' (2007) notion of 'the circle of privilege' and emerging international evidence of failure of the neo-liberal education policy by numerous academics (Angus 2012, Alexander 2009, Darling Hammond 2010, Hursh 2008, Lingard 2010) demonstrates a paradox in that by ignoring the socio-economic conditions of the disadvantaged, the aims of social cohesion, inclusion and providing opportunities for the growth and development of Europe and Ireland's youth will be difficult to obtain. There may be opportunities but not equal ones. Ball's hypothesis is that addressing educational inequality cannot be done in school alone but by looking at other parts of society.

Apple highlighted that "What education is for has been transformed" (Apple 1988 p. 283). Our increasingly bureaucratized and industrialized education will mean more for a few and less for many, in terms of economic reward. "The logic of today's marketplace is to lower expectations and limit chances for the majority of children, and competitive elitist schooling reinforces the logic"(Bastian et al 1986 p.163). Bastian goes further to say that the value of education is reduced to economic utility. Other goals such as critical understanding, political literacy, personal development, mastery and skill, self-esteem and shared respect are beside the point or too "expensive". In this context, programmes such as the School Completion Programme serve merely as what Ball coins a 'philanthropic arm' - in an overall policy scheme that does nothing to erase the relationship between income and opportunity and privileges middle class values of competitive advantage over those of 'community' within policy.

Critical Social & Economic Factors behind Procedure over Principle

Carter and O'Neill (1995) identify international perspectives of education policy and reform as 'the new orthodoxy'. Concepts such as the 'learning society' and the 'knowledge based economy' symbolise as Ball calls it; "The increasing colonisation of education policy by economic policy imperatives" (Ball, 1998, p. 122). The European Union's Lisbon strategy has been a considerable failure in that it had failed to achieve its aims by 2010 as set out. The follow on to this is the European Council's 2020 strategy document for jobs and growth. 'Europe 2020' objectives are of: "Smart, sustainable and inclusive growth, notably by equipping citizens with the skills and competencies which the European economy and European society need in order to remain competitive and innovative, but also by helping to promote social cohesion and inclusion" (EU Council 2011, p. 1). The 2020 strategy aims to reduce the share of early school leavers to less than 10% citing positive effects on jobs and growth as the motivation behind the strategy. The NEWB strategic plan reiterates the view that education is to serve the greater economic need when they state that: "The Board views Education as a key enabler to help children enjoy their childhood, realise their full potential and make a valued contribution to the economic, social and cultural life of their community." (NEWB Strategic Plan, 2010-2011)

Relevance to School Completion Programme (SCP)

SCP has been in existence since 2002. SCP was established with a 'bottom up' model of support. A range of supports were offered in each specific project depending on local needs, mindful that local factors can influence early school leaving. The programme was based on partnership with schools, parents and relevant agencies through local management committees and they enjoyed a fair share of autonomy in how they would best support disadvantaged students. Aims of SCP included: retention of young people in the formal education system, improving the quality of

participation and educational attainment of targeted children in the education process, offering positive supports in primary and post primary schools in preventing educational disadvantage.

The SCP model offered the opportunity to operate a Freirean type pedagogy of 'limit acts' 'directed at negating and overcoming, rather than passively accepting, the given.' (Freire 1970) The idea being that the interventions and supports provided by SCP would counteract the 'limit situations' that disadvantaged children find themselves in. That they could as Freire says 'transcend' their limits and as Greene states they could reach beyond their self-interest and toward the untapped possibility of what can be (Greene, 1973)

The practice of SCP has an element of Greene's concept of 'wide awakeness' which she describes as "a heightened sense of agency in those we teach, empowering them 'to pursue their freedom and perhaps, transform to some degree their lived worlds." (Greene 1995 p.48) The SCP model had been one 'where educators could respond 'to those once called at risk, once carelessly marginalized, as living beings capable of choosing for themselves' (Greene 1995 p.42) The democratic nature of SCP's practice as a local service responding to local need has shifted to a more centralised approach in the past two years. One could argue as Beyer and Apple (1998) that this is part of a global trend in a shift from considering what should be taught and why, to how to organize curriculum and evaluate it. Looney reiterates this in the Irish context when she says: "The curriculum has become something for teachers, students and schools to overcome, to manage, to conquer. There is little empowerment associated with it." (Looney 2000) Looney supports Ball's idea of 'theoretical isolationism' (1997) Theoretical isolationism is a failure to place education in a broader social policy context and a tendency to underestimate the effects of education on social inequality. Trying to convince disadvantaged families of the

merits of the education system and staying in school brings the idea of theoretical isolationism into sobering reality.

In 2012 SCP and the Home School Liaison Service came under the umbrella of the NEWB in their policy document "One Child, One Team, One Plan". Increased accountability, streamlining of services and scrutiny from authority resulted. The responsive nature of SCP had been replaced by what Glatter (2003) terms "contractual models of accountability" (Glatter 2003 p.27) Contractual models of accountability are measureable and surveillance based whereas responsive models are local and flexible. The preponderance of macro policy objectives over individual learning objectives has taken preference over the ethos of SCP reflecting Looney's overview of contemporary curriculum discourse.

The Contradiction of Policy

The Lisbon strategy from which it could be argued the Irish 'Every Child Counts' plan emanates from is framed in neo-liberal economic and political thinking. Themes of strong accountability, competition, high-stakes testing and a strong connection between education and the economy are seen as the new 'Europeanization' of education (Grek et al. 2009). The focus of which is to "maintain the high social standards of the European Union by competing on the basis of a knowledge based economy where advanced technologies and a highly qualified and adaptable labour force provide the counterweight to competition from low wage economies with low levels of social protection" (Jones, 2005 p. 249)

As a result, Cochran - Smith and Lyttle suggest that the explicit narrowing of the purposes of teaching and schooling results in an impoverished view of the curriculum and the broader social and democratic goals, processes and consequences of education. (Cochrane-Smith 2006)

Young people are officially labelled 'at risk' and are identified as failures before it occurs. The current paternalistic and patronising usage of identifying students as being at risk within a system that takes existing social arrangements for granted and without addressing the reasons why they are at risk is frustrating. Mc Graw writes: "The reasons for poor attendance at school, resistance, disengagement and early school leaving lie in the institutional preference for dividing and selecting, for noting and disregarding, favouring the privileged and treating the others as 'at risk'." (Mc Graw 2011 p.105). Arguably the goals of 'social cohesion' set out in the Lisbon strategy and the Every Child Counts policy are rhetorical. These are two key policy documents from which School Completion Programme are taking direction. The narrow view that current reform efforts to combat underachievement and educational attainment can be achieved without addressing the social and educational inequalities is highly contradictory.

Berliner argues that 'school reform efforts for poor children almost always will be unsuccessful if they do not consider the outside of school conditions that affect the ability to teach and learn successfully inside of school' (Berliner 2007 p. 163). There is a need to 'invest in student lives outside of school to increase achievement inside schools' (Berliner 2007 p. 162) Cummins suggests advocacy education with the purpose of learning and teaching collaboratively with their students. Such collaborative power creation would 'start by acknowledging the cultural, linguistic, imaginative and intellectual resources poor children bring to school' (Cummins 2001, p.653) This however does not fit in with the European Union's or Irish government's technicist and managerialist perspective that the public provision of education is to be more 'effective, responsive and transparent' (Giddens, 2007).

The Significance of Public Accountability

The Every Child Counts document stresses that attendance monitoring is one way in which the impact of investment in education disadvantage can be measured. Public accountability replaces qualitative educational measures with quantitative ones. "We are drawn into the fallacy of replacing what is important with what is measurable" (Nikel & Lowe, 2010, p, 596). For example the NEWB's attendance measuring is used as a way to measure the impact of investment in education disadvantage. Increasing attendance figures suggests that levels of participation in schools are increasing. The quality of their education and participation on the other hand is another thing which is not taken into consideration. This is endemic of the top down approach of current policies about the purpose of education and schooling. The direction where current School Completion Programme policies are headed cannot be studied or considered in isolation without looking at the broader context.

The Organisation for Economic Co-Operation and Development (OECD) has played a unique role in the orientation of education policy in Ireland for more than 40 years. Galvin gives a good chronological overview of these influences (Drudy, 2010, p. 279). Lynch highlights that The Department of Education and Science began to use the language of the market from that time in its key strategy documents beginning with 'Implementing the Agenda for Change' in 1996. Strategy statements from the DES retained this orientation into the new millennium where the market language of 'customers and clients' replaced that of students and learners (Gleeson and O'Donnabháin 2009, p. 30). The broad remit of the OECD is economic and its defining purpose is to build strong economies. The EU Lisbon policies are a response to the OECD's drive for performance and results (OECD 2008). Methodologies and tools such as value for money evaluations, performance management development systems and so on, have led us to the Transforming Public Services programme (Department of the Taoiseach 2008). The NEWB works within the framework of the

wider public service policy such as the OECD report 2008 and is doing exactly what the OECD has recommended when it states: "The NEWB's challenge is to articulate how it's work contributes to the achievement of broad social and economic goals, to have clearly identified targets, outputs and outcomes and a strong culture of planning and accountability" (NEWB 2010, p.8).

In relation to Ireland we can draw parallels from Ozga's assessment of the use of data in governing education in England. Ozga speaks of the shifts of responsibility in governing practice from one of centralised regulation to localised self -evaluation. A further key component of the change in governance is the place of data in it is comparability. As Novoa and Yariv Marshal put it, comparison is itself a mode of governance. By this they mean that comparison is used to provide evidence that legitimises political actions, through such devices as the 'international spectacle' of 'success' or 'failure' and the 'politics of mutual accountability' through performance league tables. The constant collection of data that apparently estimate or reflect 'public opinion' produces a need for further data that justify activity. It is "a regime of urgency that provokes a permanent need for self-justification" (Novoa and Yariv Marshal 2003, p.427).

Data are central to this process, as without data there can be no comparison: indicators support the new 'calculative rationality' (Bauman, 1992) of modern governance. SCP has moved from the central control of the Department of Education to the Department of Children and Youth Affairs and most recently has been taken under the wing of the newly established Child and Family Agency. Each individual School Completion Programme has its own retention plan and budget which it submits to the agency each year. The political importance of this localised data collection has been seen with recent publications on school retention rates in February 2014 by Minister for Education Ruairi Quinn.

Global Discourse

Global educational discourses on the knowledge economy, lifelong learning, and human capital education are influencing the decisions of national and European policy makers. Uniformity of global curricula is supported by international comparisons of scores resulting from the TIMSS (Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study) and PISA (Programme for International Student Assessment). The PISA results of 2012 revealed significant changes for Irish 15 year olds as a Press Release from the Department of Education stated that 'Ireland is placed 4th out of 34 countries for reading and 13th of the 24 OECD countries for mathematics. Minister of Education Ruairi Quinn argued that 'these are only one set of test results at one point in time (and that) we cannot be complacent. While we are doing well, we are not among the top performers internationally' (Department of Education Press Release, December 2013). A significant segment of the government's policy on literacy and numeracy for learning and life 2011-2020 is devoted to 'assessment..data gathering...standardised testing...performance in state examinations...and monitoring student progress' (DES 2011, PP.73-84).

There are many who criticise the intensity of focus on such literacy and numeracy strategies. Grek argues that PISA 'has achieved a brand which most regard as indisputable' (Grek 2009, p.25). There is a 'taken for grantedness about education indicators despite all the commentary asking for contextualisation in their interpretation' (Grek 2009, p.25). Standardised testing to measure performance outputs 'has become the main education accounting mechanism in many developed countries' (Gleeson 2009, p.340). The problem with this is that 'changes are being made in order to match international benchmarks that are not necessarily entirely relevant at national level'(Livingstone 2003, p.596).

Creating a Curriculum of Conscience

There may be a counterweight to contemporary discourse trends. Looney suggests a relationship between the contexts of curriculum practice, curriculum text production and contexts of influence based on c*ritique.* This relationship would arise from ongoing critical dialogue within and between the various contexts. This would seek to expose the ideological position of the context of influence. Looney argues that such a dialogue would lead to the development of what Posner (1998) calls a 'curriculum conscience'. This curriculum conscience offers an alternative to the technical bias of the dominant Tyler rationale in education policy making. The Tyler rationale in curriculum planning has been the dominant perspective in western curriculum planning since 1949. Tyler's four stage procedure fails to transcend the dichotomy curriculum as fact and curriculum as practice. Aine Looney's notion of creating a curriculum of conscience to begin reflexivity may offer an alternative against the drift to the technical and a move towards the theoretical. Recognising the relationships between these contexts Taylor et al.(1997) note, 'It is important to recognize policy processes as inherently political in character and involving compromises, trade-offs and settlement' (Taylor et al 1997, p.26).

Devine's study into childhood perceptions of education in Ireland yielded as many questions as answers. Children's awareness of equity and power relations often overlooked came to the fore in their responses to the study. A democratization of the school experience is called for as the children comment; "..they would like to see greater empathy on the part of the teachers on what it is like to be a child, particularly with reference to the degree of control which is exercised over much of their school experience" (Devine, 2000, p.35).

In relation to my own professional practice, the incorporation of SCP under the wing of the NEWB's 2010-2011 strategy ensures that the local response to educational needs of students are

monitored so as to ensure an education that will help graduates participate in the global economy. It is becoming increasingly difficult to maintain local cultures and identity in keeping with the agenda set out by both European and Irish education policy. A re-democratisation of local projects will help maintain that local responses are meeting local needs. In the Maxine Greene and Paolo Freire both considered equality, freedom and social justice to be core, foundational prerequisites of the democratic project in education. They both invite learners and educators to reach beyond their 'limit situations' toward the untapped possibility of what can be. According to Greene teachers should 'challenge that which is taken for granted, the given, the bound and the restricted...To me teaching is about more than educating the child for our economy, which is of course important but it has become the central focus of our education system' (Greene, 1973).

Other programmes such as 'The Outreach Society' whereby pre-service teachers from the University of Limerick travel out to a community school in South Hill, a disadvantaged are of Limerick city and engage students for one to one tuition in English (Murphy, 2008, p. 37) help create what Greene terms 'Wide Awakeness' in limiting the knee jerk reactionary policies of chasing assessment, standardised assessment and data gathering.

What next for School Completion Programme?

'Targeted' students in SCP come from disadvantaged backgrounds and minority groupings including Irish travellers, immigrants, children with learning and behavioural difficulties and those living in areas of rural isolation. The paradox is in imposing an 'education' and set of middle class neoliberal values on these people that is not relevant to them and no matter what 'interventions' or 'supports' they may receive, their environment, family, economic and social conditions will confine the majority of these children to academic and social exclusion. On completion of

school the chances of them leaving their communities and travelling to another city and leaving their families behind are minimal.

SCP attempts to address inequalities in school, not society. It offers disadvantaged children support and opportunities to help them attain academic success. This is all done in a policy framework that gives undue stress to excellence, competition, standards and performance. These characteristics give credence to strategic rather than social relations. Despite the rhetoric of 'Every Child Counts' the need to give consideration to the fate of others has been lessened by the inroads of neo-liberalism, value for money and competition. Ball's hypothesis that education policy which does not acknowledge or deal with social, political and economic inequalities only serves as rhetorical and is no more than arm's length philanthropy. SCP will serve as this philanthropic arm for the foreseeable future in an overall policy scheme that does nothing to erase the relationship between income and opportunity and privileges middle class values of competitive advantage over those of 'community' within policy.

As highlighted there are 'limit acts' we can use to counter the worrying drift to the technical and procedure. Clarke and Drudy (2006) believe that Teacher Education Programmes could be improved. Starting with student teachers' conceptualisations of diversity, social justice and global awareness new teachers could improve how they manage their classrooms. Advocacy Education as suggested by Cummins, whereby teachers and students learn collaboratively, and Posnan's idea of creating a curriculum of conscience demonstrate that despite the trends we have small, but limited means of empowering those we attempt to educate.

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