

The Pied Piper of Neo Liberalism Continues to Call the Tune in the Republic of Ireland: A Critical Discourse Analysis of Education Policy Texts from 2012 to 2021

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Abstract

The global coronavirus pandemic provides a disruption of seismic proportions and, in the short term at least, appears to further the reform agenda set by neoliberal/elite policymakers to reduce education to the exchange-value of a commodity. In an earlier article in the Journal of Critical Education Policy Studies, I conducted a critical scrutiny of policy reform texts in Ireland between 2000 and 2012 and revealed the playing out of a seductive tune by the Pied Piper of Neoliberalism securing a meritocratic system of social class privilege. Here I continue this critical scrutiny using a Critical Discourse Analysis of policy texts in curriculum reform, school inspection and teacher education from 2012 to 2021. I draw from critical theory to take an emancipatory-transformative perspective and to use the metaphor of a tapestry crossed threaded between consensualism (normative consensus) and essentialism (empirical consensus) to reveal a hidden curriculum of micro-management and bureaucratisation. An education system where social class and poverty (and intersectionalities including gender, race, colour, ethnicity) are normalised as issues of the individual and where wider socio-political issues of a just schooling system, and a just global world, are, either glossed over or abandoned.

Keywords: *teacher education, teaching, policy reform, critical discourse analysis, Pied Piper of neoliberalism/elitism, social class, intersectionalities, just global world*

Introduction

The Covid-19 pandemic provides a disruption of seismic proportions in the field of education and, in the short term at least, appears to further the global reform agenda set by neoliberal/elite policymakers and politicians to reduce education to a functional commodity. A meritocratic system where increasing control of pedagogy and pedagogues advances methods of mass instruction that facilitate integration into the current logic of social reality (the status quo) and normalises conformity (Fielding, 2007). A socially and intellectually impoverished education system that has less to do with student-teacher encounter and critical consciousness, understood by Freire and critical pedagogues as fundamental for teachers' emancipatory practices (Giroux, 2013; Macrine, 2020; McLaren, 2021, 2019).

In an earlier article in the *Journal of Critical Education Policy Studies* (JCEPS), I conducted a critical scrutiny of policy texts in Ireland between 2000 and 2012 and revealed a paradigm shift in the playing out of the Pied Piper of Neoliberalism (Mooney Simmie, 2012). The sorrowful fable of the Pied Piper stealing the village children, playing his seductive tune, was an apt metaphor for the neoliberal capturing of a market-led system of schooling and higher education in Ireland that has resulted in the national theft of young educated Irish people once again to mass emigration. A neoliberal imaginary playing out in the 21st century, where calls for individual responsibility and consumer choice mask reforms securing a tight disciplinary regime using a raft of new legislation and bureaucratic procedures (Power et al., 2013).

In this study, I continue the critical scrutiny, this time using a Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) of policy texts in curriculum reform, school inspection and teacher education in Ireland from 2012 to 2021. I justify CDA as a methodology as it takes into account the importance of education to the political system, as it interrogates language and meaning-making in policy texts and talk while revealing hidden assumptions and contradictions at systemic level (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Fairclough, 2013, MacLure, 2003).

The theoretical perspectives drawn from critical pedagogy (Freire, 2018/1970; Giroux, 2013; hooks, 1994; Macrine, 2020; McLaren, 2019) reveal how the Pied Piper's Neoliberal tune increasingly harmonises with neoconservative elites for a tyranny of limited performativity. A conservative (middle class) elite who stand to benefit, materially, socially and symbolically from (re)configuring teachers' practices as clinical practices, doing a symbolic violence that removes the necessity for critical mediation with the wider world and teachers' activist role (Edling & Mooney Simmie, 2020; Mooney Simmie, 2021 a, b, c, d).

I use the metaphor of a tapestry crossed threaded between the waft and the weave of consensualism (normative consensus) and essentialism (empirical consensus) to show the repositioning of teaching and teacher education in Ireland, from 2012 to 2021. A micro-managed system of limited performativity, publicly funded and yet positioned within a corporatist model, as a procrustean bed of standards, statutes, codes and competences awash with teacher 'talk' of celebration, creativity and positive relationships, while denying affordances for critique, philosophical inquiry, critical questioning, criticism, public interest values, reflexivity, contrarian views and/or historicity.

The key question throughout the CDA is how to unpick some loose threads in this seemingly impenetrable tapestry to reveal what is happening in a

(re)configured system of teaching and teacher education as evidence-based clinical practices. A deficit model where teachers are meant to speak in the distorted tongues of quasi-scientists, where the outcomes of their supposed ‘research’ are known in advance and with there is non-recognition of emancipatory practices, inclusive of the wider socio-political context and beyond the confines of the classroom and school. A communal-orientation hidden within the moral madness of a business-like logic (Biesta, 2013, 2016; Santoro, 2017). A schooling system where social class and poverty (and intersectionalities including gender, race, colour, ethnicity) are conceptualised as responsibilities of the individual and the institution and not wider moral and political issues of a just schooling system in a pluralist democratic society.

I have structured the article as follows. First, I draw from theoretical perspectives in critical theory to interrogate the current positioning of teachers’ work and developmental practices in mainstream research and within the global educational reform movement. Second, I outline the methodology for the study and justify the selection of CDA for a critical scrutiny of policy texts (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Fairclough, 2013; MacLure, 2003; McLaren, 2019, 2021). Third, I then draw from these theoretical lenses to conduct a CDA of policy texts in the reform ensemble in education in Ireland from 2012 to 2021. Finally, I discuss the findings generated while seeking to unpick at least one, if not more threads, from what is a tightly secured and perfectly presented tapestry.

Theoretical Perspectives

Critical theories take as their starting point the primacy of human emancipation for all from oppression and oppressive structures and education’s moral and social responsibility for public interest values in securing a vibrant public forum for critical debate and a pluralist democracy (Apple, 2001, Edling & Mooney Simmie, 2020; Lynch, 2015). Education as a human right (Power et al., 2013).

Critical theory acknowledges the importance of education to the political system and the inextricable linkages between policy texts and socio-political and economic imperatives. Critical theory also reveals how the education system acts as a reproductive device in a meritocratic system tilted strongly in the direction of privilege.

Critical pedagogues draw from moral and political philosophy, where education is not indoctrination into a known, to bring about conformity, but is more about opening new spaces for critical scrutiny. Education is not so much about problem-solving routines and fitting-in but rather about engaging with critical questions, intelligence with consciousness, revealing hidden assumptions and posing problems in relation to living well with self and with others in the co-construction of a social and politically just world.

From a critical perspective, teaching and teacher education necessitates teachers as activists and revolutionary intellectuals, opening liminal spaces for inclusion of a plurality of standpoints in the social realm rather than a typology of passive-obedient spectator-worker-citizens (Edling & Mooney Simmie, 2020; McLaren, 2021, 2019). Whereas an essentialist standpoint conceptualises democracy as a police state where the aim of education is merely to facilitate individual integration into the existing social order (e.g. learning about democracy). By contrast, a reconstructivist standpoint asserts democracy alters depending on changing social needs and challenges: ‘the philosophy of reconstructivism maintains that education cannot solely be about securing individual growth, as in essentialism, but it is about creating potential affordances for social and political change’ (Mooney Simmie & Edling, 2019).

Apple (2001) shows how educational policy became colonised by neoliberals and neoconservatives alike, who while coming from different directions

converge in relation to their need for tighter, stronger, and harder regulatory gazes, control and prediction. Neoliberals rely on natural law and empiricism, an assemblage of new practices for a universal learner-centred pedagogy (Hattie, 2012). Elite/neoconservative discourses by contrast are wedded to authoritarianism and an intense interest in the rule of law.

Changes in global imperatives in the last decade exacted a profound impact on public education and heralded the final collapse of liberal education (Sant, 2019). Neoliberal/elite discourses rapidly forged new relationships within a new politics of inevitability that suggests there is no alternative (Snyder, 2018). Former *Social Welfare States* in Europe and elsewhere, with social contracts for protection of workers' rights and conditions in vulnerable times (e.g. public education systems, social welfare payments), were rapidly changed to *Social Investment States* with the diminishing of the state in its existing form. Each individual and institution (e.g. school) was afforded autonomy, choice and freedom to invest in themselves as flexible entrepreneurs for primacy of the economy (Mooney Simmie & Moles, 2020; Tan, 2014). Power et al. (2013) explain that the State is not wedded to any particular doctrine other than a 'what works' ideology to keep 'facilitating capital accumulation, and preserving accumulated wealth thereafter' (p.43).

Ball (2003) described what neoliberal reforms meant for teachers' souls in the UK beset by the terrors of performativity. Santoro (2017) revealed the ethical suppression of teachers' voices in the US left bereft of the moral goods of teaching and the lack of political opportunity to speak out (teacher activism). Connell (2009) explained this newly configured actuarial teacher is continually expected to report data and evidence of successes to external policy actors (Mooney Simmie, 2021a, b, c, d; Mooney Simmie & Moles, 2020; Mooney Simmie, Moles & O'Grady, 2019). While schooling and higher education in

Ireland has traditionally acted as an ideological state apparatus what has changed since the turn of the century, especially since the financial crash (2008-2011) is the prominence given to the repressive state apparatus (e.g. law, prison) with its raft of new laws and political regulatory mechanisms (e.g. self-evaluation) in educational policy reform mandates.

Teaching as Encounter

According to Freire, teaching is a relational encounter that is caring and political and with intentionality for emancipation. Freire makes the case that teachers bring their personal self to the teaching encounter and that there can be no teaching if there is no authenticity. In contemporary Ireland, policymakers, positivistic researchers and politicians cling to the reasoning that education falls inside a private sphere/orbit of regulation and instruction for a moral apolitical purpose. A normative framing that denies recognition of the wider socio-political world in teaching and teacher education. A framing device that secures the normalisation of hierarchy inside a new flat structure of learning, where it is widely assumed that everyone is coming from the same place (hooks, 1994; Power et al., 2013).

When policy mandates seek to push into the classroom and seize control of pedagogy and assessment they asphyxiate teachers' localised autonomy and social solidarities with other teachers and with teacher unions (Carr & Beckett, 2020). Teaching and teacher education are nowadays designed as market-led systems of risk management and empiricism rather than risk facilitating endeavours of freedom, openness, emancipation and critical questioning (Mooney Simmie, 2021a, 2020; Mooney Simmie & Moles, 2020).

Teachers Speaking in Forked Tongues

The (re)positioning of teachers within a rhetoric of policy texts is legitimated as providing ‘quality’ teachers with greater autonomy for better consumer choice. However, this notion of autonomy is more about freedom to engage in a personal makeover along the lines of a desired commodity (Mooney Simmie & Moles, 2020). Teachers asked to shed their old ways of thinking, to turn away from everything they know and trust and to embrace the notion of self-directed learning within the confines of a technical rational practice. The seductive message here is that if Irish teachers eschew former constructs embedded in praxis, heritage and culture they will gain status and win public respect as professionals.

Biesta (2016) compares teaching using this new system of intelligent adaptability to the workings of a robot vacuum cleaner. The robot (teacher) bumps into pieces of furniture (students) in the room (classroom) and with every sweep of the room becomes better able (improvement agenda) at using smart technical systems (diagnostics, data, evidence) to improve the quality of the finished product (student outcomes). In this ‘smart’ system of school improvement and effectiveness, the teacher is microchipped as a practitioner researcher, adept at using technical systems of diagnostics for reporting predetermined outcomes as charts, graphs and metrics. There are serious issues with (de)humanised, deficit and universal approaches. Whereas science is concerned with experimentation and open-ended research and curiosity, teaching practices where outcomes are predetermined appear far closer to a narrow scientism that allows no spaces, or very limited liminality, for any surprises and for critical problem posing (Hyslop-Margison & Naseem, 2018).

An essentialist (reified) approach to autonomy captures teacher ‘talk’ using a neoliberal imaginary in relation to that which is ‘sayable’, such as, talk of

celebration and immersion in positive psychology (flourishing and resilience). More of a public relations exercise than a challenging encounter for an authentic intellectual, cultural and transformative endeavour. Teachers are allowed speak only when using the distorted and forked tongues of quasi-scientists, practitioner researchers presenting (untheorized) data and evidence to report matching (carbon copies) outcomes of policy requirements/mandates for individual profiles. There is non-recognition of teachers' voice speaking out about problems encountered that go beyond policy mandates, about issues related to the wider political world (Santoro, 2017).

This rather pristine tapestry of consensualism and essentialism is well supported at the transnational level of policy influencers and governments (e.g. OECD, World Bank, EC). Nation states pay substantial funding for OECD tests (some tests costing in the region of Euro 170,000 – 240,000). Teaching constructed as evidence-based practices in constant comparison with big data analytics (Hattie, 2012) tightly confines teachers' practices in atheoretical and apolitical ways for a disciplinary regime of 'what counts' that appears to have more in common with an earlier 19th century punitive regime than a 21st century regulatory discourse (Bourke, Lidstone & Ryan, 2016).

Table 1 provides a summary of critical insights drawn from the theoretical lenses discussed above, and acts as a useful conceptual underpinning for the later CDA of reform policy texts.

Table 1: Critical insights in the global educational reform tapestry

Critical Insights	Reform efforts	Crucial Question
Education as a constantly evolving field of human development	Education reduced to a fixed discourse of learning and the behaviourism of psychology (social psychology, positive psychology)	Denial of other ways of knowing e.g. experiential knowledge, philosophical inquiry, research and criticism in reshaping a future of freedom and emancipatory/transformational possibilities.
Education is important to the political system, it is a state apparatus	Results are desired but that does not mean a perfect technology, a linear match between input and outcome	Denial of the importance of the political in an education system with differential power relations, lobbyists, and numerous vested interests, begs the question: who benefits?
Consensualism	Values/virtues are preset and handed down to teachers by an elite, for a new professionalism, that is organisational rather than occupational	Values and virtues given to teachers as a fait accompli. Teachers' codes of behaviour, standards and dispositions are all externally driven criteria by policy actors and mandated by statutory obligation. A normative consensus assumed rather than interrogated, questioned or challenged.
Essentialism	A reified view that reduces reality to that which can be defined and clarified, e.g. atomisable, visible and measurable.	Teachers' work and development practices are (re)configured as evidence-based practices. Knowledge, skills and competences expressed using the empirical consensus of a narrow scientism for performance management.
Dilemmatic contradictions that cannot be named, managed and quantified	Non-instrumental aims in education that lie outside the realm of data analytics.	Education is a journey and not an event that goes beyond the commodification of the human for the functional and purely transactional. For example, recognition of spaces for liminality, the aesthetic and facilitation of risk, beauty and joy that defy measurement and management.
The importance of criticism and problem posing in education	As human development is continually evolving the importance of criticism and problem posing in this cultural and transformational endeavour	The aim of education cannot be for hegemonic closure of an ideal compliant worker-citizen (automaton). Instead, problem posing is crucial to advancing the educability of all, working on a personal life project while at the same time learning to live well with others in a socio-political and ever changing global world.

Methodology

The research design was a Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) of policy texts in curriculum reform, school inspection and teacher education in Ireland, from 2012 to 2021 (Fairclough, 2013). The study was set against the policy background of a persistent neoliberal/elite imaginary playing out in the globalised field of educational policy (political) influence (McLaren, 2019, 2021). CDA is concerned with revealing hidden assumptions in the ways power and ideology reshape policy text and talk (MacLure, 2003). CDA focuses on the meanings and contradictions underpinning language use in the policy texts, revealing the multiple ways knowledge, power and ideology interplay and showing how they legitimate a process of normalisation in localised contexts (Fairclough 2013).

The CDA was set within a transformative-emancipatory research paradigm, where the author reveals her positioning as an academic and activist for emancipatory teaching and teacher education and development (Pillow, 2003). Creswell & Creswell (2018) describe this selection of a research approach in educational studies as academic scholarship charged with advocacy for foregrounding equity and social justice. ‘A transformative worldview holds that research inquiry needs to be intertwined with politics and a political change agenda to confront social oppression at whatever level it occurs’ (p.9). CDA is therefore not only concerned with whatever is (politically) legitimated and ‘sayable’ in the language of policy text and talk, it is equally concerned with what is ‘unsayable’, constrained, forgotten, silenced and/or suppressed. Acritical discourse analysis works with and against the grain of policy texts while providing the reader with underpinning theoretical perspectives and reflexive positioning, and drawing from multiple data sources in order to assure data trustworthiness.

Critical Discourse Analysis of Policy Texts in Ireland

Here I use the theoretical perspectives and critical reflexive insights discussed above (Table 1) to conduct a CDA of policy texts in curriculum reform, school inspection and teacher education in Ireland from 2012 to 2021. The policy context was a challenging time of economic austerity, underpinned for the first time in the history of the state by emergency FEMPI legislation disciplining all members of the public services, including teachers.

The policy texts under critical scrutiny include a new curriculum framework for lower secondary education (Junior Cycle) by the *Department of Education and Skills* (DES, 2015); a policy text on school self-evaluation by the Inspectorate (LAOS, 2016); and Teaching Council policies for a new regulatory regime expected of teachers and higher education providers (Teaching Council, 2016, 2018, 2020).

Few would quarrel with students learning to take better responsibility for their selves and their learning, and with teachers' having better reliance on counter-intuitive knowledge and research and working in communal-orientation for improved decision-making. However, what is at issue here is how teachers' practices are nowadays (re)configured for an over-reliance on micro-management, statutory requirements and displays of metrics.

The thinking behind the notion of democratic governance, and Ireland is no exception, is that policies are arrived at using a consultative (democratic) process taking into account the views of all stakeholders. What this social partnership model belies is that education is far from a level playing field of policy actors, and in the last decade, the field has become overrun with translational policy influencers and corporatist lobbyists. While teachers' voices have traditionally depended on the strength of teachers' unions, nowadays all

teachers' voices are suppressed and silenced by new models of democratic governance that claim everyone is on the same page, making education equal to policy while foreclosing possibilities for contrarian views (Galvin & Mooney Simmie, 2017; Santoro, 2017). A hegemonic closure that has started to generate fresh appeals for teachers and teacher educators in Ireland, and across the global world to unite in new ways to fight this commodification of education, the rapid elimination of the commons, public interest values and the steady asphyxiation of democracy (Carr & Beckett, 2020; McLaren, 2021, Mooney Simmie, 2021a).

Framework for Junior Cycle

The *Framework for Junior Cycle* (DES, 2015) is a policy text of the Department of Education and Skills concerned with curriculum reform at lower secondary (high) school education (age 11 to 15 years). The policy framework was legitimated within an argument that national state examinations was too stressful for 15 year olds and no longer served the requirements of a post-industrial world. The reform downplays any need for knowledge, disciplinary and theoretical knowledge, and for critical consciousness and foregrounds instead skills and dispositions for adapting to, fitting into, and contributing to the status quo. The framework (re)defines a skillset to become self-regulated learners: *Communicating, Being Literate, Staying Well, Managing Information and Thinking, Managing Myself, Being Numerate, Working with Others, Being Creative*.

Within this new meritocratic system disadvantage is viewed as an issue of the failing individual, taking the gaze away from systemic inequalities (Mooney Simmie, 2014), protecting the privileged from the rise of democratisation (Power et al., 2013) and possibly disguising the intent of savings to the public purse (Printer, 2020). What is 'unsayable' in this reform is any necessity for questioning the status quo, for critical questioning and problem posing and for

radically dreaming a new future world. Teachers are required to demonstrate adaptive expertise, to be creative and critical thinkers (higher order) and work with peers in what often appears as discussions based on just one topic, ‘assessment’. However, becoming a self-regulated learner while necessary is far from sufficient to ensure that young people will learn how to make space for others, for associated living in the world with a plurality of others, and to work well in the co-construction of the world as a just place for all to live well.

Looking at Our Schools

Looking At Our Schools (LAOS, 2016) is a policy text published by the Inspectorate of the Department of Education and Skills providing external criteria for school and teacher self-evaluation. Schools and teachers must gather data and evidence and report successes to one another, to others and to the inspectorate, increasingly mandated by an Irish schooling system deeply embedded in a transnational system of international constant comparison.

LAOS expresses the skills, attitudes and knowledge needed as outcomes, where students learn to ‘modify and adapt their behaviour when required’ (p. 16). Teachers’ practices are viewed in a technocratic way as competences in pedagogical skills, subject knowledge, pedagogical knowledge and classroom management skills. Supported by this normative consensus teachers’ practices involve intensive labour in the planning, delivery and reflection undertaken for a perfectly ordered classroom sequence. There are no surprises, no grappling with theory-practice (praxis), no problem posing or the presence of unsolvable contradictions.

LAOS addresses formal leadership in schools who are expected to be ‘fully aware of their statutory obligations and ensure timely compliance with all legislative and policy requirements’ (p.25). The policy text reveals the change

from an occupational professionalism (based on teachers' needs) to an organisational professionalism (Evetts, 2011) based on the primacy of institutional/system needs: "teachers value their role within a professional learning organisation" (p.26). Formal leadership roles are assigned to ensure teachers' research their practices but within the limited proviso that all research "is firmly based on action research and is adapted to the identified needs of the school" (p.22). Equity is recast as individual responsibility and not a shared responsibility with the state and society: "values of the school enshrine equality, fairness, and justice for all students and staff" (p.26).

Brady (2020) drawing on Sartre's existentialist philosophy of freedom shows the debased nature of any externally imposed top-down system of educational self-evaluation. Skerritt et al. (2021) show how teacher and school self-evaluation processes, of policy enactment, require translation and interpretation, in specific contexts and cultures.

Teacher Professional Learning

In Ireland, the Cosán text from the Teaching Council sets out national policy in relation to (re)configuring the experienced teacher as a lifelong learner (The Teaching Council, 2018). The policy text promises greater teacher autonomy and choice, sharing that 'one size does not fit all' and expecting each teacher to arrive at their own tailor-made learning folio. At the same time, it describes teacher learning tightly linked to student need, school need and system need, the 'extent to which the design allows for best practice to be modelled' (p.23). Teacher learning presents as an evidence-based practice with national priorities publicly show cased in an annual national conference, providing recognition for the teaching profession and a 'comfy' celebratory platform to share exemplars (Teaching Council, 2018).

Teacher learners display adaptive expertise as they operate cycles of diagnostics followed by reporting the degree of fidelity achieved to policy-mandated outcomes known in advance (Ng, Stull & Martinez, 2019). A narrow scientism that has less to do with person-centred learning and community building and is instead more concerned with the exchange-value of a high-performing learning organisation (Fielding, 2011).

Cosán soft sculpts a new creative professional class of teachers for constant comparison using a business-like logic of consumer choice. Notably absent is any requirement for teacher-learners to pay attention to education's societal responsibilities for public interest values (Lynch, 2015). Research is limited to teachers' interrogating themselves and their practices inside an institutionalised environment and with no critical gaze outward to the wider world. Teachers rapidly learning how to comply, to fit in, and to adapt to normative values of the institution and system. With no requirement for co-constructing the world with others, for interrupting the world, for daring to transgress, and for critical questioning (hooks, 1994). Critical thinking understood as higher-order thinking taking precedence over the uneasy social conscience requirements and liminal spaces for radically dreaming a just global world.

A Standardised Framework for Initial Teacher Education

The Teaching Council, a statutory body for the regulation of teachers in Ireland (since 2006) started in 2011 to issue criteria and guidelines for Initial Teacher Education (ITE) providers. By December 2020, in the early months of the coronavirus pandemic these criteria achieved the rapid mandatory status of a standardised framework, called Céim standards (Teaching Council, 2020). The policy text for Céim standards bears all the hallmarks of a neoliberal imaginary of teacher education encased within a compact of consensualism and essentialism. The intellectual life of ITE, the importance of academic freedom,

disciplinary and theoretical knowledge were downplayed in favour of new procedures and communication pathways. Becoming a teacher moves to a practice turn, teachers working in 'positive' relationships with multiple others rather than as public intellectuals and cultural critics (Giroux, 2013).

The Céim policy text uses a straightforward language with no ambiguity expressed in relation to learning how to become a teacher. The text reveals a tapestry of normative and empirical consensus naturalising a meritocratic discourse while allowing a certain freedom to higher education institutions. Each higher education institution is obliged to underpin their ITE programs with a publicly declared conceptual framework, according to the ethos of each institution and with clearly defined aims (p.9). This statutory mandate awards the Teaching Council and the higher education institution control of ITE as a pedagogic device of obedience and risk-management (p.9). A mandate that threatens, if not overrides the current academic freedom of teacher educators and faculty working in higher education institutions:

A member of the academic staff of a university shall have the freedom, within the law, in his or her teaching, research and any other activities in or outside the university, to question and to test received wisdom, to put forward new ideas and to state controversial or unpopular opinions and shall not be disadvantaged, or subject to less favourable treatment by the university for the exercise of that freedom (Section 14 (2), Universities Act, 1997).

Céim standards express no recognition of the complex, nuanced, open-ended and untidy nature of teaching as a real world practice and the presence of many unsolvable dilemmatic contradictions that teachers might encounter (Edling & Mooney Simmie, 2020). An epistemological flaw at the heart of the policy text suggests teachers' practices involve none other than straightforward implementation of predetermined knowledge, skills and values. Policy

implementation where reform is made equal to education and where intelligent processes of teacher/educator translation, interpretation and (re)contextualisation are denied. “The conceptual framework shall identify the principles, beliefs and values about education, about teacher education and about teaching and learning that the HEI believes can best support student teachers in learning about teaching and how to teach” (p.10).

The placement of student teachers in this standardised ITE framework between higher education and schools is no longer understood as problematic. It is not depicted as a liminal interstitial space for assuring the living contradictions of teachers’ praxes, the playing out of theory-practice dilemmas, including the darker side of a possible tyranny of the majority, the uncritical reproduction of practices and/or problems with differential power relations.

Instead, Céim standards offer a virtually impenetrable tapestry of normative and essentialist (reified) thinking that leaves little or no spaces for praxis (grappling with theory and practices), for critical mediation with the wider world and for individual academic freedom to critically question and advance transformative possibilities. While the policy text in Céim standards might move teaching and initial teacher education up a notch from former folk psychology it merely continues a long established meritocratic discourse in Ireland that plays to the middle classes for a new mediocrity, if not a race to the bottom.

Conclusions

The CDA of policy texts in education in Ireland conducted here, from 2012 to 2021, reveals that teachers’ work and developmental practices were all (re)configured within a new meritocratic system commensurate with a Social Investment State. The aims of education are externally driven and made equal to political mandates for a new superhero individual, a strong self-regulating

individual with no recognition of dependencies and interdependencies that matter to the dynamic building of an inclusive and pluralist public forum.

Moreover, teaching and teacher education are ethico-political and cultural endeavours rather than corporatist games of thrones taking place in institutional spaces tucked away in hard-to-reach private orbits (Giroux, 2013; Mooney Simmie, 2021a). Downplaying and denying the importance of the socio-political in the field of education in Ireland brings enormous benefit to those who already hold advantage, power and privilege (Apple, 2001, McLaren, 2021).

This is the first loose thread I unpick in the study. Reframing educational settings using ‘comfy’ and uncontested notions of a ‘learning organisation’, ‘community of practice’, a ‘professional learning organisation’ repositions teaching and teacher education as taking place for a new individualism and a new institutionalism. Portrayed as a rather innocent private orbit/sphere located somewhere outside the social and political world (Giroux, 2013; Mooney Simmie, 2021 a, b, c, d; Watson, 2014).

Nowadays, mainstream understandings of reform as systems of learning for the exchange value of a commodity wins the support of powerful global influencers and corporatist lobbyists where soft methods of constant comparison and an over-reliance on metrics has brought teacher education and teaching to a new mediocrity, if not a new low. A technocratic discourse that can be compared to a game of premier league soccer: with normative rules, predetermined outcomes, intensive technical preparation, diagnostics based on the best available empirical findings from psychology as a behavioural science, a hawk eye observing players on the pitch, a coach running routinized drills to keep everyone match-ready and a declaration of winners and losers. The problem

with this confined, if not closed hegemony is that it fails to take other disciplines and ways of knowing into account (e.g. history, philosophy, the arts), contexts and cultures, particularities and peculiarities, social class and intersectionalities (Mooney Simmie, Moles & O'Grady, 2019).

The CDA of policy texts conducted here suggests that teachers and teacher educators in Ireland and elsewhere urgently need a restatement of academic freedom, at the school and in higher education institutions. Affordances to critique and productively contribute to co-constructing the world with others in the direction of a just schooling system and just global world (Edling & Mooney Simmie, 2020; Mooney Simmie, 2021a, b, c, d).

Nowadays, there is intense pressure on higher education institutions set free into markets for academic staff/teacher educators to (re)position inside scientific/corporatist communities of practice for a new branding of institutionalism that speaks to authoritarianism and eco-fascism (Fielding, 2007). Without access to theory and intellectual quality, capabilities to do the reflexive work of authentic meaning-making and the necessary liminal spaces for critique of the wider world (Watson 2014), teacher educators, educational researchers and teachers may simply find themselves inside echo-chambers of hollowed-out practices constantly compiling an inward-regulatory gaze for an actuarial view of self.

The potential for symbolic violence in this new tyranny of the majority (Arhendt, 1961) may become a reality for many teachers and teacher educators trapped inside echo chambers where the only allowable item on the agenda is 'assessment', where 'group think' and bullying thrive whilst relying on untheorized evidence and apolitical practices of 'what works' and 'what counts'. This is the second loose thread unpicked. An uncritical system of

learning that requires no grappling with theory, praxis and the intellectual, and has no place for critique or awkward questions. An uncritical politics of education that fails to take power, social class and privilege into account (Apple, 2001; Power et al., 2013; Santoro, 2017).

Here I propose an alternative politics of refusal and principled resistance to facilitate emancipation and the spaces for transformative possibilities for teaching and teacher education (Mooney Simmie, 2021a). Teachers and teacher educators/researchers acting in solidarity in the interest of the greater good of humanity as public and revolutionary intellectuals and cultural critics (Carr & Beckett, 2020; Lynch, 2015; McLaren, 2021). Teachers and teacher educators working together to grapple with a future of uncertainty, radically dreaming together and with others for opening new discourses about a just schooling system and just global world, new thinking for securing the future of a just humanity and the planet rather than domestication into the known.

The rationale for this alternative politics of refusal is clear. No society advances very far without criticism and without nurturing criticality and reflexivity in its education system. Marcel (2013) argues that if research is reduced to a problem-solving exercise of 'turnkey solutions' (p. 234) for a tightly policed system of what works it will fail to 'fulfil its social, critical and heuristic functions and provide a consistent contribution to the definition of the social value of teaching work' (p.226).

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