Examining Social Justice, Inclusion and the Experiences of Low-income students in Ireland, through the lens of Nancy Fraser

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Abstract

This article focuses on the application of Fraser's three-dimensional model for understanding the impact of educational policy and its funding in Ireland for examining if education experiences are equated with justice. There was an examination of conditions in Early Childhood Education (ECE), and primary and post-primary schools to ascertain if economic, cultural and political justice existed for low-income students. The results showed that low-income students have been damaged by neoliberal policies mainly due to the availability of choice which exists in the educational market, which they cannot avail of. Schemes to ameliorate levels of disadvantage and increase opportunities for low-income students need further action so that they operate to ensure that end users become beneficiaries. Equality of outcome is important for low-income students, and resources need to be allocated so that equality of opportunity and equality of outcome, both become realistic conclusions. Results also showed that policies to reduce disadvantage in education in Ireland are mainly aimed at economic redistribution and only for school-age children, with cultural and political injustices largely being ignored.

Keywords: Disadvantaged, early childhood education, primary school, post-primary school, neoliberalism

Introduction

This article examined how educational policy and the funding of education impacted on low-income students progress in Ireland, using Fraser's lens. Fraser focused on socio-economic, status and political challenges that impacted mainly on low-income groups. Economic structures can deny access to resources, whilst hierarchies of cultural value can lead to status inequality. Political justice is also needed so that everybody has access to political participation. It looked at the negative terminology around low-income students, and how the neoliberal environment acted to benefit advantaged students whilst detracting from the lives of disadvantaged students, consequently leading to further inequality. The article also looked at the experiences of low-income students in early childhood education (ECE), and primary and secondary schools to examine if the experiences equated with Fraser's theory of justice. Fraser's lens has been used by other researchers and applied to a language school for refugees and immigrants in Australia by Keddie (2012). It has also been used in higher education (HE) - Bozalek and Hölscher (2020) applied it to HE in South Africa, and Dent (2019) applied Fraser's work to HE in England. Fraser's lens has not previously been used in relation to Ireland's Early Childhood Education (ECE), primary and post-primary schools in Ireland and the results in this paper will make a contribution to knowledge.

Low-income students are typically referred to as 'disadvantaged' - the label 'disadvantaged' is now discussed to assess its usefulness in describing low-income groups. Language can be inclusive and empowering (DC Fiscal Policy Institute, 2017) and the term disadvantaged, which is widely used in education in Ireland, has negative connotations. Denny (2010) stated that oppression still exists and unless the everyday language of oppression is addressed in education the situation will continue, with power structures that privilege some populations over others. The deficit thinking model refers to the idea that

students do not succeed in school due to low income or other deficits, and it is a damaging discourse on disadvantage. This was found to be the case in schools in the Flemish region of Belgium whereby students from non-majority backgrounds tended not to do as well academically as the majority and middle-class students (Clycqa, Nouwen and Vandenbroucke, 2014). Students' backgrounds were seen as the catalyst for the success or failure – the deficit thinking model. The Educational Act 1998 described disadvantage as "the impediments to education arising from social or economic disadvantage which prevent students from deriving appropriate benefit from education in schools" (Irish Statute Book, 1998, p. 32). It does not specify or explain which social or economic disadvantage it is referring to, nor does it mention cultural capital. Hooks (2009) uses the term non-materially advantaged to describe groups who may have strong social and cultural capital, and a lack of material goods. This term is useful when describing those who lack material goods though it is likely that disadvantaged students suffer from multiple disadvantages i.e. lack of security, safety, compassion and lack of material wealth. The DC Fiscal Policy Institute advised the use of terms such as low-income families rather than disadvantaged families as a way to empower and include different groups. (DC Fiscal Policy Institute, 2017). They suggested that using the term 'disadvantaged' implied that this was a complete picture of the family/group whilst in reality there may be many resources within the family/group which are not reflected in the data.

Neo-liberalism Influence on Irish Education

Ireland, similar to other developed countries, adopted a neoliberal approach to education - a system in which the role of the state has a reduced role in providing welfare, and a larger role in promoting markets (Martinez and Garcia, 2000; Thorson and Lie, 2007; Hearne, 2016; Ostrey, Loungani and Furcei, 2016). In Ireland, there are large disparities between advantaged and low-

income families in education - only families that can afford choice in education are served, which is justified because of their abilities (Power et al, 2013). In education, the neoliberal belief is that the market logic can fit any problem that exists (Connell, 2013). Consumer choice is emphasised, but it does not produce equality, but instead increases inequality (Ravitch, 2013). This inequality was recognised by the Irish Government and in 2005, the Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS) programme was launched, which integrated previous schemes and operates to improve opportunities in education for low-income students in primary and post-primary schools. However, provision of equal opportunity to access education cannot guarantee equality of outcome. Equality of opportunity ensures that low-income students have the same opportunities to make gains. Equality of outcome ensures that these students are making gains, and both equalities need to be in place for justice to ensue. The next section introduces and explains Fraser's lens of justice which is used in later sections to examine if education in Ireland equates with justice.

Theoretical Framework

Fraser's three-dimensional lens is used in this article as it focuses attention on socio-economic, status and political challenges which are challenges that low-income students and their families face. My hope is that Fraser's lens will help to define the phenomena and lead to new insights and ways of understanding he issues when neoliberal policies are followed in education. Other critical theorists have discussed disadvantage and inequality, such as Adorno and Marx; Adorno viewed modern society as a structure of domination founded on the unequal distribution of material resources (Gartman, 2012). He focused on culture and argued that culture was linked with the unequal structure of power and wealth, and that modern culture was a mass culture which obscured class differences. The dominant class used its power to impose a particular culture on the dominated class, who did not possess sufficient resources to access high

culture, unlike the dominant class who monopolised high culture and this inequality could only be broken by the state. Neoliberal policies reduced state funding for culture leading to mass commercialisation which was dominated by television and focused on entertainment rather than serious debate. Mass culture provides a superficial satisfaction of social recognition and prevents individuals from creating a more equal society (Leontowitsch et al., 2022). Marxist theory stated that inequality and poverty are produced by the capitalist mode of production. Inequality is then reproduced generation after generation through lack of services and opportunities (Peet, 1975). There is a need to produce industrial workers which leads to continuing poverty. Without change in methods of production, inequality and poverty cannot be eliminated. Capitalists can use their profits to increase their wealth and as they get rich, the workers remain relatively poor (Nilsson, 2020).

Fraser's approach, using a three-dimensional lens, is useful as it breaks down the injustices into three areas which are separate but interrelated, and can be applied directly to the lives of those on the fringes of society. The focus is on socio-economic challenges, status challenges and political challenges which impact daily on low-income groups.

Justice "requires social arrangements that permit all to participate as peers in social life" (Fraser, 2010, p. 16). Fraser's model also states:

> People can be impeded from full participation by economic structures that deny them the resources they need in order to interact with others as peers; in that case they suffer from distributive injustice or maldistribution. The problem is the class structure of society, which corresponds to the economic dimension of justice.
>
> (Fraser, 2008, p. 37)

When individuals/families do not have sufficient resources, it may impact negatively on their ability to participate fully in society – there is maldistribution of resources. Individuals/families may suffer from status

inequality when their social position is seen as inferior to others. Fraser asserted that:

> People can also be prevented from interacting on terms of parity by institutionalized hierarchies of cultural value that deny them the requisite standing; in that case they suffer from status inequality or misrecognition. The problem is the status order, which corresponds to its cultural dimension.
>
> (Fraser, 2008, p. 37).

Both economic inequality and status inequality need to be addressed for justice to prevail. The third justice, political justice is needed, where it is confirmed who will be included/excluded from the group claiming redistribution and recognition.

Fraser stated that the political dimension of justice:

> Concerns the scope of the state's jurisdiction and the decision rules by which it structures contestation. It tells us who is included in, and who is excluded from, the circle of those entitled to a just distribution and reciprocal recognition.
>
> (Fraser, 2008, p. 38).

Political injustice occurs when political boundaries and decision making prevent some individuals/families from accessing opportunities to participate politically in the same way as others. Low-income students and their families may experience socio-economic injustice, status injustice and political injustice. Fraser's three-dimensional lens offers an opportunity to examine the impact of Ireland's neoliberal education policies on the experiences of low-income students in relation to ECE (pre-school) and this is further explored in the next section.

Positionality to Research

The reason why I am interested in low-income students, stems from my background in Economics which I studied at undergraduate and postgraduate level in London. One of my lecturers remarked that Ireland when it joined the

EEC was considered a “third world country”. I remember being quite shocked to hear this about my own country, as I was aware that it had not been as progressive as other countries in Europe at that time, but I would never have described it as such. I now work in a “disadvantaged” school in Ireland demarcated as a “disadvantaged” rural area. One of my students recently commented that she had just been made aware that the area she lived in was termed “disadvantaged”, and she was visibly moved at this description of her village. Up to this she had not considered herself or her family to be disadvantaged. I tried to explain how the term was not particularly useful, as it didn’t recognise the wonderful sporting achievements of her village, or the community spirit amongst the locals. But the damage appeared to have been done as the student looked visibly upset for the duration of the class following the negative description of her village and surrounding area. Prior to this students generally were very proud of their local area, and would promote and defend their village against the slightest criticism. This led to my questioning of the terminology we use to describe different phenomena, and realising how harmful and disparaging it can be. Thus, the word low-income will be used in this paper when required.

Methodology

Secondary research in the form of national reports, international reports and academic articles were used to examine the impact of government policy on ECE and primary and post-primary schools in Ireland.

Findings

Impact of Government Policy on ECE in Ireland, using Fraser’s Three-Dimensional Lens

Nancy Fraser stated that justice is made up of redistribution, recognition and representation (Fraser, 2010). For socio-economic justice to prevail there must

be distributive justice – resources include financial resources and access to quality education and culturally responsive teaching. In Ireland parents are offered ECE for three hours a day, five times a week free of charge during term time from when their children are 2 years and 8 months. This is part of the Early Childhood Care and Education Scheme (ECCE) introduced in 2009 (Early Childhood Ireland, n.d.). This means that parents need to pay for the remaining hours during term time if they wish to work full-time, and for the full hours during school holidays, and for full-time care when their children are below the starting age. Mothers are more likely to leave the workforce or work fewer hours when their children are young (OECD, 2017). Generally parents will work a forty hour week if working full-time. This means that parents will have to pay for at least twenty-five hours ECE during term time. Moreover, forty hours during school holidays will have to be paid (there are sixteen weeks holidays at primary school), forty hours when their child is below two years and eight months, and if they have more than one child in ECE, the bill escalates. This expense continues when children go to primary school as generally the working day continues after the school day, and parents will pay for after-school care usually for students up to the age of 12.

Fraser (2008) states that when people do not have the economic resources needed, they cannot fully participate in society due to the lack of resources i.e. there is distributive injustice. The situation in ECE in Ireland discriminates against lower income groups who cannot afford to offer their children an appropriate start to education as full-time ECE fees are too high. This means the children begin school already at a disadvantage, compared to their counterparts who have either had access to full-time quality ECE, or a part-time experience accompanied by a supportive, and a culturally positive experience in the home environment.

ECE has a profound impact on children due to early interventions having high returns, as they take place at the same time as brain sensitivity peaks and lead to development of children's skills, and ensure better learning at later stages (Carneiro et al., 2003). Later interventions have lower returns as children have passed this development stage. Advantaged children may develop these abilities within their families and low-income children receive high benefits from attending quality ECE. The Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA, 2018) showed that students in Ireland who attended ECE for a longer time period in terms of school terms/years, scored higher than those who had attended for less time. Children who had not attended ECE were more likely to enrol in a disadvantaged school (OECD, 2019). Early entry into ECE may reduce inequalities in education if low-income children have the same opportunities as advantaged children to attend high-quality ECE (Downey, Von Hippel & Broh, 2004).

When insufficient financial resources are invested in a sector, the result leads to gaps in opportunities which usually impact those who need it most. Distributive justice is not present in the ECE sector in Ireland as government policy does not support an adequate financial investment. The OECD Report (2021) showed that Ireland spent .2% of GDP on ECE compared with the average OECD expenditure of .9%, whilst Norway and Sweden spent 1% (Early Childhood Ireland, 2021). In Ireland 46% of 3-year-olds were in ECE compared to the OECD average of 71% (OECD, 2017a) – this placed Ireland in 29th place out of 33 countries for low participation.

Lack of public funding for ECE has impacted on provision of ECE in Ireland. The government relies on private provision of education for this age group with only 2% of facilities being publicly funded in 2014, compared to the OECD average of 68%. This reduced to 1% of publicly funded ECE institutions in Ireland in 2017, with the remainder under private provision (OECD, 2019a).

The cost of childcare in Ireland is amongst the highest in the OECD, at 33% of the average wage compared to the OECD average of 15% (The Journal, 3rd February 2022).

Lack of government spending in the sector, lack of government ECE facilities and a reliance on private provision means that Ireland has a neoliberal approach to this sector. "Let the market provide" has led to an expensive provision of ECE that only wealthy people can afford. Workers in this sector earn low wages, though in September 2022 the pay increased by 20% to thirteen euros an hour (Workplace Relations Commission, n. d.) Childcare providers find it difficult to pay themselves a wage, due to the high cost of training, resources, insurance, rent, utilities, maintenance and the adult to child ratio. Currently the ECE sector in Ireland poses large costs for both providers and users of the service.

Fraser also stated that hierarchies of cultural value may deny some groups equal standing, leading to misrecognition (Fraser, 2008). Misrecognition is a cultural phenomenon that validates unequal power relations and social differences between different social groups (Bourdieu, 1977). Disadvantaged groups tend to have low social status as they have reduced wealth, education, health outcomes and labour opportunities and they are more likely to come into contact with the justice system, compared to middle-class, wealthier groups (Welsh Government, 2021). There may be invisibility when one is not valued in the same way as those in the dominant group. Other identity-based mistreatments include hypervisibility, when one stands out as the organisational norms are those of the dominant group and a low-income individual may be seen as different.

Students need to have culturally rich curricula and diversity of staff in terms of culture and gender, to ensure they feel included in the curricula and school environment. Generally there are few teachers in ECE from minority and ethnic

communities and most of the teachers are women (OECD, 2017). In Ireland less than 1% of the workforce in ECE is male (National Childhood Network, n.d.). Diversity is important to help the integration of low-income children, and boys need male role models in ECE. Lack of diversity of staff will impact negatively on children, especially on low-income children who may also be immigrants. They and their parents need to see a wide range of teaching/other staff who can liaise with these families, especially if there are language and cultural differences. When children are taught from the perspective of the global north and not introduced to other viewpoints and influences, they will believe that this is the correct and only way to learn. Ethnocentrism emphasises ethnic preference, superiority and exploitiveness and could lead people to racism (Bizumic, 2018). The education system will reflect the culture of the dominant group. Attitudes can lead to behaviours and there may be discrimination against people from different ethnic groups, by the dominant group. With ethnocentric learning children and parents from different cultures will feel that their own culture is less important, which may lead to reduced confidence and self-esteem. Ethnicity, race and gender have unequal social relations and status associated with them, and undoing injustices based on these identities needs to be addressed (Fraser, 1996).

Fraser stated that political justice is also needed – injustice occurs when some people are excluded from a just distribution and reciprocal recognition (Fraser, 2008). For political justice everybody should have a political voice and to be able to influence decisions that affect them. They need to be represented at different levels in society, and boundaries should not be established that include some and exclude others, which Fraser (2005, 2008, 2010) termed "misframing". Low-income people may not have any involvement in local politics as they feel that political representation does not represent their issues and values. Economic inequality is a form of voter suppression as the wealthy

set the agenda and get the outcome that serves their interests (Schattschneider, 1975). When politics works for the rich, poor people have less incentive to vote. They may also not have opportunities to improve their literacy if they are immigrants or from ethnic minority backgrounds and have low levels of education. As a result they may not be in a position to register to vote as the literacy levels needed are an obstacle. This may also hinder their involvement with local pre-schools. A key element of representation is empowerment or encouraging participation to increase collective power, which in itself is a key facet of social innovation (Mulgan, 2019). When low-income groups do not believe that they have the tools needed for their own empowerment, they experience barriers through lack of resources (Fraser, 2010).

The three-dimensional lens of distributive justice, recognition, and representation are necessary in order for individuals and families to participate as peers in social life. Currently in the ECE sector in Ireland, the evidence points to personal autonomy and individualism rather than collectivist values. This has been brought about by the lack of publicly funded childcare institutions and the necessity of provision by private providers. Neither the private providers nor the users perceive the service as meeting their needs due to the high costs involved. The private market and competitive forces, both aspects of neoliberal policies, have not operated for the benefit of either group. Distributive justice is not experienced by low-income families due to the lack of financially supported full-time ECE provision. Misrecognition exists as children do not have adequate access to a diverse staff in terms of mixed gender and from minority ethnic groups. Political justice is also absent as generally boards of management tend to be comprised of middle-income parents and staff, thus further reducing the involvement of low-income groups in decision making. School-based decision-making reforms appear to be less effective in disadvantaged communities, particularly if parents and community members

have low levels of education and low status relative to school personnel (Carr-Hill et al, 2016). Low-income parents may not have sufficient literacy skills and self-confidence to contemplate joining boards of management.

Better financial supports, increased recognition of cultural diversity and access to political justice will lead to low-income groups overcoming the three-dimensional inequality experienced (Fraser, 2010). The following section examines the impact of government policy on education in primary and post-primary schools using Fraser's lens, to assess its impact on low-income students.

Impact of Government Policy on Primary and Post-Primary Schools in Ireland, using Fraser's Three-Dimensional Lens

Ireland's membership of the EU and OECD has meant that all educational initiatives introduced by these organisations have been implemented. Mercille and Murphy (2015) argue that they have both influenced the deepening of neoliberal influence in Ireland's education system, and Irish officials and institutions have also followed neoliberal interests. Neoliberal policy sees education as a private good which can be traded, rather than a public good to liberate the lives of men and women (Giroux, 2009), and social problems are now individual responsibility (Ball, 2008). Educational inequalities and injustices are not seen as economic problems of structural inequalities, but as social problems of community and family inadequacies.

There was recognition by the Department of Education and Skills (DES) that some schools and students needed additional supports and in 2005, the DEIS programme was introduced to primary and post-primary schools, as part of the Schools Support Programme (SSP) in order to reduce educational disadvantage. Supports included additional classroom teaching posts, home school community liaison coordinator posts, extra funding and access to the School Completion

Programme (DES, 2022). The School Completion Programme (SCP) supports young people who are at risk of early school leaving or who are out of school and are not part of a learning site or in employment (Tusla, n.d.). Inequality of opportunity is the extent to which background, demographic, socio-economic, gender, etc. impact pupils' academic performance (Ferreira and Gignoux, 2014), and DEIS was expected to close this gap. This initiative supports Fraser's idea of distributive justice – when low-income families have increased socio-economic challenges due to lack of resources, there is maldistribution of resources. Programmes that operate to increase the levels of resources and supports lead to redistribution of resources that increases participatory parity (Fraser, 2008).

Kavanagh and Weir (2018) found that poverty was the largest determinant of educational outcome in their study of pupils in SSP and non-SSP in PISA 2015. Large gaps in achievement existed between pupils, with the overriding factors impacting on educational outcomes coming from the pupils' backgrounds. They concluded that the achievement gap between poor and affluent pupils would continue until the economic inequality (income and opportunities) had been addressed. There were similar results in PISA 2018 with large gaps in achievement between DEIS and non-DEIS schools, and fee-paying and non-fee-paying schools (McKeown et al, 2019).

Fraser (1997) argued for increased redistribution of resources though she also argued that the "surface reallocation" of resources can increase group differentiation and generate stigmatisation through making low-income communities the focus of "special attention". Therefore she suggests that better allocation of resources is necessary but there also needs to be focus on the way that resources are allocated, so as to reduce groups being given unwanted attention. DEIS schools have breakfast clubs that are inclusive so that all students and staff are entitled to have a free breakfast regardless of income

levels so in this way schools are operating to increase distributional justice, whilst also not stigmatising certain groups. This changes at lunch times when those who are entitled to a free lunch must produce a card indicating this. Homework clubs can also act to stigmatise students with a fee-paying club and a free homework club for low-income students, operating side by side in the school.

Educational policy must meet the changing requirements of society and there is a necessity for discussion on society requirements beyond economic needs (Lynch and McGarr, 2014). Despite the additional supports outlined above, which include economic, social and academic supports given to DEIS schools and students, the gap in achievement between DEIS and non-DEIS schools has not reduced over time (Smyth, Kingston and McCoy, 2015). DEIS schools have higher concentrations of low-income students and accommodate more students from Traveller backgrounds, more non-English speaking students, and students with special educational needs. Low-income students in non-DEIS schools are likely to need extra resources and these schools may not be eligible for any additional supports. In an analysis of national assessment data, it was found there was a small but statistically significant proportion of variance in the performance of rural students in primary schools in Ireland, which depended on pupil and school background – evidence of inequality (Karakolidis et al., 2021).

In Ireland medical card holders (those who do not have to pay a fee to access doctors and other medical services) are used as a proxy for poverty/disadvantage (Weir and Kavanagh, 2018). Since 2007, the relative percentage of medical card holders in DEIS schools has increased. A strong relationship existed between individual student achievement and the proportion of families with medical cards in the school – the social context effect (Sofroniou et al., 2004). The social context effect means that student achievement is negatively impacted by rising densities of students from low-

income backgrounds. Results from the 2016 study (Kavanagh and Weir, 2018) showed that the social context in schools had a greater impact on education outcomes in 2016 compared to earlier studies (Weir and Kavanagh, 2018). Those with medical cards achieved less than those without medical cards (absence of poverty). The increasingly strong social context indicated that students' educational achievements had a large negative impact when attending a school with a concentration of students from poor socio-economic backgrounds, regardless of whether students had a medical card or not. The percentage of medical card holders in DEIS schools compared with non-DEIS schools increased between 2007 and 2016 indicating that the 2007/2008 recession had a larger impact on already low-income groups (Weir and Kavanagh, 2018). They concluded that most of the inequality in educational outcomes in Ireland are a result of income inequality.

Material resources are necessary for low-income students and their families, alongside a rich and varied curriculum in both primary and secondary school education – examples of economic and cultural justice which Fraser supported. Distributive justice means arranging resources that prioritise the interests of the least advantaged (Connell, 2017). Most mainstream curricula prioritise the interests of the most privileged which means the curricula is not a just curricula. In order to achieve curricular justice, reform is needed with democratic deliberation and decision making along with community power and teacher initiative. When non-dominant or marginalised cultures are included in the curriculum, this reflects recognition of different cultures and "recognitive justice in its potential to destabilise the dominant social patterns that create inequitable status hierarchies" (Fraser, 2008a). It is also important to continue to have high academic standards for all students including low-income or marginalised students - teaching framed by low expectations that "waters down" achievement for marginalised students should be avoided. Valuing other

cultures and other knowledge would also necessitate cultural criticism and scrutiny in relation to intragroup conflict and injustice. Boundaries/frames, by privileging middle-class and white identities and knowledge, have tended to provide a tokenistic or superficial engagement eg celebrations of Polish Independence Day, Brazilian Independence Day in schools in Ireland. Issues of ordinary political justice are a focus of equity within education in relation to concerns about the under-representation of minority groups within mainstream schooling contexts (Fraser, 2008a) eg lack of ethnic minority staff including Traveller teachers and Traveller Special Needs Assistants, in primary and secondary schools. The racial and ethnic makeup of school boards rarely matches that of the students in the schools they are responsible for (Samuels, 2020). This makes it difficult for board members, who are responsible for the running of the school, as they will not have direct experience of struggles faced by low-income and marginalised groups such as poverty and racism.

Despite extra resources given to DEIS schools, gaps in achievement between DEIS and non-DEIS students continued. Poverty was seen as the main determinant of educational outcomes and it was suggested that educational outcome differences would continue until economic equality was achieved (Kavanagh and Weir, 2018). Students in DEIS schools may have additional special needs compared to their non-DEIS counterparts and this may attribute to the lower PISA scores achieved. There was no attempt to address this in any of the research available (the methods used in PISA do not make the scores of special educational needs students visible – LeRoy et al., 2018, p. 9). DEIS schools in Ireland appear to have large concentrations of low-income students. Without an economically mixed student population, there may be an overriding belief amongst the students that education is not for them. They may not have sufficient role models amongst the staff, and consequently further underachieve.

The DEIS model has three bands at primary school level; Band 1 schools receive additional teaching posts to reduce class size, compared to Band 2 (Weir and McAvinue, 2012). There is also a Rural Band for primary schools in rural areas, so there is some differentiation between schools (INTO, March 2022). At secondary school level, schools in DEIS are treated as if they are all in the same band or position and there is no explanation for this. In DEIS schools the range of themes focused on include attendance, numeracy, literacy, retention and progression, examination attainment, and partnership with parents and others (DES, 2017). Themes are selected at the beginning of the year in schools by self-selected staff and management, and these themes are focused on for the academic year. Targets are set, results are measured and new targets are set if progress is less than expected. There is no attempt to examine if these themes are the right themes for any particular school, as again there is a one size fits all approach. It would be inconceivable to expect that a small rural DEIS secondary school is similar in any way to a large urban DEIS secondary school, or that the issues present would be comparable. In the school I work in there are many parents who rely on medical cards to pay for medical services and also claim Job Seekers Allowance (unemployment assistance). It is a rural environment with an absence of employment opportunities. Many of the parents would like to work but are restricted because of the dearth of vacancies and lack of transport to get to work. These issues place them firmly in the DEIS bracket and their only issue may be that they are low-income but have strong family and community ties, and extensive social supports. They are not in any way comparable to an inner-city family who may have a catalogue of significant and complex issues that impact on them as individuals, and as a family, yet there are both treated similarly within DEIS. The educational needs of different schools are not examined, nor is there any scrutiny of increase or reduction of needs, or examination of the different resources needed to tackle these needs. Students

and their families are not consulted regarding the DEIS themes selected for focus in schools each academic year.

Schools differ in their student cohort and size - some schools will have large numbers of Traveller students, others may not. Traveller students may prefer to attend schools that have other Travellers present, so that they have contacts outside of class time who may also be relatives – hence the larger populations. There is plenty of evidence that Traveller students leave education earlier than their settled counterparts, yet there is no Career Guidance available in schools that is specifically designed to suit this younger cohort. DEIS schools differ in their need for funding for different resources. When schools have not had sufficient examination of specific educational needs, it may lead to students acting out in the absence of appropriate educational resources. This can lead to teachers opting for a caring approach, rather than an educationally and pedagogically challenging one (Devine and McGillicuddy, 2016). Fraser (2008a) has concerns about the way that focus on cultural identity may displace problems of distributive justice. In this case the teaching offered is set at a low level, to make “allowances” for marginalised students, and is not a fair opportunity for these students.

Despite DEIS being in its thirteenth year, educational disadvantage is still very much at the forefront of schools in Ireland. In 2022, 322 extra schools were brought into the programme, indicating that disadvantage is increasing in both primary and post-primary schools in Ireland (DES, 2022). In spite of its wide-ranging issues, disadvantage is still viewed as a school-based problem, and there is no recognition at policy level of its relationship with wider economic inequalities across Irish society (Fleming and Harford, 2021).

Discussion

Ireland's response to educational disadvantage meant identifying the disadvantaged and addressing their needs and not focusing on the system that led to the disadvantage (Tormey, 2007). The most advantaged of the disadvantaged then tended to benefit (Lynch, 2007). When the focus is on disadvantage, there is no focus on the advantaged and privileged, and this remains unnoticed and unchallenged (Tormey, 2007). Neoliberalism was initially hailed as a triumph, though the International Monetary Fund (IMF) has now stated that some aspects of this policy do not work (Ostrey, Loungani and Furcei, 2016). A new macro-level economic framework is needed, which is based on equality and sustainability (Hearne, 2016). This paper examined the impact of government policy on low-income students in Ireland – it has led to increases in inequality (Ostrey, Loungani and Furcei, 2016; Hearne, 2016; Connell and Dados, 2014; Power et al., 2013; Ravitch, 2013).

The introduction of DEIS in Ireland in 2005 aimed to increase opportunities for low-income students in primary and post-primary schools. Whilst the interventions are necessary, focus may shift from addressing the systems and policies that led to the inequalities in the first place, to simply meeting targets for individual students/schools. Despite the programme, gaps in achievement in both primary and post-primary schools were clearly identified between advantaged and low-income students and the conclusion was that poverty was the defining predictor of educational outcome (Kavanagh and Weir, 2018; Smyth, Kingston and McCoy, 2015). The belief that achievement gaps in educational outcomes will disappear with economic equality (Karakolidis et al., 2021; Kavanagh and Weir, 2018; Weir and Kavanagh, 2018) needs to be questioned. Pointing out that economic inequality is the reason why low-income students performed less well than other students seems to be too simplistic, as is offering this as the solution to the problem i.e. once overall income and

opportunities are equal, all the issues will disappear. DEIS was introduced to increase equality of opportunity for disadvantaged students. Equality of opportunity does not automatically mean that educational outcomes will be similar. There can be complex reasons why an individual is from a low-income group – they may have learning difficulties, special needs, social situations such as addictions that impact a person's life and prosperity. Achievement gaps appear when low-income students results are compared with advantaged students indicating that economic inequality is the reason for the gap in achievement. However PISA tests are conducted so that each student sits the same test in Reading, Science and Mathematics, regardless of whether they have a learning difficulty, special need or not. Results are then presented without any explanation of how many students had extra needs or the amount and severity of needs. Differentiation is a major component of teaching and education, and part of every taught class in both primary and secondary schools. Omission of this in national standardised tests does not lead to accurate results, or results that can be examined further.

Irish policy does not focus on eliminating the inequality of wealth, power and status that produces the inequality generation after generation (Power et al., 2013). Working class students have not gained any great advantage and the education system in Ireland operates to reproduce society's inequalities (Power et al., 2013). In the school I work in, there are some families that fall into the "disadvantaged" category year after year, generation after generation. One of the issues is that dominated classes need to introduce a counterhegemony in order to challenge the current situation, otherwise the status quo continues (Fraser, 2019). Friedman (1962) stated that "only a crisis produces real change in the actions taken, which depends on the existing ideas at that time". The policies in education in Ireland which are aimed at reducing inequality and increasing opportunities for low-income groups frame equality in terms of

economic terms and they do not attend to a "new political imaginary centred on identity, cultural domination and recognition" (Fraser 1997). Policies misframe the problem by focusing on who (the low-income group) and what – the intervention that can show redistribution rather than how low and high-income groups are constructed in terms of low and high social status. Participatory parity can only occur when all three injustices are addressed (Fraser, 2008). A transformative approach is needed which addresses root causes of injustice as opposed to affirmative strategies which only act to correct inequities.

Conclusion

Fraser stated that the three sources of inequality must be addressed before we can identify equality; socio-economic, cultural and political. By encouraging market forces the Irish government has tacitly encouraged the adoption of neoliberal policies in many sectors of the Irish economy including education, resulting in advantaged students gaining and low-income students losing out. Educational opportunities increase when those who are most in need of resources are given these resources and examination of who is in need, of what, at what level, and for how long, is needed. Low-income students in ECE have gained due to the ECCE programme and it is likely that a lot of families would not have accessed pre-school before the free hours were offered. In primary and post primary schools it is difficult to estimate how low-income students would have achieved without the intervention of DEIS and it is likely that they had higher academic performances because of DEIS. However the ECCE and DEIS models have limitations in that they generally apply a one size fits all to ECE and schools, and do not take account of extra needs in some areas and more specialised needs in others. The policies have economic advantages for low-income families and they are a help in providing distributive justice, part of Fraser's framework. Further public provision of ECE is needed with increased government expenditure in order to support all pre-school children, and

especially those in low-income households. Cultural justice is not addressed in ECE or primary and post-primary schools apart from token approaches to cultural inclusivity. Low-income families are not consulted regarding any of the initiatives to increase justice, or asked to comment on how the approaches are working or involved in any decision making concerning the policies – an absence of political justice.

There needs to be a concentrated effort on providing social and cultural resources for all families which will only take place when those at the advantaged end of society take corrective action along with government resources. Focus on building communities and providing the same access to resources will lead to the term disadvantaged becoming outdated. Otherwise the current system will continue; equality of opportunity will be the focus, resulting in no change in outcome for those who need it most.

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