Educational inequality and the reproductive nature of schooling in Irish second-level education: exploring the influence of the wider political context

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Abstract

Acknowledging the reproductive function of schools, this paper explores three pivotal periods of Irish second-level education over the past century and considers how these periods were influenced by the political context at that time. The analysis shows that an insular nationalistic period that used schools as a vehicle for social and cultural reproduction was replaced from the 1960s to the present with an economically outwardly looking period that used schools as a vehicle to advance economic development while maintaining their reproductive function. Throughout this time, a meritocratic rhetoric dominated that downplayed continuing educational inequalities. The paper highlights how the political backdrop to these changes goes some way to explaining the nature of the policies and practices implemented and argues for greater attention focused on the political backdrop to education policy in general. With the fragmentation of the political homogeneity that once dominated Irish politics and in the context of a rise in populism globally, the paper raises questions about how this changing political climate is likely to influence future educational policy, particular policies focused on educational disadvantage.

Keywords: *Irish education; social class; educational inequality; class politics; party politics*

Introduction

By many measures, there remains persistent educational inequality within this Irish education system despite decades of policies and reforms (Jeffers & Lillis, 2021). There are considerable differences in application rates to higher education between middle-class and working-class schools (McCoy, Smyth, Watson & Darmody, 2014) and significant differences in terms of educational attainment by social class. To understand these persistent inequalities, this paper argues that one must situate education policy within the wider political context - acknowledging the historical use of the schooling system as a tool for political ends, to advance particular economic or social ideologies, and as a mechanism to preserve the values of specific social groups. Such an approach acknowledges the political nature of education rather than seeing the educational system as a 'neutral environment purged of ideology' (Althusser, 1971, p. 156). Therefore, understanding the nature of Irish politics can go a long way to explaining the gap between the rhetoric of tackling educational inequality and the reality of its persistency on the ground. Ireland is an interesting case to explore as looking at the Irish political context this paper will highlight how it is quite unique. In his book *Labour in Irish History*, James Connolly challenged nationalistic and religious accounts of Irish revolutionary movements and instead presented Irish history from the perspective of class struggle (Connolly, 1910). He argued that most agitation for Irish independence over the centuries were expressions of middle-class interests concerned with land ownership, but that these movements were veiled in a language of Irish nationalism and religious independence. The working-class, while often enduring the greatest suffering from such agitation, gained little. In short, Connolly contended that accounts of Irish struggles for national independence were presented as 'classless' in nature where class divisions where downplayed or ignored. It could be argued that this 'classlessness' continued within Irish politics after independence from British rule and remained throughout the 20th century. Mair (1992) argued that a type of

political homogeneity prevailed that inhibited the emergence of class politics. For that reason, Ireland is seen as somewhat unique from a political perspective in that there has been an absence of a strong voice from the political left to advance issues of inequality targeted at the most underprivileged. It has resulted in a legacy where the issue of social class is frequently absent from Irish education debate (Cahill, 2015).

Building on the idea that schools reproduce social and economic privilege, this paper explores how the prevailing political context contributes to this reproductive function of schooling. To do this, the paper has selected three pivotal periods in the history of Irish second-level education over the past century: the period following independence from British rule (1920s-1950s), the educational reforms of the 1960s and educational policies from the late 1990s. The policies in these periods will be used to show how the schooling system primarily played the role of reproducer of the existing social and economic order. In exploring these three periods, the political backdrop of each period will be subsequently used to explain the rationale for the policies and practices. Such an exploration is timely as Ireland is undergoing significant political and social changes in recent years and the extent to which these changes are likely to impact on education is worth considering. This analysis also has wider relevance given the rise in populism and the fragmentation of traditional political patterns globally. Taking as a starting point the role of schooling as a form of social reproduction, the paper firstly provides an overview of social reproduction theory before then moving on to outline the Irish education and political systems to set the work in context.

Social Reproduction Theory and schooling

Social reproduction theory is used to explain how social structures reproduce and maintain social inequalities. Using the theory as a lens to examine schools and education policies, it helps to explain how, instead of addressing inequalities, public policies and schooling systems maintain existing conditions and thus contribute to the reproduction of inequality (Collins, 2009). The theory argues that not only does education play a role in shaping people's beliefs and values (facilitating their acceptance of the status quo), relevant policies in education also reinforce the interests of the ruling class. This is frequently achieved in hidden and opaque ways resulting in a 'taken-for-granted' view of schooling practices and curriculum content. While equality and meritocracy are trumpeted within education policy, this discourse often does not reflect reality and instead cloaks deeply unequal practices. In exploring social reproduction in education, Althusser (1971) identified the school as an example of an ideological state apparatus, i.e., an institution and practice that exerts ideological influence and control over citizens contributing to their acceptance and subjection to the status quo. Studies have employed this theory to show how schools act as a mechanism to maintain social and economic inequalities (Bowles & Gintis, 1976; Da Silva, 1988). For example, assessment regimes can advantage those that can afford additional tuition when regurgitation of content is primarily assessed. From the perspective of curriculum, the illusion of subject choice can function as a mechanism to filter students to particular subject tracks within schools that ultimately determine the careers they can access. Schools therefore function in both subtle and overt ways to maintain the current social order. While social reproduction theory has been used to explain persistent educational inequalities, the theory has been criticised as being too reductionist and deterministic (See Backer & Cairns (2021) for a historical overview of social reproduction theory in education and its criticisms). Such views highlight that insufficient attention is given to the

role of individual agency and resistance (Giroux, 1983) and to the transformative potential of education (Freire, 1970; Hooks, 1994). It is also criticised for 'grand theorising' and downplaying intersecting influences such as race, gender and sexuality (Gewirtz & Gribb, 2003). Despite these criticisms, Backer and Cairns (2021) note that social reproduction theory has been an important historical step in educational thinking. It has helped to highlight structural inequalities that transcend daily classroom practices and shed light on the hidden undercurrents of power that influence schools.

A brief overview of the second-level education and parliamentary democracy in Ireland

In Ireland the majority of pupils commence primary education at 4/5 years of age and progress to second-level education at the age of 12. Normally students complete 5 years of second-level education and leave at 17/18yrs of age with a high proportion of students progressing on to either further education and training or university education (Government of Ireland, 2023). Primary schools are mainly denominational in nature reflecting the historical religious traditions but in more recent decades there has been a growth in non-denominational primary schools. At second-level education there are a number of 'types' of schools (secondary, vocational, community and comprehensive schools) largely reflecting different education policies over the past century however they all offer the Junior Cycle programme (for lower second-level education 12-15yrs) and the Leaving Certificate programme (for upper second-level 16-18yrs). The types of second-level schools mainly differ in terms of their patronage. Voluntary secondary schools owned by religious orders tend to be more 'academic' in orientation offering fewer vocational/'practical' subjects reflecting their historical origins. A high portion of these schools are single-sex schools and they tend to have students from more middle-class backgrounds. The other types of schools are state-owned and in general tend to reflect a

greater diversity of students and subject offerings. Since Irish independence in 1922, despite curricular changes, in general, the second-level education system has remained relatively unchanged. In the context of Irish educational policy, Ireland has quite centralised policy-making process with no regional variations and has tended to operate within an Anglo-American zone of influence. As a result, educational policies display many of the influences of neoliberal ideologies (Lynch, 2012) where second-level education has increasingly seen an emphasis on human capital and a greater justification of school subjects based on their economic utility (Lynch & McGarr, 2016). More recently, Irish education policy has been influenced by wider global trends and specifically EU policy. Within the area of educational inequality, while national policies aim to address it, there remains persistent inequalities within the system (Jeffers & Lillis, 2021).

From a political perspective, Ireland is a parliamentary democracy since independence in 1922. The national parliament, the Dáil, is the chief legislature and consists of 166 elected members (TDs) from 39 constituencies. The parliament elects the government and cabinet. Headed by the Taoiseach (prime minister), the cabinet of ministers have executive powers but are answerable to the parliament. Members of parliament are elected on a system of proportional representation by universal suffrage. Elections take place at least once every five years. The main political parties in the Dáil are Fine Gael, Fianna Fáil and Sinn Féin. Other smaller parties such as the Labour Party, the Green Party, the Social Democrats and a range of other smaller parties and non-party (independent TDs) make up the rest of the elected members of the lower chamber. For the majority of the past 100 years the Fianna Fáil party has been in government interspersed by occasional governments led by Fine Gael in coalition with the smaller labour party. Party politics in Ireland has tended to be unique in that it has not followed typical left-right cleavages as in other

European countries. Throughout its history the ruling parties have tended to be centrist in nature playing down class divisions (McDonnell, 2008). This political homogeneity that prevailed for most of the past 100 years however has begun to fragment and more recently coalition governments consisting of a number of parties have governed.

The education system after Irish independence - Schooling as ideological reproduction

The first period to be presented is the period following Ireland's independence in 1922. This time of independence is often presented as a period of revolution, but according to Akenson (1977), in most matters related to public policy it was more of a change in management than a revolution – Irish politicians replaced UK politicians and below the top levels of the civil service, personnel remained the same. He commented that, '*if radical revolutions are concerned with the reorientation of systems of power, then the Irish revolution was a very superficial revolution indeed*' (p. 33). This conservatism was particularly evident in education where, apart from concessions to an 'ambitious catholic middle class', the 'protestant middle class' and the 'powerful neo-Gaelic lobby' (Garvin, 2004, p. 158) there was no significant change to the system inherited from the imperial administration which at that time was largely controlled by the Catholic church. The lack of attention to the issue of the provision of education was a result of the socially conservative nature of this 'revolution' which tended to focus on gaining independence from the UK over any other issues such as social equality (Akenson, 1977). While the proclamation of the Irish republic, published less than a decade earlier, claimed it would cherish 'all the children of the nation equally' the post-independence education system maintained the class privileges of the inherited colonial system. National schools (primary schools) were free to all students, but in terms of second-level education, there were low progression rates from the primary school system to

the sector. In essence second-level schooling was elitist in nature, for the preserve of those that had the financial resources to avail of it. It was provided in private denominational institutions and required tuition fees beyond the reach of the majority of the population. While the state provided grants to these schools there were no attempts to widen participation. The establishment of vocational schools under the Vocational Education Act of 1930, while providing greater structure to vocational and technical education, created further class divisions. Their establishment created a bi-partite system where the status of the traditional secondary schools was considerably higher than their vocational counterparts (McGarr & Lynch, 2017). Clear class distinctions were also evident in enrolment where children from working-class families primarily attended vocational schools whereas voluntary secondary schools catered for middle-class children (Gray & O'Carroll, 2012). The demarcation of subjects offered to male and female students within vocational schools also reflected the socially conservative nature of the initiative and its role in maintaining existing gender roles. Hence, despite inheriting a deeply inequitable education system following independence no reformation of the system took place. Schools were therefore powerful agencies for social and cultural reproduction rather than vehicles for political and social revolution.

Understanding the political context: 1920s-1950s

The political context at the time goes a long way to explaining this conservatism and inattention to issues of educational inequality. Firstly, despite Ireland being a very unequal society at the time of independence, a critical debate in relation to the existing political and social conditions at the time did not take place (Kusche, 2017). Class politics was supressed and instead there was a focus on nationalism and catholic identity. For example, Lynch (2012) notes that at the time of the partitioning of the country in 1922 the state was consumed by nationalism. Similarly, Mair (1992) commented that the independence

movement, that incorporated almost all citizens, was imbued with nationalist and catholic identity. Within this movement he argues, solidarity, cohesion and homogeneity had been emphasised which left, '*little space in which to mobilise an internal opposition, which might have polarised privileged and under-privileged*' (p. 404). McDonnell (2008) notes that as politics progressed following independence, a clear two-party system developed, but not on traditional left-right or secular-religious divides. Instead, as Gleeson (2010) notes, these two centrist parties differed in terms of their acceptance or rejection of the Anglo-Irish Treaty (a treaty that partitioned the island north and south) and had no significant differences on social values. Political populism dominated to the detriment of the public interest and the parties presented themselves as parties of the people, downplaying class politics that was seen to be against the national interest.

A second factor contributing to the absence of debate around social issues and equality was the absence of a strong voice from the left. At the time of independence, organised labour was not powerful and the fragmented and weak socialist element of the revolutionary movement which continued post-independence meant that the voice of the marginalised was largely absent. Kusche (2017) notes that the Irish labour party, the traditional party of the left, never had the strength of similar social-democratic parties in other European countries and when in power has tended to be a junior collation partner. Thirdly, throughout the early period of independence, the inability of the left to develop a strong voice was also hampered by emigration. It acted as a safety valve that, 'channelled economic and social discontent away from domestic politics to a significant degree' (Kusche, 2017, p. 174) and maintained, 'the marginal classes below a threatening level' (O'Donoghue & Harford, 2011, p. 319). Fourthly, those running the department of education after the formation of the new state were mainly, 'loyal conservative Catholics who administered the system'

(O'Donoghue & Harford, 2011, p. 323). It is not surprising that, as Lynch (2012) contends, 'there was a socially disengaged (and social justice indifferent) nationalism at the heart of official public thinking' (p. 91).

A great deal of criticism of this period of Irish education is targeted towards a powerful catholic church hierarchy that dominated thinking on education. While this is certainly justified, it would be impossible to separate the church's conservative ideology from the political class at the time that were, in effect, two sides of the same coin. By way of an example, Garvin (2004) highlights Richard Mulcahy's (the minister for education in 1950) comments that education should essentially consist of religious instruction as advances in knowledge had led to 'endless misery and destruction'. Garvin (2004) notes, 'this attitude to knowledge may indeed be a wise one, but comes oddly from the mouth of a Minister of Education unaffiliated to the Afghan Taliban' (p. 176). These comments indicate that a separation of political and church influence would be futile as they worked hand in glove. The demonisation of left-wing politics by this powerful catholic church in post-independence Ireland contributed to it remaining weak (Lynch, 2012) and served the benefit of existing political parties that downplayed class politics for popular support. In turn, these parties support for denominational second-level schools ensured schools remained important vehicles to advance this religious teaching.
It was these contextual factors that contributed to an absence of an emergence of class politics and a critical mass to counteract the imposition of this political hegemony and populism.

In looking at this period through the lens of social reproduction theory, and the opportunity for change it represented, what is apparent is that questions of a more equal society were suppressed. The maintenance of an already unequal system was essentially maintained. This came from two different sources of

middle-class power, i.e., the church and ruling political parties. Althusser (1971) refers to such institutions as *ideological state apparatuses*, mechanisms used by ruling classes to impose particular ideologies. By controlling who benefitted from the education system and subsequently moved to positions of influence, the church ensured that a conservative mindset remained in positions of authority within the architecture of government. This, in turn, maintained the centrality of church influence. This intertwining of church and state resulted in the church being the most dominant apparatus as education was largely subservient to its influence, but as the next section will highlight, this dominance was slowly replaced by the educational system itself as the main ideological state apparatus. In short, the elitist view of second-level education that was inherited from the colonial era was not challenged due to the political conservatism at the time and hence the significant inequalities remained within society and the education system. While not an exclusive explanation for the lack of reforms, understanding the political backdrop can therefore help shed light on the changes, or in this case the lack of changes.

The investment in education report (1965) - *Schooling as economic reproduction*

The second period of focus is the mid-1960s, specifically the reforms to widen participation in second-level education. The 1960s was a time of considerable economic change in Ireland. The more insular economic thinking and 'rural fundamentalism' (Gray & O'Carroll, 2012) that dominated the early decades of the state was replaced with more outwardly looking economic policies that aimed to attract inward investment and develop industry and business in what was then a largely agricultural economy. An influential report, *The Investment in Education Report* (1965), presented a wide-ranging analysis of the Irish education system highlighting the shortcomings of the educational system and the disparities in participation amongst the population (Walsh, McCoy, Seery &

Conway, 2014). Linking investment in education with economic development, the report challenged prevailing thinking about the provision of second-level education. The subsequent period is seen as a significant turning point for second-level education (O'Connor, 2014). As a result of the report, financial barriers were removed by the government to increase access to second-level education and the capacity of the system was increased to cater for such changes. It is frequently seen and praised for being a period where educational inequalities were tackled (see: *Irish Educational Studies* special issue vol 33 (2)), but such praise mistakenly equates educational access with educational equality. As Reville (2022) notes, '… equity is not the same as equality … equality guarantees the exact same resources and opportunities to everyone while equity apportions resources and opportunities to meet the different needs that result from people's differing life circumstances' (p. 411). The ideological basis of the reforms also assumed that a more meritocratic system based on opening access would address inequities, but these assumptions did not recognise the wider social and economic context of the child. Kennedy and Power (2010) argue the state's continued use of meritocratic rhetoric not only perpetuates existing inequalities, it also, 'serves to make the existing unequal societal status quo seem 'natural'' (p. 236). Lynch and Lodge (2002) have also criticised this meritocratic ideology arguing that it hides class processes that take place in schooling where schools reproduce social inequalities. It must be noted however that this meritocratic myth is not unique to the Irish context. Reay (2006) notes a similar discourse in the UK context and argues that it plays a powerful role in maintaining the existing social hierarchy.

While this period was transformative in increasing participation in second-level education, it did not address the inequalities within the system. By way of an example, Raftery and Hout's (1993) analysis of educational transitions for the 1908 to 1956 birth cohorts concluded that, 'the 1967 reforms appear to have had no effect on equality of educational opportunity' (p. 41). They also found that

instead of improving access to education for disadvantaged students, the removal of tuition fees was a ‘windfall’ for families who could already afford to send their children to second-level schools. This contention mirrors Akenson’s (1975) analysis of the earlier scholarship scheme introduced in the early 1960s. He found that this scheme appeared to chiefly benefit the ‘upper-working-class’ families who could afford to put aside money or forego the lost earnings of the child remaining in education. The children of very low-income families appeared to have benefitted very little. Therefore, while the rhetoric of this period focused on addressing educational inequality, its result was to increase participation in second-level education rather than addressing the inequity within the system (Gray & O’Carroll, 2012).

Understanding the political context: 1960s

Turning again to the political context below the educational surface, while the educational reforms of the 1960s were seen as helping to address the lack of opportunities for poorer children to advance to second-level school and beyond (O’Connor, 2014), the primary aim of the new policy was driven by a commitment to economic expansion (O’Donoghue & Harford, 2011). The government’s programme of economic expansion was dependent on having a suitably educated workforce and it would not have been possible to attract foreign direct investment in industry and business without a sufficiently educated population. Lynch (2012) notes that the *Investment in Education* report strongly endorsed a human capital understanding of education and a shift from the personal development of the learner to the demands of the labour market – an ideology that remains evident in Irish education policy to this day. This political agenda goes a long way to explaining the rationale behind the reforms at the time. To understand how they were articulated in specific policies however, one needs to understand the political landscape and the political party makeup of the parliament. When one looks at the political parties at that time, it

is apparent why such an ‘across-the-board’ increase in access to second-level education was applied rather than utilising a more focused policy to target particular under-privileged cohorts. Raftery and Hout (1993) highlight the power of vested interests at that time and how the reforms of the period did not threaten the existing privilege enjoyed by the middle-classes;

> As a general principle, it is easier to apportion a surplus than a deficit. To try to advance merit and retract class advantages as a basis of selection in a system that remains highly selective is likely to rankle too many entrenched interests. Those who lose privileges could be expected to fight to retain them. In the case of Irish educational reform in the 1960s, little conflict ensued because interests were not threatened (Raftery & Hout, 1993, p. 60-61)

This desire to appeal to all and to not disadvantage the middle-ground can be explained by looking at the political landscape. The two dominant parties at that time, and throughout most of the 20th century, were Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael. Kusche (2017) notes that these two parties, have had similar policy platforms. Introducing a policy that would have been more targeted rather than been applied to all, would have disgruntled a great deal of the ruling party’s own voters, Fianna Fáil. It would have also played into the hands of the main opposition party, Fine Gael, who largely shared the same political ideology, particularly on economic matters. In addition, since its origins, the Fianna Fáil party positioned itself as a party of the whole nation and played down class differences;

> … Irish party politics grew out of a culture which had emphasised solidarity, cohesion, and homogeneity. This culture was then consciously sustained by Fianna Fail, which saw itself as a party that represented the interests of the Irish people as a whole, and that decried any attempt to turn sections of this people against others. (Mair, 1992, p. 409)

This helps to explain this approach, one that benefitted all pupils rather than arguably those that needed it most. It suggests that a type of populism was dictating policy. This contention is supported by McDonnell (2008) who claimed that Irish politics had a 'strong dose of populism' (p. 200). Gleeson (2010) further notes that the Irish multi-seat proportional representation system used to elect members of parliament, contributes to this populist politics by creating, 'an environment where populist politics flourish and the overriding political concern of every politician is to ensure re-election' (p. 59).

In looking at this section through the lens of social reproduction theory it could be argued that despite the considerable changes implemented, the social reproductive role of the education system remained the same. This is evident in three ways. Firstly, as has been highlighted, the changes were presented as egalitarian in origin, but this masked the economic rationale behind the reforms. Secondly, while access to second-level education was widened, this did not address the inequalities within the system. The meritocratic rhetoric did not acknowledge, or show an awareness of, the wider social and cultural capital that infers advantage in education (Bourdieu, 1986). Thirdly, from a political level, this period highlights a desire not to challenge the status quo and maintain the political homogeneity, particularly by the ruling party that introduced the reforms. This period is also characterised by a shift in the dominant *ideological state apparatus* from the church to the education system. This supports Althusser's (1971) contention that in mature capitalist societies the dominant ideological state apparatus is the education ideological apparatus which has replaced older more dominant apparatuses, particularly the church. This is not to downplay the continued influence of the church in proceeding decades, but it could be argued that this period marks a tipping point in its primacy as the dominant ideological state apparatus. In essence, education was used primarily as an apparatus to advance economic development not social equality.

The Education Act (1998) and the Schools IT2000 initiative – interpreting and enacting global trends

The third period in focus is the late 1990s. This period has been selected as the policies in focus reflect the wider global, and particularly European, influence on Irish educational policy. Notably however, such global influences were tempered and refracted by the social and political national context. While other policies and initiatives have been introduced in the intervening years, it has also been selected as it captures the Education Act that was a catalyst for several initiatives in the proceeding decade. The makeup of the parliament and government at that time was also typical of the political situation throughout this period of the mid-1990s until 2011. The two policies selected to highlight the thinking of this time are the Education Act of 1998 and the *Schools IT2000* initiative of the same year. Turning firstly to the Education Act, this Act is seen as significant as it was the first parliamentary Act that encompassed the different levels of the education system – from primary school to university level. The Act set out new requirements for the Department of Education and for schools and detailed the role and function of the various stakeholders including the inspectorate, teachers, school principals and the school. Several key principles of the Act are of relevance, they include the right to education for every citizen and a strong emphasis on inclusivity and equality of access and a respect for diversity. Also of relevance here is the right of parents to send their children to the school of their choice and greater accountability within the system for the key education stakeholders (parents, students and the state). This more rights-based discourse was influenced by wider global discourses that Ireland had lagged behind relative to other countries (MacGiolla Phádraig, 2007). While the Act gave attention to educational disadvantage, Cahill's (2015) analysis of the Act shows that there is no reference to social class. His analysis of the Act also highlights the 'othering' of those not experiencing equality of educational opportunities and points to the consequences of this

language in reifying existing stereotypes. This positioning and representation of the working-class is not unique to Ireland. Speaking about the long history of the pathologisation of the working-classes in the UK, Reay (2006) observes that, 'education for the working-classes has traditionally been about failure' (p. 294). In Cahill's analysis of the Act, he further argues that the continued absence of class from legislation and policy reproduces existing inequalities. For example, he argued that policies, such as the right of parents to send their children to the school of their choice, are used to legitimise class separation and stratification. Preserving school ethos is also used to this end. O'Connor (2014) for example contends that the stratification in enrolment patterns in Ireland evident in urban areas and the popularity of private schools has as much to do with maintaining privilege as it has to do with the preservation of school ethos. In an analysis of patterns of segregation between migrant and non-migrant pupils within the primary schools in Dublin, Ledwith (2017) found clear evidence of segregation and that Irish speaking schools (known as Gaelscoileanna) and multi-denominational schools were more segregated than the traditional Catholic schools. It suggests that middle-class families may be using the opportunity to establish new types of schools to distance themselves from an increasingly diverse population due to immigration patterns in recent decades. She concludes that, 'enshrining parental choice as the corner stone of school provision in Ireland is flawed since it, intentionally or otherwise, builds an educational infrastructure that encourages school segregation' (p. 335). Therefore, applying such principles to an existing unequal system exacerbates rather than addresses the issue.

The second policy of interest in this period is the *Schools IT2000* initiative. This was a national initiative aimed to increase the use of digital technologies in teaching and learning in schools and increase students' level of digital literacy. The initiative mirrored similar initiatives launched by other countries to advance

digital technology use and prepare citizens for the information age and the opportunities it presented. It had a strong economic rationale behind it (McGarr & Johnston, 2021) and is of importance in the context of this period as it is a further example of the education system reacting to external trends (similar to its late response to a more rights-based educational discourse) and shows a continuation of a human capital focus towards education. It is also of interest in how it framed educational disadvantage in that it acknowledged that more affluent schools would have access to greater resources and therefore aimed to ensure that schools in disadvantaged areas would, 'not fall behind schools with access to greater resources' (p. 8). The challenge of addressing educational disadvantage was therefore seen as an issue related to access to appropriate equipment at a school level which could therefore be addressed by keeping schools on a technological par with their counterparts. Such a strategy however largely ignores all other dimensions of educational disadvantage (and digital technology ownership) that would infer advantage on other students.

Understanding the political context: 1990s

Again, looking at the political backdrop to these reforms can help shed further light on its rationale and purpose. Despite slow and incremental societal change in the period, there are major similarities with the political environment of the 1960s and the late 1990s. The political party that had been in government for the vast majority of the 20th century, Fianna Fail, were again in government. While its ability to present itself as a party for all was beginning to wane and there was evidence in that decade that traditional political allegiances, that could be traced back the civil war in 1922, were beginning to weaken (Breen & Whelan, 1994; McDonnell, 2008), it remained the dominant party. Its positioning of the party across the political spectrum continued to stifle the growth of class politics as noted by Mair (1992) who wrote some years previously that;

> … the Irish state itself, still bears a strong Fianna Fail imprint, an imprint which continues to bias that culture against an acceptance of the political expression of internal social conflict. We may not all be in the same boat, but all our different boats do lie alongside one another, and hence we should all wait, together, for the shared rising tide. It is for this reason also that class politics has been inhibited (p. 407)

Seen within this context, there are echoes with the 1960s reforms in that there was 'something in it for everyone'. While educational disadvantage is expressed as a concern, as Cahill (2015) notes, it is viewed in isolation with little mention of material poverty and wider economic inequalities in society that are at the root of educational inequality. This is particularly evident in the *Schools IT2000* initiative where educational disadvantage is seen to be addressed by providing greater digital resources to schools ignoring wider inequalities. In relation to the management and organisation of schools, the rhetoric of partnership evident in the Education Act maintains power amongst the ruling classes as they are more articulate and resourceful in expressing and advancing their views than their working-class counterparts. In addition, the language of school choice within policy legitimises existing segregations and stratifications in schools. For example, the continued funding of fee-paying schools and an ideology of meritocracy camouflages deep structural inequalities that exist. Speaking about the continued provision of state-subvention of private fee-paying schools, Kennedy and Power (2010) argue that, '… politicians are acutely aware that any policies that threaten middle-class advantages, threaten electoral advantage … all the while legitimating this inequality through a discourse of meritocracy' (p. 233).

Another factor contributing to a lack of attention to social class is the culture of political clientelism (Garvin, 2004; Kusche, 2017) that is a characteristic of

Irish politics. Political clientelism has also been referred to as 'parish pump politics', 'stroke politics', 'gombeen politics' and 'gombeenism' (Kusche, 2017). It refers to gaining state benefits through politician's intervention, and in return, guaranteeing their vote. As Komito (1984) notes, the voter becomes the politician's 'clients'. Political clientelism is, according to Kusche (2017), 'at odds with common notions of universalistic democracy' (p. 176). This 'parish-pump politics' has worked against the pursuit of collective interests, including class interests, as more attention is paid to local day-to-day concerns rather than national issues (Mair, 1992), and as noted by Gleeson (2010), the multi-seat proportional representation system contributes to this clientelism. For example, if parents are struggling to avail of local school transport for the children or are struggling to gain a school place for their child, they tend to 'get it sorted' through engagement with their local politician rather than questioning the policies that were the source of the problem in the first place. This system fragments issues of educational inequality to an individual level preventing more collective responses to develop.

When this period is examined through the lens of social reproduction theory it is evident that wider international trends were incorporated into education policy, but the changes settled within the contours of the existing system. The rights enshrined under the Education Act were used as a mechanism to maintain existing schooling arrangements through the discourse of 'choice' and the framing of educational inequality as an issue related to access to suitable educational resources (in the case of the *Schools IT2000* initiative) had limited impact on deeper structural inequalities. It could be argued therefore that schools continue to operate as ideological state apparatuses in two ways. Firstly, they mask the reproductive function of schooling through the use of persuasive policy discourses around educational equality that have wide public appeal. Secondly, they frame educational inequality in narrow terms, that focus

exclusively on access to educational resources. This ensures that policies that address this narrow understanding of educational inequality are easy to implement, tangible and therefore publicly recognised. It also deflects attention from the wider socio-economic factors influencing educational inequality.

Discussion

From the onset, this paper has argued that to understand the development of education policy one needs to look below the educational surface to the political undercurrents that drive it as schools are instruments to advance politico-nationalistic ends (Akenson, 1975). When the political backdrop of education policy in Ireland is explored it has often focused on the crusades of individual reforming ministers of education and frequently overlook the political context in which they were situated. While previous work has analysed the policy making context of the Irish education system (see Gleeson, 2010), looking at this through the lens of social class and paying specific attention to the party-political context has not been presented to date. The political nature of the education system, particularly the highly centralised authority of the minister for education have been acknowledged (O'Reilly, 2012), but the party-political environment that led to these decisions has not been given sufficient attention to date. As this analysis has shown, throughout the 20th century and into the early part of the 21st century, from a political perspective, Ireland was somewhat of an outlier. Breen and Whelan (1994) observed that, 'the relationship between social class and party preference in Ireland appears weak by comparison with other Western European countries' (p. 118). Since its formation, politics has suffered from a political homogeneity led by a party in power for most of the 20th century that emphasised unity and downplayed social and economic inequalities. Other unique characteristics are the absence of a strong political

party of the left (Mair, 1992) and the culture of political clientelism (Garvin, 2004; Kusche, 2017).

All these factors have contributed to a particular construction of educational inequality, one that associates equality with access and that downplayed wider socio-economic factors. The result has been continuing educational inequality, thus supporting the contention that by many measures schools are engines of inequality that maintain existing privileges for the ruling classes (Althusser, 1971; Bowles & McGintis, 1976; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977; Bernstein, 2003). Exploring the social and economic reproduction of schools however has, according to Collins (2009), largely been abandoned since the late 1980s. This, he argues, is because it is quite ‘unpalatable’ to many as it challenges the meritocratic assumptions and egalitarian aspirations of those working in education. However, as this analysis has highlighted, looking at schools in this way can help to see policies and reforms in an alternative light and cut through the meritocratic rhetoric. Further, setting these in the political context highlights that educational inequality is constructed and maintained through actions and inactions rather than being something inevitable. It is therefore not surprising that in reflecting on the Irish and US schooling contexts, Reville (2022) noted that, ‘our democracies have not generally shown the political will to achieve genuine equality of opportunity and that it serves some people’s interests while keeping others down’ (p. 412).

As this analysis has highlighted, the downplaying of class that has been emphasised by the main political party throughout most of the past century is reflected in the major educational policies throughout the last century. Similar to Reay’s (2006) observation of the education system in the UK, there has been an ‘absent presence’ of social class in education. This has resulted in an education system that has avoided developing students’ political understanding

and awareness (Lynch, 2012) and developed policies that did not directly address class inequalities in education but instead provided reforms that were universal in nature and applied to all. The collective effect of this has been to maintain a schooling system that advantages particular cohorts of students (Harford, Hyland & Flemming, 2022; Cahill, 2020; Byrne & McCoy, 2017; Smyth, 1999). Yet this is not unique to Ireland, Hill (2018) comments that in general;

> … during most periods of history, the state acts, to a major degree, in the interests of the ruling capitalist class. Politics is about the allocation of scarce resources in society. It is about who gets what and who doesn't, who wins and who loses, who is empowered and who is disempowered, 'who gets the gravy' and who has to make it. It is also about how this system is organised, legitimated and resisted. (p. 4)

Over the years the educational language may have changed, and new policies may have been introduced, but these hide from view the maintenance of privilege. Despite new policies, little has changed in the fundamental nature of Irish second-level schools. O'Connor (2014), for example, notes that, 'in reality, the structure of Irish second-level education remains largely as it was in 1965 …'(p. 204). He further adds that;

> issues of social selection persist across the various sectors of second-level education with middle and upper-income groups generally congregating in the secondary school sector owned by religious organisations. Such differentiated enrolment patterns … exacerbate inequalities' (p. 204).

This middle-class privilege is also evidenced by the annual attention devoted to the state examinations within the national media and the national resistance to any changes to this system that could disrupt the status quo. As another state apparatus, the national media also play a role in this regard. Devitt's (2021) analysis of the media's reporting of the lower secondary-level curriculum reforms in the national media found that the reporting tended to focus on the

industrial relations issues rather than informing the public about the rationale and content of the reforms. The focus on the assessment as identified by Devitt (2021) would suggest that change was not in their interests. As Lynch (1989) contends, ‘education matters most to who those who gain from it, namely the middle-classes. They have learned the educational formula by rote, it is in their interests that it does not change …’ (p. 124). While having the appearance of being a fair examination process, participation in ‘grind schools’ or additional paid tuition, disproportionately concentrated amongst students from middle-class families (Smyth, 2009), ensures that those with the financial resources will in general fare better in state examinations. This is reflected in the university participation rates, particularly amongst high status courses and professional courses (McCoy, Smyth, Watson & Darmody, 2014). Therefore, any effort to change this system will be subject to a challenge from the group that benefits most.

Is the political context changing?

The final period under investigation in this paper was witnessing the end of the political homogeneity that characterised the Irish political landscape for most of the previous century.

The electoral implosion of the ruling Fianna Fail party in 2011 after the financial collapse (Murphy, 2011) heralded in a new political era culminating more recently in a historic coalition between the two ‘civil war’ parties, a collation that would have been considered unthinkable only a decade earlier. This coalition has been seen by some as the end of ‘civil war politics’ that defined the political cleavage in Irish politics for almost 100 years. Notably, in parallel with this development has been the rise in support for the Sinn Fein party, a party that positions itself to the left (McDonnell, 2008). This may be the beginnings of a more traditional demarcation of class politics in the Irish parliament, which may result in issues of inequality becoming more prominent

in political debate and wider society, but this is not necessarily guaranteed. The growth in the number of 'independent' (non-party) elected members of the parliament would suggest that political clientelism, as opposed to collective interests, are still dominant in Ireland. This could be seen as a result of an education system where there is little focus on political analysis and a lack of wider public scrutiny of the social processes of public life (Lynch, 2012). Further evidence of this 'political illiteracy' is evident in Bruen's (2014) comparison of political education in Ireland and Germany that found that less time was devoted to the topic in Irish schools and that the teacher-centred nature of the pedagogy employed when teaching it did not lend itself to the development of an interest in politics. In her study, Bruen concluded that this resulted in less interest in politics and less participation in political processes in Ireland than in Germany. Local populist politicians can therefore not only occupy the political vacuum that has emerged from the political fracturing of traditional voting patterns in recent years, but they can also exploit the political illiteracy of elements of the population through populist rhetoric that positions themselves as outside of the 'political elite'. As Freire (2020) noted, the greater the political immaturity of the people, the more easily they can be manipulated. In addition, to maintain support, the largest party in opposition, Sinn Fein, may feel the need to temper its left-wing language to become more palatable to a wider spectrum of voters (in a similar way in which it has done so in Northern Ireland). The rise in support for Sinn Fein has also been to the cost of elements of the Fianna Fail party but also the smaller left-wing parties. This rise in support is not only due to the economic collapse in 2008 but also because the Sinn Fein party largely absorbed the populist voters in Ireland that both emerged from the crisis and were traditionally associated with the Fianna Fáil party (Reidy & Suiter, 2018). How this dynamic plays out over time will also be important in determining whose voice is heard. Populism within the Irish context is a form of political practice or performance rather than a specific

ideology and hence the political ideology that lies behind this rhetoric is important. Cohen's (2021) analysis of the educational policy discourse in the US during the Trump presidency for example concluded that rather than the populist turn representing a shift in neo-liberal hegemony, it instead could be seen to signal a call for more pure, fundamentalist form of neo-liberalism. Therefore, there is no guarantee that class politics and issues of social inequality will become more significant elements of Irish politics despite the significant political changes occurring. A wider populist movement seeking a wide appeal is unlikely to pay significant attention to those on the margins and therefore the political status quo may remain unchanged.

A study of this nature, exploring the political backdrop to educational policies, has wider relevance beyond Ireland, particularly in a wider global context that is experiencing a change in traditional party cleavages and a rise in populist parties (Guth & Nelson, 2021; Hussain & Yunus, 2021). While populist parties (both on the left and right) may not gain sufficient voter share to govern in many countries, (although in some cases they have), their presence on the political landscape is likely to have an influence on political discourse and debate. In that context, future work should pay attention to this changing political landscape and explore the explicit and implicit ways in which this changing political landscape is shaping education discourse and policy focused on educational inequality. For example, will educational equality be central to future policies? In what ways will it be conceptualised or corrupted? What voices will dominate the discourse and what voices and perspectives will be omitted? From the perspective of addressing educational inequalities, how will traditional parties respond to louder voices from the political extremes? As Cohen (2021) contends, 'If we are, in fact, in the midst of a turning point, it will be important for scholars of education policy, or, really, for anyone concerned

about the future of public educational institutions, to understand the various forces seeking to fill the hegemonic void' (p. 23).

Up to this point the paper has highlighted the reproductive function of schools. Yet there are those that question the view of schooling as a mechanism of reproduction arguing that it is too deterministic and downplays the importance of human agency and resistance' (Giroux, 1983). It may well be that more bottom-up changes will emerge in the future, particularly if policy making becomes less centralised and more inclusive, but what groups participate in this process is important. This deterministic perspective of the reproductive function of schools also underestimates the agency of the teacher, particularly those with a commitment to social justice. As Freire (2020) argues, all education is a political act, it is not neutral. Similarly, Keer (2016) contends that, 'teachers are not and can never be neutral or benign actors within education, and education is not a natural phenomenon, but rather a process of enculturation that traditionally upholds an unequal social order' (p. 67). Therefore, teachers can challenge this process of enculturation and question the ideology of the present system. They can resist policies that maintain privilege and advantage. This, however, is dependent on teachers recognising their own privileges, a challenge in a country where an awareness of class inequality has been downplayed for decades and the teaching population are predominantly from middle-class backgrounds (Keane, Heinz & Lynch, 2020). A second point of note before concluding is that positioning schools as mechanisms that reproduced the existing social order while simultaneously arguing that policies could be implemented to enable them to address inequalities could be seen as contradictory (Sant & Brown, 2021). While acknowledging this contradiction, schools remain a central part of children's lives and so it is an imperative that more equitable policies are pursued.

Conclusion

Looking at the three periods selected in this paper, it could be argued that while policies shift and change, schools continue to operate as tools of social reproduction. Following independence there was an insular nationalistic period that used schools as a vehicle for social and cultural reproduction and where the church and school were the main ideological state apparatuses. This was replaced in the 1960s with an economically outwardly looking period that used schools as a vehicle to advance economic development and where the education system became the dominant ideological state apparatus. This period marked a shift from schools as exclusively vehicles for social and cultural reproduction to schools as vehicles for economic advancement too. Existing privileges and advantages within the system for the middle-classes were maintained despite the widening of participation. More recently the education system has become more responsive to international expectations and trends, but it remains primarily as a vehicle for economic reproduction. Throughout this time the system has managed to maintain a meritocratic rhetoric that masks continuing educational inequalities and, as the paper has shown, the political backdrop to these changes goes some way to explaining the nature of the policies and practices implemented. This paper therefore argues for greater attention focused on social class in Irish education and a greater emphasis on how the political landscape influences educational policy and the reproductive function of schools. As the political context in Ireland appears to be undergoing significant changes in recent years, the extent to which these changes influence education policy, particularly in addressing inequities within the educational system, is open to debate. In 2019 the government introduced a free school meals programme on a pilot basis for disadvantaged schools that was extended to more disadvantaged schools in the intervening years. In 2022, fees for school transport were waived and in 2023 it was announced that from September 2023 schoolbooks for all primary school pupils would be provided for free. Such changes could be seen

as a response to cost-of-living increases and in particular to address educational disadvantage, but their universal application undermines this and follows the historical pattern of ensuring everyone gains from such policies. Looking at these changes from a wider lens they could also be seen as a reaction to a more vocal opposition from the left in parliament and an attempt to remove opportunities for potential future governments to take credit for implementing similar initiatives. This raises important questions for the future. Firstly, will such changes be the extent to which the political system responds to educational disadvantage, or will more substantial change occur amidst this changing political landscape? Much deeper questions around the type of pedagogy used in schools, the curriculum, the organisation of schools, their management, ownership and organisation need to be considered for significant change to occur (Hill, 2017). Further still, the issue of educational inequality is one that extends beyond the school. As Fleming and Harford (2023) write in relation to the Irish educational system;

> *Educational disadvantage is a deep-seated and multi-faceted problem which is not amenable to easy and in-expensive solutions. … educational disadvantage continues to be viewed as a school-based issue, with a lack of recognition and response at a policy level of its fundamental, deep-seated relationship with wider economic inequalities across Irish society.* (Fleming & Harford, 2023, p. 395)

The extent to which this wider context is taken into consideration is unlikely to change as it challenges the discourse of meritocracy that is deeply embedded. This analysis also raises questions as to whether the present political system, characterised by clientelism and populist responses, inhibits collective responses to issues of societal inequality. Therefore, while the issue of

educational inequality is deep-seated and multi-faceted, so too is the political system that maintains it.

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