

“Crossing the Sahara without water”: experiencing class inequality through the Back to Education Allowance Welfare to Education programme

Martin Power

University of Limerick, Ireland

Abstract

This article critically appraises the success of the Back To Education Allowance (BTEA) in removing barriers to participation in 3rd level education for welfare recipients in Ireland. The paper is based on empirical data from focus group and in-depth qualitative interviews with 3rd level students on the BTEA. This study argues that it is beneficial to society to specifically fund access to third level education for people on welfare as it provides the State with a larger return on its initial investment than traditional welfare to work programmes. However BTEA participants perceived that the effectiveness of the scheme in providing access falls short in the face of the class inequalities that exist in 3rd level education in Ireland, which are assisted by a general acceptance of the 'new right' ideology of personal responsibility. It is argued that the specific targeting of individuals for the scheme and the provision of direct assistance in applying for 3rd level courses would maximise the schemes potential.

It is argued that welfare recipients are still seen as 'Undeserving' (MacGregor, 1999: 110). This mindset allows short-termism to prevail in relation to the progression and administration of the BTEA. This ideology allows the civil service to take personal ownership of decisions affecting the participants on the scheme. The data shows how these elites restrict the effectiveness of the BTEA, with a functionalist approach being taken to both the design and implementation of the scheme. The strong appeal of the functionalist approach is its ability to appear compassionate, helpful and promising while simultaneously posing no real risk to the status quo

(George & Wilding 1985, p.9). At all stages of their participation in the BTEA scheme the respondents have come up against obstacles. Subsequently when assessing the overall effectiveness of the BTEA in achieving its primary objective, the paper finds the scheme has not removed the barrier but simply lowered it.

Introduction.

In an earlier work (Power, 2006) I gave a brief history of the Back to Education Allowance (BTEA), whose primary objective was the removal of the barrier to participation in third level education faced by the long-term unemployed. It was shown how the changes introduced between 1998 and 2002 by the Department of Social, Community & Family Affairs increased the number of people who could qualify for and participate in the scheme. However we saw that this all changed in 2003 when certain restrictions were placed on the scheme. What this paper now seeks to evaluate is how effective the BTEA scheme has been in enabling access to third level education, and removing the barriers to participation at third level for our population of interest.

Research methodology and data analysis

The data collection for this paper was undertaken using a qualitative methodology. It investigated the perceptions of BTEA participants on the effectiveness of the BTEA in removing barriers to participation in 3rd level education for welfare recipients in Ireland. The focus of the research was to explore the experiences of the interviewees in relation to their participation on the BTEA scheme. It further enquired about the value, implementation and administration of the scheme, and sought the views of the respondents on any positive and / or negative impacts the scheme had for them, and what could be done to improve levels of participation. The focus groups and individual interviews were recorded (audio) and transcribed. These transcriptions were then coded with the aim of identifying the key themes within the data. Five key themes were identified from this process of data analysis and will be discussed in detail throughout this paper. The themes identified were:

- Education is seen as a way of improving an individual's economic and consequently social position
- The belief that it is beneficial to society to specifically fund access to third level education for people on welfare as it provides the State with a larger return on its initial investment than traditional welfare to work programmes.
- The perception that the effectiveness of the scheme in providing access falls short in the face of the class inequalities that exist in 3rd level education in Ireland, which is assisted by a general acceptance of the 'new right' ideology of personal responsibility.
- The specific targeting of individuals for the scheme and the provision of direct assistance in applying for 3rd level courses would maximise the schemes potential.
- Respondents have come up against obstacles in all stages of their participation in the scheme and they perceive that welfare recipients are seen as 'Undeserving', which allows short-termism to prevail in relation to the progression and administration of the BTEA.

Education & Social Mobility

It is accepted that addressing educational disadvantage requires intervention at pre-school level right through to third level (Power, 2006). However over 50% of the jobs created in Ireland in the very recent past require third-level qualification across all disciplines (IDA, 2006). With this increasing requirement of the labour market to have third level qualifications, it becomes apparent that access to 3rd level is becoming more important in relation to social mobility. The fact that current labour markets are very much qualifications orientated has ultimately resulted in the commodification of education (Mulderrig, 2003). The education system selects individuals for different types of occupation through exams and qualifications, thus controlling levels of social mobility (Drudy & Lynch, 1993: 26). Education plays a huge role in the status attainment process and reward structure of our society, with the higher the level of education attained the less likely the prospect of unemployment (Clancy, 2001: 17). Additionally a third level education delivers an annual earnings premium of 57% in Ireland (OECD, 2002. Cited in Department of Education and Science, 2003: 7). Consequently this gives weight to the argument put forward by the respondents that

3rd level education is the best route to take if they wished to get off welfare permanently and into sustainable employment. Conversely the lack of access to third level education is a major obstacle to getting the kind of work that would help people out of poverty (Power, 2006) and thus has a major bearing on social mobility rates for welfare recipients in particular.

Five of my respondents identified the necessity of obtaining a third level education, given their particular circumstances. For example both Frank & Sean had received back injuries and as a result could no longer source manual labour. Thus if they wished to move off welfare the only job they would be able to access would be a non-manual one, which would usually require third level qualifications. Furthermore eleven respondents made reference to the concept of lifelong learning, believing that people need to continuously update their educational qualifications in order to maintain employability for the duration of their working lives, with people having to change career direction as a result of fluctuations in the labour market. This change in career is facilitated by gaining either a qualification in a different subject area or gaining a qualification at a higher level. However it was argued that the State still have not sufficiently focused in on the fact that lifelong learning is vital for those in receipt of welfare payments in current labour markets. Brendan explained

there is the White Paper on Adult Education and that was the main focus, that adult learners, that 2nd chance learners were given the opportunity to re-skill themselves basically but while they are saying all of this in the White Paper there is no structure in place.

Additionally Peter made an interesting argument that the process of life-long learning is in fact “class based”, as it is designed to suit people already within the labour market with specific jobs, that need to upgrade their skills, and not for those who could be termed worse off. However the dominant view among the respondents was that if people go back to education they will defiantly experience social mobility and move out of poverty. Gus explained that

“If I had a 3rd level qualification 12 years ago when my fiancée died and I was left to rear our son... I would not have had to go down the route that I have done. I would have had the security of a good third level educational qualification which would have led me into a good job...It would have made a massive difference but I didn’t have that qualification so I went through the years earning €280 a week”.

Returns on the BTEA

Twelve respondents argued forcefully that the government gets a good return on the investment that it is making in welfare recipients accessing 3rd level education through the BTEA scheme. The State will first of all see this return in the form of reduced welfare payments. These new graduates will increase their chances of sourcing sustainable employment which will take them “outside the minimum wage, the survival income” (Gus) and thus off welfare on a more permanent basis. Additionally when unemployment occurs it is for a shorter period than it is for those with lesser levels of education. These views are supported by the evidence that unqualified people were six times as likely to be continuously unemployed or in low paying jobs than those who had a third level qualification. (Layte *et al.* 2003, cited in McCoy & Smyth, 2004: 87)

Furthermore the State will see a return in the form of an increased tax take from the former welfare recipients turned 3rd level graduates, which is an automatic return on its initial investment. Gus explained that along with the increased direct tax take, the state will also benefit from an increase in indirect taxes through the spending power of the individuals concerned. Respondents also made reference to the reliance of the Irish economy on Foreign Direct Investment (FDI). They made the argument that Ireland’s highly educated workforce is one of the factors that attract that FDI here and without that highly educated workforce the economy will suffer. Therefore the qualifications that these welfare recipients will obtain, add to the pool of 3rd level graduates and ensure that the country can continue to attract FDI. Consequently it was argued that the return to the state on the investment in the BTEA will be considerably higher in the long term than the return it will get from somebody on a more traditional welfare to work scheme. In fact Gus, who had participated on a ‘welfare to work’ scheme prior to the BTEA, believed he learned nothing from that course that would enable him to access good quality sustainable employment.

Finally respondents made particular reference to their belief that the investment the State was making in the BTEA would result in a benefit, which would be shared by future generations. The belief was that by being in 3rd level education, BTEA participants would develop different expectations and values in relation to education, which in turn would be passed on to their children, subsequently lessening the

chances of those children being exposed to intergenerational exclusion. These views reflect those expressed by both McCoy & Smyth (2004: 92) and the Department of Education and Science (2003: 7), that the benefits of education accrue not only to individuals but to the broader society, with increased educational investment associated with a reduction in welfare costs and crime levels, and an increase in active citizenship, and taxation, etc. Finally it also shows how respondents are aware that Ireland needs its graduate output to be in the top 25% of OECD countries to ensure national economic competitiveness. (Department of Education and Science, 2003: 14) To this end it would appear that the beliefs of the respondents give weight to Beveridge's argument that welfare expenditure on education should be regarded as a collective investment, likely to bring a good return. (Beveridge 1944, p.163 Cited in George & Wilding 1985, p.65) Consequently for all of these reasons it is argued that it makes more sense to give welfare recipients the opportunity to avail of third level education, rather than the current preoccupation with traditional welfare to work programmes.

Experiencing class inequality through the BTEA

Twelve respondents made reference to the class inequalities in third level education in Ireland, with the view being expressed that the ‘lower’ classes simply could not afford third level education. All but one of my respondents felt that they would not have been able to attend college without the financial assistance of the BTEA. As a consequence twelve respondents admitted that they had ‘played the system’ in relation to qualifying for the BTEA or in order to gain the most benefit from the scheme, usually by extending their period of unemployment. However, ten of these respondents said they were left with little or no alternative. It is my belief that the amount of respondents stating that they were left with no alternative but to manipulate the system if they were to attend college goes some way to illustrate the class inequalities that exist in 3rd level education in Ireland.

The overwhelming majority of respondents believed that the state wants to play less of a role in the welfare of individuals within the state, and increasingly the public perception now is that it is your own responsibility to educate yourself. This discourse can in turn reshape public attitudes towards social justice, where poverty, inequality and social exclusion become the responsibility of the individual and not the state

(Mulderrig, 2003). This mirrors the unequivocal aim of the ‘New Right’, to create an atmosphere of ‘incentive’ and ‘enterprise’ among individuals in order to provoke a competitive market ethos, where people would endeavour to better themselves financially and ease notions of state dependency, by placing the onus on individuals to become more responsible for their own income without relying too heavily on financial support from the State. (Burgess & Parker 1999, p.201) However one respondent explained the difficulties with this ‘New Right’ ideology in that the “government want people to get educated but they don’t want to use OUR money to educate us. They want you to use your own money to educate yourself and where are you going to get money if you are a working class person?”(Peter)

As a result of the obvious advantage that the middle classes have in accessing 3rd level education via traditional routes (See Whelan and Whelan 1984, Bourdieu, 1984, Clancy 1988, Drudy & Lynch, 1993), alternative routes in become ever more important. Ten of my respondents gained entry to 3rd level education via an access course. However while access courses are recognised for the BTEA it was interesting that some of those who entered via the access route were not in receipt of the BTEA as they were on a part time access course, which is not recognised for BTEA purposes. Additionally Denis highlighted that he needed to manipulate his address, so that he would improve his chances of obtaining a place in education and consequently the BTEA. He stated

When I applied I gave my father’s address and the one thing I was asked was where that was. I said it’s not far from the Railway station, it’s near the park. Oh! It was near the park so it was the better end. It was near the park but not where they thought. That was a subtle change; it was a tactic I used. As you kind of manipulated your address I found that the structure became a little bit more accommodating.

The fact that this individual felt the need to undertake this strategy raises serious concerns about those in the position of authority making the decision on the eligibility of the applicant. Consequently, nine respondents made reference to their belief that the BTEA scheme is actually run or administered along class lines. This stemmed from the belief that the middle classes and particularly those in a position of power in relation to the scheme are fearful that there will be too much encroachment on their

‘traditional’ areas in society, namely third level education, if those from lower classes continue to get access through the BTEA. Diane argued

they are in a position... they are the ones who make the decisions. They are the ones in the civil service jobs with good power and that is the way that they use it.

As a result the respondents believed that the restriction on the post-graduate option of the BTEA would protect this middle class privilege as even if there is encroachment into traditional middle class 3rd level territory by the lower classes, the onset of degree inflation will ensure once more that the best jobs will remain in the hands of those who can afford to obtain the highest educational qualifications. Carmel argued that this process will ensure that the amount of students from lower class backgrounds going on to gain higher educational qualifications “will be seriously slowed down and it will once again leave the best paid jobs to people whose families can fund them”. As a consequence these respondents felt that they were expected to know their place by those in these positions of power, a point well made by Diane who suggested

it appears that because we come from a social welfare background we are only entitled to so much of a job, a certain type of job, we are not entitled to go on and become a professor or whatever. ‘You will only get your degree? Sure you are on social welfare, you should be glad of that.

The respondents’ views are significant when we note that a conflict view of the state acknowledges that some groups in society, in this case the civil service; always exercise more power than others. (George & Wilding 1985, p.7) The civil service have two avenues by which to exercise this power. Firstly they have power in setting ‘the limits of policy-making’ as regards both policies which are introduced and policies which are not included in government plans. (Hall et al 1975, pp. 150-152 Cited in George & Wilding 1985, p.7) Furthermore by adapting Birnbaum’s conclusion that property owners and managers have the capacity ‘if not to impress their will on the state at least to severely limit programs undesirable to their interests, (Birnbaum 1969, p.5 Cited in George & Wilding 1985, p.8) we can see how those within the civil service can limit the effectiveness of the BTEA through their often haphazard administration & promotion of the scheme.

Thus it was quite disturbing to hear thirteen respondents make reference to difficulties in obtaining information on the BTEA. Although the local social welfare office was

the first point of contact for information, most of the respondents found them to be unhelpful in that regard. Additionally it was worrying that the respondents almost in their entirety did not receive adequate and accurate information from the Department of Social Welfare, which impacted on their ability to access the BTEA and / or get the maximum benefit from the scheme. Denis explained that his experience of the social welfare office is that

you go to an information desk and after half an hour I got to deal with this member of staff who after listening to me for 5 minutes told me that another member of staff was more familiar with it. Then when she came out, I'm not sure about that but I'll take your name and I will send you out a form, as you say accurate information, it was about 2 weeks, maybe 3 visits and a follow up letter but I couldn't find one person who could say right this is what you do, this is the process. It was always oh so and so knows more about that now than I do.

Additionally respondents offered negative views on the decision to put the information in the form of pamphlets and posters as they felt they could not give you enough accurate information. Accordingly it is very concerning that little has changed since Healy (1997: 27) highlighted that obtaining information about the scheme in the early 1990s was very difficult and a general lack of knowledge about the scheme existed in local Social Welfare Offices. With the difficulties faced in obtaining accurate information, it was interesting that six respondents claimed they obtained their information from informal networks of information, covering everything from routes of entry to 3rd level, to the existence of the BTEA and other financial entitlements. It is extremely worrying that individuals have to rely on this informal network of information, when in reality this information should be obtainable through official channels via the apparatus of the State.

Seven respondents believed that the fact the BTEA scheme is an administrative scheme, which is constantly under review, has a negative bearing on their participation at third level. The belief among these individuals was that the State can "take stuff away from you at any time if they decide that"(Adam). Additionally it was highlighted that people could be hindered in their plans to go to college, as after having applied and or been accepted, the criteria for entitlement to BTEA could change, meaning that an applicant who was eligible when they applied was no longer eligible by the time it came to enrol. Furthermore five respondents believed that the decision to no longer pay the BTEA over the summer months had put a lot of people

off trying to access the scheme. As a result all of the respondents felt that participants already on the scheme should not be detrimentally affected by any changes made subsequent to them beginning their course of study.

All of this is important when considering the formulation and implementation of policies in relation to 3rd level education and deciding if it serves the interests of all citizens in the state equally. We have seen a functionalist approach taken to education in Ireland. However a functionalist approach assumes that a certain amount of social and economic inequality is both inevitable and necessary to the proper functioning of industrial societies. (Davis & Moore, 1945; Marshall, 1971; cited in Drudy & Lynch, 1993: 31) Therefore this approach by its very nature will not serve all citizens in the same manner. Thus we have seen equality of opportunity strategies pursued, where everyone allegedly receives equal support and assistance, but thereafter inequalities are allowed to multiply as individuals make what they can of their opportunities (Baldock et al, 2003: 75).

In effect, we are also seeing a functionalist approach being taken to both the design and implementation of the BTEA scheme. The strong appeal of the functionalist approach is its ability to appear compassionate, helpful and promising while simultaneously posing no real risk to the status quo (George & Wilding 1985, p.9). Ryan argues that a liberal, progressive person faced with the dilemma of having to resolve inequalities which they believe to be wrong in principal with their own privileged position in society, resorts to the ‘blaming the victim’ formula. (Ryan 1971, p.27 Cited in George & Wilding 1985, p.9) This allows them to reject any solutions, which might bring about radical change on the pretext of it being too extreme while in fact it is because it poses a challenge to their own privileged position in society. Consequently this inevitably leads to a compromise resolution that is acceptable to their conscious and which leaves the status quo unaltered. (George & Wilding 1985, p.9) Thus it is argued by respondents that these equality of opportunity policies are essentially paying the subject matter lip service, which ensures that those in positions of power can protect their privileges while at the same time be seen to be addressing these inequalities. Frank thus argued that the BTEA would be

tinkered with to make it look like its being made available to more people when in actual fact the numbers who participate in it may increase slightly but are more likely to stay the same.

Maximising the potential of the BTEA

George & Wilding (1985, p.17) argue that governments are directly or indirectly persuaded by the lower classes to introduce social policy legislation, though the make-up of the legislation will take into account the unavoidable opposition from the capitalist class. In essence this means the impact of the policy on inequality will be diluted. It can be argued that this is what happened in relation to the expansion of the BTEA scheme. From 1999 until 2003 the numbers eligible to apply for the scheme grew exponentially but the numbers accessing the scheme remained relatively constant. Consequently it was suggested by two respondents that there is no use in the government constantly talking about extending the scheme as they are really only extending the amount of people who can apply. Instead thirteen respondents felt the Department should be actively encouraging qualifying individuals to participate in the BTEA scheme. The belief was that there should be an individual in every Social Welfare office that specifically targets people who are eligible for the BTEA and gives them the information and encouragement to access third level. The respondents argued that this targeting is essential if the State is serious about getting people off welfare via the BTEA. The conviction was that the scheme should be proactive as being on welfare has a psychologically negative effect on those who find themselves in that situation. Consequently Sean argued that

Just saying the scheme is there and it's up to them to decide whether they want to get on it or not is not going to work... There are still people who have been unemployed not for months but for years. They are never going to be able to get out of that situation unless someone actually physically intervenes and says ok this is what you should do, it will benefit you, you should do it, let's discuss what channels you can take.

However it was very disappointing to find that only one respondent believed that they were targeted for the BTEA. In contrast for all of the other respondents the BTEA was never mentioned by anyone in the Department of Social Welfare as an option that they could avail of. One respondent argued that in fact a huge amount of pressure was put on her to get back into the workforce. Ultimately she believed that as long as she was off welfare the officials in the Social Welfare office did not care what she did. This again would seem to support the argument that post-welfare reforms assume that the road to self-sufficiency begins with employment, irrespective of the earnings or

social insurance benefits attached to that job. Welfare is thus increasingly regarded as “an expensive luxury and one upon which taxpayers money can only be spent sparingly” (Jarvis 1992, p.407).

Furthermore it emerged that while two respondents had received direct assistance in relation to applying for a qualifying 3rd level course, nobody received assistance from the Department of Social Welfare. Consequently seven respondents argued that the Department of Social Welfare should be directly assisting interested parties to apply for 3rd level courses. Three respondents explained how this direct assistance would be beneficial to applicants in that it would take the fear factor / mystique away from applying to college. However four respondents expressed a contrasting viewpoint. They had doubts about whether assisting people to get 3rd level places would make the scheme any more effective. Mary believed that assisting someone to write a supporting statement letter in their application would indeed help people to obtain places in 3rd level. However she argued that this might mean the individual is seen as being articulate “but once the course starts they may not be able for the course and they have taken a place that somebody else could have benefited from”. It can be argued that these individuals would appear to have internalised the dominant ideology of personal responsibility, which in effect has allowed governments throughout the globe to roll back on the welfare state.

The undeserving welfare recipient and a short-term approach to the BTEA

The respondents experiences of the administration of the BTEA, suggest that they are perceived as ‘Undeserving’ (MacGregor, 1999: 110), particularly given the success of our Celtic Tiger economy. Frank captured the prevailing belief when he stated

The approach of the cabinet, the Dáil, the majority of the TD’s in the Dáil, the civil service, the Department of Education, the people that you meet in the welfare office that you have to deal with, is condescending. They feel that you are not suitable and that you somehow are not worthy of their efforts. That’s what they feel because that’s why they make it difficult for people.

This mindset allows short-termism to prevail in relation to the progression and administration of the BTEA, while allowing the civil service to take personal ownership of decisions affecting the participants on the scheme. The data shows how

these elites restrict the effectiveness of the BTEA, with a functionalist approach being taken to both the design and implementation of the scheme.

Five respondents expressed the view that only some politicians are committed to the idea of education being a tool to enable welfare recipients to gain social mobility. Additionally it was argued that even those politicians who are behind schemes like the BTEA are often simply individual voices. Adam captured this idea perfectly when speaking of one of the most vocal defenders of the BTEA in the Dáil, Michael Ring. He stated, “his own party won’t even take any notice of him because his seat isn’t secure. So if his own party aren’t going to take any notice of him the government aren’t going to either”.

Consequently four respondents believed that if the state has to make cutbacks, the BTEA was an area where it can make them with a minimal amount of fuss. This is because those that the decisions will affect are in the main a voiceless population, ensuring there is less chance of a challenge to the States’ decision. Adam highlighted this when he stated “They cut back on the things that they thought that they could get away with like the BTEA. They didn’t cut back on the tax relief for stud farms or anything like that”.

Additionally the prevalence of discretionary decision making over standardised procedures was experienced by the majority of respondents as resulting too frequently in decisions which did not optimally benefit and in some cases actively disadvantaged, those eligible for and receiving the BTEA. One respondent for example had lost out on her cost of education allowance for two and a half years because she was kept on a lone parents payment and not transferred to the BTEA, despite being a full time student. This cost the individual €1000 that she was entitled to. The dominant belief was that social welfare officers feel as if they are “the gatekeepers of the purse in the social welfare department and they are trying not to let it go... They feel that it is coming out of their own pockets” (Maxine). Furthermore five respondents had been given incorrect information concerning the scheme from social welfare officers. This predominantly involved giving out information booklets, which were out of date. However one respondent was informed by an officer that he must sign off for one day in order to be entitled to the BTEA. This would have meant the respondent would break their period of unemployment and no longer qualify for

the BTEA. He explained “I said to her well I know what the regulations are, she kept telling me ‘you do not’. I am the officer in charge I know what they are, you haven’t a clue” (Sean). Luckily for the respondent, he refused to comply and was successful in obtaining the BTEA. Finally a majority of respondents felt those working for the Department of Social & Family Affairs, largely ignored them when they looked for assistance. Claire explained that civil servants would “hang up, they wouldn’t help you, they were rude, and they seemed to think... I am god here, when we fell like paying you we will”. This created a huge sense of frustration among the respondents with Maxine stating “the civil servants of this country... some them should just be taken out and shot”

Consequently respondents made particular reference to their belief that a social welfare system should be about helping people. However the dominant view held by these respondents was that the imposition of the barriers just alluded to have implications for those thinking of accessing the scheme also, which in turn has implications for social mobility. Denis explained that

perception is everything. If you perceive that something is going to be a struggle and you come up against barriers... you will probably get your degree but on the road to getting that degree there is so many things put in your way that you probably got the degree in spite of them.

The respondents argued that they are doing what the State wants, which is for them to get off welfare. However they feel in spite of this, the social welfare system constantly places obstacles in their way. Frank noted that dealing with the Department of Social Welfare is like

trying to get through the Sahara without any water, it’s just tormenting. That’s all I can say about it, it is just tormenting.

Consequently Diane explained that the State is “very short sighted worrying about people grabbing and sponging when really it is exactly the opposite. We are going to get off the social welfare books, so really it’s a short term pain for long term gain”. To this end it was argued that the State needs to look at the BTEA scheme more as a long-term business investment as opposed to how much it is going to cost in the short term. However the vast majority of respondents felt that the State was actively interfering with the investment it was making in the BTEA participants. The

predominant belief was that in any industry or business they would never tamper with their own investment in a way that would negatively impact on the return on that investment. However the respondents believed that is in fact what our State appears to be doing through the various interferences that civil servants in the Department of Social Welfare inflict on the participants in the BTEA scheme.

Therefore it is apparent from the experiences of the respondents that Friedman's assumptions about the provision of public services are correct. He argued that it gives immense power to the bureaucrats and professionals who make judgments about need and it instils a sense of being god on those distributing services and a feeling of utter dependence on those receiving the services. (Friedman & Friedman 1980, p. 249)

Conclusions.

This paper finds that education has enormous potential to address inequality and disadvantage. However, the evidence presented here in relation to participation at third level suggests that this potential is not being maximised. It is argued that it is beneficial to society as a whole to specifically fund access to 3rd level education as it is more likely to result in sustainable employment, and presents the state with a greater return on its initial investment. In spite of this, the administration of the BTEA is experienced by participants as hampering the effectiveness of the scheme in achieving its primary objective. Adam summed up the perceptions of the participants interviewed when he said that the BTEA as it is currently administered has "opened the gate one inch and there are 10 people behind that gate making sure it doesn't open any further. Keeping it jammed tight". The paper finds that although the scheme itself offers opportunities for the acquisition of key forms of marketable cultural capital (including but not restricted to educational credentials), the administration of the scheme is experienced as hindering this self-same process. Thus while some inroads have been made into the privileged territory of the middle classes, i.e. 3rd level education, these inroads via the BTEA scheme have been few, restricted in scope and substantially modified in practice. In effect the elites are ensuring that the encroachment into their sphere of influence is controlled rigidly and while they may lose several battles they have so far always succeeded in winning the war. (George & Wilding 1985, p.8)

Bibliography

Baldock, J., Manning, N., & Vickerstaff, S. (Eds.), (2003) *Social Policy*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Bourdieu, P. (1984) *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, London: Routledge.

Burgess, R. & Parker, A. (1999) 'Education' in Taylor, S., ed., *Sociology: Issues and Debates*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 180-207.

Clancy, P. (2001) *College Entry in Focus: A Fourth National Survey of Access to Higher Education*, Dublin: Higher Education Authority.

Clancy, P. (1988) *Who Goes to College?*, Dublin: Higher Education Authority.

Department of Education and Science, (2003) *Supporting Equity in Higher Education: A Report to the Minister for Education and Science*, Dublin: Department of Education and Science.

Drudy, S., & Lynch, K. (1993) *Schools and Society in Ireland*, Dublin: Gill & Macmillan.

Friedman, M. & Friedman, R. (1980) *Free to Choose*, Penguin: Harmondsworth.

George, V. & Wilding, P. (1985) *Ideology and Social Welfare*, London: Routledge.

Healy, M. (1997) *Report on Department of Social, Community & Family Affairs Third Level Allowance Scheme*, Dublin: AONTAS National Association of Adult Education.

Higher Education Authority. (2004) *Achieving Equity of Access to Higher Education in Ireland: Action Plan 2005-2007*, Dublin: Higher Education Authority.

IDA Ireland. (2006) *IDA Ireland Year End Statement - Thriving economy set to continue in 2006*. [online], Available:

http://www.idaireland.com/home/news.aspx?id=9&content_id=515 {accessed 14 Mar 2007}

Jarvis, P. (ed), (1992) *Perspectives on Adult Education and Training in Europe*, Leicester: NIACE.

Layte, R., Russell, H., O'Connell, P., Maitre, B., & Whelan, C. (2003) *The Dynamics of Household Joblessness in a Booming Economy*, Dublin: The Economic and Social Research Institute Seminar Paper.

Lynch, K. (1999) *Equality in education*, Dublin: Gill & Macmillan.

McCashin, A. (2004) *Social Security in Ireland*, Dublin: Gill and Macmillan.

McCoy, S. & Smyth, E. (2004) *Educational Expenditure: Implications for Equality. Budget Perspectives 2004*, Dublin: ESRI. [Online], Available: http://www.esri.ie/pdf/Budget04chp_McCoy_Eduational%20expenditure.pdf. [Accessed 28 June 2005]

MacGregor, S. (1999) 'Welfare, Neo-liberalism and New Paternalism: Three Ways for Social Policy in Late Capitalist Societies', *Capital and Class* 67, 91–118.

Mulderrig, J. (2003) 'Consuming Education: a critical discourse analysis of social actors in New Labour's education policy', *Journal for Critical Education Policy Studies*, [Online], 1(1), Available: <http://www.jceps.com/index.php?pageID=article&articleID=2> [Accessed 11 Apr 2007]

OECD. (2002) *Education at a Glance: OECD Indicators 2002*, Paris: Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development.

Power, M. J. (2006) 'Why Not Education? The Necessity for Welfare to Education Programmes to Alleviate the Social Exclusion of Welfare Recipients in Ireland', *Journal for Critical Education Policy Studies*, [Online], 4(2), Available: <http://www.jceps.com/?pageID=article&articleID=79> [Accessed 23 Sept 2007]

“Crossing the Sahara without water”

Whelan, C., & Whelan, B. (1984) *Social Mobility in the Republic of Ireland: a Comparative Perspective* (ESRI paper no. 116), Dublin: ESRI.

Author's Details

Martin J. Power, Department of Sociology, Room C1056, University of Limerick,
Ireland

Correspondence

martin.j.power@ul.ie