

“The Smokescreen of meritocracy”: Elite Education in Ireland and the reproduction of class privilege.

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Introduction:

Despite generally being neglected in sociological research, the study of elite¹ schooling provides valuable insights into how educational exclusion operates. The predominance of the privately educated in key leadership positions highlights the extent to which such exclusive schools act as conduits of privilege, where they not alone determine a student's academic learning, but also (and more importantly) "shape students lifestyles and life chances" (Persell & Cookson 1986, p.16). Students of elite schools are first rewarded in the education system and later with high status occupations, where their social gifts are interpreted as natural ability and interest (Bourdieu, 1988). In this regard it is clear that privileged groups "utilize the education system in such a way as to ensure optimum benefit for their children", and in the process they continually reproduce the existing class stratification system (Lynch & Lodge 2002, p.40). This paper seeks to challenge the legitimacy of the meritocratic discourse, which serves to 'justify' such educational inequality (see Hill 2003). The paper will demonstrate how the combination of a strong meritocratic ideology and the provision of elite education is critical to the upper class project of exclusionary social closure. We will argue that educational attainment must be viewed as more than personal achievement, because elite schools "both inculcate and certify economically valued cultured capital" and it is apparent "that processes of credential cronyism are at work" (Kingston & Stanley Lewis 1990, p.xxviii) in the education system as it presently stands.

Research methodology and data analysis:

This article presents a synthesis of the existing body of literature with empirical data from a small scale qualitative study, which sought to gain a greater understanding of the role that elite private schools play in the social reproduction of elite groups in Irish society. Most qualitative research is guided by purposive sampling (Lindlof 1995) with the sample chosen to provide conceptual richness. In this respect, it was essential to select participants from whom it was most likely that information relevant to the purpose of the research could be obtained, as the research participants influence the

¹ The term 'elite school' in this paper refers to a small set of Ireland's most exclusive fee-paying secondary schools.

quality of the data collected and the inferences that can be made from that data (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994).

The sample consisted of eight individuals. Four individuals were past pupils from private fee-paying schools that now hold key leadership positions in Ireland. The first of these individuals is a prominent left-wing T.D.², the second is a member of the Irish Senate³ who is also prominent in the legal profession, the third is a Junior Minister in the present Irish government, and the fourth of these respondents is a successful businessman with business interests on several continents, who sits on numerous national and international boards. Additionally our sample contained four principals or vice-principals of secondary schools in Ireland. Two of these worked in exclusive fee-paying schools in the Leinster area (an all-boys boarding school and an all-girls day school), while the other two worked in non-fee paying schools located in the Munster area (an all-girls convent and a mixed vocational school). This provided a sample closely related to the purpose of the study, with people having experiences within the socio-cultural environment being examined. We believe that selecting the participants in this manner makes our contribution to theory more robust and trustworthy and extends the generalisability of this research (Hillebrand et al. 2001, p.654).

We examined all of the respondent's opinions on whether being privately educated has implications for educational and occupational outcomes and further inquired as to whether a meritocratic ideology impacted on the participants' attitudes to educational success or failure. The individual interviews were recorded (audio) and transcribed. Grounded theory was chosen as the method of data analysis. This method uses a systematic set of procedures to develop inductively derived theory which is grounded in data (Strauss and Corbin 1990, p. 24). The emphasis is on allowing themes emerge from the data (Glaser and Strauss, 1967), which when successfully accomplished results in conclusions that are not "an extension of the analyst and his or her personal biases" (Bryman 2004, p.182). Using the comparative approach, in which we compared the qualitative data and emergent concepts to other studies, has allowed us

² A member of the Irish Parliament – The equivalent of a British MP.

³ The upper house of Parliament in Ireland.

to make stronger claims about our analysis and “directly tackles the question of generalizability by demonstrating the similarities and differences across a number of settings” (Perekyla 2004, p.296 cited in Silverman 2005, p.129). As a consequence of this process of data analysis, four key themes were identified and will be discussed throughout this paper. The themes identified were:

- Education as the engine of meritocracy
- Private education: Reproducing class privilege
- The impact of economic and cultural capital
- Status groups & social capital

Education as the engine of meritocracy

In a meritocracy the individual alone determines success and failure (Drudy & Lynch 1993; Considine & Dukelow 2009). In essence, it is “a society where ability and effort count for more than privilege and inherited status” (Hurn 1993, p.45). According to this ideology, limitless opportunities exist for all individuals to go as far as their own merit takes them (see Considine & Dukelow 2009, pp 287–299). The determinants of success in this system are generally held to be a combination of factors including innate talent, hard work, and having the right attitude and moral virtue (McNamee & Miller, 2004). Proponents of this system argue that a meritocratic society is a more just and productive society, where distinctions based on criteria such as class, race and gender will diminish in time (McNamee & Miller, 2004). Thatcher’s statement that there is no such thing as society, only individuals who have a responsibility to provide for themselves (1987), for example “perfectly encapsulated an ideological drive that reduced everything to individualized relationships between providers and consumers, and understood inequality variously as a sign of personal / community deficit or part of the necessary spur to achievement in a meritocracy” (Gilborn and Youdell 2000, p.39).

Globally, but especially in developed countries, we have seen neo-liberalism continuously working to mould the education sector to the needs of global capitalism (see Mulderrig 2003; Hirtt 2004). These reforms, as Collins (1979) has noted, have resulted in a trend towards a more technical education system, which gives students the necessary skills for employment. As a result, education determines occupational success, particularly in countries where the global economy has resulted in an

increasing concentration of highly skilled positions (Collins 1979, p.7). Marxist education theorists hold that it is inevitable that such market-oriented education systems reflect the features of capitalist inequality (Greaves et al. 2007; McNeill 2000, p.3; Dale 1989). It is clear that this in turn has created a legitimacy problem for governments who are advancing such policies. Consequently, governments have sought to legitimise these neo-liberal ideals and increasing social and economic inequality by transferring responsibility to the individual (see Hursh and Martina 2003; Hill 2002) and the promotion of a ‘meritocratic’ society. This meritocratic ideology is very attractive to the dominant classes, as it not only justifies their privileged position in society, on the basis of their natural “giftedness” (Bourdieu, 1977), but it also helps to gain acceptance for this system from the underprivileged classes. By restricting access to the valued elite cultural capital and by cultivating the belief in its superior competence, the advantages elites enjoy are accepted and justified (Bourdieu, 1977). Consequently, ascribing success or failure solely to an individual’s ability, effectively absolves the state and wider society of any responsibility for inequality in the education system (see Considine & Dukelow 2009, pp 287–299). Hence, we would argue that rather than reflecting a fair and equitable system, the state’s use of this meritocratic rhetoric actually helps to further perpetuate existing inequalities in the education system, and essentially serves to make the existing unequal societal status quo seem ‘natural’ (Hill 2003).

The widespread support that such meritocratic ideology enjoys in Ireland was clearly evidenced in our qualitative data with all participants demonstrating meritocratic attitudes. Contributions from the majority of participants portrayed Ireland as a society, where success or failure ultimately boils down to individual ability and determination. David⁴ articulated this viewpoint succinctly. When asked what he attributed his own success and strong leadership qualities to, he credited it completely to his “own DNA”. Dismissing the influence of attending an elite school, or his family background, David argued that people that are “naturally driven” will “be the one that comes to the fore, [as] you either have it or you don’t.”

⁴ David is a very successful businessman with business interests on several continents. He sits on numerous national and international boards of management. He was privately educated at an elite boys boarding school.

As the ‘engine’ of meritocracy, education is held to be the principal means by which greater social equality can be achieved (Tovey and Share 2003). According to this ideology, education’s role is to identify the most talented and motivated individuals, and subsequently to provide these individuals with the appropriate educational training in “direct proportion to their individual merit” (McNamee & Miller 2004, p.95). In these meritocratic neo-liberal education systems, social actors are required to make educational choices (such as where they send their children to school) in competitive education markets “on the basis of evaluations of their costs and benefits” (Breen and Goldthorpe 1997, p.275 cited in Kivirauma et al. 2003). We would argue that this ideology of ‘educational choice’ serves those that can afford the desirable ‘choices’, but not all social actors can actually exercise ‘choice’ in this ‘free market’ of education. Working class parents have fewer financial resources to invest in the education of their children, and less ‘valued’ cultural and social capital to transmit to them (Reimers 2000, p.55) relative to advantaged groups.

It has been suggested that Ireland successfully resisted the neo-liberal educational reform movement. Yet we argue that even before Neo-liberal reforms came to prominence internationally, Ireland had a system characterised by local management of schools and a fully functioning education ‘market’ (Tormey 2007, p.185). Dunne (2002, p.86) describes the Irish education system as being underpinned by business values whereby students and their parents are defined as consumers, for example, parents in Ireland have always been free to seek places for their children in whatever school they wish (O’ Sullivan 2005, p.168). In essence, we argue that Ireland did not need to participate in the Neo-liberal educational reforms that took place elsewhere because we already had such a system in place (Tormey 2007, pp.183-186).

Our qualitative data would suggest that there is strong support for the meritocratic perspective, with all participants expressing a meritocratic understanding of the role of education in Ireland. For Daniel⁵ “there is no doubt that education is a factor in social mobility and in achieving status both in your profession and in your position in society”. Gerry⁶ believed that

⁵ Daniel is the vice-principal of an elite boy’s boarding school.

⁶ Gerry is the vice principal of a non-fee paying inner city girls school.

“without education,...your chances of getting out of a certain area or a certain strata is going to be more difficult... you are not going to get the jobs, you are not going to be qualified, so you are inclined to fall into a rut”

It is most interesting that the three participants expressing the strongest individualistic explanations were all teachers. While Alan⁷ acknowledged the obstacles some people encounter, he reiterates the meritocratic view that in life success is essentially down to the individual.

“I am a firm believer that with hard work, anything can be achieved across the board. Will it be harder? There might be more hurdles, but the more you get knocked back, the stronger you become.”

While it is true that the Irish education system has a core curriculum common to all school types; the availability of specific subjects for example, is often determined by the size, gender, and class composition of the school (Lynch 1988, p.154). Additionally, we argue that in contemporary Irish society, to consume education one must have both the skills and more importantly the resources to do so (Lynch 1988, p.162; Lynch 1999; Murphy 2008; Smyth 2008), as Irish parents are increasingly expected to subsidise their children’s education. When parents are not in a position to do so, their children invariably suffer (Lynch 2007; Smyth and Hannan 2007, p.183). Therefore we argue that the simple provision of an equal opportunity to access education cannot guarantee equality of outcomes for all (see Lynch 1988). In this context, while the Irish state often uses a meritocratic discourse when discussing education, the targets set in relation to addressing educational inequality have almost always been politically conservative. Furthermore, the Irish state’s responses tend to be targeted rather than systemic. Such an approach, which focuses on those who are said to have ‘failed’ within the system, denies us the opportunity to focus on the system itself (Tormey 2007, p.191), which we would argue is where the real problems lie.

It is noteworthy in this context that Michael Young, who coined the word ‘meritocracy’,

⁷ Alan is the vice-principal of a state vocational school.

speaks of it in a profoundly negative light. Ability, which was once randomly distributed between the classes, has become increasingly “concentrated by the engine of education”, which in turn has “put its seal of approval on a minority that “has the means at hand, and largely under its control”, to reproduce itself from one generation to the next (Young 2001). If such individuals / groups believe, as they are encouraged to, that their success results entirely from their own ability, they will feel they fully deserve the fruits of their labour, while those who fail in such a system may well internalise that they are the cause of their own misfortune (Young 2001). Under such a system we believe that we will continue to see those who enter the education system from socially, economically, and culturally marginalized positions benefiting least from an unequal and unfair education system, which continues to reward certain sections of the population disproportionately (Chubb and Moe 1990; Lauder and Hughes 1999, pp.24-25; Whitty, Power and Halpin 1998, cited in Kivirauma et al. 2003; Ball 2003, cited in Hill 2003; Machin and Vignoles 2006, p.14).

Private education: Reproducing class privilege.

Top places in Ireland’s school league tables are consistently dominated by some of the countries most exclusive fee-paying schools (Timesonline, 2009). These tables rank schools on the basis of progression rates to third level education. Ireland’s elite schools thus have very strong connections to the top of the social hierarchy. Their alumni contain a disproportionate number of individuals in key leadership positions in politics, business, and the legal professions⁸ (Clancy 1995; Rice, 2006; Flynn, 2008a; CRO, 2009; Cairnduff, 1999), which documents the enormous power and influence that the graduates of such schools enjoy (Sunday Tribune, 2003). The ‘smaller class sizes, extracurricular ‘innovation’ and the “holistic approach to education” offered by these exclusive schools, is said to be responsible for their continued success (Butler, 2009). This explanation is congruent with a functionalist perspective (See Drudy & Lynch 1993), which in essence, proposes that the success of such schools should be seen as

⁸ With six of the eight Irish Supreme Court judges and a disproportionate number of politicians and business leaders having spent their formative years in these schools, it is clear that investing in elite education pays rich dividends. For example, the exclusive Belvedere College has educated writers such as James Joyce and business leaders like Tony O’ Really. Clongowes Wood College in Naas has educated business leaders Michael O’Leary and Michael Smurfit and former Irish prime-minister John Bruton, while Dublin’s Alexandra College lists it’s most noteworthy past pupils as politician Ivana Bacik and Supreme Court Judge Mrs. Susan Denham.

being the product of a meritocratic society.

In the United Kingdom and elsewhere⁹ a similar process has occurred and recent research has highlighted the extent to which high status occupations are dominated by the privately educated (Panel on fair access to the professions, 2009). Despite, a mere 7% of the UK population attending private schools, this elite group provides 75% of judges, 70% of finance directors, almost 70% of barristers in the top chambers, and one in three MP's (Panel on fair access to the professions, 2009). Such evidence strongly suggests that for elite groups, investment in elite education is "highly rational" (Kingston & Stanley Lewis 1990, p.xiv).

This domination of the high status occupations and professions by the middle and upper middle class can be said to reflect a strategy of social closure (Flynn, 2009). With the necessary educational resources and cultural capital required for such professions safeguarded by elites, these professions are effectively shut off to others (Flynn 2009; Bilton et al. 2002; Collins, 1979). The numbers allowed entry into these professional locations are limited, which subsequently makes such positions more valuable and of a higher status, thereby justifying the higher earnings and social prestige enjoyed in these professions. A further feature of increasing credentialism that has been criticised is the protection it offers to those in the higher ranks from sanctions that non-professional classes may face. This has resulted in some poorly performing professionals being protected by safety nets that prevent "even the dimmest privileged children from slipping downwards" (Toynbee, 2009). Much of what is taught in schools bears no relation to skills or knowledge required in the workplace, and this has led to the charge that the education system serves primarily as a "screening device, effectively operating as a gatekeeper to these positions" (Young 1990, p.207). Moreover, as credentials such as the leaving certificate¹⁰, diplomas and degrees become increasingly devalued, attending the more prestigious school or university becomes of greater importance (Collins, 1979; Bourdieu, 1984; O' Connell et al, 2006). In essence, this process can result in students who attended elite schools being able to 'credentialise'

⁹ Research from the US and France would also suggest that recruitment to elite positions is restricted to a minority of elite schools (Domhoff 1967; Tomlinson 2005; Bourdieu 1998; Bourdieu & Passeron 1990).

¹⁰The Leaving Certificate is the final examinations in the Irish secondary school system.

themselves as intellectually superior by virtue of having graduated from schools recognized as producing the ‘best and the brightest’. These elite credentials act as a ‘cultural marker’, allowing its possessor to be identified as the ‘right sort’ (Kingston & Stanley Lewis 1990, p.xiii). Consequently, we would argue that while the time spent in education is generally considered the best single predictor of occupational status and income, with elite groups, where one is educated is possibly of greater significance.

All of our participants acknowledged the links between elite schools and individuals in high status positions in Irish society. However, they largely dismissed any suggestion that this had anything to do with the reproduction of privilege. Maeve¹¹ for example argued that it was too pessimistic to presume that elite leadership is restricted to the privately educated. Daniel acknowledged that his school had educated quite a number of individuals in very influential positions in Irish society.

“Traditionally we have provided a lot of people to the legal profession, a number of our past pupils, are Supreme Court Judges, High Court Judges and a lot of eminent barristers, and solicitors all over the whole country”

Yet, he wondered whether this strong association with private schools and very prominent individuals in Irish society, was simply the result of those schools being better known. Gerry also acknowledged that a private education gives one advantages, however he offered a strong meritocratic understanding when he states

“If you are the type of person that can get out there and get involved, I don’t think it will stop you... definitely the people in the fee-paying schools have an awful lot of advantages, but I don’t put it down to their education system as such ...I just don’t think that being from a deprived area would stop you, if you do have the family support and you do have the *motivation you can go all the way*”.

Likewise, Daniel displays a strong meritocratic ideology in relation to this matter when he states that he believes that much of the success his students enjoy must be attributed to “a very strong work ethic....the boys are busy and they are worked hard”. It was very interesting to find that even Maeve (who had attended an elite secondary

¹¹ Maeve is prominent in the legal profession and is also involved at a senior level in Irish politics. She was privately educated at an exclusive fee-paying girls school.

school on a scholarship, but did not find the experience a very positive one), demonstrated a meritocratic understanding of the Irish education system. She described the ‘huge culture shock’ attending an elite private school. She recounted how she “experienced bullying and....experienced feeling sort of, isolated and lonely”. Yet in spite of these experiences, she described these experiences as “character building” and expressed the view that elite education is still a rational choice if families “want to give their children the best.” David concurred with this assessment, arguing that people choose to pay for education as “it is the ticket to the future.”

Shane¹² argued that the disproportionate success of elite schools is due to “good people coming into the system in the first place, the cream of the cream, the *crème de la crème*”. In fact he strongly believes that the biggest advantage he got was not from having attended an elite school, but rather it was the product of “coming from a middle class family... and [having] a very ambitious mother”. Likewise, Daniel reasoned that while the school environment “can give certain things... I hugely believe in pedigree, and what goes on in the home!” In total, six of the eight participants expressed views that would suggest that much of the success of elite schools students is largely attributable to some innate superior qualities which are inherited from one’s family or from influences within the family homes, and conversely the failure of marginalized students to advance in society is due to family deficiencies. In essence they argue that it is the result of a meritocratic education system. We believe such understanding to be hugely problematic.

The impact of economic & cultural capital

We would argue that the possession of economic capital plays a key role in the reproduction of privilege; allowing dominant groups to mobilize their financial resources to buy the best education for their children (see McMullin 2004, pp 18-23). With fees ranging up to €25,000 a year, it is clear that elite private education largely remains the preserve of the middle and upper middle classes in Irish society (Walshe & Hickey, 2008). Such fees raise an annual income of €119 million, a bottom line figure which does not include the many other contributions that are sought by these schools

¹² Shane is a prominent politician, who was privately educated in an elite boys school.

to maintain their high standards (Walshe & Hickey, 2008). Despite benefiting from this very healthy income stream, the 58 elite fee-paying schools in Ireland also receive a very generous subsidy of €101 million of taxpayers' money each year (Special group on public service numbers and expenditure programmes, 2009). In essence, this results in a grossly inequitable situation whereby Irish parents “who collect Tesco tokens to get the odd computer for their children's classrooms generously donate, through their taxes, to schools with private swimming pools” (Allen 2009, p.179).

Furthermore, while most schools have been affected by a range of dramatic cuts in state funding (see Flynn 2008b for an overview), cuts to state subvention of fee-paying schools has been largely ignored. In what amounted to a pre-budget submission document, the report of the special group on public service numbers and expenditure programmes (McCarthy et al. 2009, p. 62-63) recommended a 25% reduction in such funding, while acknowledging the great inequity in the state funding of fee-paying schools. It is noteworthy that this group's recommendation acknowledged that the proposed cut would not result in any significant change for the bigger private schools, effectively leaving the existing status quo unaltered. It is even more significant that in Budget 2009, the Irish State decided to leave the amount of state funding to elite fee paying schools unaltered, while simultaneously reducing the payment rates of student grants, reducing and removing certain VTOS¹³ allowances, and reducing the funding of the Strategic Innovation fund¹⁴. We would argue that the reticence on the government's part to remove funding to fee-paying schools reveals the extent to which politicians are acutely aware that any policies that threaten middle class advantages, threaten electoral advantage (O'Brien 2008) and essentially results in the Irish state “giving the children of richer people a head start” (Allen 2008, p.179) all the while legitimating this inequality through a discourse of meritocracy.

Our findings would strongly suggest that the greater economic resources which are available to elite schools have a considerable bearing on the success of students in their subsequent careers. The high fees and substantial contribution from the State,

¹³ VTOS is the Vocational Training Opportunities Scheme which offers unemployed people an opportunity of returning to adult education. See <http://www.vtos.ie/main/index.php> for further details.

¹⁴ See <http://www.heai.ie/en/sif> for further details of this initiative.

together with additional generous contributions from their student's families and the religious orders running the schools, have allowed these elite schools to tailor all aspects of schooling to impact significantly on their students' educational outcomes. For all students, access to educational resources, such as books and computers, smaller class sizes and private tuition on a one to one basis, are positively related to student's educational outcomes (Lynch 1989; Lynch & Lodge 2002; Smyth, 2008; Smyth & Hannon, 2007). However the resources that elite schools enjoy, allows for the development of the "whole personality" and encourage confidence and "leadership skills" (Allen 2008, p.17).

According to Bowles and Gintis (1976) influential "correspondence" theory, schools operate in the "long shadow of work", where their primary function is to serve the needs of capitalism, and where success is not determined by one's ability, but rather by one's position in the class structure. A 'hidden curriculum' is said to operate in the education system, the aim of which is to socialize young people into accepting the role assigned to them by the capitalist class (see Drudy & Lynch 1993, pp.167 – 188). In such a system, schools provide different classes and social groups with the knowledge and skills they needed to occupy their respective places in a labour force stratified by class, race, and gender (Bowles & Gintis, 1976). In essence, schooling is tailored to the social background of the student body. In schools that cater for working class families, the hidden curriculum teaches compliance, punctuality, and discipline, skills that are required by employees in the workforce. In contrast, elite schools focus on "articulateness, authoritativeness, and ability to work effectively in groups", all forms of valued cultural capital, and skills necessary in leadership roles (Young 1990, p.207).

While the majority of our participants rejected this view as "too pessimistic"¹⁵, our qualitative research findings strongly suggest that educational provision does differ according to the social class composition of the school. The elite schools in the study clearly differed from non-fee paying schools in terms of the subjects they offer, their extracurricular activities, and the manner in which they interact with their students.

¹⁵ It was particularly interesting that three of the vice-principals completely rejected the idea that schooling is tailored to the social class of the students.

This is most evident in the greater emphasis on non-technical subjects in the elite schools. Subjects that many vocational schools prioritise such as woodwork and metal work are not offered as subjects in elite schools, while the “classics”, such as Latin and Greek, that are no longer seen as having a practical value for most students, are still considered of high value for elite schools. Furthermore communication and analytical skills and the cultivation of social and personal responsibility are all skills and attitudes strongly associated with leadership positions. Our data clearly show that the development of these skills and attitudes is a feature of elite schools, thereby reflecting the role of elite schools in preparing the next generation of elites for their future roles as key-players at the pinnacle of Irish society.

The findings of our qualitative research would also suggest that despite being generally considered a benign element of schooling, extracurricular provision is another element of schooling that is strongly influenced by the social background of student body. While all four school representatives spoke of their desire to provide a comprehensive range of activities, the findings from our qualitative data clearly show that the type and range of extracurricular activities offered by fee-paying and non-fee paying schools differ significantly. A much stronger emphasis is placed on the provision of extracurricular activities in fee-paying schools, where they are seen as a key part of what the school had to offer. Daniel expressed the view that extracurricular activities are the “value added quality” in his school and “what parents are prepared to pay their money for when they send a student here”. He acknowledged that the “sheer range”¹⁶ of activities that were offered in his school “would leave us atypical. Really most community schools or local secondary schools would not be able to offer that range”.

In contrast Gerry spoke of the constraints he faces in providing a wide range of such activities. He explained that apart from basketball, the school was not in a position to provide other outdoor activities due to a lack of space. However, he did not believe his school was unusual in this regard. There was a much greater emphasis on more

¹⁶ Daniel spoke of his school providing rugby, soccer, athletics, cross country, golf, Gaelic football, hurling, tennis, a certain amount of cricket. They also provided access to an indoor swimming pool, and a large range of clubs, including a debating club which debated in three languages. Finally, Daniel stated that the school had a full orchestra and a full choir.

practical skills when providing extracurricular activities in non-elite schools. One such school in this study included lessons in fishmongery and pizza making in local business establishments as extracurricular activities. The other non-fee paying school offered ‘enterprise’ as an extracurricular activity, an activity Alan believes has great benefits for his students, “preparing them for when they leave school, the idea of going into business and working, what it is to try and make money for yourself”. These differences are indicative of the two-pathway education system that exists in Irish society “whereby some are trained to become managers who can conceptualize and lead, while others are destined to become "operatives" who are permanently bossed around” (Allen 2008, p.17).

While access to economic resources is clearly a significant factor in the reproduction of privilege, our qualitative data would strongly suggest that economic capital alone does not ensure educational and occupational success. Whereas economic capital allows dominant groups to mobilize educational resources, we would argue that to benefit from the education system, one must also have the “instruments of appropriation”, the appropriate valued cultural capital (Bourdieu 1977, p.488). Without access to a valued cultural capital, it is clear students cannot fully exploit the limited resources which are available within the education system. This inability to benefit from access to superior economic resources without the appropriate cultural capital was clearly illustrated by Gwen¹⁷. She argued that students from disadvantaged areas, who attend her school on a scholarship, have access to the superior resources in teaching and extracurricular activities that the school has to offer, but can still struggle to ‘fit in’ and succeed in the school. For the majority of our participants, the inability of such scholarship students to benefit fully from the opportunity to attend an elite school is perceived as resulting from a lack of commitment to education among the working classes. Gwen illustrated this viewpoint, when she explained that her school expects students “to do hours of homework every night” but students from disadvantaged areas may be “going back to a home background where that is not seen as important or of high value”. However we would argue that rather than reflecting a failure to value education, this apparent lack of commitment is a reflection of the cultural and economic differences between working

¹⁷ Gwen is the vice-principal of an elite fee-paying girls school.

class homes and the culture of the school.

Consequently, while the dearth of the working class in key leadership positions is typically ascribed to personal failings on the part of the individual, we would argue that schools are contributing to this inequality. While they appear to be impartial and neutral, acting “in the name of fairness and objectivity”, it is clear schools also function to transmit the benefits of a valued culture (Bourdieu, 1977, p.167). Such an education system places those who attend elite private schools at a distinct advantage. As the culture of the school is so closely aligned to the dominant classes, elite groups are far more knowledgeable of, and at ease in the education system (Bourdieu 1977). This familiarity with the school means that dominant groups know how schools work and accordingly they know what strategies are needed to be successful. While already imbued with reserves of cultural capital on the day they enroll, the greater emphasis on high culture in these schools, results in greatly enhanced life chances for such students. Elite schools effectively convey the distinctive patterns of speech, mannerisms and social graces of the upper classes. We would argue that these skills, together with the promotion of a competitive spirit combine to make elite schools ‘genuine executive training grounds’ (Bourdieu 1998, p.88). In such circumstances, working class children are at a disadvantage from their first day in school as the education system creates hurdles for those without the requisite cultural knowledge that are very difficult to overcome (Marks 2009).

For most students, success in the education system is largely determined by one’s ability to pass exams and gain the necessary points to secure one’s preferred college course. However, our analysis of the qualitative data generated clearly shows that for elite students that there are a far greater number of routes to success. By way of illustrating this, Daniel describes some of the strategies employed by dominant groups that significantly increase the probability of educational and occupational success for their children.

“A certain number of the boys here would go abroad to do certain courses, the back door, for instance, medicine in Budapest...but to do that his parents will have to fork out and pay for his flights, his accommodation, and his fees ...now my parents could not have done that.... Sometimes it is paying for the advice, or paying for the

counseling or paying for career guidance... occasionally you see people here getting other consultations here for their sons, I can go pay for it privately and maybe the private person will say well ... there is a back route here if you go to Waterford IT, if you do 2 years down there and you get a certain mark and you can transfer to Cork and get accepted on a degree” (Daniel).

Additionally, for most students fortunate enough to progress to third level, the luxury of repeating exams or switching courses to find the one that is most suited to one’s own interests and abilities is simply not an option. In contrast, families who are rich in economic and cultural capital are able to support their children until they find the course of study that is most suited to their skills and in which they are most likely to excel. While Daniel stressed the role that a strong work ethic played in the success of many of his past-pupils, he also provides a very illustrative example of how dominant classes utilize their cultural and economic resources to ensure their children’s success.

“I am convinced ...money itself can perpetuate success. If I had failed my university exams at the end of first year, I am afraid I would have had to go out to work but if these guys fail or decide at the end of first year that I don’t like the course I am doing, I will change course, most parents can support them through those years. I have seen guys here: I never would have believed would make a barrister, solicitor, an auctioneer, a successful businessman, whatever. But they get there and it’s partly because their parents have the resources to keep them the extra year in college and of course they have the confidence too, to believe they have almost a right to do some of these things”.

This clearly highlights a process whereby through the mobilization of cultural and economic capital, elite families are effectively ‘buying’ success in the education system.

Status groups & social capital

Finally, the dominant classes are also reproduced through the cultivation of networks or status groups (Wright Mills 2000, p.292). Our findings would suggest that of all the metaphorical forms of capital advanced by Bourdieu, the impact of social capital on the reproduction of privilege is the one that is acknowledged most by our participants. Social capital is seen as a valuable resource that enables individuals to achieve their interests more effectively than can be attained independently (Bourdieu, 1977). All

participants saw social capital as a resource that is exploited most effectively by elite groups, with several participants expressing the view that the direct and indirect employment of social capital allows elites access to powerful positions. Elite schools play a central role in this process. Admission into such elite groups requires knowledge, familiarity and ease with the culture of the status group. The sense of collective identity generated in elite schools is the main factor in cultivating this particular status culture. Cohen (1974, p.99) remarked that elite schools achieve this through socializing their students “into specific patterns of symbolic behaviour including accent, manner of speech, etiquette, style of joking and play”. This process allows the bearer of these distinctive styles of presentation, manners, and tastes to be readily identified as a member of an exclusive social network.

The culture of ‘old boy networks’¹⁸ is clearly so strong that the majority of participants, (particularly the privately educated participants) associated certain character traits and distinctive styles with these elite schools. Daniel expressed the opinion that assumptions are made about individuals on the basis of which elite school they attended. He describes this as “like Coca Cola, the brand is immediately identifiable”. It is this elite ‘brand’ that is a key determining factor in the reproduction of privilege (Collins 1979). As graduates of elite schools are readily identifiable to others within their status group, those responsible for recruitment to high status occupations may naturally gravitate towards those familiar with the same status culture (Collins, 1979). Shane expressed the opinion that the influence of such schools on Irish society was disproportionate to their number. David agreed with this assessment. He maintained that the connections one forms at these schools, opens doors, and that these networks allow him access “to people in power, in positions of influence.” Gerry similarly acknowledged the value of these networks which are developed through elite schooling. He stated

“yes, there is the school tie scenario, it’s easier for some people that are in that, there is an expectation, there is the support there, they have gone to a certain school , a certain university, you will find they will probably get into a job etc easier”.

Interestingly, Alan acknowledged the much greater emphasis on developing and

¹⁸ The status groups synonymous with elite schools.

maintaining networks among those students who have been privately educated.

“I know from talking to friends of mine that I was at university with, who had gone to private schools, they ... meet much more regularly for their school reunion... and there is a much greater awareness, there is constant letters home from these schools, there is a far greater tie to these schools”.

It is clear that the cultivation of elite social networks lead to tightly connected social and business networks. Gaining entry to elite school status groups is therefore key in allowing access to potentially very valuable business and social contacts later in life. Alan argues these contacts “are all helping hands to get up that ladder”. Accordingly, we would argue that the ‘old boy networks’ clearly exert considerable influence in Irish society, with success in many professions dependent on access to such networks.

Interestingly, the analysis of our data revealed that access to substantial economic capital alone will not grant access to such elite networks. An examination of the admission policies for elite schools highlighted the extent to which in elite education social capital trumps economic capital alone. The variety of mechanisms that elite schools employ to monitor entry prioritise those already acquainted with the culture of these status groups. The criteria for selecting pupils include giving first preference to the siblings of past pupils, to children of a member of staff, to the children of past pupils and to selection based on interviews. This process ensures that access to elite status groups is denied to almost all but those already familiar with the dominant culture and is in essence a very effective mechanism of social closure.

Consequently, for all of these reasons, we would argue that the remarkable ‘success’ that Ireland’s most exclusive fee-paying schools enjoy is not as Butler (2009) has argued, a demonstration of the ‘all-round excellence’ of these schools in a meritocratic Ireland, but is more accurately described as a demonstration of the impact of continuing class inequality in the Irish education system.

Conclusions:

In conclusion, research (see Smyth 2008; ESRI 2006; Clancy 2001; Lynch 1999; Clancy 1988; Hannan et al. 1983), has long identified that in Ireland, children from

the upper socio-economic groups get a disproportionate number of the more valuable educational qualifications. Yet Irish policy in this area has not significantly concerned itself with eliminating the inequalities of wealth, power, and status that reproduce educational inequalities from one generation to the next (Lynch 2007). Therefore, we would argue that the Irish education system ensures that those who enter from advantaged positions are perfectly positioned to increase (or at worst maintain) their advantage at every level within the system. Indeed, we would argue that having linked success and failure with individual effort and desire to succeed, the neo-liberal education system acts as a powerful mechanism of social control which is used to legitimate the exclusion of certain sections of the population from certain types and levels of educational credentials (Greene 2007).

In this regard the education system plays a pivotal role in conditioning and institutionalising people to accept their future situation and indeed in orienting their expectations to that future (Greaves et al. 2007). Neo-liberal policies (which are essentially located in class positions), have become widely accepted, even by those who are marginalized by these very practices (Holst 2007). Universalistic practices which provide limited potential to acquire valuable educational qualifications, underpinned by the use of a strong meritocratic discourse helps to present a public facade of equality, to which the state can refer when asked to explain the persistence of educational inequalities (Lynch 1988, p.165). A perceived potential for upward mobility (rather than its actualisation) thus disguises the need for those who are disadvantaged by the current system to engage in its reform. Accordingly, we view the meritocratic ideology, which is particularly strong in the Irish education system, as facilitating the continuation of class-based advantage through elite schooling, and effectively “camouflaging the continued existence of privilege” (Power 2008, p.75; Lynch & Lodge, 2002; Drudy & Lynch, 1993).

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