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In this paper we examine the impact that the ideological / political / class project of neoliberalism has had on education in Ireland. We discuss the effect of neoliberal policies on Ireland and Irish society in order to provide a context for what follows. We then examine the Primary and Secondary sectors of the Irish education system – with particular reference to elite fee paying schools - critiquing the marketisation of education and the emergence of an ideology of ‘consumer choice’. We argue that this ideology serves those that can afford desirable ‘choices’, and that the resultant inequality in educational achievement is ‘justified’ through an ideology of meritocracy / personal responsibility. Finally, we examine how neoliberalism has impacted on Higher education in Ireland. Following O’ Connor (2013) we ultimately argue that it has resulted in a downgrading of services, attacks on the idea of public education as a right, and the pushing of the neoliberal model in its stead, all of which serve to legitimise and promote a rigid instrumental understanding of what education is for (Bok, 2003 cited in O’ Connor 2013, p.17).

Introduction

Education is an important human right. In this paper we examine the impact that the ideological / political / class project of neoliberalism has had on education in Ireland. The paper begins with a discussion of the impact of neoliberal policies on Ireland and Irish society in order to provide a context for what follows. The next section examines the Primary and Secondary sectors of the Irish education system – with reference to elite fee paying schools - critiquing in particular the marketisation of education and the emergence of an ideology of ‘consumer choice’. The remainder of the paper examines how neoliberalism has detrimentally impacted on the Irish education system in terms of a downgrading of services, attacks on the idea of public education as a right, and the pushing of the neoliberal model in its stead.

The impact/ effects of neoliberal (and neoconservative) policies on Ireland

Many of the policies that we refer to as neoliberal (and neoconservative) were already threadbare in Ireland when the process of deregulation and privatisation took hold in Latin America, the United States, the UK and elsewhere from the 1970s onwards. Ireland had already sold off its natural resources and had ceased protecting Irish industry early in the previous decade (McCabe 2011). Thereafter Irish firms became more vulnerable, particularly after entry into the European Economic Community (EEC), when indigenous firms began to collapse one after another, with 44 % of indigenous firms closing over the following 13 years (O’Hearn 1998, pp.39-42). Manufacturing became ever more dependent on foreign direct investment (FDI), to the extent that from the early 1960s most new manufacturing jobs were in trans-national corporations (TNCs) (O’Hearn 1998, pp.40-42). Thereafter development strategy became a matter of shaping regulations, the tax structure, and the workforce, in such a way as to attract as much foreign industry as possible (O’Hearn 1998, p.48; Wickham 1983).

In this respect Ireland was a pioneer of neoliberalism, primarily because the indigenous capitalist class was historically weak, and was forced to play the role of ‘middleman’ for international capital. The TNCs that located in Ireland benefitted enormously in terms of grants, light-touch regulation, and one of the lowest corporation tax rates in Western Europe (formerly 10 per cent, now 12.5 per cent). In the 1980s, when foreign industrial investment stalled considerably, the government responded by extending its low corporation tax rate to financial firms, creating the International Financial Services Centre (IFSC) in the Dublin docklands area. Thereafter Ireland became an effective tax haven, with the key selling point of an absolutely minimum level of regulation and oversight (McCabe 2010, p.11).

The official tax rate ensured that relatively little tax was paid on profits repatriated by foreign firms. However, Department of Finance figures from 2010 show that the effective rate of tax is about half the official rate. In 2010 companies declared taxable profits of €61bn, but paid only €3.9bn in tax. This would put the effective rate paid on declared profits somewhere in the region of 6.5 per cent (RTE, 2012). However, since this is based on declared profits that figure may also differ considerably from the actual rate of tax paid on profits as a whole. In recent decades this has included a ‘tax dumping’ service to foreign firms that are domiciled in Ireland, but whose physical existence in the state sometimes amounts to little more than a brass plate on a building somewhere in the Dublin docklands area.

The point to be taken from all of this is that deference to wealth was not something necessarily imposed on Ireland in the wake of Thatcher and Reagan. The consequence of neoliberalisation in Ireland has been an ever increasing dependence on foreign direct investment, and an ever increasing vulnerability to fluctuations in the global economy. Those cognisant of the dangers inherent in

this strategy realised that any decline in FDI investment would inevitably create a substantial rise in unemployment (see O'Hearn 1998). The extent of dependence on FDI meant that the fate of Irish exports would depend on decisions made outside of Ireland. The decline in FDI from 2000 onwards could well have led to a continued decline in employment and prosperity, had it not been for the construction boom. The condition of near full employment, coupled with the financial deregulation of the late 1990s, had opened up opportunities for accumulation on the basis of speculation. As the boom years rolled on the government provided ever greater incentives to developers, to the extent that these so-called 'wealth creators' were effectively given the run of the country. Decisions about what and where to build were generally made by land hoarders, developers and those with political connections (Kerrigan 2012; McDonald and Sheridan 2008). As it transpired in the Mahon Tribunal (2011) favourable land rezoning decisions were effectively bought. And all of this was in addition to the increasingly generous tax incentives that fuelled speculative development.

As such, the years of growth produced one clear result: the lion's share of wealth created went to TNCs, to property developers and to speculators and financiers. The accumulation of wealth on the part of the indigenous moneyed classes and professionals was considerable. In the last three years of prosperity (2004-2007) the richest 450 people in Ireland added €41 billion to their combined personal wealth (O'Toole 2010, p.78), but generally continued to dispose of their wealth in harmful ways, particularly via property speculation (O'Hearn 1998, p.39). It took an economic collapse to demonstrate the extent to which the interests of lenders, property developers and speculators were put ahead of those of workers and home-owners.

Terrence McDonough (2010) locates the policy agenda of the boom period in the broader international process of 'neoliberalisation', which he sees as

essentially being about freeing markets and firms from state regulation; removing barriers to the transnational movement of goods and capital; reducing taxes on capital; cutting social programmes; privatising state enterprises; and shifting the objectives of monetary policy away from that of full employment to that of preventing inflation.

While this is generally an adequate description, these policy proscriptions are really only the expression of the interests of finance capital, which is not permanently wedded to any particular policy or doctrine. This is evidenced by Ireland's economic collapse, which appears to have led policy makers to abandon previously lauded free market principles, which provide no justification for state bailouts of developers and financial firms. This suggests that the particular policies and doctrines advanced are much less significant than the end goal, which is, always and everywhere, about facilitating capital accumulation, and preserving accumulated wealth thereafter. With the transition from boom to bust the emphasis necessarily shifts from the former to the latter. As part of this process Irish governments have demonstrated that there was never any principled adherence to free market doctrine. It has socialised private debts of banks and developers, increased taxes (though not on capital) and nationalised certain bankrupt firms. That is not to suggest that Ireland has abandoned neoliberalism, but rather that neoliberalism has to be understood as a class project rather than a fixed basket of policies and/or ideological forms. It is to stress the point that neoliberalism is as much a project of preserving accumulated claims on wealth as it is about the facilitation of capital accumulation. Ireland's case demonstrates that post boom policies (the effective closing of ranks) emerge from the same womb as those that produced the preceding speculative bubble (Kerrigan, 2012).

At present the Irish population is experiencing the opposite side of the

neoliberal medal – the foisting of the costs of private debt onto its population. All alternatives to the bailout of bankers and developers have been ruled out. Since the revenue that could be used for investment has been used to pay for the European banking crisis, the economy continues on its downward spiral. The human consequences have been more severe than any of the ‘experts’ expected. At the end of the boom period the Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI) expected a necessary ‘correction’ in the market. It predicted that construction of houses would fall to *only* 65,000 in 2008 and that employment would rise by *only* 12,000 in that year (ESRI, 2007). This was, as we now know well, extraordinarily optimistic. 250,000 jobs would be lost over the next three years, and construction of new houses would collapse almost completely. This resulted in unemployment in Ireland rising steeply, with the weight of this increase falling most particularly on young people. The contraction in the labour market has also resulted in the numbers of people staying in education increasing significantly. At second level the number of students staying to complete their education (at more than 90%) is now at its highest rate ever (Department of Education and Skills 2012), while record numbers are also attending third level, as further education is sought out as the most desired ‘strategy’ for school leavers who want to ride out the economic ‘storm’ and by jobless adults as they opt for the safety of a better qualification that may get them back to work (O’Connor 2010).

Yet, despite this turning to education there is little confidence - among many of the present cohort of third level students - of being able to secure employment at home after they graduate. Irish optimism has clearly waned, when almost a third of students in a recent study stated that they have no future in Ireland and will have to emigrate after they graduate in order to find work (Trendence Institut 2012). Faced with such a dispiriting lack of options, the resumption of the mass emigration of Irish people has once again become a characteristic of the Irish

economy; the rate of which has not be seen in decades. “87,100 people emigrated in the twelve months to April 2012 – giving a daily average of 238, or one person every 303 seconds” (Reilly 2012).

The number of long term unemployed growing, the cohort staying in education increasing and the numbers emigrating rising, has had a further knock-on effect; widening the gap between revenue and necessary public spending/investment, which from the government’s point of view can only be bridged through cuts. Predictably, the various cuts (such as in public sector pay) and new impositions (such as a universal social charge and new regressive taxes) introduced by the government since the crisis began, mean that consumers (the real job creators) have been further weakened. The falling effective demand ensures the continued fall in revenue, leading to a drop in the amount of money available for investment in necessary infrastructure, health, welfare and education (O’Flynn 2012a).

Though the opposition parties assail the government with “austerity is not working”, we argue that it is in fact working quite well from the perspective of finance capital. Every austerity measure is in fact a covert bailout. To suggest that the policies are not working is to put the objectives of government policy out of sight. Ireland remains open for business. Its business is to facilitate TNCs. Its business is to serve as a tax haven for international capital. Its business is to facilitate speculation on price and to do everything in its power to preserve accumulated wealth in the event of collapse. The strategy, thinking and policy agendas up to, during and after the boom period have revolved around one very simple idea: ‘be nice to the rich’ (O’Toole 2010, p.23). Against this backdrop Ireland’s reputation as a tax haven is understandable. Though policies and doctrines have necessarily changed with the economic collapse, this very simple strategy continues to hold sway.

This section has provided a context for the rest of the paper, where we examine why neoliberalism continuously works to mould the education sector to the needs of global capitalism (see Mulderrig 2003; Hirtt 2004), which has in turn lead to a downgrading of services, attacks on the idea of public education as a right, and the pushing of the neoliberal model in its stead.

Neoliberalism and education

“Education is a fundamental human right. As such it is clearly the responsibility of the state and a core element of any development policy committed to social justice. Securing the right to education is key to enabling people to secure other human rights, yet the right to education is violated by governments around the world.”
(Archer 2006, p.7 cited in Greene 2007)

Collins (1979) has noted, the trend towards a more technical education system is regarded as giving students the necessary skills for employment. In effect, education has been placed at the forefront of assembling the post-welfare society (Tomlinson 2001, cited in Mulderrig 2003) where the State uses the education system (and other institutions) and associated meritocratic rhetoric to make the existing status quo seem ‘natural’ (Hill 2003).

Under neoliberalism, social actors are required to make educational choices (for example regarding where they send their children to school) in competitive education markets “on the basis of evaluations of their costs and benefits and of the perceived probabilities of more or less successful outcomes” (Breen and Goldthorpe 1997, p.275 cited in Kivirauma et al. 2003). In fact, O’ Sullivan (2005, p.112) holds that a ‘mercantile paradigm’, evident in the Irish education system, asserts that “what education is for is a matter for consumers of the system, such as pupils, parents, civic leaders and business interests, to decide”. In essence we follow Tormey (2007, pp.183-186) in claiming that Ireland did

not need to participate in the Neoliberal educational reforms that took place elsewhere because we already had a system that permitted / was based on Neoliberal 'consumer choice'.

The ideology of 'educational choice' serves those that can afford these desirable 'choices', but not all social actors can actually exercise choice in this 'free market' of education. Disadvantaged parents have fewer financial resources to invest in the education of their children, and less cultural and social capital to transmit to them (Reimers 2000, p.55) relative to advantaged groups. Under such a system we will continue to see the middle classes and the sons and daughters of those from the educated professions (who have higher levels of valued cultural and social capital) gain the most access to and benefit from the education system, while those sections of the population who enter the education system from socially, economically, and culturally marginalized positions will continue to be the ones that benefit 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; Gerwitz et al. 1995).

It is often suggested that Ireland has successfully resisted the Neoliberal educational reform movement, characterised by the marketisation of education and the introduction of consumer 'choice'. Yet we argue that even before Neoliberal reforms came to prominence internationally, Ireland had a system characterised by local management of schools and a fully functioning education 'market' (Tormey 2006, p.185). The post-primary education system emerged principally from local, private initiatives, as religious orders and congregations established schools in response to local need or demand. The State eventually increased its involvement in education, but the autonomy of existing secondary

schools, and in particular their choice to cater specifically for one social class or another, was never effectively challenged. The present system still bears the marks of its historical origins (Hannan and Boyle, 1987, p.31). For instance, religious orders such as the Holy Ghost Fathers or the Jesuits have traditionally catered for upper middle-class boys, and continue to do so, in exclusive, expensive private schools heavily subsidised by the State (Courtois, 2013, O'Neill, 2013).

It was only in 1967 that the State began to effectively subsidise access to post-primary education for all children. Under the terms of the 'Free Scheme', participating schools would remain in private ownership and under private management, but would receive State subsidies instead of charging fees to families. While the 'Free Scheme' increased access to post-primary education dramatically, it did not threaten the "competitive advantage" enjoyed by the wealthier segments of Irish society (Raftery & Hout, 1993, pp. 60-61). Indeed, the most prestigious and socially exclusive schools were allowed to opt out of the scheme and to maintain high fees. Thus, they continued to act as shelters protecting the privileged from the advances of democratization. As the State provision of post-primary schools increased, the private, fee-paying sector prospered. Some Protestant schools had to close, merge or open their doors to non-Protestants (and more recently, to consider joining the non-fee-paying sector), but overall and in particular over the Celtic Tiger years, the fee-paying sector expanded due to increasing demand, and a substantial private independent sector also developed. Today, for moneyed families, the educational market is indeed quite broad and varied.

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, in principle, to seek

places for their children in whatever school they wish (O' Sullivan 2005, p.168). In effect, the freedom of schools to decide who they accept or reject can override parents' 'right to choose'. High fees constitute an impassable barrier for many, but also, in the absence of any centralised system of allocation of school places, schools which are in higher demand routinely refuse places to children. This is the case of the best performing, fee-paying or non-fee-paying schools. Each school is free to establish its own admission criteria, as long as these are not openly discriminatory. Typically, these admission criteria prioritise children who are baptised in the faith of the school, siblings of children already enrolled and children of past pupils. The family's address or the date when the child was placed on the waiting list, are also possible criteria. Thus, in Ireland, while schools are not allowed to base their selection on academic ability, recruitment methods based on religious faith and family connections are considered legitimate. Children of the wrong faith or no faith, and newcomers to an area, including migrants, are thus clearly at a disadvantage. This makes the 'consumer choice' argument sound particularly hollow. Moreover, it is argued that the anti-discrimination framework in place in Ireland does not sufficiently protect minorities, an assertion supported by a recent case where Irish Travellers lost an appeal against a school's decision not to enrol their son (Heffernan 2012).

As elsewhere inequality in educational achievement is 'justified' by the ideology of meritocracy / personal responsibility (See Kennedy and Power 2010; Considine and Dukelow 2009; Drudy and Lynch 1993; McNamee and Miller 2004) on the grounds that everyone is given equal access to education. Yet we argue that the meritocratic discourse evident in the Irish education system camouflages the continuing existence (and reproduction) of privilege (see O'Brien and Ó Fathaigh 2007, p.596; Considine and Dukelow 2009). Such issues have long been identified in research (see Smyth 2008; ESRI 2006;

Clancy 2001; Lynch 1999; Clancy 1988), which has documented that in Ireland, children from the upper socio-economic groups get a disproportionate number of the more valuable educational qualifications. The education system in Ireland has a core curriculum common to all school types; however the availability of specific subjects for example, is often determined by the size, gender, class composition and / or location of the school (Lynch 1999, p.154; Lynch, 1998). Additionally attendance at middle class schools (Smyth and Hannan 2007, p.176), and / or the ability to access such resources as extra notes, grinds schools, and revision courses, all impact on educational attainment (Smyth 2008, p.13; Lynch and Moran 2006). Walsh and Donnelly (2006, cited in Murphy 2008, p.34) claim that “education by chequebook” reaps significant dividends, as parents who heavily invest in 2nd level education significantly increase the chances of their children getting into 3rd level. Annual league tables show that fee-paying schools, for example, charging in excess of €5,000 per year (and three to four times this amount for boarding) continue to occupy the top ranks for admission to university courses.

Combining state funding, fees and donations, fee-paying schools have financial resources that allow them to offer particularly privileged learning environments: choice of subjects, extracurricular activities, lower teacher-pupil ratio, modern equipment, etc., which enhance not only students’ academic results but also their sense of self-worth (Bourdieu and Passeron 1990; Bourdieu 1998; Courtois 2013). At the top end of the sector, schools are set in expansive grounds, complete with swimming-pools and golf courses (for example Clongowes Wood College, Blackrock College, St. Columba’s College and St Gerard’s School). As is the case in other national contexts, such features, combined with the historical association of the most prominent of these schools with Irish elites, encourage students to internalise a distinct elite identity and sense of separateness from ‘common people’ (Bourdieu and Passeron 1990, Bourdieu

1998). Importantly, the autonomy of these schools allows them to preserve a great level of social sameness. It should be noted that the core clientele of schools like Clongowes, Glenstal or again St Columba's is not only privileged, but extremely wealthy, with a number of loyal families represented in the registry of aristocratic and landowning families *Burke's Peerage* or in the 'Irish Rich List' (Courtois 2013). The 'selective isolation' (Bourdieu 1998), which is very real in isolated boarding schools such as Clongowes or Glenstal, ensures that students develop a strong sense of collective identity, which often translates in lifelong friendships, professional networks, and even endogamic marriage practices (Courtois 2013). While some of these schools have implemented scholarship schemes, they are often based on charity rather than social justice ideals – which results in the selection of children, who do not differ much in background from the traditional clientele of the school. We argue that inside a State-funded system, these schools are allowed to act as agents for the reproduction of the most privileged sections of Irish society and accordingly the simple provision of an equal opportunity to access education for all cannot guarantee equality of outcomes.

It is argued that the State has only intervened in the area of educational provision through equality of opportunity policies and not in the area of participation (Lynch 1998, p.151). Tawney (1964, cited in Lynch 2007) captures the ambiguity of these equality of opportunity policies by stating that its "credit is good as long as it never tries to cash its cheques". In this context, while the Irish state often uses a meritocratic discourse, which "draws on liberal conceptions of equality", the targets set in relation to addressing educational disadvantage have almost always been "politically conservative" (Tormey 2007, p.178). This process continues to the present time with targets set in the National Action Plan for Social Inclusion 2007-2016 essentially being rehashed versions of previous targets which were not met either (Tormey 2007, pp.178-

179). Furthermore, Irish responses to educational disadvantage tend to be targeted rather than systemic, i.e. most are based on identifying the disadvantaged population and addressing their specific needs. Yet there are two major limitations to such an approach. Firstly, such responses mainly benefit the most advantaged individuals from the disadvantaged groups that they are targeting (Lynch 2007) and secondly, and most importantly, focusing 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). This focus on the disadvantage also ensures that privilege goes unchallenged; even unnoticed.

Thus we would argue that the Irish education system ensures that those who enter the education system from advantaged positions are perfectly positioned to increase their advantage at every level within the system. Additionally, the meritocratic discourse used by the State ensures that as long as the education system is functional for the majority, the exclusion of the minority is tolerated (see O’Brien and Ó Fathaigh 2007). This has profound implications for education (in its current ideological location) as a mechanism for achieving social inclusion and / or an egalitarian society in Ireland.

Educational disadvantage is an outcome of an unequal society (Lynch 2007) but this obvious fact has been largely ignored in policy on educational disadvantage. Irish policy in this area has not significantly concerned itself with eliminating the inequalities of wealth, power, and status that produce educational inequalities in the first instance and reproduce them from one generation to the next (Lynch 2007). Accordingly we argue that the outcome for those whose educational ‘choices’ are restricted in Ireland, is the same (if not worse) as for those in similar situations in countries which have recognised Neoliberal education systems.

Higher education in Ireland

Responsibility for the development and implementation of higher educational policy lies with the government of the day and the Department for Education and Skills, while the Higher Educational Authority (HEA) “has wide advisory and monitoring powers and is the funding authority for the universities and other designated higher education institutions” (O’ Connor 2013, p.65 - for an excellent overview of policies related to higher education in Ireland see Chapter 3 in O’ Connor 2013). There is also a fully fledged private higher education system in operation. Griffith College for example with the “largest law school in Ireland” is an intriguing example of the commercial success of HE aimed at moneyed local and international students. An interesting initiative in place here is where the College has launched a new Student Exchange Initiative, which provides a subvention in the form of free fees for Irish students whose families provide room and board to the colleges international students (Griffith College 2013). The push to attract international students, where Ireland seeks to capitalize on its English-medium education, and the viewing of HE as a business are central elements in the further commercialization of higher education.

Higher education institutions are under increasing pressure to be more accountable and the resultant managerialism, which is supposed to deliver such accountability is “characterised by a distrust of academics”, and an ever increasing “battery of mechanisms of audit and control generated by the state and instituted by senior and middle academic-managers” (Kolsaker, 2008, p.515 cited in O’ Connor 2013, p.66). This has seen the introduction of “cycles of institutional reviews”, which largely “ignored the fact that measures to monitor quality related to teaching have long existed” in Irish universities (O’ Connor 2013, p.67). Indeed, academics are now required to be evaluated by external examiners, have their teaching quality and research outputⁱ evaluated, adhere to

individual workload models and academic activity profiles, in addition to undergoing annual performance and development reviews; all processes which have been described by “those who are not opposed to accountability” as being “wasteful of resources that could be more effectively used in front-line activity” (Morley, 2003 cited in O’ Connor 2013, p.68; see also Garvin 2012). Such restrictions are inevitable in a neoliberal system which by and large envisions higher education only in terms of its contribution to the creation of the famed ‘knowledge economy’ (Allen 2007). As such, social engagement, for example, is merely defined in terms of “the commercialisation of research” and not in “terms of equity or social justice” (Lynch, 1999 cited O’ Connor 2013, p.68). Such views have had significant implications in that the Irish state, European Union and “various corporate interests... have stressed that the allocation of state monies to research in science and technology is essential for economic growth” (O’ Connor 2013, p.74). However, this has resulted in the overwhelming majority of research funding going to limited areas in science, engineering and technology in recent years (Lynch *et al.*, 2012).

The impact / effects of neoliberal policies on higher education in Ireland

This section of the paper examines a small number of the impacts that neoliberal policies have had on higher education in Ireland. We begin by examining the impact of neoliberalism in terms of the funding of higher education in Ireland, before assessing some of the impacts of the Public Sector agreements (2010 -2016) in this area. The final piece of this section examines persistent inequalities in access to 3rd level education in Ireland.

An increased focus on alternative sources of funding

O’ Connor (2013, p.24) eloquently argues that the most observable manifestation of the changed relationship between universities and the neoliberal state is the “increased focus on the importance of alternative sources

of funding including student contributions, funding from philanthropy and from industrial/commercial sources. Between 2007 and 2011, a reduction of 15% (from 70% to 65%) in the proportion of the total State funding occurred in conjunction with an increase in non-state funding, including a rise of 82% in students' contributions (O' Connor 2013, pp.25-26). Indeed, the expansion in participation in 3rd level education is occurring at a time when resources are being reduced and staff numbers are falling, which "has meant that core funding per student by the state over the period 2007-11 fell by 56 per cent" (O' Connor 2013, p.26).

Public Sector agreements 2010 -2016: The impact on higher education.

The Croke Park agreement was negotiated to "ensure that the Irish Public Service continues its contribution to the return of economic growth and economic prosperity to Ireland, while delivering excellence in service to the Irish people" (Public Service Agreement 2010, p.2). "In order to sustain the delivery of excellent public services alongside the targeted reduction in Public Service numbers" over the life time of the agreement (2010-2014) there was an acceptance that "efficiencies will need to be maximised and productivity in the use of resources greatly increased through revised work practices and other initiatives" (Public Service Agreement 2010, p.3).

At a rally in a Dublin Hotel on 9th March 2013 members of public sector unions highlighted the effects of pay cuts and levies - with the impact on new entrants being particularly severe, the impact of early retirements and the replacement of experienced staff with casualized labour leading to a loss in the knowledge and experience of lecturing and research staff, and the detrimental effects of the additional hours required under the Croke Park agreement. Speakers also documented the impact that austerity is having on students, who face ever growing financial burdens.

In response to a parliamentary question on July 3rd 2012, Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Brendan Howlin) said that “an estimated €810m in sustainable pay bill savings” and administrative efficiency (or ‘non-pay’) savings totalling €678m were reported for the first two years of the Agreement. Despite such significant savings and the impact that the agreement has had, a new more regressive agreement was deemed necessary by the government in 2013, despite there being a full year left to run on the current agreement (see Reilly 2013b for a discussion on the ‘negotiation’ of Croke Park 2) . The public sector unions voted not to accept this ‘revised agreement’.

Inequalities in access to 3rd level education:

In 2004 Mary Hanafin, the then Minister for Education and Science, stated that

“Equity of access must be an integral feature of our higher education system if that system is to deliver for individuals, society and the economy... There is now general agreement that individuals should be able to enter and successfully participate in higher education, regardless of social, economic or cultural background”. (Higher Education Authority 2004, p.5)

Such statements were indicative of an evolving government discourse, which increasingly incorporated the understanding that the cumulative exclusion experienced by people living in certain districts, has resulted in high unemployment rates, welfare dependency, and comparatively low levels of participation in education, particularly 3rd level education. Consequently, tackling social exclusion through education, achieving equity of educational opportunity, and encouraging access to and successful participation in higher education have all been national policy priorities in Ireland since the mid-1990s (Higher Education Authority 2004, p.9). But how successfully have these policy priorities been implemented?

Access to 3rd level education in Ireland has expanded over recent decades, but for many working-class children going to college remains an improbable dream. Inequalities in participation ratios show both continuity and change over time (O'Connell, Clancy and McCoy 2006, p.65). Continuity is evidenced in the persistence of class inequalities in access to 3rd level education, while change is indicated in some lower socio-economic groups reducing their disadvantage, partly as a consequence of more advantaged groups reaching saturation point (O'Connell, McCoy and Clancy 2006, p.312). Empirical evidence shows that while rising participation rates have assisted all socio-economic groups, working-class groups have not gained any great advantage in relative terms (see HEA 2013, ESRI 2006; Action Group on Access 2001; Drudy and Lynch 1993).

At a national level, overall rates of admission to higher education in Ireland rose from 20% in 1980, to 44% in 1998, and to 55% by 2004. It is interesting to note that in 1993 Raftery and Hout suggested growth in the numbers progressing to 3rd level would improve the educational chances of formerly disadvantaged groups, once the participation rates of advantaged groups had reached saturation point. We saw large increases in participation occurring for those lower socio-economic groups with very low rates in 1980. This was clearly evident in the participation rate of the unskilled manual group, which increased from 3% in 1980 to 21% by 1998 (Clancy 2001, p.161). The participation rate in 3rd level education for the semi and unskilled socio-economic groups had also improved to between 33% and 40% by 2004, while over the same period the skilled manual socio-economic group has almost doubled its participation to a range of 50% to 60% up from 32% in 1998 (ESRI 2006; see also O'Connell, McCoy and Clancy 2006, p.327). However, the progressive increase in the estimated participation rate of those groups, which were already 'over-represented' in 1980, was striking. The higher professional group's participation rate reached

saturation level, with an estimate of full participation by 1998, up from 85% in 1992 (see O'Connell, McCoy and Clancy 2006, p.324; Clancy 2001). The employers and managers group had a participation rate of 84% by 1998 (up from 42% in 1980), while the farmers group reached a participation rate of 72% by 1998 (Clancy 2001, p.161; Action Group on Access 2001, pp.33-34).

In spite of a stated policy priority to increase access to 3rd level education for disadvantaged groups, we saw that in 2004 participation ratios in respect of higher professionals, farmers, employers and managers and lower professionals remained above 1, illustrating that these groups had advantaged positions in terms of accessing higher education. The share of children of skilled manual workers among new entrants increased and had become roughly proportional to their share of the population of college entry age in 2004, with similar improvements in access among the semi-skilled and unskilled manual workers, though these groups remained significantly under-represented in terms of their proportional share of new entrants to 3rd level relative to their share of the population (O'Connell, Clancy and McCoy 2006, pp 47-51; see also ESRI 2006; O'Connell, McCoy and Clancy 2006, pp.319-322).

More recently, children from higher socio-economic groups are acquiring "even more college places as the gap between social classes widens" (Donnelly 2013). The Employer and Manager, Higher Professional, and Own Account Workers group have increased slightly since 2010/11 while the participation of new entrants in the Manual Skilled, Semi-skilled and Unskilled groups has remained more or less the same (HEA 2013). The employers and managers group account for 18.9% (17.9% in 2010/11), higher professionals for 11% (10.7% 2010/11), lower professionals for 9.3% (8.8% in 2010/11), and the self-employed category account for 8.4% (7.6% in 2010/11) of new undergraduates in 2011/12 (Donnelly 2013). Therefore very little has changed since Clancy (2001, pp.158-

159) reported that more than 58% of 3rd level entrants in 1998 came from just four socio-economic groups (higher professional, lower professional, employers and managers and farmers), in spite of these groups making up just over 37% of the relevant national population.

Moreover, we continued to see major differences between socio-economic groups in terms of the type of collegeⁱⁱ students attend (HEA 2013, O' Connell, Clancy and McCoy 2006, p.50; Clancy, 2001). In 2004 65.1% of entrants to university again came from just four socio-economic groups (higher professional, lower professional, employers and managers, and farmers groups). In addition these four groups made up 51.2% of entrants to Institutes of Technology, almost 59% of entrants to Colleges of Education, and over 61% of entrants to other colleges (O' Connell, Clancy and McCoy 2006). It is quite profound to note that the employers and managers group made up the highest percentage of new entrants in all four categories of college. Similarly, in 2012 the largest socio-economic group in the Universities and Institutes of technology is the Employer and Manager group (HEA 2013). In 2012, the employers and managers group accounted for 21.1% of first-time entrants to university and 20% of first-time in the institutes of technology (Donnelly 2013). The 2004 data showed an improvement (and in some cases a very significant improvement) on the 1998 participation rates and the 2011/12 figures show further continuity and change in this area. Yet, we must remain acutely mindful that there is a continuing competition to achieve the most highly valued credentials (Clancy 2001, pp.174-175) and the system as it currently stands disproportionately benefits advantaged groups in accessing these credentials.

The promotion of a neoliberal discourse of individual responsibility and meritocracy has also underpinned the introduction of equality of opportunity policies in relation to access to 3rd level for mature students, which we argue

have in turn resulted in low participation rates for this population. Irish Government White Papers and Green Papers in this area were built upon the concept of ‘second chance’, with the state seeing ‘second chance’ as allowing people the opportunity to gain qualifications which they did not obtain previously from the education system (Fleming 1998; Grummell 2007, p.183). Following Fleming (1998) and Grummell (2007), we argue that for many people such ‘opportunities’ are not their second chance, but rather their first chance (Fleming 1998, pp.59-60), and for some may be their last chance, to gain such qualifications. Such discourse also fails to recognise the reality that many citizens cannot make active consumer choices (Grummell 2007, pp.188-189), either in progressing to 3rd level education as a traditional age student, or in returning to 3rd level education as an adult. Inadequate financial supports also (increasingly) effect the participation of mature students in education (Action Group on Access 2001, p.88). Research has long highlighted that the inadequacy of maintenance grants, which have been cut back in recent times, the need for additional support towards the cost of books, course materials and transport, and the lack of supported services such as childcare are prominent obstacles which have to be overcome (Action Group on Access 2001, pp.88-89; Healy 1997; Lynch 1997). The absolute debacle, caused with the introduction of the Student Universal Support Ireland (SUSI) Student Grant Application System (see Reilly 2013a for a fuller discussion) will inevitably have heaped further intolerable pressure on disadvantaged students accessing higher education in Ireland. Indeed, it is also noteworthy that since the onset of the economic crisis in Ireland student contribution charges have been rising. They will stand at €2,500 in September 2013 and rise further to €3,000 by 2015 (Donnelly 2013). Union of Students in Ireland (USI) president John Logue (cited in Donnelly 2013) argues that the

“deliberate attempts by this Government to create a two-tiered education system, through the increase of fees and slashing of the

grant, have resulted in students from lower socio-economic being pushed out of our third-level institutions”.

In such a context we argue that our current model for mature student access to 3rd level education allows the “strong and self-motivated individual to climb the economic ladder and fit into society” (Fleming 1998, pp.59-61) while those who are most in need of ‘second chance’ education continue to struggle to access it.

Accordingly the data presented in this section suggests a society where successful participation in higher education is unrelated to social, cultural or economic background has not materialised and the rise in participation rates has disproportionately benefited the middle classes. All of this has occurred in spite of the abolition of 3rd level tuition fees in Ireland in 1996 (McCoy and Smyth 2003; O’Connell, McCoy and Clancy 2006, p.315), which was designed to remedy this situation. Thus it is argued that the education system as it currently stands is a mechanism through which society’s inequalities are being reproduced.

Conclusions:

This paper has sought to examine the impact of an ideological / political / class project on the Irish education system. We argue that the neoliberal education system will continue to disproportionately benefit those at the top end of the social ladder, while the existence of strong levels of meritocratic ideology masks the perpetuation of privilege. In essence, we follow O’ Connor (2013) in arguing that the processes discussed in this paper ultimately result in the destabilization of

“the meaning and purpose of the university as an institution; weakening the student/teacher relationship; ridiculing the involvement of academic staff and students in the governance of the university; distorting research activity; increasing the levels of

casualization among teaching staff and depicting students as customers” (Allen, 2007; Grummell *et al.*, 2007; Lynch *et al.*, 2012 cited in O’ Connor 2013, p.17; Garvin 2012).

Indeed, they also legitimise and promote a constricted instrumental understanding of what education is for (Bok, 2003 cited in O’ Connor 2013, p.17); namely “a limited educational paradigm which is preoccupied with a positivistic concern with ‘facts’; and a wider populist and anti-intellectual culture within Irish society which implicitly favours a utilitarian market driven approach” (O’Carroll, 2008 cited in O’ Connor 2013, pp.12-13; See also O’ Dowd 2012 for a discussion on anti-intellectualism and capitalism).

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ⁱ Publishing in academic journals has become a 'key performance indicator,' at universities in all higher-income economies, over the past decade, part of the "politics of knowledge production within cognitive capitalism" (Roggiero 201, p.vii). In Ireland, there is an ever increasing expectation / requirement to publish in Thomson Reuters ISI ranked journals. Such publications are seen as being important for university rankings, and with the requirement to demonstrate the 'impact' of research, the introduction of workload documents, etc many 9if not all) academics now can be seen to be "researching under the audit" (Illner 2011, p.70).

ⁱⁱ See the Higher Education Authority website www.hea.ie for a list of these colleges. The Universities offer courses up to doctoral level. Institutes of Technology primarily offer courses to certificate and diploma level, though some degree courses are provided. The courses offered in IT's are primarily technical courses. The Colleges of Education prepare individuals for careers as primary school teachers.

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