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Introduction

Mindful of the political and cultural context preceding the introduction of 'free education', this paper engages reflexively with the contemporary educational 'common sense' that equalizing opportunities in education is an effective means of overcoming social class inequalities and promoting a meritocratic society more generally in Ireland. In doing so, it is mindful of fact that there is no view from nowhere in academic life: academics, including the authors, do not stand on neutral intellectual ground; their personal and intellectual premises and values underpin their theoretical positions (Crean and Lynch, 2011; Gouldner 1970; Lynch and Ivancheva 2015).

The following statement from the 'experts' in the Irish Council of Education (1960) is salutary, and a reminder of how 'educated' people at a given time in history are bound by what Alvin Gouldner (1970) termed their *domain and paradigmatic assumptions*, that is to say by their own values and assumptions emanating from their biography, professional interests, academic backgrounds and experiences.

An unqualified scheme of 'secondary education for all' would be both financially impractical and educationally unsound. Only a minority would be capable of benefiting from such education and standards would fall. The voluntary system has worked well and preserves a sense of the value of education. Better State grants and more scholarships are needed to further stimulate it' (Council of Education, Ireland, 1960).

The experts serving on the Council of Education in the 1950s were people who genuinely believed that a selective and exclusive secondary education should be retained; they thought that most people were not capable of being educated to secondary level. While this may seem extraordinary, given what we now know from the history of education, sociology, developmental psychology and other disciplines, Council members were merely reflecting

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the 'common sense', the received and unquestioned 'wisdom' of that time in Ireland. Though respected educators, the Council were also limited by the lack of diversity and reflexivity within their own ranks. They were overwhelmingly male religious drawn from the secondary school sector. The domain assumptions and values of their social backgrounds, and the narrow paradigmatic assumptions of their academic education, framed their educational and social imaginary. As respected 'experts' they were not required to be reflexive about how their *domain* assumptions may have framed their *paradigmatic* assumptions regarding what was educationally possible.

This paper suggests that we may be suffering from an equally constrained educational and social imaginary in our current thinking about equality in education. The 'common sense' of our time, enshrined in both EU and Irish law, is that equality of opportunity is a reasonable and tenable principle for promoting equality in education and in society more generally. It is also widely believed that the educational system is itself meritocratic. Using empirical evidence from a range of international studies, this paper claims that equality of opportunity needs to be underpinned by the principle of equality of condition, especially equality of economic condition, if it is to be meaningful. As the principle of equality of opportunity is operationalized in education through the practice of meritocratic selection in schools and colleges, the paper demonstrates how meritocracy is an unrealizable myth in an economically unequal society.

Why Equal Opportunities Policies in Education Cannot undo Social Class Inequalities

Ireland's educational achievements over the last 50 years have been remarkable in aggregate terms. Ireland is among an elite group of countries with relatively high rates of educational attainment, a low rate of early-school leaving and a high proportion of graduates from

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second-level schools entering higher education (Byrne and McCoy 2017). Moreover, Clancy's analysis of EUROSTUDENT surveys (2005-2011) shows that access rates to higher education for blue-collar (working-class students) is higher in Ireland than in several other European countries, including Germany, France and Austria (Clancy 2013).

However, as with all aggregated data, the general picture does not tell the complete story. Educational expansion, while raising the national standards of education, has not led to the kind of reduction in *relative* social-class inequalities that many believed it could or would. The relative class advantage of the upper and upper middle classes only tapered off in a given sector of education when their participation rates reached saturation point, in other words when they had maximized their social class advantages at that level (Raftery and Hout, 1992; McCoy and Smyth 2011). Social class background exercises a direct influence on educational opportunities including school choice (Cahill and Hall 2014); it also interfaces with ethnicity and race in determining educational opportunities for Traveller and immigrant children (Devine 2011; Darmody, Byrne and McGinnity 2014). The educational advantages of the Irish professional and business elite are also aided financially through the State funding of elite schools (Courtois 2015). Although there is little known about how social class and disabilityⁱ classifications and inequalities are operating in Ireland, due to the lack of attention given to these issues in research (McDonnell 2003), there is ample international research showing that access to disability support services and disability classifications are also classed and raced in ways that advantage those who are privileged (Blanchett, 2010; Riddell 2009, 2016).

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While international evidence confirms that the relatively privileged have maintained their social class advantages within and without education for many decades (Blossfeld and Shavit 1993; Marsh 2011; Reardon 2011), this is not to suggest that the quality of education in schools is inconsequential in challenging inequality. Irish research shows that the quality of teaching, the inclusiveness of the curriculum and assessment procedures, and school organisational arrangements are important for mitigating the impact of social class, ethnic, racial and gendered injustices in society (Banks, 2014; Devine, Kenny and McNeela 2008; Darmody and McCoy 2011). However, while education can significantly enhance a given *individual's* capabilities and life chances, it cannot overcome structural (group-based) injustices arising from economic inequalities as the generative site of those injustices is not located within the education system in the first instance (Lynch and O'Neill, 1994; Lynch and Lodge, 2002; Lynch and Baker 2005; Marsh, 2011).

What has remained largely unappreciated in Ireland and elsewhere is that the expansion of education and liberal equal opportunities policies cannot not have a significant impact on relative social class dis/advantages, for reasons arising from the dynamic relationship between the structures of a capitalist economy and formal education (Marsh, 2011). The false promise of meritocratic individualism in a hierarchically organised society, needs to be recognised. While a small minority from working-class households can and do succeed relative to their upper class peers, this is not feasible for the majority. Educational credentials are competitively acquired positional goods, and those who are collectively and individually best resourced are at a competitive advantage in attaining the most valuable educational credentials. A major study in the US (involving a meta-analysis of 19 national studies over a 50-year period) has confirmed this. Reardon (2011) found that social class-

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based inequalities in educational attainment have risen in the US since the 1970s and these inequalities are directly related to income inequalities; those who own and control private wealth are always in a position to use this wealth to advantage their own children, especially by buying extra educational resources outside the formal educational system. Kaushal, Magnusson and Waldfogel's (2011) research in the US shows that families in the top income quintile (richest 20%) are spending almost seven times as much per child each year compared with the poorest 20%: they paid \$9,000 per child for "enrichment" activities such as out-of-school tutoring, athletic activities, test preparation, summer camps, 2nd language learning and cultural activities compared with the \$1,300 per child that families in the bottom quintile (20%) spent. Private, out-of-school financial investment is advantaging children in high-income households in terms of educational attainment (Duncan and Murnane, 2011). There is every reason to believe that private family investment is also advantaging children from privileged backgrounds in Ireland. The data from the *Growing Up in Ireland* study shows that most structured out-of-school cultural activities are only fully accessible on a paid basis. The net effect is that 'those in the higher income families are much more likely to attend' (Smyth 2016, p. 96).

Even though the Irish state has invested much in making education more egalitarian in terms of standardising the quality of schools and teaching, this work is undermined by what is happening in other fields of fiscal and public policy. Economic inequalities in Ireland are among the highest in the OECD *prior to social transfers* (TASC 2015, 2016); inequality has remained consistent over time, and was exacerbated during austerity from 2008-2014 (Lynch, Cantillon and Crean, 2017). Rising economic inequalities means that children from poorer households cannot participate on equal terms with others within education as they do not

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have equal resources. The way poverty impacts on returning to school each year exemplifies this: the average cost of returning to school varied from €340 (primary) to €775 (second level) for a given child in 2017 (Barnados, 2017). Yet, the government back-to-school allowance for low-income families was €125 for a child up to age 11, and €250 per child after that age. The allowance does not meet even half the costs involved ~~leading~~ forcing poorer parents into debt (Barnados, *Ibid*). This reflects the general underinvestment in public education in Ireland, and the disinvestment in public goods and services during and since the financial crisis (Lynch, Cantillon and Crean 2017; Murphy and Dukelow 2016). The lack of political commitment to equality in education is evident from cuts to educational services for children with learning disabilities, Travellers, and language supports for immigrant children over the last ten years. The latter cutbacks exemplify in particular the ways in which race and disability interface with social class in undermining equal opportunities: lower income households (and low-income immigrant families are among them), rely most heavily on public services; the lack of investment in public services impacts most severely on them (TASC 2015, 2016a).

As public schools in Ireland are not adequately funded, the majority are required to supplement their income by requesting 'voluntary contributions' from parents, a policy that is deeply inequitable given parental differences in ability to pay: schools with the poorest parents have the lowest voluntary contributions even though they are the ones that need it most. Moreover, the costs of school books, computers and extracurricular activities require considerable parental investment even in the so-called free educational system (Barnados, 2017). Social class advantage comes into play through differential economic power. Ireland has a long-established 'educational market': the middle and upper classes are free to migrate

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to semi-private and private service provision to make up any deficits in the public education system (Tormey, 2007). They can also supplement public schooling with private investment. The use of private tuition (grinds) ~~are~~ is a prime example of this. It is 'common sense' among those who are educational 'insiders' (Lyons, Lynch, Close, Sheerin and Boland, 2003, pp. 329-356) to get private tuition for their children prior to the Leaving Certificate in particular (Lynch and O'Riordan, 1998). While Smyth's (2009) analysis of School Leaver Survey data suggests that grinds *per se* may not boost grades, grinds are only one of the panoply of market services available for those who can pay for them. Summer camps, language travel and educationally relevant extracurricular activities are widely available for those who can pay.

The market for out-of-school tuition in Irish and Music reflects the longevity (and widespread acceptance) of privately funded education. Private tuition in Irish and Music is so well established that it is rarely if ever framed as a grind. Given that 40% of the overall grade for Leaving Certificate Irish is now given for oral Irish, parents who can afford to send children to the Gaeltachtⁱⁱ are at a distinct advantage in the Leaving Certificate Examination. Almost 50% of the overall grade in Leaving Certificate Music can be given for performance; yet, it is extremely difficult to excel in performance in the Leaving Certificate without undertaking private tuition over an extended period of time and the costs are very high: in 2017, one-to-one instrumental music classes were advertised on the internet at €25 for half an hour. The costs are prohibitive for low-income families (Conaghan, 2015). The introduction of the Higher Professional Aptitude Test (HPAT) assessment for medicine is a more recent example of a class-biased selection criterion; both preparation for the test and taking it has to be privately funded.ⁱⁱⁱ

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The link between economic and educational inequality is reflected in the fact that at age 13, a 1% increase in household income predicts a 6.5% increase in verbal scores, a 5.2% increase in numerical scores and a 5.8% increase in the total Drumcondra Test scores' (TASC 2016b). Moreover, data from the *Growing up in Ireland* survey shows that classed inequality in educational attainment literally increases with age (TASC, 2016b). Entry to higher education is also highly class stratified, and while the proportion of students attending higher education has increased for all classes since free education was introduced, 50% of students from Ireland's most affluent areas study at one of the most elite universities in Ireland, four times the rate of those from disadvantaged areas (*Ibid*). As is true internationally (Reay, 2017) higher education has become an increasingly important site for social class stratification. What is clear from the above is that there is a circular relationship between economic inequality and educational attainment: the relative lack of economic resources disables those seeking competitive advantage; lower rates of attainments, in turn, limit people's opportunities to outcompete others in the quest for valuable educational credentials.

The Generative Sites of Economic Inequality

Although the quality of public education can significantly enhance an individual's capabilities and life chances relative to others, especially in a labour-migratory globalised economy, it cannot overcome economic injustices directly when the generative site of those injustices is not located within the education system in the first instance. Education can enable people to develop individually; however, as it is not the generative site of economically-led social class inequality it must not be held accountable for its persistence. It was the restructuring of the economies and occupational structures in Western capitalist states in the post WWII period that enabled absolute rates of social mobility to rise, not changes in

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education *per se* (Goldthorpe, 2007). In the post-1980 period, it was the deregulation and geopolitics of taxation and finance that contributed significantly to the rise of economic inequality (Piketty, 2014, p. 20). The rise of precarious work, zero-hour contracts and the proliferation of low-waged economies in the services sector, in Western capitalist economies (Standing, 2011) is not the direct outcomes of actions in the education sector; education cannot prevent powerful employers creating low-paid jobs, or failing to provide pensions for their workers; it cannot alter the structure of the capitalist economy that creates the inequality that contributes to unequal access to and participation in education (Marsh, 2011). The new oligarchic rich are global citizens and increasingly detached from nation states and their policies (Streeck, 2016, p. 28); *noblesse oblige* does not apply. It is not the educational institutions that enable them to maintain their class advantage through inheritance, low taxes on wealth, deregulated financial markets and the free movement of capital across borders. The latter is a function of mobilized class power, be it in international law, military spending, fiscal policy and/or the legislative and political infrastructures of global capitalist economies. This applies in Ireland as elsewhere (Allen, 2007). The super-rich can block wealth taxes and buy political majorities through campaign contributions, while maintaining social legitimacy through philanthropy (Streeck, 2016, pp. 28-30). In determining levels of inequality, 'inherited wealth comes close to being as decisive at the beginning of the twenty-first century as it was in the age of Balzac's Père Goriot' (Piketty, 2014, p. 22). As major class inequalities are not a product of educational policy *per se* it is not appropriate to hold ~~it~~ them responsible for them. What is equally unacceptable is to promote the idea that education can alter the class structures of society through meritocratic means, selecting out the academically capable and creating a class-fair system of social

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selection in an economically unequal society. Yet, blaming schools for failing to resolve social inequalities has become a powerful narrative in recent decades in a number of countries including the United States (Kantor and Lowe, 2013). Education has been given the responsibility to challenge class inequality, something it cannot do alone.

The Myth of Meritocracy and Equality of Opportunity in an Economically Unequal society

It would be very difficult for educational (and economic) inequality to be sustained over time in democratic societies unless it was deemed morally justifiable. The moral justification for unequal outcomes in education is provided through widespread allegiance to a liberal code of equality of opportunity (EO)^{iv}. There is a belief that the EO principle is an acceptable guide to policy in the distribution of social goods: it is encoded in EU Treaties, and advanced within member states by a variety of legally binding directives. Its legal status adds to its legitimacy as a mechanism for distributing social goods, including education.

The principle of equality of opportunity is formally operationalised in education through the practice of meritocratic selection; competition for advantage is regulated by rewarding those who achieve highly. The most 'meritorious', where $IQ+Effort=Merit^v$ (Young, 1958), are given high grades and the least 'meritorious' are awarded lower grades. On the basis of these classifications, education and social selection for each stage of education and, ultimately, for the labour market, is determined. There is widespread allegiance to the fairness of this 'meritocratic' system in Ireland (Kennedy and Power, 2010). Given the relationship between educational success, income, wealth and other forms of social and cultural capital outlined above, meritocratic selection is simply unattainable in an economically unequal society (Brown, Lauder and Ashton, 2011; Brown, 2013; Mijs, 2016).

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There is a false promise of methodological individualism underpinning equal opportunities thinking: the selection of the few cannot become the pattern for the many, not least due to the limited number of elite positions within a hierarchical system. Also, because credentialised education is a positional good, its value is always relative: to succeed one must have more of the valued credentials than one's competitors. In an economically unequal society the competition is never a fair one as competitors are not equally resourced, and that includes resourced in terms of social networks (Kennedy and Power 2010). A study involving Ireland and a number of other Western European countries by Frazini and Raitano (2013) highlights this point. It shows how, even when people have comparable college degrees and grades, the class position of their social origins impacts on the prestige and income of their jobs, to the advantage of the already privileged. They hypothesise that class-based social networks and social skills contribute to these class-biased labour market differentials.

Meritocratic policies are also unrealisable for other reasons. The abilities and opportunities to be meritorious are based on non-meritocratic factors, including inheritance and the circumstances of birth; in addition, what is defined as worthy of merit recognition at a given time and culture is quite arbitrary and, by definition, excludes some groups (Mijs, 2016). The key question always remains, who has the power to define which abilities are of merit and how does a society know and measure abilities (intelligences) and/or effort. There is no clear formula for measuring these that is not deeply subjective and numerous studies show that meritocratic traits vary across societies and over time (*Ibid*). Unfortunately, although it is known that many tests of 'abilities', such as aptitude and IQ-type tests like the SAT, are both social class and racially biased (Lemann, 1995) (and inherently disablist given their reliance on online equivalents of pencil and paper tests), they remain in widespread use

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across the world. Karabel's (2005) study of how the definitions of merit changed in Harvard, Yale and Princeton over the twentieth century in ways that enabled them to exclude unwanted outsiders, be these non-whites, Jews, Catholics or women, is proof of the arbitrariness of merit. The inclusion of large numbers of students within contemporary universities who have dyslexia or other disabilities is also proof of how arbitrary exclusions 'on merit' have been historically. The problem remains that those who have the power to define 'merit' will always do so in a way that will ensure their own children are meritorious (Mijs, 2016, p. 21). The principle of meritocracy is an ideology that justifies inequality not a means of overcoming it.

A further problem with the principle of meritocracy is that it 'crowds out' debates about equality and need (Mijs, 2016: 23-26). This is perhaps its most dangerous characteristic. The belief that one can select and find the meritorious creates a widespread political and educational culture focused on finding 'the talented few'. It fosters a belief in a neoliberal era that only a minority of talented (market valuable) people exist, propelling the so-called 'global war for talent' (Brown and Tannock, 2009) and the self-righteousness of the 'successful'. Meritocracy has a moral as well as a market message; the educationally successful are of value while the relatively unsuccessful are not. The moral code implicit in meritocratic thinking, focusing on the prioritisation of the few at the expense of the many, over-rides and weakens other values in education: nurturing, trust, integrity, care and solidarity are subordinated to regulation, control and competition. Investment in 'elite' scholars, athletes, leaders, musicians, actors (the so-called 'bright', 'gifted' 'smart' 'able' students) is prioritised over investment in those with greatest educational needs, who could be equally 'bright, smart, gifted and able' if given the opportunity. As the amoral principle of

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competition become the necessitous in a meritocratic system, documenting scores, educational attainments and ranks becomes an industry in itself. Student and staff idealism to work in 'the public interest' is diminished as energy and time must be devoted to documenting institutional and/or personal achievements (Lynch, 2015). Moreover, educating those who are most disadvantaged ceases to be a priority as the vulnerable are a threat to a good performance appraisal. What emerges is a twenty-first century manifestation of essentialist, eugenics-related logic, declaring that only a minority are worthy of investment. Educational resources are redirected to policies and practices that will ensure the selection of the meritorious few rather than enabling the socially disadvantaged to gain parity (Brown and Tannock, 2009). The rise of elite academies, centres for so-called gifted children in schools and merit scholarships in universities, are all indicative of this trend. Claims of 'giftedness' are mirrored in parallel systems of disability labelling. Much of the latter is class-biased and racialized and does not lead to better services for those who most need them, although it may well advantage the better off (Blanchett 2010, Riddell 2009, Riddell and Weedon, 2016).

A further danger of deploying meritocracy as a principle of justice for the allocation of rewards (including educational awards) is that it individualises the problem of relative educational failure. What are effectively structural injustices become defined as personal troubles; they manifest themselves in feelings of guilt, anxiety, failure and, at times, hopelessness. Over time this creates cynicism and anger, individually and politically, as people realise that their 'failure' was the inevitable outcome of an unfair competition (Liu, 2011). Arlie Hochschild's (2016) five-year study with supporters of the Tea Party in the Southern States of the US shows how the meritocratic myth has exploded into political agitation and anger in America. What is also dangerous about relying on liberal equality of

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opportunity policies, and their moral ally meritocracy to address injustices is that they foster an illusion of manageable and achievable success. They provide a moral legitimisation for failure that depoliticises the debate about social injustice. Meritocratic thinking is a literally a smokescreen behind which privilege is normalised (Kennedy and Power, 2010). It focuses attention on the self, the actuarial self who has to manage her or his own risk and opportunities and blinds us to the need for solidarity and cooperation to overcome group-based injustices. It propels people to be more and more individually competitive and to ignore and out-compete others rather than stand by them in collective action.

Why Equality of Condition Matters

In educational terms, equalising opportunity is about promoting fairness in the competition for advantage. It implies that there will be winners and losers, people who do well and people who do badly. An 'opportunity' in this context is the right to compete, not the right to choose among alternatives of equal value. So two people, or two different groups, can have formal equal opportunities even if one of them has no real prospect of achieving anything of value. For example, a society that allows only 20 per cent of the population to attend third-level education could, in this liberal sense, give everyone an equal opportunity to do so, even though in a stronger sense it would clearly be denying the opportunity for third-level education to 80 per cent of the population. Under an equal opportunities framework, the purpose of having a principle of equality in public policy-making is to provide a fair basis for managing these inequalities, by strengthening the minimum to which everyone is entitled and by using equality of opportunity to regulate the competition for advantage. The most ambitious liberal equality principle is Rawls's 'difference principle', which states that 'social

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and economic inequalities' should work 'to the greatest benefit of the least advantaged' members of society (Rawls, 1971, p. 83; 2001, pp. 42-43). Rawls also argues that people should not be advantaged or hampered by their social background and that their prospects in life should depend entirely on their own effort and abilities. Rawls calls this principle 'fair equal opportunity' (1971, p. 73; 2001, pp. 43-44).

The problem with the concept of equality of opportunity is that it pre-supposes the persistence of structural inequalities; it assumes that there will always be major inequalities between people in their status, resources, relationships and power. It is implied if not stated that the fundamental structures of modern welfare capitalist states (with the Nordic countries in Europe frequently cited as the ideal cases) are, at least in broad outline, the best humanity is capable of at this time in history. This is not to say that promoters of equality of opportunity in the liberal egalitarian tradition think that we live in the best of all possible worlds or that there is little we can do to improve the way we manage education or societies generally to make them fairer. However, there is an assumption that a mixed economy of capitalism and voluntary effort, a developed system of social welfare, a meritocratic educational system, and a specialized and hierarchical division of labour - define the institutional framework within which any progress towards equality can be made. The task for egalitarians is to make adjustments to these structures rather than to alter them in fundamental ways.

In contrast to liberal equality of opportunists, promoters of equality of condition claim that inequality is rooted in changing and changeable social structures, and particularly in structures of domination and oppression. Equality of condition refers to the belief that people,

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individually and collectively, should be as equal as possible in relation to the central conditions of their lives, particularly in terms of their material conditions and the exercise of power. It is not about trying to make inequalities fairer, nor is it about giving people a more equal opportunity to become unequal; it is about ensuring that all of humanity have roughly equal prospects for a good and decent life. In education, it is not about just giving groups of people a formal right to education which in reality is unrealizable given pre-existing structural inequalities (e.g. due to lack of transport, money, books, or other cultural resources). Equality of condition recognises the categorical and highly institutionalized character of social inequality that Tilly (1998) has identified. Because deep inequalities between peoples are encoded in laws and public policies in the form of property rights, relational and communication rights, and cultural and participatory rights and practices, equality of condition is focused on achieving changes in the organization of institutions, be these economic, political, cultural or affective.

What liberal egalitarians see as inevitable, promoters of equality of condition regard as changeable. Because social structures have changed in the past, they can be changed in the future. Exactly which structures need to change is a matter of debate, but they clearly include structures of capitalism (a predominantly market-based economy in which the means of production are privately owned and controlled resulting in the deeply exploitative work relations for the majority of humanity), patriarchy (systems of gender relationships that privilege men over women worldwide), racism (social systems that divide people into 'races' and privilege some 'races' over others with enormous human cost in terms of life and livelihoods) and disablism (social systems that define people in terms of abilities they lack

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rather than those that they possess thereby denying millions of people the right to education and autonomy).

Focusing on social structures when explaining inequality focuses policy attention on changing the structures and regulations protecting privilege. It recognises the long, slow processes involved in unravelling centuries of privilege that are encoded in laws of ownership and control, in hegemonic modes of thinking and in language itself. In contrast to the tendency of liberal egalitarians to focus on the rights and advantages of individuals in particular, equality of condition pays equal attention to the rights and advantages of groups; it recognises the intersectionality of injustices on life's positioning within (Gillborn, 2015) and without education (Anthias, 2012). In contrast to liberal egalitarians' tendency to concentrate on how resources can be redistributed, it focuses on the structures and relations of unequal ownership, control and distribution in the first instance and how these can be changed (Baker, Lynch, Cantillon and Walsh, 2004). It argues that pre-distributional inequalities of wealth and income need to be examined not just the means for redistributing wealth and incomes after the fact. Equality of condition also means paying more attention to how people are related, how the wealth of some is at the cost of the poverty of others, and how unequal power relations interface with inequalities of wealth, status, and other resources. In contrast to the tendency of liberal egalitarians to hold individuals as being responsible for their successes and failures in education, equality of condition emphasizes the influence of social class, race, disability, care responsibilities, sexuality, gender, regional location, and other factors on people's choices and actions. It presents a holistic framework on social change in education, arguing that inequality in education is not only about issues of equality of access, but is also about *parity of respect and recognition* within education, *parity of participation* in the

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exercise of power and *the realisation of love, care and solidarity* within the organisation of schools and colleges (Lynch and Baker, 2005). While it has only been possible to focus on the significance of equality of economic condition in this short paper, similar issues arise for the realization of equality of condition in relation to achieving parity of respect and recognition and parity in the exercise of power in relation to race, gender, disability, ethnicity, sexuality, age, etc. There is also a profound need to rethink education in terms of its core care responsibility (*educare*) to nurture and enable people to grow and develop in a way that is not simply directed by the market economy.

Concluding Remarks

The equality principle governing Irish public policy, and particularly educational policy, is that of equality of opportunity based on merit. Those who adhere to the meritocratic position claim that those who work hard and are academically capable will do well in school regardless of their social background. The evidence does not support this claim: major social and economic inequalities inevitably undermine all but the thinnest forms of equality of opportunity in education because privileged parents will always find ways of advantaging their children in an economically unequal society. The inability of formal education to overcome social class inequalities is a reflection of the general inability of liberal equal opportunities policies to deliver social justice in an economically unjust society, something Tawney (1931) predicted almost 100 years ago. Speaking of promoting equality of opportunity in a capitalist society he stated: '*Equality meant not the absence of violent contrasts in income and condition, but equal opportunities to become unequal...equality is encouraged to reign provided it does not attempt to rule*' (Tawney, 1931, p. 103). This presents a major dilemma for educators; even when schools do their best to overcome the

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many class (and increasingly ethnic/racial/disability-related) disadvantages that students experience within schools and colleges, they cannot eliminate the competitive advantage of the most advantaged. Yes, there are individual exceptions; but the exceptions are deceptive and dangerous when taken as examples (role models) of what is possible for the majority; they prolong the meritocratic myth that hard work and academic ability are all that is required to succeed relative to others. Unless we address social class inequality outside of school, and create a more economically equal society in Ireland more generally, we cannot have any meaningful equality of opportunity in education. We need to have a significantly more equal distribution of wealth and income to have substantive equality of opportunity in education. And for this to happen both fiscal and educational policy need to be framed in an egalitarian way. This means dealing with pre-distributional and post-distributional injustices in the taxation system, and increasing taxes in a fair and equitable manner, something that is not the case currently as Ireland relies heavily on indirect systems of taxation that are highly regressive (Collins, 2014). Ireland visibly fails to tax profits and unearned wealth in an equitable manner. Given the relational nature of injustice, an unjust taxation system has a direct impact on the quality of the public education services and on the abilities of those who are most in need to maximise the benefits of education.

A number of questions arise from this paper. Are we deceiving young people in working-class areas, and inadvertently promoting cynicism among them, by telling them they can compete on equal terms with those whose out-of-school resources are vastly superior to theirs, and who are able to activate these resources as required to maintain their educational advantage? Do our unspoken domain and paradigmatic assumptions about the efficacy of equal opportunities and meritocratic policies prevent us from documenting and highlighting

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the whole truth about equality in education in Ireland? In an educational competition where both the definition of merit and the resources to achieve it are already controlled by the upper middle and upper classes of Irish society, are we deceiving those who are working class and/or underprivileged for reasons of ethnicity or race or differences in abilities about what education can offer them? In other words, are we any different to the authors of the Council of Education Report in 1960 when we congratulate ourselves on what we have achieved while ignoring the perpetuation of inequalities in education and society more generally under a new coda? Equality of condition is possible, even if it takes time, but does it challenge too many vested interests? And if it does, who will take up the challenge?

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ⁱ The word disability needs to be challenged as a category of identification. 'Dis' is a negative prefix in English , so to define any person or group as disabled or having a disability is to implicitly suggest they are lacking something in human ability terms. Perhaps the word should change to 'diffability', thereby recognising the enormous diversity in abilities within the human condition

ⁱⁱ While a small minority get scholarships, the average basic cost for a standard three-week course in 2017 was €950

ⁱⁱⁱ It cost €130 to do the HPAT test in 2017 and a basic preparation course cost €250.

^{iv} Equality of opportunity is a liberal concept. Liberal egalitarians typically define equality in terms of individuals rather than groups; while they vary between conservative liberal and left-leaning liberals, they all subscribe to the view that equality of opportunity means that people should in some sense have an equal chance to compete for social advantages. As they assume that inequality is endemic to society, equality of opportunity is about equalizing the distribution of educational (and life) chances within an unequal society. For a discussion on the difference between liberal ideas of equality and equality of condition, see Chapter 2 of *Equality: From Theory to Action* (Baker, Lynch et al. 2004).

^v For Michael Young (1958) this formula was not a principle to be lauded as a fair means of operating social selection; quite the contrary, his book is an ironic critique of the idea, and of the moral judgement that would ensue from its implementation. To fail due to bad luck would be forgivable but to fail because you did not deserve to do well (lacked merit) is to be held accountable for failure and not so easily forgiven.