

**‘Talking your way to the top’
A sociological examination of the role of elite education in the
reproduction of privilege in Irish society**

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This paper examines the role that elite schools play in the reproduction of privilege in Irish society. Ireland’s elite schools have very strong connections to the top of the social hierarchy with their alumni containing a disproportionate number of individuals in key leadership positions in Irish society. Yet to date, the role these schools play in determining who has access to power in our society has received little attention. The paper focuses on the role debating and extracurricular activities play in this process. The study received ethical approval from the University of Limerick AHSS Research Ethics committee.

Introduction

Despite generally being neglected in sociological research, the study of elite schooling provides valuable insights into how educational exclusion operates. The term ‘elite school’ in this paper refers to a small set of Ireland’s most exclusive fee-paying secondary schools. The predominance of the privately educated in key leadership positions highlights the extent to which these exclusive schools act as conduits of privilege, where they not alone determine a student’s academic learning, but also (and perhaps more importantly) “shape students lifestyles and life chances” (Persell & Cookson 1986, p.16). Elite schools provide their students with the necessary skills to enable them to convert valued cultural capital into social resources, and to use these resources to gain wealth, reputation, and power. Consequently, while the time spent in education is

generally considered the best single predictor of occupational status and income, this paper argues that where one is educated is possibly of greater significance.

Elite education

Ireland's elite schools have very strong connections to the top of the social hierarchy, with their alumni containing a disproportionate number of individuals in key leadership positions (Clancy 1995; Rice, 2006; Flynn, 2008a). The roll of past pupils for many of these schools documents the enormous power and influence that their graduates wield (Sunday Tribune 2003). The exclusive Belvedere College, for instance has educated writers of the calibre of James Joyce and business leaders like Tony O' Reilly. Clongowes Wood College in Naas has educated business leaders Michael O'Leary and Michael Smurfit and former Taoiseach John Bruton, while Dublin's Alexandra College lists it's most noteworthy past pupils as politician Ivana Bacik and Supreme Court Judge Susan Denham. With six of the eight Irish Supreme Court judges (The Supreme Court of Ireland 2009), and a disproportionate number of politicians (Sunday Tribune, 2003) and business leaders having spent their formative years in these schools (CRO 2009; Cairnduff 1999), it is clear that investing in elite education pays rich dividends.

With fees ranging up to €25,000 a year, it is clear that elite private education largely remains the preserve of the (upper) middle and elite classes in Irish society (Walshe & Hickey 2008). Such fees raise an annual income of €119 million, a bottom line figure which does not include additional contributions, obtained from the religious orders running these schools and from students parents, which serve to maintain their high standards (Walshe & Hickey 2008). Despite benefiting from this very healthy income stream, the 58 fee-paying schools in Ireland also receive a very generous €101 million of taxpayers'

money each year ¹(Special Group on Public Service Numbers and Expenditure Programmes, 2009). In essence, this has resulted 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). Consequently, I would argue that the remarkable ‘success’ that the country’s most exclusive fee-paying schools enjoy, topping annual league tables, is not as Butler (2009) has argued, a demonstration of the ‘all-round excellence’ of these schools, but is more accurately described as a demonstration of the impact of continuing class inequality in the Irish education system.

Theoretical Framework: A lens to view educational inequality and social reproduction:

My theoretical framework utilised structural Marxism, Weberian status theory and Bourdieu’s concept of capital. By combining these three theoretical lenses a greater explanatory power was offered for the phenomena I was exploring and my combined framework provided far greater explanatory power than any single framework could (Kearney and Hyle 2006). I now document how this framework views educational inequality and social reproduction.

The education system is largely promoted (by those of a functionalist persuasion) as an arena where every child, regardless of social background, has the same chance to succeed, and where success is determined by one’s innate

¹ While most schools have been affected by a range of dramatic cuts in state funding (see Flynn 2008 for an overview), there have been few calls to cut state subvention of fee-paying schools until the recent report of the Special group on public service numbers and expenditure programmes. In recommending a 25% reduction in such funding, McCarthy’s group acknowledged the great inequity in the state funding of fee-paying schools, yet they also acknowledge that the proposed cut will not result in any significant change for the bigger private schools, effectively leaving the existing status quo unaltered (See Special Group on Public Service Numbers and Expenditure Programmes 2009, pp.62-63).

abilities and hard work (see Considine & Dukelow 2009, pp 287–299). As the ‘engine’ of meritocracy, education’s role is to identify and select the most talented and motivated individuals and subsequently provide them with the appropriate educational training in “direct proportion to this individual merit” (McNamee & Miller 2004, p.95). In essence, these meritocratic principals propose that the individual alone determines success and failure (Drudy & Lynch 1993; Considine & Dukelow 2009).

From a conflict perspective, however, the reality is very different. From this viewpoint, rather than operating to promote equality, the education system functions to reproduce and protect the interests of the dominant classes (Bourdieu & Passeron 1990; Lynch 1989; Lynch & Lodge 2002). Proponents of this argument, contend that the strategic use of the meritocratic discourse allow for the reproduction of inequality, but also and perhaps more importantly, they argue that its use provides a way of legitimising inequality in education (Hurn 1993, p.114; Power 2008; Lynch & Lodge, 2002; Drudy & Lynch, 1993).

For Marxists, the key to educational (and in turn economic) success does not rest on personal attributes but rather on one’s access to economic capital (McMullin 2004, p.20). The vastly superior resources available in elite schools, is a central factor in determining their pupils success. 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 & Hannon 2007). However, the resources that elite schools enjoy are such that the children who attend these schools are effectively given “a head start” (Allen 2008, p.179).

From this perspective, the education system acts as an avenue to perpetuate or ‘reproduce’ the capitalist system. According to Bowles and Gintis (1976),

‘correspondence theory’ 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 need to occupy their respective places in the labour force (Bowles & Gintis 1976). Schools that cater for working class families teach compliance, punctuality, and discipline, skills that are required by employees in the workforce, while elite schools focus on “articulateness and authoritativeness”, and other skills required in leadership roles (Young 1990, p.207). For Marxists, 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).

Bourdieu proposes an understanding of social reproduction based on a range of metaphorical forms of capital. From this perspective, educational success or failure is explained by the amount and type of cultural and social capital one possesses rather than by measures of individual talent or achievement (Bourdieu 1977). Bourdieu defined cultural capital as the aesthetic preferences, linguistic styles, attitudes, and values that are highly valued in society (Bourdieu and Passeron 1990). Social capital is identified as the connections, relationships, and networks of influence that are employed throughout the course of one’s life that enables one to succeed. The dynamics between these forms of capital, allow one form to be converted into another and for Bourdieu (Bourdieu & Passeron 1990) it is this ability to convert capital that aids the intergenerational reproduction of privilege.

Bourdieu holds that the cultural resources in the home facilitate a child’s ability

to adjust to school and to achieve academically, thereby transforming cultural resources to cultural capital. From this perspective, educational success or failure is explained by the amount and type of cultural capital inherited from the home environment. Thus, those who have higher levels of valued cultural and social capital gain the most access to, and benefit from, the education system. As each class has its own particular culture, students from homes with a culture most closely aligned to the culture of the school will therefore have a distinct advantage (Aronowitz and Giroux 1982). Consequently, as the culture of the school is unashamedly the culture of the dominant class, students from a middle or upper middle class background at a distinct advantage in school (Aronowitz & Giroux 1986).

Weber's status group theory was utilised to illuminate how social or communal relations can become the basis of one's life chances (Scott 1996). From a Weberian perspective, dominant classes are reproduced through the cultivation of networks or status groups. Elite schools play a central role in this process, with the 'old boy networks' (the status groups synonymous with these schools) credited with greatly contributing to the solidarity of elite status groups. The influence of these 'old boy networks' is such that success in many professions or organizations is often determined by one's ability to access these networks, where it is said, "the real business goes on" (Bottero 2005, p.114). For Collins (1979) this is a critical factor in explaining the success of graduates from elite schools in obtaining high status occupations, with those responsible for recruitment naturally gravitating towards candidates that are already familiar with the status culture. This process results in the reproduction of the dominant classes "without any need for a consciously tended bias in recruitment, as the established 'old boys' sponsor the recruitment through their networks of contacts of each new generation of old boys" (Scott 1991, p.117). As credentials such as the Leaving Certificate, diplomas and degrees have become increasingly devalued, attending

the ‘better school’ or ‘better university’ has become of greater importance (Collins 1979; Bourdieu 1984; O’Connell et al. 2006). Accordingly, the quality of one’s education can pale into insignificance when compared to the social power attendance at a certain school may confer.

Research methodology

A qualitative methodological approach was adopted, due to its potential to yield data that can provide depth and detail, creating a deeper understanding of the phenomena under investigation. The data was collected from a purposive sample of nine respondents. However, identifying who has been privately educated in Ireland is difficult, thus locating a suitable sample was not as straightforward as I had anticipated. Fortunately, many private schools have websites, in which they list their most successful or well known past pupils (See for example Gormanston College). Having studied such websites, I identified some prospective participants and began to recruit my sample. Eventually I was successful in recruiting a sample which was closely related to the purpose of the study. My sample consisted of four past pupils from private fee-paying schools who now hold key leadership positions in Irish society, four Principals or Vice-Principals² from Irish secondary schools and an auditor of a leading debating society with responsibility for school debating competitions.

As I was utilising a qualitative methodology, I decided that interviews were the most appropriate method of data collection, given the flexibility that they offered and their potential for obtaining rich data from the respondents. Following Kvale’s (1996) guidelines on successful interviewing, I designed my

² Two were from exclusive fee-paying schools (an all boys boarding school and an all girls day school) and two were from non-fee paying schools (an all girls convent and a mixed vocational school).

interview guide with clear, easy to understand, jargon-free questions. The interview guide was semi-structured, made up of a series of open-ended questions. The interviews ranged in time from forty minutes to two and half hours, covering issues such as extracurricular activities, school debating, education in general, and the development of leadership skills. Once all of the interviews had been transcribed I utilised a grounded theory approach to data analysis, which uses a systematic set of procedures to develop inductively derived theory grounded in data (See Creswell 1998). All participants in this paper have been given pseudonyms.

Research Findings

My findings demonstrate that elite schools clearly differ significantly from other schools, in terms of the subjects they offer, their extracurricular activities, and their emphasis on the development of leadership skills. By focusing on extracurricular activities and debating in particular, the findings clearly demonstrate that even the most benign aspects of schooling are tailored to the needs and interests of the dominant classes. The mobilization of substantial economic, cultural and social resources in elite schools was found to have a considerable bearing on their student's educational and occupational outcomes, with elite schools clearly excelling at transforming social and cultural advantage into educational advantage, and subsequently into economic and occupational advantage. Finally, the extent to which a strong meritocratic ideology helps to mask the perpetuation of privilege by the dominant classes in the education system was revealed.

The impact of capital

It is clear that the greater economic resources which are available to elite schools have a considerable bearing on the success of students in their subsequent careers. While it is clear the majority of participants rejected Bowles

and Gintis ‘Correspondence theory’³ as “too pessimistic”, my findings strongly suggest that education differs considerably according to the social class composition of the school. This is most evident in the greater emphasis on non-technical subjects in these schools. Subjects that many Vocational Schools prioritise such as Woodwork and Metalwork 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 students in elite schools.

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, my findings clearly show that for elite students that there are a far greater number of routes to success. By way of illustrating the importance that institutionalised cultural capital plays in reproducing privilege, Daniel ⁴ 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 Sometimes it is paying for the advice, or paying for the counseling or paying for career guidance. 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”.

³ According to Bowles and Gintis (1976) ‘correspondence theory’, a ‘hidden curriculum’ operates in the education system, the aim of which is to socialize young people into accepting the role assigned to them by the capitalist class, with schools providing the different classes with the knowledge and skills they need to occupy their respective places in the labour force.

⁴ The Vice-Principal of an exclusive private school.

As most of these services and practises are confined to elite schools, groups without access to elite circles are totally unaware of their existence. Additionally, for most students who progress to third level, the luxury of repeating exams or switching courses to find the one that is most suited to your 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. Daniel states,

“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 mobilisation of cultural and economic capital, elite families can effectively ‘buy’ success in the education system.

My findings would also strongly suggest that economic capital alone does not ensure educational and occupational success. While economic capital allows dominant groups to mobilise educational resources, I would argue that to benefit from the education system, one must have the “instruments of appropriation”, the appropriate cultural capital (Bourdieu 1977, p.488). This inability to benefit from access to superior economic resources without the appropriate cultural capital was clearly illustrated by Gwen⁵. She argued that students from disadvantaged areas, who attend her school on a scholarship, have access to all the resources that the school has to offer, but can still struggle to ‘fit in’ and succeed in the school. For Gwen, the inability to benefit fully from the

⁵ The Vice-Principal of an elite girl’s day school in Leinster.

opportunity to attend an elite school is perceived as resulting from a lack of commitment to education among the working classes. She clearly illustrated this viewpoint, when she explained that while her school expects students “to do hours of homework every night”, students from disadvantaged areas may be “going back to a home background where that is not seen as important or of high value”. However I would argue that rather than reflecting a failure to value education, this apparent lack of commitment is a reflection of the cultural differences between working class homes and the culture of the school.

Status, Power, & Status Groups

All of my 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 group’s access to powerful positions. The sense of collective identity generated in elite schools is clearly a crucial factor in cultivating this particular status culture. Gerry⁶ acknowledged the existence and the value of these networks in elite schools when he stated,

“yes, there is the school tie scenario, its 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”.

In fact, Daniel believes 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”. For Collins (1979), it is this elite ‘brand’ that is the key determining factor in the reproduction of privilege. Accordingly, I would argue that the ‘old boy networks’ clearly exert considerable influence in

⁶ The Vice Principal of a non-fee paying inner city girls school.

Irish society, with success in many professions dependent on access to such networks. Shane⁷ acknowledged that to gain access to these status groups,

“A lot of people will send their kids to what they perceive to be a fee-paying school because it will give them that advantage of networking for the rest of their lives”.

The variety of mechanisms that elite schools employ to monitor entry to these status groups was also highlighted. The criteria for selecting pupils include giving first preference to those with brothers or sisters in the school, to children of staff, and of past pupils and to selection based on interviews (see for example the admission policies for Glenstal Abbey, Clongowes Wood, and Alexandra College). 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 an element of social closure.

Extracurricular activities

Extracurricular provision is generally considered a benign element of schooling, with participation universally held to result in positive gains for all students (Camp 1990; Zaff et al. 2003). All of my participants acknowledged the importance of extracurricular activities in the education system, expressing the view that participation in such activities is beneficial for all students. However, my findings show that despite these common aspirations, extracurricular provision is yet another element of schooling successfully employed by the dominant classes in the reproduction of privilege.

My findings demonstrate that extracurricular provision is prioritised far more in elite schools, with huge resources allocated to the provision of state of the art facilities and with considerable time being allocated to such activities. The two

⁷ A prominent politician.

Vice-Principals of elite schools and the participants, who were educated in such schools, described a wide variety of extracurricular activities. Daniel for example acknowledged that

“the sheer range⁸ of what we are able to do because it is a boarding 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.

The emphasis on the provision of more practical skills in non-fee paying schools was evident in those schools extracurricular provision. Both non-fee paying schools in the study offered activities that they believed would have a practical value for students when they have completed their studies. One school offered enterprise as an extracurricular activity, while the other non-fee paying school had included lessons in fishmongery and pizza making in local business establishments as extracurricular activities. The activities offered in elite schools also clearly differ from activities prioritised in non-fee paying schools, with greater emphasis placed on the provision of high status activities in elite schools. All participants from private schools for example, cited high status activities such as cricket, rugby and golf among the activities offered in their schools. It would appear that elite schools are acutely aware that they must equip their students with a range of “soft” skills to exhibit their “true potential” (Lleras 2009). This has resulted in a far greater emphasis on extracurricular activities and the development of soft skills such as teamwork and

⁸ Daniel spoke of his school providing rugby, soccer, athletics, cross country, golf, Gaelic football, hurling, tennis, a certain amount of cricket and swimming. Additionally he stated that the school had a full orchestra and a full choir.

communication in elite schools. In fact, the development of such skills is seen by elite groups as being as “important as arming them with the necessary credentials, contacts and networks” (Tomlinson 2005, p.171). I would argue that the different emphasis evident in both elite and non elite schools extracurricular provision “reflects both the social backgrounds of the student body and their likely future positions” (Bowles & Gintis 1976, p.132).

Daniel corroborated this argument when he stated 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”. The desire to impart these skills is also shared by non-fee paying schools, however they differ in the number and type of resources they have at their disposal. Few schools can compete with the economic resources that elite schools enjoy, where with the benefit of state funding and generous fees, state of the art facilities are provided in a wide range of activities⁹. These extra financial resources also enable these schools to pay their teachers more, in return for a greater commitment to after school activities (Lynch 1989).

From a credentialist perspective, extracurricular activities matter insofar as they enable students to display markers of high status. The ability to play the cello or play cricket is not important in itself, its importance is that it serves as a cultural marker, which show employers that the applicant is a well-rounded person, with diverse interests and capabilities, and is clearly familiar with the valued cultural capital. Additionally extracurricular activities unquestionably play a key role in forging and maintaining the influential ‘old boy’ networks. In this regard

⁹ For example, Clongowes Wood College’s extensive extracurricular sporting facilities include: ten rugby pitches and an all weather floodlit pitch: four soccer pitches: nine-hole golf course: athletic track: cross-country course: indoor heated swimming pool: gymnasium: all weather cricket crease: nine hard and eight grass tennis courts on over ninety acres of grounds (Clongowes Wood College 2009).

participation in high status activities foster both the acquisition of skills and competencies, and a level of comfort and familiarity in elite culture (Bourdieu 1984). My research found that the development of these skills 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 society.

School Debating

School debating is an arena in which one can observe elite schools using their many advantages to maximize students educational and career outcomes. I would argue that debating in Ireland is a highly class based activity, and is perhaps one of the most explicit examples of how through education, elite groups conserve and protect the skills and competencies required for leadership. Although debating is not necessarily always thought of as a high status extracurricular activity, I would argue that the skills developed in competitive school debating pay rich dividends, yielding high profits in terms of the acquisition of economic, social, and cultural capital.

While historically debating and public speaking have been activities most closely associated with elite schools, over eighty percent of secondary schools now reportedly offer debating as an extracurricular activity (Lynch 1989, p.109). However, this figure gives little indication of the extent to which debating is undertaken within individual schools. My research found that participation in debating remains disproportionately associated with private schools. While all participants expressed the view that debating skills are a valuable asset for all students, debating is still prioritised to a greater extent in private fee-paying schools. By way of illustration, the two non-fee paying schools in my study described debating as a minority activity, sometimes confined to a group as small as five or six students. In contrast, Daniel reported

that all first year students at his elite school must participate in debating and that it is a “well regarded, well respected and sought after” extracurricular activity. Alan ¹⁰ offered the view that a greater importance placed on debating skills in middle and upper middle class home results in a very different attitude to debating, which in turn has created a stronger debating culture in private schools. He believes that,

“...There would be a lot more importance put on the role of debating by the parents of students going to fee-paying schools. There is a greater awareness of the benefits and a greater desire to push their children... because they recognise the importance of being able to speak in public, to be able to conduct proper arguments ...someone coming from say... a working class background may not have that same awareness of the value”

The teams that are successful at debating at a competitive level would also suggest that debating is more closely associated with elite schools, with elite schools enjoying disproportionate success in national and international debating competitions (Irish Schools Debating 2009). Fionn ¹¹ for example acknowledged the disproportionate involvement of elite schools in debating competitions.

“A high proportion of people seen in the competition would come from fee-paying schools...if you analysed the proportions they would come mostly from fee-paying schools.”

In fact, in this years Denny Leinster Schools debating competition, six out of the eight schools competing in the grand final were elite schools (Irish Schools Debating 2009).

¹⁰ The Vice-Principal of a vocational school in Munster

¹¹ The auditor of a leading debating society with responsibility for school debating competitions.

In the United States, where debating has aroused some interest, scholars have acknowledged the role debating plays in preparing elites for positions of power in the professions and in politics (Fine 2001). Similarly in Ireland, the number of individuals who hold top positions in the legal profession, in politics and in the media, who participated in debating while at school and college reveals the association between debating and high status occupations in Irish society (Literary and Historic 2009). All of my participants acknowledged the benefits of having a debating culture in Irish schools, particularly in terms of career advancement. Cathy¹², for instance believes that debating skills are invaluable in the legal profession.

“If you are in the bar you have such huge exposure, to speak in public and you have to be able to think clearly, to put a case logically.... so it is great to have those skills if you are going to be a major player, performer in the chamber”.

Furthermore, Shane credits the development of all his “political skills, without question” to his involvement in school and university debating.

Knowledge and familiarity with the dominant language is a key factor in the domination of high status occupations by the middle and upper classes (Bourdieu 1977). Language is a form of embodied cultural capital, which is capable of being converted to academic (institutionalised cultural capital) and subsequently occupational reward (economic capital). My findings demonstrate, that exposure to a strong debating culture and to other high status activities facilitate the effortless reproduction of the upper middle classes into “good social and economic positions” (Tomlinson 2005, p.173). Public speaking and debating skills generate linguistic capital, and clearly place those in possession of this form of capital at a distinct advantage in the marketplace. In essence, I would argue that these activities offer an avenue for students from dominant

¹² A leading politician.

groups to convert home and school advantages to economic advantage (Lareau 1992).

The significance of a strong meritocratic ideology in the Irish education system

Hurn (1993, p.45) described a meritocratic society as “a society where ability and effort count for more than privilege and inherited status.” ‘Evidence’ of the meritocratic nature of Irish society was given by several participants, who highlighted the number of individuals who have progressed to the top of their respective careers without the benefits of private education. The majority of participants expressed the view that success is essentially down to individual ability and determination. It is extremely interesting (and somewhat worrying) however, that the three participants expressing the strongest individualistic explanations for educational inequality were all teachers¹³. Gerry acknowledged that a private education gives one advantages, but nonetheless offered a strong meritocratic view of Irish society when he argued

“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”.

Alan also acknowledged the obstacles some people encounter, but 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.”

¹³ Two were from non-fee paying schools and the other was from a fee-paying school.

I would argue that these views are reflective of the particularly strong meritocratic ideology that exists in the Irish education system today (Power 2008, p.75; Lynch & Lodge, 2002; Drudy & Lynch 1993; Clancy 1995). I believe that by ascribing success or failure solely to an individual’s ability, a strong meritocratic ideology effectively absolves the state and wider society of any responsibility for inequality in the education system (see Considine & Dukelow 2009, pp 287–299). Therefore, from this perspective, the failure of so many working class individuals to succeed in securing top jobs is wholly due to individual deficiencies (Levinson et al. 2002). Hence, rather than reflecting a fair and equitable system, a strong meritocratic ideology operates as a mechanism of social reproduction, as its ideology and its dissemination into popular discourse essentially masks the perpetuation of privilege (see Young 1990, pp.192-225). The ideology of meritocracy is very attractive to the dominant classes, as it not alone justifies their privileged position in society, as the result of their natural “giftedness” (Bourdieu 1977), but it also helps to gain acceptance 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).

I would strongly argue that such beliefs have been cultivated in relation to debating, with debating and public speaking commonly held to be tasks that are to be faced with great apprehension. Hence, I do not think Gerry is unusual in holding the belief that debating skills cannot be fostered in the majority of people. He expressed the view that in his inner city school apart from a small minority who were very strong in English, that there would be very few students with the necessary skills or attitudes to excel in debating, a situation he believed that was reflected in society, where most people are ‘not cut out to be’ public speakers. In contrast to this, all the privately educated participants and the vice-principals from the elite schools expressed the view that all children benefit

from the opportunity to debate during their time in school. Debating skills were clearly not viewed as something that only a minority could excel in or held up as a task that is always faced with great apprehension or fear, but rather it is accepted as “something that people do” (Fionn). Consequently, I would argue that the misrepresentation of high status skills (like debating) being the result of innate ability rather than a class based advantage, reinforces erroneous beliefs in the superior competence of the elite, thereby allowing elite groups to conserve and protect the skills and competencies that are required for leadership positions.

Conclusions

This paper has argued that elite education is a crucial mechanism of social reproduction. Elite schools clearly excel at transforming social and cultural advantage into educational advantage, and subsequently into economic and occupational advantage. Whilst these schools are just “one aspect of the larger phenomenon of elite maintenance and reproduction” (Persell, 1985, p.126), I would argue that they are unquestionably a critical aspect of the upper class project of exclusionary social closure.

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