

Accountability for Equity?

A retrospective look at how neo-liberal models of accountability have impacted Irish Education

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Abstract

There is now a considerable body of scholarship on the impact neo-liberal models of accountability have had on education systems. While very pervasive, neo-liberal models of accountability are not monolithic and encounter different systems at different stages of development and varying degrees of readiness or receptiveness to reform imperatives of this nature. This paper seeks to examine how the different stakeholders have mediated these newer forms of accountability in the Irish context. It seeks to look specifically at the impact of forms of accountability, including those with neoliberal origins, on the achievement of more equitable student outcomes. Generally speaking Irish education reform has come late to neo-liberal policy platform so the current inequitable outcomes of the Irish system cannot be the result of neo-liberal reforms alone. What is examined here is how the main manifestations of accountability that are established in the Irish system have contributed to the differences in outcomes for different social groups. The analysis suggests that even without neoliberal type reforms the Irish system was not doing well with respect to equitable student outcomes. Therefore,

as a system, from an equity point of view, it is not well positioned to incorporate neo-liberal discourses that have failed to deliver equity elsewhere. It becomes clear that unless equality outcomes and the more politically challenging equity-derived policy imperatives are explicitly built into the pedagogical core of schools there is little hope that education systems will contribute to the achievement of equity.

Keywords: neo-liberal reform, equitable outcomes, forms of accountability, pedagogical core

Introduction

Much of this literature on the impact of neo-liberalism on education models of accountability point to the negative impact of these reforms on the form of education provided and specifically on the asymmetrical student outcomes of many school systems. It is important however not to be overly deterministic about the impact of this reform trajectory but instead to seek to read different national systems against the broad neo-liberal canvas in order to identify patterns of policy and practice that have mediated this neo-liberal trend. While very perva-

sive, neo-liberal models of accountability are not monolithic and encounter different systems at different stages of development and varying degrees of readiness or receptiveness to these reform imperatives. This paper seeks to examine how these newer forms of accountability have been mediated by the different stakeholders in Irish Education and specifically what impact they have had on achieving more equitable student outcomes. This contextual analysis will provide a better sense of the key role context plays in shaping responses to particular policy imperatives. A key assumption underpinning this paper is the view that accountability is necessary in all fields and especially in systems such as education because they place significant demands on the public purse. This demand to account is not a boundless field and is essential to ensure that the broad values of education are central to the framing of what schools should be accountable for. In this framework, equitable outcomes for all students are key. Accountability for the process and outcomes of education are very useful when applied to the idea of equity in education because the distinction between the two interrelated dimensions maps onto the well established idea in the discourse of equity of opportunity/participation and the more challenging, radical notion of equity in and equality of outcome (Baker, 2009). This framework can be used to hold systems to account not only for the quality of what goes on in schools, the outcome of which can have significant negative implications for some social groups, but for the outcome of education on subsequent life chances. It will also be necessary to ensure that two other aspects of accountability are kept in mind throughout this discussion – accountable (and responsible) for what and accountable and (responsible) to whom. In an era where schools are sometimes expected to be all things to all people it is important to keep in mind where the boundaries may/ should be drawn. The additional typology of forms of accountability outlined by Moos (Moos 2013) will be used later in the paper as the broad structure to facilitate and critique the types of accountability that frame the education

system in Ireland. It is important that the idea of accountability for equity attempts to integrate or hold together the discourses of both accountability and equity so that the manner in which one impacts the other can be examined and understood fully. Whatever accountability meant in the past, within the neo-liberal perspective the manner in which accountability has evolved creates serious challenges for the achievement of equity. It could be, and frequently is, argued that these new forms of accountability are a significant factor in the failure to move closer towards more equitable outcomes; ‘neoliberalism starkly increases inequality’ (Spence, 2013, p.141). Consequently, it is important to recognise the origin of the current range of accountability measures. The fact that they are derived from neo-capitalist / neo-liberal forms of governmentality (Ball et al 2012, Ball, 2012a; Ball 2012b, Barnett, 2008, Wacquant, 2009) where the broader inequalities in society have been widened and deepened means that working with these two unhappy bedfellows will require a considerable nuanced analysis if we are to find patterns of policy and practices where equity outcomes are identifiable. We have now had neo-liberal-derived accountability models, to varying degrees, in most systems for well over 20 years. This provides a reasonable evidential base upon which to judge the outcome of this perspective on issues related to equity. The legacy of this period within the field of education is the subject of considerable critical analysis – the high stakes nature of much of the public face of accountability has been shown to have a negative impact on the nature of educational provision in schools. Research from the UK by Alexander (2009) on an education system that has been describe as the laboratory of neo liberal educational reforms (Ball 2013) is a damning indictment of the direction many of the current models of accountability are leading education systems. Much research and critical comment points to a significantly negative impact on equity focused outcomes. Other research based on the impact of No Child Left Behind (NCLB) in the US is equally highly critical of how these reform movements impact quality

(Labaree, 2010; Spence, 2013). The notable exception here are the Scandinavian countries, where educational reforms have led to a reduction of social inequalities, mostly because they have been accompanied by wider programs of social democratic reforms (Erikson and Jons-son, 1996 in Lanelli, 2011). By and large education related practices, some directly related to education and others more broadly focused and to varying degrees enabled by the neo-liberal way, reconfirm how educational reform and current accountability systems are not addressing the persistence of inequitable patterns of outcomes in education. What has happened in many countries, including Ireland, is that the expansion of education has only postponed the point of selection. The levels of institutional and curriculum differentiation within education systems is often linked to patterns of school choice particularly among the middle classes. These practices are facilitated by many of the neo-liberal-derived practices (Devine, 2004). This has resulted in an increasing number of people from lower social classes, who stay on in education, concentrated in less prestigious institutions, studying for less prestigious, sometimes subdegree level programmes which in turn may affect their ability to gain prestigious and well-paid jobs. It has been found that social stratification reproduces itself not only through vertical differentiation (between levels) but also through horizontal differentiation (between types) of educational outcomes (Lucas, 2001; Lanelli, 2011). In addition to this, and also enabled by the neo-liberal free market ideology, the persistence of social class inequalities demonstrates that the labour market does not work on a purely meritocratic basis. Although employers use educational qualifications to screen potential applicants for jobs ‘research has also found that the effect of social class origin on individuals labour market outcomes is still strong and only partly mediated by education. This means that children of middle-class families are more likely to achieve higher occupational outcomes than children of working-class families, irrespective of their educational qualifications. They have other resources (such as so-

cial networks) at their disposal that advantage them in the competitive job market (Lanelli, 2011, p. 252). There are traces of neo-liberal type ideas and policies identifiable within the Irish system. Many of the more extreme practices of high stakes accountability evident in the UK or the US are either not present or are in the early stages of development in Ireland. What can be seen are recognisable shifts in the discourse that are clearly laying down the foundations for a much more neo-liberal response to reform of the education system in the future.

In order to examine the current models of accountability in Irish education it is necessary to explore to some degree some of the historical legacy and cultural specifics that have framed Irish education. These factors have created a particular national context that has mediated the broader transnational developments of neo-liberal models of accountability. As is the case in all countries, when ideas transfer into the national framework, the outcomes differ and it is important to recognise this if we are to understand the dynamics involved in how neo-liberalism has impacted education systems (Lynch et al, 2012). By doing this it will be possible to trace the different forms of accountability in operation and the extent to which these are (a). influenced by neo-liberal ideology and (b) either by resistance to the neo-liberal order or by some other means striving to keep equity at the centre of the frame.

Public sector reform in Ireland

Within the broader public sector in Ireland in the 1990s new public management type reforms were the first visible sign that change was afoot. It was not that reform was not needed – in fact stagnation within the public service in terms of work practices and an inward looking, conservative perspectives prevailed. Piecemeal reform and transformation appeared not to be working too well (see Garvin, 2004, Allen, 2007, O Sullivan, 2006; Lynch 2012) other factors also contributed to creating ‘a fertile ground in which to breed neo-liberal policies’ in certain sectors (Lynch, 2012, p. 10).

The size of neo-liberal project, its strength as an approach to reform may well have been what was needed in order to wake the sleeping giant that to varying extents was the Irish Public Service. Neo-liberal models of accountability have become well established in most of the Irish public service and it could be argued that many of the outcomes of this new order have had some positive outcomes; Ireland operates within the Anglo-American zone of influence for reasons of history, culture, language, colonization and trade. It is not surprising therefore that it also displays many of the features of its powerful neo-liberal neighbours in terms of its social, health and education policies' (Lynch et al 2012 p.5). However, new managerialism and the associated new forms of accountability were not just about changing work-practices but also about changing values in how organisations relate to workers, customers, the state and the general public good (Clarke, 2000). In education circles, once the ideas began to infiltrate thinking in relation to educational practice clear patterns of resistance were identifiable. The focus on outputs, performance indicators, key deliverables dominated by the idea of choice and the free market, where market principles become the primary vehicle of problem solving did not sit comfortably within the education sector in Ireland. The teacher trade union sector provided a robust and successful resistance to many of the more controversial forms of accountability (Lynch, 2012); 'despite all the changes occurring through the endorsement of neo-liberal principles at management levels, evidence from schools suggest that not much may have changed at the classroom level' (ibid. p. 15). More recent evidence on the ground would suggest that this assessment might have been slightly dated at the time of writing (2010). The recent economic downturn changed the trade union/ state dynamic. Currently austerity measures have seen the relationship between unions and the state move to a more contentions, pay and conditions basis creating what has been termed the perfect storm (Conway, 2013) where many hitherto unpalatable ideas and practices associated with neo-lib-

eral reform have gained considerable traction.

There were some signs that changes were coming in the education sector just before the economic crisis when the Ministry succeeded in publishing all school evaluation reports on the Ministry website in 2007. Other smaller changes were evident as far back as 1992 when 'control', 'accountability' and 'quality assurance' were strongly evident in the consultative green paper on education (Government of Ireland, 1992).

'Transparency' and 'evaluation' were added in the White Paper 1995 (Education, 1995), with 'accountability, to evaluate effectiveness' named as one of the five educational principles (Gleeson & Donnabháin, 2009, p. 31). 'Transparency' and 'accountability' are also central to the 1998 Education Act echoing the corporate language of the earlier national policy documents (Dooley, 2013). The introduction into the Irish inspection system of four point rating scale for schools developed by the Standing International Conference of Inspectorates (SICI) as a way of classifying school during school inspections and the setting up of the high level School Improvement Working Group to follow up on failing schools identified on the four point scale during inspections was further evidence of raising the stakes of accountability. However, it was the very public fall from grace in the PISA 2009 results that provided the most significant platform to date for an accelerated approach to forms/models of accountability that previously would have been unthinkable. This PISA fall from grace provided strong evidence that the system was flawed. What followed was the enforcement of a back to basics type literacy and numeracy strategy (Department of Education 2011) the introduction of mandatory standardised testing, the reporting of the outcome of standardised testing to parents and school management, the introduction of curricular reforms at junior cycle to better correspond to the type of competences tests in PISA and other international comparative testing regimes. We are in danger of becoming transparent but empty, unrecognisable to ourselves – 'I am other to myself precisely at the place where I expect to be myself' (Butler,

2004, p. 15 in Ball, 2013, p. 91). In terms of becoming visible to ourselves the recent (2013) introduction of School Self Evaluation (Department of Education 2012), the parameters of which are centrally controlled by the ministry, is a type of process where schools can make a spectacle of themselves using the same technologies of surveillance that were previously used by external evaluators. We are now approaching at a point where the commodification of knowledge and learning, together with demands for efficiency, productivity and greater competition evident in the policy agenda for many years (Deborah et al., 2008; Lynch, 2006; Lynch et al, 2012; Sugrue, 2006) is now impacting practice and is becoming more evident in schools and classrooms thereby making it more difficult to maintain a focus on the broader, more holistic aspects of schooling (Dooley, 2013).

What is clear from the manifestation of neo-liberal models of accountability in Ireland is that the education sector, largely through the action of very powerful teacher unions, resisted almost all of the more reductive, 'show and tell' type of measures experienced by many education systems internationally. The opportunity presented by the 'never waste a good crisis' context was certainly availed of in the field of education. With the unions forced to focus on the core work of terms and conditions, that were under significant threat, other aspects of reform found an unguarded access route and took hold or were supported by very explicit expectations in terms of productivity, tied into revised work practice agreements developed as part of austerity measures. The full impact of these recent reforms has yet to be realised, however the author's professional work with graduate students in education is already revealing a creeping instrumentalism and a level of disempowerment in teachers' discourse that previously would not have been part of seminar discussions. More extensive research to establish the degree of these changes is now underway. It is also too early to say how this new order will impact equity. As is already stated, the international evidence does not bode well and this is particularly problematic because of the very une-

qual patterns of education that already prevail in the Irish system. The section to follow will examine the different ways in which the Irish education is held accountable for what goes on in schools. The five headings outlined by Moos 2013 are used to structure this discussion.

Managerial and bureaucratic accountability

Market-oriented accountability

Public accountability

Professional accountability

Cultural-ethical accountability

This typology, to some degree, corresponds to an existing framework used to examine the key social contexts and systems – economic, political, cultural and affective (Baker et al, 2009; Riddile et al. 2011) within which patterns of equality and inequality are shaped and reproduced.

Managerial and bureaucratic accountability

At a broad level the Irish education system has a clear hierarchy of governance; ministry, patron, board of management (governors), principal and teachers. This, however, should not obviate the highly complex nuances that exist in the system. It is beyond the scope of this article to deal with the full complexity of this context, Instead the discussion will confine itself to the broad patterns of practice in this area.

The system is highly centralized – the Ministry of Education i.e. the Department of Education and Skills (DES) is responsible for providing for the education of the children in the state. As a department it is accountable to the Ministry of Finance for the budget that is allocated to it. In times of austerity, high spending departments like education are the subject of continuous scrutiny in terms of identifying potential cuts and consequently ensuring value for money. The Comptroller and Auditor General keeps a watchful eye on all government departments and the DES is the subject of a number of value for money audits and reports. The inspectorate in the DES is the main body responsible for ensuring quality assurance in

schools and in many ways functions as the visible manifestation of the Ministry's accountability requirement. While this may seem clear, it is complicated by the how the church and state relate to each other in relation to the governance of schools. The majority of schools at primary level (90%) and a significant percentage of second level schools are under the control of the Church (mainly the Catholic Church). The Constitution of Ireland comprises many Catholic principles and under this model of Catholic social theory, parents were given the right and responsibility to educate their children.

The State acknowledges that the primary and natural educator of the child is the Family and guarantees to respect the inalienable right and duty of parents to provide, according to their means, for the religious and moral, intellectual, physical and social education of their children (Government of Ireland, 1937, Article 42.1)

The role of the State is thus framed as being subordinate to that of the parents and confined 'to provide for free primary education' and 'to intervene where parents neglect their rights and obligations'. The marginalisation of the State's role in this way resulted in a practice where the State provided financial support for the schools while the Church, acting on behalf of the people, attended to all the other aspects of the running of the State schools (Walsh, 2009). The system was set up in this way and to a significant degree this structure prevails. The DES pays for the teachers' salaries, most of the buildings and the upkeep of the schools while the patron (usually the local bishop) is in charge of the day-to-day running of the school. The Board of Management (Governors) manages the school on behalf of the patron and is accountable to the patron and the Minister. The Board must uphold the characteristic spirit (ethos) of the school and is accountable to the patron for so doing. The principal is responsible for the day-to-day management of the school, including providing guidance and direction to the teachers and other staff of the school and is accountable to the Board for that management.

Because the patron devolves responsibility for most of the day-to-day activity in the school to the board of management and because board members are voluntary what happens in practice is that the running of the school is left in the hands of the principal. Consequently, the principal is a key player in how policy and forms of accountability are mediated within the school. It is necessary, therefore, to focus to a limited extent on the nature of school leadership in Ireland where another site of resistance to neo-liberal reform is clearly identifiable. As already established, at a systems level, within the public service, neo-liberal-derived policies have taken a firm hold. This is clearly evident in the language used by ministry on the website, in communications, circulars, templates etc.

Many of the rudiments of new public management do not sit well with school leadership in the Irish context. This issue of identity through performance criteria (Lumby, 2013) has not impacted this sector. The number of small schools at primary and also to a lesser extent at second level find little scope for the type of leadership practice advocated by organization such as the OECD (Deborah et al 2008; Mac Ruairc 2010). To a large extent Irish schools are dominated by personcentred models of school leadership (Fielding 1999; 2012) based on mutual trust and organic, authentic models of locally based accountability related very specifically to the core task of education often in its broadest sense. It is not without its problems, schools evaluation identify underperformance of teachers, poor levels of attainment in certain schools and poor quality leadership in some schools. All of these issues are well understood but solutions have not been forthcoming to any satisfactory level and any effort to deal with these issues becomes fraught with difficulty. In this regard, the power of the teacher unions in mediating the pace and content of reform related to these issues cannot be underestimated. The combined power of the teacher unions at both primary and second level is formidable processing significant political influence at negotiations etc. and are viewed as 'strongly resistant to new managerial norms and values and [were] powerful enough to resist

many of the key demands in ways that were not true in other countries' (Lynch et al, 2012, p. 16).

The role that religious ethos plays in ensuring that the broader Christian values relating to equity are always part of the discourse. There are some contradictions here between the values espoused by the churches and actual practice on the ground. The public fee paying school system in Ireland, widely regarded as a significant contributor to asymmetrical patterns of educational mediated privileges between different social class groups, are all under the governance and private ownership of the churches (both Catholic and Church of Ireland). Notwithstanding this historical legacy that requires a separate consideration, it can be argued that while the influence of the church remains, the basic ideals of equality and equity will continue to be included in discourse and policy if not realised in practice.

Market-oriented accountability

The forms of market-oriented accountability in Ireland are very limited. There has been a persistent refusal on the part of the Ministry to produce league tables of schools or to publish publically the results of standardised testing. What has happened in its absence is the publication of an annual media-generated league table of the outcomes of second level schools based on the number of entrants to higher education institutions. This information is accessible through a freedom of information request. There is a widespread recognition that these tables are not accurate and are not accounting for the full picture but increasingly there are providing more nuanced information. Initially they published the ranking of schools generally but now they provide information on a district-by-district basis so that parents can compare local schools. The other main form of visible reporting on schools has been the publication of all school reports on the DES website. Initially this created a huge level of interest. Ten times more than normal traffic crashed the site repeatedly (Sugrue, 2006) on the first day of publication. This has abated somewhat but sometimes schools use excerpts from inspection

reports as part of their own promotional literature and some local papers publish the strengths and recommendations identified in the reports.

There is a much more covert system of market-orientated accountability in operation in Ireland. Social networks transmit information about the quality of schools and the quality of individual teachers and principals ensuring that this information gets into the public domain very effectively. While active among all social groups, the manner in which it is used in a concerted way to benefit certain social groups is more evident among middle class parents. Clearly identifiable patterns of concerted cultivation (Lareau, 2003) of certain types of educational experiences for children are well established.

Market-oriented accountability

There are a number of forms that this dimension of accountability in the Irish system. Specific organisations and formal structures have been put in place over the years to hold schools and the broader education system to account. Broadly these will be divided into three groups for the purpose of this paper and I will briefly refer to the role played by each in terms of accountability and in so far as is possible to how equity is dealt with in each.

The Department of Education and Skills:

- Inspectorate
- The State Examination Commission

Other public bodies (National):

- Government Departments (e.g. Health, office of the minister for children)
- The Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI)
- The Education Research Centre (ERC)
- The National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA)
- The National Council for Special Education (NCSE)
- The Equality Authority

International organisations:

- OECD/ IEA
- The Inspectorate and the State Exa Com-

mission

Schools are responsible to the state for the quality of the education system. This is not to say that the churches are not interested in quality; it is rather to acknowledge that the evaluation and monitoring of the quality of education falls almost entirely to the state and specifically to the inspectorate in the DES. One of the high level goals of the inspectorate 'to improve the standard and quality of education and promote best practice in classrooms, schools, colleges and other centres for education' (Department of Education and Skills Strategy Statement 2009). In support of this, the inspectorate engage in a number of different forms of evaluation all of which are detailed on the ministry website (www.education.ie/inspectorate). Inspectors typically engage in whole school evaluation, evaluation of probationary teachers at primary level, curricular/programme evaluation as well as launching a new initiative relating to School Self Evaluation as a vehicle, at least in the short term of ensuring the implementation of the Literacy and Numeracy strategy (DES, 2011). The latter developments are as close as the Irish system has come to a neo-liberal type of accountability model. The model bears all of the imprint of the new order of high-stakes accountability encompassing increased, mandatory testing, setting of SMART targets, making visible the outcomes of school review and testing. The impact that these developments will have on the system remains to be seen. The increasing public visibility of the outcomes of schooling, without full consideration of the context is becoming a factor for Irish schools. This may become increasingly problematic for a system where there are already well established patterns of 'chosen and unchosen' schools (Mathews, 2012), as well as very homogenous socio-economic patterns in terms of housing resulting in a system of schooling, particularly in urban areas, where schools are strongly stratified along social class lines.

All second level schools are held accountable for the work they do through a system of state examinations after three years in secondary school and at the end of secondary school

usually after completing six years. The Junior Certificate and Leaving Certificate are well established in Irish education since its inception. Originally managed by the inspectorate it is now under the control of the State Examinations Commission set up in 2003 (www.sec.ie). Transfer to almost all forms of higher education depends on the outcome of the Leaving Certificate. A system of points allocation for each grade received by students operates with the maximum number of points set at 600 i.e. A1 in 6 subjects. With the large increase in participation in higher education by all social groups but by higher social groups in particular this point's race has become very controversial. Research strongly points to a wash back effect from the examinations process on teaching and learning in schools (Smyth et al, 2011). It is claimed that the current system of assessment leads to rote learning, highly strategic planning in relation to subject choices, topics covered by teachers and significant levels of instrumentalism among students (ibid). It does little to contribute to equitable outcomes for working class students in particular. Those who can afford to pay can access fully private, additional tuition for children putting them in prime position to maximise their points. Despite its well-documented faults a recent review found that by and large it was fair (Hyland, 2011), at least when viewed from the flawed perspective of meritocracy. The claim to fairness may have some validity. Attempts to change it have been found to be equally detrimental to lower social groups – the introduction of the Health Professions Admission Test-Ireland (HPAT) as an additional assessment for students who would like to pursue medicine as a career has revealed that expensive crash courses (sometimes more than one) are accessed by students who can afford it. Once again, this type of practice has a negative impact on those who do not have access to these levels of resources. At the moment, consideration is being given to a number of alternatives and amendments in order to decrease the negative impact the exam is having on patterns of student engagement and more equitable outcomes for those underrepresented in higher education.

National Public Bodies

Schools are held accountable by a number of other Government Departments and national bodies. Among other developments, the recent scandals in relation to child abuse in the Church and state institutions dealing with children have fundamentally changed the context within which children are now educated. Child protection is at the core of school policy and the boards of management, principals, teachers and all other school staff now work within the child protection guidelines. All staff who have any involvement with schools and students have to have garda clearance as child abuse cases have been successfully taken against swimming coaches, football coaches and other who had free access to children, sometimes through the schools, in the past. This is an aspect of accountability that is taken very seriously by schools and one where it is unlikely to find schools below par.

The Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI) (www.esri.ie) and the Education Research Centre (ERC) (www.erc.ie) and the Higher Education Research Community conduct research on schools regularly. Both the ESRI and the ERC have a formal role in carrying out research and in this regard they are often commissioned by the state to conduct specially commissioned research. The ERC administers PISA, PIRLS and TIMSS as well as national assessments of reading and mathematics. While the ESRI sometimes do more broadly focused studies on early school leaving, students' engagement with education and the impact of disadvantage on attainment and educational outcomes. The work of the ERC calls schools to account in a broad sense for overall attainment particularly in reading and mathematics. They point out the anomalies that exist between different social class groups but often this analysis is positioned within a quantitative functionalist perspective. The ESRI and some research from higher educational institutions often produce highly critical reports from an equity perspective with clear implications for policy changes.

The National Council for Curriculum and

Assessment (NCCA) develops and revises curricula at primary and post primary and while schools are not directly accountable to this organisation the research carried out by the NCCA on curriculum implementation indirectly provides a mechanism that hold school responsible for how they teach and assess the curriculum (www.ncca.ie). The National Council for Special Education (NCSE) was set up to improve the quality of education services to persons with special educational needs arising from disabilities with particular emphasis on children. The Council was first established as an independent statutory body by order of the Minister for Education and Science in December 2003 (www.ncse.ie). This is one area in relation to equity that has seen a lot of change in the past twenty years. A significant number of legislative developments including Student Support Act 2011; Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs Act 2004; Residential Institutions Redress Act 2002; Education (Welfare) Act 2000; Education Act 1998 have changed the nature of schools' responsibility to students who have special educational needs.

Finally the Equality Authority (recently subsumed into the Human Rights Commission) holds all organisations in the state to account for any discrimination in employment, vocational training, advertising, collective agreements, the provision of goods and services and other opportunities to which the public generally have access on nine distinct grounds under the Employment Equality Act, 1998 and the Equal Status Act, 2000) The grounds are gender; civil status; family status; age; disability; race; sexual orientation; religious belief; and membership of the Traveller Community. Discrimination is described in the Act as the treatment of a person in a less favourable way than another person is, has been or would be treated on any of the above grounds (www.equality.ie). A number of successful cases have been taken by students and parents in relation to some aspect of schooling, usually in relation to a refusal on the part of the school to enrol a student. The Authority also engage in proactive research and policy development all relation to equality

and human rights on issues such as homophobic bullying, stereotyping, gender discrimination, social justice issues etc. They also engage in research in relation to the level of compliance among schools with the both the spirit and the letter of the law (Equality Authority, 2010).

In summary, it is clear that a focus on equity remains very active in the education discourse in Ireland. Many of the structures in place in relation to accountability have a very strong mandate to hold schools accountable for issues relating to equity. This is a positive situation but it is vital to recognise that despite this degree of focus on this core issue the outcomes of schooling are extremely unequal and there are very clearly established patterns of reproduction of these unequal outcomes. In better economic times, increased funding for schools was having a positive impact on many disadvantaged students' experience of schooling. The improvements in resources during the rise through to the decline of the Celtic Tiger era was very laudable. However, this was mirrored by regressive distribution patterns more broadly in society where the relative gap between rich and poor widened considerably during the same period with the result that the income gap was the worst in Europe and second only to the differential between rich and poor in the US (Allen, 2007). The recent economic decline has had some negative consequences for schools in disadvantaged areas but efforts have been made to protect additional funding in so far as is possible. The worsening employment situation and general economic conditions do little to help the engagement of students with the idea school as an employment pathway when jobs are so hard to come by and where very visible patterns of unemployment delimit their social worlds. The biggest concern however relates to how schools emerge from these tough economic times and how the legacy of recent neo-liberal type reforms outlined above impact the overall system into the future.

International organisations

The impact of international organisations on the Irish system has been interesting in the historical context. The early activity of the Irish State (1920's) was framed by an ideological allegiance to a rural way of life and delimited, and arguably sustained to a large degree, by Catholic dogma and values. Economic policy was characterised by a stringent policy of economic protectionism and the avoidance of any foreign influence (Breen et al., 1990; Garvin, 2000). The Church's control of schools would have contributed to this overall 'conservative consensus' (Walsh, 2009) in the overall approach to government. This practice continued until 1958, a year considered to herald the birth of the modern Irish economy (Breen et al., 1990; Walsh, 2009). At this time, there was a clear realisation that the economic protectionist model, that had been in existence since the foundation of the State, was not working and that it would be necessary for Ireland to modernise its economic structures and practices (Garvin, 2000). There was a growing realisation that a quality education system focused on the needs of a modern economy and directed towards providing a skilled and up-to-date workforce was central to the achievement of this outcome. It became necessary for the State to take a much greater interest in the education system (Walsh, 2009; O'Sullivan, 2005; Garvin, 2000). Pressure to increase State activity is attributable to many sources, most importantly the OECD Investment in Education Report published in 1966. This report provided the international imperative to the State to take action. A number of developments signalled a much higher level of State involvement as a central player in the field of education followed the publication of this report. The introduction of free second-level education, a series of amalgamations of small schools and the State-led review of the curriculum were all developments that stemmed from this report. Since that time Ireland has participated in a number of OECD led reports and reviews and it also has been the subject of a number of country reports of different aspects

of the system. We are like many other countries held to account for aspects of our education system by the OECD. It is now the international testing systems that have the most impact on our system. PIRLS (Progress in International Reading Literacy Study) and TIMSS (Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study) are projects of the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA). TIMSS was first conducted in 1995 while PIRLS first took place in 2001. In 2011 Ireland took part in PIRLS for the first time and in TIMSS for the first time since 1995. In both of these tests Ireland scored significantly higher than international averages. (Eivers and Clerkin, 2012). However it was the 'international spectacle' that is PISA (Simola, 2005) that has resulted in a significant neo-liberal type backlash. Ireland had been doing very well in PISA until 2009 when the ranking dropped to 17th in literacy from a rank of 5th when literacy was first tested in 2009. The impact of this has been considerable and has been discussed previously in this paper.

Professional accountability

It could be argued that this aspect of accountability was always strong among Irish teachers. The idea of a teacher as a professional is a key element in teacher identity (Devine et al, 2013, Sugrue 2009; Sugrue et al 2011). Teachers have always appreciated the level of autonomy they had with respect to content choice, methodology and assessment. In the past there was an element of Lortie's egg carton about teachers' practice. However, more recently, a range of collaborative enhancing initiatives have been introduced into schools. This has contributed to a much more vibrant collaborative culture around issues related to teaching and learning. Teachers by and large also view the extracurricular and co-curricular work they do as a core element of their professional role and identity. Many teachers give of their free time to work with students in the areas of sport, music, drama and a whole range of other activities many of which would not be possible, particularly in

poorer areas, without this commitment from teachers. Notwithstanding this, the requirement on teachers to up skill and to engage in continuous professional development has never been a feature of the Irish system. Most teachers engaged in some form of further training but the compulsory element has not been there. By and large CPD choices were motivated by individual interest and/or a sense of professional identity (Sugrue 2006; 2012). CPD activities ranged from day-long workshops to short courses to masters and sometimes doctoral level qualifications. The lack of a compulsory element no doubt meant that some teachers did not engage in any professional development (a very small minority I would argue). The establishment of the Teaching Council in 2006, as the regulator of the teaching profession, to promote professional standards in teaching is addressing this issue. Previously the teacher unions straddled the trade union professional organization roles. Now it is the Council that acts in the interests of the public good while upholding and enhancing the reputation and status of the teaching profession through fair and transparent regulation. While not always viewed positively within the teaching profession, the council is beginning to make inroads into articulating a career development pathway for teachers from initial teacher education, through induction, to the requirement for evidenced CPD. A brief quotation from its website indicates the neo-liberal type language and the overall shift in focus that will shape the professional in the future.

As outlined in its Strategic Plan (2012-2014) – A New Era of Professionalism:

We admit teachers to the profession through registration.

We set standards for teacher education at all stages of the teaching career.

We establish standards of professional competence and conduct.

We investigate complaints made against registered teachers.

We are committed to providing high standards of service in accordance with the Quality Customer Service initiatives approved by Govern-

ment. *The Customer Service Charter and the Feedback and Complaints procedures follow the principles of good customer service and complaints procedures as set out by the Office of the Ombudsman's Guide to Good Public Administration* (www.teaching council.ie).

Cultural-ethical accountability

The issue of cultural and ethical responsibility is closely linked to the previous idea of professional accountability. This value base would be well embedded in the Irish education system. Teaching remains a high status occupation and competition for entry into colleges of education and university graduate programmes is very high. A number of austerity-derived measures, recently introduced, may well alter this situation. The removal of all promoted posts in schools with the exception of the principal compounded by the cessation of allowances for masters and other graduate qualifications, significant pay cuts, cuts to allowances, and insecurity in relation to employment have eroded a number of improvements that had built up over previous years. The impact is not fully evident yet but a decrease in the number of applicants for teaching in this year's (2015) cohort of potential students may well be a sign of things to come. There is also the view that teachers act ethically, in the interest of their students and with a sense of responsibility to the broader society to which they feel accountable. By and large this is the case. While support for this perspective is evident (Sugrue 2006; Devine et al 2012) anecdotally there is also some evidence of a darker side within the profession. Practices exist and are reproduced that have build up over the years that do not serve all students equally. Either derived from pragmatic decision-making or a particular value base there is evidence that not all is as it should be. The number of cases relating to discrimination, particularly in relation to enrolment, suspension or expulsion, taken against schools to the Equality Authority is indicative of some negative practices. School Evaluation reports indicate that the manner in which resources are deployed to support stu-

dents with additional needs is not always as inclusive as it should be (www.education.ie/inspectorate). It is here that robust professional development of teachers and school leaders is vital in order to ensure that negative practices are challenged through on-going critique and self-reflection in order to ensure that developments and changes are taking schools in the direction of more equitable experiences and outcomes for all students.

Conclusion

The impact of neo-liberal forms of accountability on education systems has been considerable in many countries with the result that it is difficult to find scholarship that does not in some way make explicit reference to these types of reform imperatives. In the case of Ireland, up until recently, the influence of neo-liberalism on education has been limited and indirect coming mainly from a growing demand for parental choice in relation to children's schools and the excessive influence of the terminal examinations system on public perception in relation to good schools and schools viewed less favourably. It is too early to be sure how the very recent and more explicit neo-liberal turn in Irish education policy will change the context for schools and students in the future. It is only possible to speculate that achieving equity though neo-liberal reform policies has not been the experience of systems committed for a much greater period of time to this policy pathway. It is legitimate therefore to examine how Irish policy initiatives have addressed the area of equity and equality in the past by exploring how other forms of accountability have shaped the system in equitable ways. This exploration revealed that a number of accountability mechanisms that have an equality or equity focus are in place in Irish education. Many of the mechanisms are very valuable and provide a strong scaffold that should produce more equitable outcomes but despite these initiatives the Irish system is a long way from being equitable. A number of issues are worth bearing in mind in relation to this situation.

Firstly, it is worth remembering that while neo-liberal reforms may do little to improve the system it cannot be viewed as the sole cause of the problem. Secondly, and more importantly, accountability measures are just that no more no less. They are not set up as an improvement device or a way of achieving a specific outcome. In calling schools to account they may have a washback effect on what is prioritised in individual organisations but they by no means colonise the full canvas of practice. It is true that neo-liberal measures have added impetus to this colonisation process by hollowing out of many concepts associated with good forms of accountability as well as producing a whole new arsenal of measures and mind-sets that are highly reductive. However, there is space for an alternative discourse and there is evidence that when schools, their leaders and teachers focus on the broader context of learning, a strong counter discourse emerges (Sugrue, 2009). An explicit focus on the pedagogical core of schooling (OECD, 2013) delimited by a much stronger sense of professionalism and professional identity (Sugrue, 2009) of leaders and teachers, arguably for the first time ever in education could be the space where real and meaningful improvement in terms of student experience and outcomes will be achieved. In this way pedagogy and students become the primary imperative for what happens in schools and from this perspective a range of challenges can be faced down in a much more educationally sound way. Here we can deal with under-performance of teachers as an example of an issue that emerges frequently in current calls for more robust accountability measures. Instead of schools and systems trying to conceal or obviate the problem of underperformance, the focus moves towards how this impacts student learning and this imperative alone is the driver of a solution. Equity and equality too become more achievable in this type of system. What is at the core of this is a strong value base that drives schools towards scaffolding the potential of all students so that all achieve to the best of their ability while ensuring that the process is as enriched and enabling as possible. Some schools

are doing this very well, all schools need to. The current practice for many of chasing the concerns of the multitude of stakeholders who call school to account has produced little other than a frazzled and unfocused profession that is increasingly responding in a more and more instrumental way by ticking whatever box is presented. Many scholars of the intensification of the work of school leaders and teachers but a more important question is what drives this process? More often than not it is the frenzied chase to be seen to be doing what it is whoever is asking views as important and not intensification derived from what schools should be doing i.e. ensuring that the pedagogical core is solid.

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