

# **Class and wealth, not merit, are awarded in Ireland's education system**

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THINGS THAT MATTER most are often the things we speak about least. They are the **taboo subjects**, kept hidden, and if spoken of are discussed in **euphemisms** or metaphors that hide the full truth.

Social class is one such subject in Ireland. Unlike in England and mainland Europe where class inequalities are part and parcel of political debate, 'social class' is rarely used in Ireland. When people talk about class-based injustices, they are accused of making political debates 'ideological'. Those who call discussions on social class 'ideological' don't acknowledge the fact that all political perspectives are ideological. There is no view from nowhere.

Yet Ireland is as class divided as the UK or France, even if we pretend otherwise. Access to the most selective higher education courses (such as medicine) are heavily dominated by those from the most **affluent** (white Irish) families (Higher Education Authority, 2019).

The majority of Traveller children do not complete second-level education, while children from migrant backgrounds are more likely to leave school early than native Irish children, and are **disproportionately** educated in larger urban schools in the more socio-economically deprived areas.

The most obvious place where we speak in metaphors and euphemisms about social class is in education, and one of the prime examples of this is the use of the term 'disadvantaged'. 'Disadvantage/d' is used to classify schools where poorer working class (and increasingly ethnic minorities) attend – and to describe the students themselves. The use of the term 'disadvantage', while intending to be respectful, is also concealing. It does not open up debates about the wealth and power differentials between classes that create inequalities in educational outcomes in the first instance. Like the term 'poverty', disadvantage/d is a static noun/adjective where the **agents of social injustices** are made invisible. If students are disadvantaged someone must be responsible for this; who is responsible?

The Myth of merit: Because those from privileged schools and social backgrounds dominate the entry to elite programmes year-on-year (leading ultimately to elite jobs), inequalities are **normalised**; we take no notice of the patterns, they seem legitimate.

The message is: 'Sure they got there by their hard work and ability'. Did they? The social scientific evidence suggests otherwise. There are numerous studies that show that getting high grades and good degrees is heavily dependent on the money invested in a given child/adult over time. The educationally successful are disproportionately drawn from wealthier backgrounds because they have both the **economic capital** (money) and **cultural capital** (knowledge of how the education system works, and how and where to maximise competitive advantage for their own children).

Money makes the difference: We know from extensive research conducted by scholars across different countries, and especially Sean Reardon, Professor of Poverty and Inequality in Education at Stanford University in California, that money invested in children's education outside of school (in and of itself) is becoming increasingly important in determining success within school. Wealthier parents (the wealthiest 20%) spend seven times more per child each year on private education outside of school hours than the poorest 20%. Those who are wealthiest use their private wealth to advantage their children outside the school system through private tuition in Ireland too. No matter how **egalitarian** our schools are, private wealth can undermine their democratic purposes. We can see this every day, though we do not measure its impact systematically.

In every town and village, private grinds are offered by individual teachers (sometimes the same teachers who teach children in class), and by 'grind schools' in Leaving Certificate subjects. Expensive language exchange and summer programmes are available to those who can pay to excel in French, Spanish or German especially. If you study Music and Irish for the Leaving Certificate, you are heavily advantaged in the race for points if your parents can pay for private tuition. This is how it works: the performance part of the Leaving Certificate music examination now counts for 50% of the total grade, but to be sure of getting a higher level H1 or H2 students need to have undertaken music lessons in an instrument privately at a cost of from €30-60 per lesson. The cost can and does run into thousands of euro over several years.

A similar situation applies in relation to Gaeilge. As 40% of the Leaving Certificate Examination (LCE) grade is for spoken Irish, those who can afford to pay for their children to attend the Gaeltacht each year (€1,000 for a 3-week stay) are automatically advantaged. Almost one-sixth of your final LCE 'points' can be reasonably well secured in advance by private investment in two subjects.

The problem is bigger than the Leaving Certificate. Educational credentials are a positional good in a competitive society: by this I mean their value is always relative to what others have in educational terms.

When competitors are unequally resourced, as is the case in Ireland, those with most resources, namely those from well-off middle and upper-class backgrounds, are most likely to perform best.

This is not some ideological standpoint - this is the logical outcome of economic inequalities. If we really want to address class inequality in education, then we need to challenge the **neoliberal capitalist economic model** that generates the growing income and wealth inequalities between households in the first instance. It is these inequalities that feed into injustice in education. They literally 'frighten' the middle classes into working systematically, and sometimes frantically, outside of school to advantage their own children.

Fear of losing, or not getting, class advantage is what drives the pressures on children from their parents in the Leaving Certificate. Parents with insider knowledge, money, and time, work actively to ensure their children will not be consigned to the low-waged, temporary, **precarious** employment they see all around them. Whether we approve of their actions or not, they see this as their job as parents.

But it is not the job of a democratic government to ensure that the wealthiest can **perpetuate** their class privileges through inheriting excessive private wealth at the expense of precarious, low-waged workers on the one hand, and failing to intervene in educational policies that are blatantly class biased on the other.

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**QUESTIONS:** (Before you begin, ensure that you understand the words highlighted in **bold**.)

1. What evidence does Lynch provide to demonstrate that educational success is 'class-based'?

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2. While the author concedes that the use of the term 'disadvantaged' is intended to be respectful, she also finds it problematic. Why is that?

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3. How does the author suggest that 'inequalities are normalised' in the education system?

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4. What do studies suggest that high grades are dependent on?

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5. The author asserts that educationally successful students are disproportionately more likely to be wealthier for two reasons: Economic capital and cultural capital. Explain what she means by each of these terms.

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6. What evidence is provided to suggest that spending on education outside school hours is important?

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