Governmentality and Education: How is knowledge production in Irish secondary education complicit in fostering neo-liberal subjectivities

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ABSTRACT

Education maintains a unique position in contemporary societies due to an often unquestioned assumption regarding its inherent worth and value. Education is often perceived as a vehicle for social mobility and valued for its fostering of human well-being. This thesis problematises the taken for granted valorisation of education through an examination of secondary education in Ireland. The work takes as its central question how is knowledge production in Irish secondary education complicit in shaping neo-liberal subjectivities? In doing so it draws on the work of Michel Foucault in understanding how power relations shape subjectivities through acceptance of cultural norms and values. It argues that Irish secondary education is guided by human capital theory which engenders an instrumental understanding of education. Such an understanding elicits an 'entrepreneurial self' as individuals view education and knowledge as an external acquisition for self-investment in pursuit of obtaining desirable job. Resistance does exist through criticisms of the dominance of rote learning, and through engaging in some interactive and participatory learning. However, this is ultimately undermined by the centrality of the Leaving Certificate examinations which acts as a mediator of educational success in Ireland.

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

Introduction

In contemporary societies education enjoys a unique and privileged position in which its virtue and benefits are unquestioned. This development is shaped by an enduring faith in the virtue of education. It is at once a vehicle for social mobility; through a commitment to education one will reap the rewards of improved social standing and a capacity to earn higher wages. In addition to material benefits, education is viewed as an essential ingredient in human well-being. Where education is regarded as not meeting the public standards it is viewed as in need of improvement; where education fails to address, or perpetuates, inequalities such as gender, race and class, it is seen as in need of reform. Rarely is the ubiquitous valorisation of modern education questioned (Peim 2012). The purpose of this is work is to problematise these taken for granted assumptions regarding the valorisation of education through an examination of second-level education in Ireland. In doing so, this work takes the question of how the production of knowledge in Irish secondary education attempts to shape neo-liberal subjectivities as its primary concern. It draws on interviews conducted with four teachers currently working within the second-level system, and eight first year university students who advanced directly from secondary education discussing their experiences of knowledge production in second-level education; the kinds of knowing prevalent within classrooms, the role of examinations, the place of critical thinking, student-teacher relationships and the importance in progressing to tertiary education.

Irish second-level education is often seen as having resisted neo-liberal reforms which took place in other developed countries over the past two decades (Kennedy and Power 2010), while little research has been done on the impact of neoliberalism on Irish education in general (Finnegan 2008). David Harvey outlines neo-liberalism as a set of political economic

practices that seek to liberate individuals' entrepreneurial possibilities in order to ameliorate human well-being within the established institutions of free markets, free trade and property rights (Harvey 2005). This work argues that the Irish system was already oriented toward neo-liberalism due to the ingrained nature of human capital theory as its guiding principle. As a result, Irish secondary education is dominated by an instrumentalist discourse in which education is viewed as a means of self-investment, and in which education and the needs of the economy as individuals become resources to be fostered as part of a competitive economy. This instrumentalism elicits a neo-liberal subjectivity as the individual is encouraged to become an entrepreneur of their 'self'; knowledge here is viewed as an external acquisition which improves one's opportunities of obtaining a desirable job. Progression to university appears as an unquestioned norm linked to notions of self-investment through education. While students and teachers are critical of the dominant kinds of knowing and practice a counter-discourse through interactive learning, this is nonetheless undermined by the importance of the Leaving Certificate generating a criterion for selection to third level institutions and employers. It draws on Foucault's work on power relations to highlight that subjectivity is not simply imposed by a hierarchical and monolithic power, but rather through a neo-liberal 'governmentality'; particular attributes are fostered and elicited through the acceptance of cultural norms and values. Thus, through this fashioning of conduct, individuals are actively involving in making themselves. This work avoids debates regarding the linear cohesiveness of Foucault's thought, rather I draw on him liberally in order to put the conceptual tools to work, utilising them as a "tool-box" as Foucault (1994) himself explicitly anticipated.

Structure and Outline of Thesis

Following this introduction, chapter two outlines the methodology section. It consists of four sections through which I outline my ontological and epistemological perspectives. These perspectives inform the ensuing section which details the research methods used in this research. The following section outlines the ethical considerations that inform the thesis. This chapter is integral to both the study and the research process itself as it highlights my approach as a researcher. The lack of student engagement in educational research is problematic (Lynch 1989; Smyth and Banks 2012), and something to which this work hopes to make tentative contribution toward rectifying. It is underlined by a view that those who are most affected by a situation who are best able to talk about it (Foucault 1977). My approach to the research is a qualitative one conducted through semi-structured interviews with students and teachers and aims to amplify the voices of those most affected by the phenomenon. Chapter three consists of seven sections, the first five of which are dedicated to reviewing the literature relating to secondary education on the kinds of knowing; the role examinations; critical thinking; teacher-student relationships and progression to university. The final two sections serve to illuminate those aspects of Foucault's 'toolbox' which will be later used to elaborate on the research findings, while also highlighting Foucault's understanding of neo-liberalism and its implications. Chapter four outlines the main findings of the research under eight headings: kinds of knowing; examinations; critical thinking; student-teacher relationships; progression to university; confidence; a knowledge hierarchy; purpose of secondary education. Chapter five offers an analysis of these findings in the context of the ideas and concepts focused on in the literature review of chapter three. This is done under the first five headings, with the themes of confidence, a knowledge hierarchy and the purpose of secondary education weaving through the chapter informing the more dominant themes. Finally, chapter six concludes the work.

CHAPTER TWO

METHODOLOGY

Introduction

This research is borne of a desire for a more egalitarian society. It begins from the premise that inequality is no accident, but rather that it is constituted and reinforced by "structured constellations of power, economic interest and culture" (Cox 2010). While education systems are often identified as riddled with class and gender inequalities, this research is concerned with investigating how knowledge production in Irish secondary education shapes neo-liberal subjectivities. It is guided by my belief that what underlies our relationship to knowledge is essentially a relationship to power, and that neo-liberal subjectivities treat knowledge as an external acquisition. Knowledge treated as an external object implies an already given reality external to both student and teacher. If the world is viewed as something already given and knowledge is an object to be received then both the individual's ability to be creative and to actively alter their environment is undermined. However, although I enter this research with my own ideas and perceptions informed by my own experiences, I nonetheless do so openly in a willingness to have my own bias challenged by the experiences of others. The research is therefore guided by a social constructivist approach in which subjective knowledge is valid and meaningful in understanding our social world. I will now turn to discuss my methodology through an elaboration of my ontological and epistemological positions, followed by my research methods and ethical considerations.

Ontological Perspective

My ontological position holds that there is no objective reality 'out there' to be discovered, but rather that social reality is constructed through the lived experience of individuals. Further, individuals hold ideas, beliefs, perceptions and attitudes derived from their

experiences, which are meaningful elements of the social world. I hold that these subjective meanings are not simply the articulation of individuals but are negotiated socially and historically through interaction with others and underlined by cultural and historical norms within a society (Cresswell 2007:21). This construction of reality is always embedded in power relations. Truth is always socially constructed through the interrelations of power and knowledge which at the nexus constitute discourse, the socially and historically determined rules governing what can and cannot be said, wrote about, and thought within knowledge disciplines (Foucault 1976). Discourses are not simply a linguistic concept, but gain materiality by going beyond what one says to incorporate practice; what one does (Hall 2010:72). We are shaped by this delimiting of the possible; a dissemination of the norms and standards which shape our behaviour. However, this is not simply a process of imposition, but rather for power to be effective it necessitates the acceptance by individuals through the internalisation of its restrictions as norms and standards. It is through this epochal enabling and constraining of the possibilities of what we can say, write and think that individual subjectivity is produced (Foucault 1976). There is no essence of human nature, but rather finite, historical and empirical subjects whose existence is based on contingent and historical conditions. These contingent and historical conditions imply the absence of ubiquity regarding truth, and thus the possibility of transformation.

My ontological perspective is therefore grounded in the belief that while there exists multiple competing truths, these exist within a cultural-historical context in which a particular truth dominates. It is my contention that the truth which pervades Irish society is a neo-liberal truth which seeks to position individuals as private self-interested individuals. Further, that the pervasiveness of this truth is heavily indebted to the influence of human capital theory in Irish education which individualises learning as an instrumental process, and

knowledge as external acquisition, for external gain of credentials and careers. Knowledge as external implies an already given reality in which inequality appears as a natural course of events rather than the result of socio-political structures. Institutions form a pivotal point in the interplay of power and knowledge by transmitting the discourses, values and norms of a given society. As such, I wish to investigate the role of secondary education institutions in 'normalising' individuals toward the dominant values and ideas of society through its treatment of knowledge, and how students encounter and/or resist such processes.

Epistemological Perspective

This research is motivated by the desire to understand how the treatment of knowledge within secondary education shapes the subjectivity of individuals. In particular, my research focuses on the direct experiences of teachers and students in their relationship to one another, knowledge content and examinations. It is guided by my belief that in order to understand something one must allow for those affected by it to speak on their own behalf (Foucault 1977:209). As such, I rely on the views of the participants in articulating their experiences of secondary education as the main foundation for this research. To speak about individuals is to play the part of coloniser who through the collection of data the 'expert' comes to own and control part of the groups involved (Lynch 1989:148). I believe that the ideas, beliefs, perceptions and attitudes of those involved can provide meaningful understandings of these processes and provide evidence through an elaboration of a shared lived experience. Moreover, that these understandings, and my own interpretation of the data, are influenced by the particular social, cultural and historical context we are situated in, and our individual experiences of this context. As Berger and Luckmann (1966:15) state:

> And in so far as all human 'knowledge' is developed, transmitted and maintained in social situations, the sociology of knowledge must seek to understand the process by this is done in such a way that a taken-for-granted 'reality' congeals for the man in the

> street. In other words, we contend that the sociology of knowledge is concerned with the analysis of the social construction of reality.

As outlined above I come to the research with my own perceptions and assumptions which I see as an inevitable part of making sense of any aspect of the social world. These perceptions and assumptions are based on my own experiences of secondary and tertiary education in Ireland. Mine are just one set within a multiplicity of experiences and interpretations producing numerous understandings of the social world. It is in this collision of experiences and interpretations set within shared contextual boundaries of our experiences of culture and history that meaning can arise in our social world (Creswell 2003:182). As researcher I know that I occupy a privileged role as I decide how the research is conducted, it is my questions that participants answer, and most significantly, the data produced is filtered through my 'personal lens'. However, as Creswell (2003:182) notes: 'The personal-self becomes the researcher-self. It ... represents honesty and openness to research, acknowledging that all inquiry is laden with values'. I too am caught up in and shaped by the multitude of social processes which inevitably entail developing normative values, such values cannot be cast aside in the pursuit of scientific 'objectivity' in social science. However, I aim to account for this privileged role in the research design outlined below.

Research Methods

This research is grounded in my ontological perspective emphasizing the multiplicity of human experience and my epistemological belief that experiences, ideas and interpretations of individuals are valid and meaningful ways of understanding the social world. As such the research requires eschewing an ‘experimental’ approach satisfied with testing and proving hypotheses, while also going beyond the analysis of mere statistics. Rather in order to capture the array of ideas and interpretations within the complexity of human experience of a

phenomenon it is necessary to utilise research methods in which the voice of the participants are heard. Indeed, Blumer (1969) notes that if one fails to find out what meanings individuals attribute to things, as researchers we nonetheless end up writing about those meanings, leading us into treacherous epistemological territory in which the researcher guesses about what could be directly ascertained (Becker 1996). It is for this reason that this research embraces a qualitative approach which, as Cresswell (2007:37) notes:

> Begins with assumptions, a worldview, the possible use of a theoretical lens and the study of research problems inquiring into the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem.

Qualitative research is done in the 'natural setting' (Cresswell 2007:37) and begins from the subjective meanings those involved attribute to a phenomenon. In giving a space for these subjective meanings, qualitative research underlines the complexity of the social world by highlighting the variety of perspectives on the object in search of shared meanings and understandings. This research aims to draw on these characteristics through in order to explore how the production of knowledge in secondary education in Ireland shapes neo-liberal subjectivities.

This was achieved through the medium of one to one semi-structured interviews involving open-ended questions. The selection and design of questions encouraged students and teachers to articulate their own experiences of various aspects of secondary education in Ireland. Semi-structured interviews were used as they operate as "conversations with a purpose" (Burgess 1984:102) guiding the research, while remaining flexible enough to allow participants to highlight and discuss aspects of education important in their personal experience. Two cohorts of participants were involved in the research; eight students who had just completed secondary school and entered university, and four teachers currently working within the secondary education system. Including both teachers and students allows for a

holistic approach in which similarities and differences can be identified across the classroom divide. While initially it had been hoped to interview current second-level students this was scuppered to the lengthy waiting period for Garda vetting. However, the participation of first year tertiary level students offers an advantage as these students can and do reflect upon their time in secondary education through their experiences of tertiary level. The students participated in the research following their responses to emails distributed through the university mailing list detailing the research and inviting students to participants while the teachers were approached through third party contacts. Times and locations for interviews were decided in conjunction with participants; all student interviews taking place in locations on the university campus convenient to students, while locations for teacher interviews were selected by the participants. Participants were happy to conduct interviews without a time-frame allowing the interviews to unfold organically until they flowed to a natural conclusion. Interviews were then transcribed and coded into nine themes which make up and form the basis for the Findings chapter.

Ethical Considerations

As May (2001) notes ethical decisions do not denote what is advantageous to the researcher or their project, but rather they refer to the responsibility of doing what is right and just. While this sense of responsibility involves ensuring the integrity of the research through a willingness to open up new debates and to add to existing debates; these notions of responsibility and integrity also necessitate acting in a transparent and respectful conduct toward participants. Moreover, ensuring that participants' views are properly represented is an underlying necessity in the honesty of research which aims to genuinely explore the social world. Such considerations acknowledge the inherent power imbalance between researcher and participant; the former occupies a role of authority through which we can dominate and

dictate the interests of participants in a myriad of ways, from using academic jargon to choice of clothes denoting superiority (Chambers 1997:97). While researchers intrude into the lives of participants for varying intervals and research papers emerge from such intrusions**,** the latter often derive no material benefit from it; in this sense the researcher owes a debt to the participant. As such, throughout the interviews I was committed to continuously monitoring my own behaviours and adjusting them to the needs of the participants; my own conduct was continually under self-review throughout the research process.

An essential component of ethical research is the principle of informed consent which necessitates that participation is voluntary and devoid of coercion, and based on transparency and openness (Halvorson 2005:188). Prior to beginning each interview I explained the purpose and nature of the research as I wanted to ensure that all participants understood their participation fully before each participant read and agreed to the details of the consent form. The consent form reminded participants of the nature of the research, while detailing what their participation involved, how the data would be stored, for long, and who had access to it. It made participants aware of the extent of confidentiality and anonymity and their legal limitations under the Data Protection Act 1988. This was a particularly important point for teachers who were still active within the secondary education system. Although no students requested that their involvement be anonymised, this was requested by all teachers; it was therefore decided to anonymise all names so as to respect the trust and privacy of all participants. Moreover, the consent form guaranteed that all participants received a copy of their interview transcript which they could request changes to. It also informed participants that their participation could be withdrawn at any stage; however, no participant requested changes to transcripts or to withdraw from the research. A particularly difficult aspect of ethical research which impinges upon the concept of Informed Consent is how a researcher

ought to deal with their own bias. I hold that all social research is in a broad sense, political, as it "sets out with specific purposes from a particular position, and aims to persuade readers of the significance of its claims" (Clough and Nutbrown 2007:4). It is important then to not only be aware of one's own viewpoint, but to state it openly so that it may be subject to revision. However, returning to the issue of power in research we see that in openly stating one's position it runs the risk of silently dictating how participants, as it may encourage responses conducive to the researcher's point of view. Here one must call upon their reflexivity to avoid easy consensus and encourage participants to elaborate in order to see if differences emerge. However, I do not feel that this was the case in my research as throughout the interviews I found myself encouraging participants to elaborate upon views incongruent with my own. For example, students articulation of the importance of teacher authority in learning challenged my initial impressions of the teacher-student relationship. Throughout my research my ethics are underlined by a responsibility to act in an open and respectful manner toward participants in order to create a space in which their views could be expressed openly.

Conclusion

Conducting a research project is a challenging and frustrating experience. Indeed, research is inevitably a struggle, imbued as it is with the personal experience of the researcher. As researchers we occupy the privileged position of choosing a topic to study, frequently these topics are chosen because of our own deep interest in them. We bring our own bias to the research, it is from the outset guided by our own experiences and thoughts along with a motivation to delve into a particular aspect of our social world. The point is not to hide them away, but to make them explicit in order to expose them to critique and challenge. This underlines the importance of reflexivity in qualitative research; that it not set out to prove the

point of the research, but rather to construct an understanding of a phenomenon based on the lived experiences of participants. In doing so the researcher must deal with the logistical problems of engaging with people in research and ensure that all ethical requirements are accounted for so that the research is underlined by an integrity that can lead to it being a worthwhile contribution to understanding the social world. I feel that this project is based on informed consent which creates a space for the outpourings of real lived experiences through semi structured interviews. The burden now is to do justice to these lived experiences, as it is their richness and value in understanding the social world which makes research an ultimately satisfying experience.

CHAPTER THREE

LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

This literature review takes a thematic approach and encompasses research related to Ireland, while also drawing on international research. It begins with an exploration of how the purpose of secondary education has been perceived in Ireland and its relationship to neo-liberalism. In doing so it highlights the role of human capital theory in fostering a dominant instrumental understanding of education in Ireland. It then moves on to examine the literature exploring how this instrumental discourse influences the kinds of knowing found within classrooms in Irish secondary schools. Moving on, the importance of the Leaving Certificate examination in Ireland necessitates a review of the literature on the effects of high-stakes testing on pedagogy and the treatment of knowledge. Following on from this is an examination of the different conceptions of critical thinking and the implications of each in shaping what is useful knowledge. A review of literature relating to the teacher-student relationship pertaining to the respective positions of teacher and student in the classroom follows. This is followed by an examination of the literature identifying the reasons underlying students' progression to tertiary. The chapter then moves onto excavation of Foucault's 'toolbox' in order to illuminate concepts such as discourse and governmentality that will inform the analysis. Finally, this excavation is further developed through examination of the applicability of Foucault's thought to neo-liberalism.

The Purpose of Secondary Education in Ireland

In order to examine how knowledge production in Irish secondary education is complicit in shaping neo-liberal subjectivities it is necessary to provide context through outlining the purpose of secondary education in Ireland. David Harvey defines neo-liberalism as a set of

political economic practices aimed at human well-being through the liberation of individuals' entrepreneurial freedoms and capabilities within a conducive institutional framework of free markets, free trade and property rights. The state's role is as guarantor of this institutional framework while refraining from intruding into the market (Harvey 2005:2). Although, for Harvey, the theory and practice of neo-liberalism differ as the state is put to work in the interests of capital (2005). Under neoliberalism education is increasingly shaped toward satisfying the needs of global capitalism (Mulderrig 2003; Hirtt 2004). Ideas of consumer choice and competition are central as social actors make cost-benefit decisions in competitive educational markets based on the perceived probabilities of successful outcomes in the labour market (Breen and Goldthorpe 1997:275). There has been little research on the impact of neo-liberalism on Irish education (Finnegan 2008). However, it has been argued that many developed countries succumbed to neo-liberal educational reforms over the previous two decades and Ireland already had a system based on consumer choice (Kennedy and Power 2010:227). This system is characterised by local management of schools and parents' freedom to choose whichever school they wish for their children (Tormey 2007:185); although this latter aspect is undermined somewhat by schools' ability to enforce religious ethos as an admission criteria. This has led Dunne (2002:86) to identify the Irish education system as one underpinned by business values in which students and their parents are defined as consumers.

Holborrow (2012) identifies the moulding of higher education to the needs of the economy through an emphasis on human capital and 'up-skilling' individuals in order to "provide the competitive edge of the Irish economy by attracting foreign direct investment" (Department of Education and Skills 2011:47). However, such thinking has long been the bedrock upon which the Irish secondary education system is situated. The Organisation for

Economic Development and Cooperation (OECD) led review of education which produced the *Investment in Education Report* (1965) embedded human capital theory as the guiding principle of Irish education policy (O'Sullivan 1992). One of the first theorists of human capital, Gary Becker (2002:3), defines it as such:

> Human capital refers to the knowledge, information, skills, and health of individuals ... the economic successes of individuals, and also of whole economies, depend on how extensively and effectively people invest in themselves.

In Ireland, this resulted in the displacement of the previous overtly classical and humanist approach in favour of a market-led system to meet the demands of the labour market through a focus on science, engineering and technology (Lynch 2012). Education was seen as "at once a cause and a consequence of economic growth" (OECD 1965**)** such that "since our wealth lies ultimately in our people, the aim of educational policy must be to enable all individuals to realise their full potential as human persons" (OECD 1965).

Irish educational discourse is dominated by a perceived relationship between education and the needs of the economy (Gleeson 2009) to such an extent that "economists can get away with playing the philosopher kings because there is so little challenge to the dominant orthodoxy" (Lee 1989:583). Suggestions that investment in education was responsible for the high growth in the Irish economy during the 1990s are commonplace. It is viewed that education simultaneously increased labour force participation and the productivity within the labour market (Fitzgerald 1998:4); such a view is evident among politicians with former Minister for Education Niamh Bhreathnach stating: "money spent by government is investment in human capital which has paid off very handsomely" (cited in Gleeson 2009:43). A litany of government documents bear witness to the centrality of human capital and the entwining of education with the needs of the economy continue. For example, the Education Green Paper, (Government of Ireland 1992:109) emphasised that the

"achievement of economic growth and industrial development is dependent .. on the availability of qualified personnel with the necessary technical and vocational skills and competences". Moreover, the Enterprise and Strategy Group's *Science, Technology and Innovation White Paper* stated that "knowledge creation and diffusion are at the core of economic activity" (2004:26**).** While Gleeson (2009:198-99) highlights that the National Development Plans (2000-2013) subsumed social inclusion interest within economic and human capital perspectives as expenditure on the former was only justified in so far as it facilitated access to the labour market. This focus has intensified over time with the market language of 'customers and clients' replacing that of students and learners (Gleeson and O'Donnbháin 2009:30). Indeed, this emphasis has permeated the mutations of Department of Education to the Department of Education and Science, to the Department of Education and Skills with a Customer Charter and a Customer Action Plan in 2010 (Lynch 2012). While Giroux (2004) criticises the "rule of terror" characterising neo-liberal educational reforms which eclipse democracy, the case of Ireland intertwining the education system and the economy is not a recent phenomenon.

Kinds of knowing

The kinds of knowing exercised within the classroom influence the shaping subjectivities as they influence how knowledge is approached, created and used. The didactic and interactive pedagogical models offer opposing influences on the kinds of knowing which exist in classrooms. In his work '*Pedagogy of the Oppressed'*, Paulo Freire (1970) contrasts a 'banking concept' of education with 'problem posing' education. Freire emphasizes that problem posing education is characterised by beginning from the experience of students in order to develop a dialogue between teachers and students which empowers students as co-creators of knowledge. For Freire, education systems and the kind of knowing dominant

within them are not politically neutral, rather they are embedded in and produced by oppressions existing in the social world. Problem solving education is therefore orientated toward the liberation and fulfilment of humanity. In contrast, the 'banking concept' of education stimulates the credulity of students as they are considered passive receptacles of knowledge transmitted from textbooks and the minds of teachers. In Freire's view this constitutes an oppressor-oppressed relationship between student and teacher which dehumanises both by disconnecting them from the world through external knowledge. The transmission of knowledge in this way, Freire argues, renders it an external process which engenders alienation in disempowered students as they passively receive the ideas of the dominant ruling class in society rather than actively understanding their world.

For Lynch (1989:43-44), a banking mentality and alienation are evident within the Irish secondary education system in which credentialization and individualism are central. Government regulation, particularly regarding subject provision, and occupational selection determine the subjects pupils pursue in school regardless of their interest, with the result that courses are often pursued for the credentials they offer (Lynch 1989:43-44). Assessment and rationing of time among subjects serves to both necessitate a banking mentality in order to transmit the required knowledge for examination and thus credentials. It also serves to render learning an individualistic process as voluntaristic interests are not rewarded in competitive public examinations. Learning is therefore motivated for extrinsic gain rather than an intrinsic value in the work itself marking the student as alienated from the process (Lynch 1989:44). Indeed, Lynch views the banking mentality, the commodification of subject content and time, and the rewarding of credentials as developing individualistic cultural attributes at the expense of others (1989:43). Yet, despite these criticisms of the banking approach to learning it remains a widely accepted practice, indeed, one study suggests that

students favour teacher-centred approaches (McCoy, Smyth, Watson and Darmody 2014). Students surveyed in this study highlighted listening to the teacher explain and copying notes from the board as the most useful approaches (McCoy *et.al*:123). While discussing topics with a teacher ranked highly, mentions of other interactive forms of learning such as group work and project work were infrequent. According to this research students appear content with the teacher-centred approaches despite the normative theoretical critiques outlined above.

Examinations

Examinations can play a key role in determining how knowledge production shapes subjectivities as they can influence understandings of what knowledge is for, and what counts as useful knowledge. The impact of high-stakes testing on the curriculum or whether it affects it at all is highly contested among researchers. In the United States of America, early studies such as Madaus (1988) and Smith (1991) suggested that high-stakes testing controlled classroom practice and promoted "multiple choice teaching" respectively. In contrast, Gradwell (2006) found that such tests have a minimal influence on teaching practice, while Braun (2004) suggests that high-stakes testing improves students' learning experiences. Yet, such research has in turn been challenged, for instance, Watanabe's (2007) ethnographic research finds that high-stakes testing narrows the curricula and displaces teachers' priorities toward their students. Au (2007) synthesizes the results of 49 qualitative studies in order to establish a better understanding of the phenomenon. Au's research finds that high-stakes testing does influence the curriculum, most prominently through the narrowing of curricular content to tested subjects happening in 69.4% of cases. Knowledge itself is shown to become fragmented as subject content is taught in isolated pieces for exam preparation in 49% of cases. These phenomena affect pedagogy as teachers move to more teacher-centred

instruction as evidenced in 65.3% of cases. To underline his point, Au highlights that the dominant paired themes in the research were 'Content contraction/teacher-centred pedagogy' which occurred in 70.3% of cases, while 'teacher-centred pedagogy/knowledge fragmentation' occurred in 65.7% of cases (Au 2007 262-62).

In the Irish context, Gleeson (2010:142) highlights that debates regarding curriculum contestation have focused on the need for assessment reform and fail to take curriculum content and pedagogy into account. The formal knowledge systems transmitted in Irish second-level education is tightly controlled by the Department of Education and Skills ensuring that it is universal in character (Lynch 1989:37). Moreover, the Leaving Certificate is universally used by third-level institutions in selecting intakes, ensuring that second-level educators keep to prescribed courses (Lynch 1989:38). Long (2008:121) identifies three protocols governing "what is sayable and unsayable" in Irish education: rubric, paradigm and noise. He states that the rubricist protocol is the "dominant protocol among teachers and schools who organise their courses and teaching round assessment measures" (2008:123). Examination techniques are valued as more important as meeting the expectations of the examiner becomes prioritised above any "generative inquiry", which in turn limits the ability of teachers to teach creatively within in their classrooms (2008:124). Long shares the view of Lynch (1989) and Gleeson (2010) that Irish education is dominated by a technical and instrumental paradigm which reduces education to "detailed prescriptive outcomes [and] targets that are easily coded on a manager's spreadsheet" (2008:125). These protocols are underlined by the third; that of noise, constituted by a multitude of philosophical approaches to education permeating through government white papers which allows all interest groups to justify their own claims rather than considering public needs (2008:129). The net effect being an instrumental and technical approach to curriculum and learning which prioritises

high-stakes testing learning and teaching.

Much of the literature highlighting the impact of high-stakes testing considers its affects such as contraction of the curriculum, fragmentation of knowledge and the prioritising of teacher-centred pedagogies to be unintended consequences (Jones 2007). Such a contention is challenged by Au (2010) who argues that the control of curricular knowledge content and pedagogy is made possible through policy structure. Au (2010:4) identifies high-stakes testing as concomitant with a centralised author, highlighting that in the case of the U.S it is federal policy which determines the nature of assessment and the criteria for a pass and fail. While in the Irish case, it has already been noted how Lynch (1989) highlights the strong national centralization of control over curriculum and assessment exerted by the Department of Education. It is through the setting of standards, the criteria for passing or failing and the resulting rewards or sanctions that high-stakes testing becomes the key regulatory tool for what happens in the classroom (Au 2010:5), thus representing a form of "steerage from a distance" (Menter. Muschamp, Nicholl, Ozga and Pollard 1997). High-stakes testing works under the assumption that tests are universally applicable with the result that local contexts and difference are suppressed. There is then a need to standardise knowledge, but also the measurement of students so that comparisons can be made functional (Au 2010:7). While this supposedly establishes the objectivity of tests and the equality of students it does so only by decontextualizing the individual; all trace of difference must be omitted as students must be homogenised and reduced to a test score (Lipman 2004:172).

High-stakes testing works toward homogeneity and stasis (Au 2010) while giving rise to non-voluntaristic competitive individuals (Lynch 1989). This stands at odds with Parker's (2005) conception of a democratic education orientated towards "teaching against idiocy" – here "idiocy" is derived from the Greek word *idios*, meaning private and self-centred. In

contrast, democratic education requires teaching for a more common, public and deliberative identity (Au 2010:8). Parker identifies three key actions for educators in this educational struggle; first, the championing of diversity by increasing interaction among culturally, linguistically and racially different students. Secondly, educators should create the conditions for deliberation of common issues among diverse groups; and thirdly, to distinguish between deliberation and "blather", as well as between inclusive and exclusive deliberation (Parker 2005:348). It is clear that universal applicability of high-stakes testing runs counter to the promotion of diversity which Parker sees as key to democratic education. This raises two questions: can democratic education be fostered within education systems given the centrality of high-stakes testing; and to what extent do or can students and educators work 'within the cracks' of the system to foster a more democratic form of education? Indeed, the question of agency is taken up Smyth and Banks (2012) who identify the lack of student input in research on high-stakes testing, and how such tests affect them in day to day learning as problematic. As they point out, it is possible that students may differentiate between learning for the test and other forms of learning (2012:9). Their interviews with Irish students found that although students indicated a strong preference for interactive learning, with one stating:

> You do experiments and stuff. Yeah, you do experiments or we use the projector and stuff. So, it's more interesting. Not just going through a 400 page book like. (Smyth and Banks 2012:23)

Yet, these views were often reassessed in the final year of study as students favoured more teacher-centred approaches in preparing for the Leaving Certificate (2012:23-26). Indeed, some students argued that exam preparation should have started a year earlier:

> You don't think about it [Leaving Certificate Exams] when you're fifth year at all, you should be doing exam papers and stuff in school but you don't do any of that. (Smyth and Banks 2012:28)

It is important then to acknowledge that students are not simply passive participants upon which these phenomenon act, but are often involved in challenging and reproducing them.

Critical Thinking

Competing conceptions of critical thinking can influence subjectivities in different ways, for example, whether critical thinking is conceived of in terms of problem solving, which leaves social world the problem is embedded in intact, or through problematising the system of values within which the problem is set. The technical-instrumental paradigm dominant within Ireland promotes the development of useful and effective skills in individuals for the labour market. Papastephanou and Angeli (2007:605) state that the 'development of skills' is now dominant within debates regarding education and critical thinking. These authors argue that through the assumption of an objective rationality the 'skills paradigm' maintains the highest distance from "emotions, context and prejudice" in favour of what its proponents perceive as universally valid criteria (Papastephanou and Angeli 2007:605). The skills perspective reinforces situatedness in pursuit of optimising outcomes. As one of its proponents states:

> critical thinking is the use of those cognitive skills or strategies that increase the probability of a desirable outcome. It is used to describe thinking that is purposeful, reasoned, and goal directed (Halpern 2003:6)

Halpern's conception of critical thinking fails to go beyond the evaluation of thinking processes and the achievement of desirable outcomes, it makes no mention of the ability to question the appropriateness of the task itself (Papastephanou and Angeli 2007:608). As such the skills perspective is immersed in the dominant socio-political system as pre-given and takes no account of system of values it operates within (Papastephanou and Angeli 2007:608). Where the means-end rationality with its emphasis on effectiveness and performativity is hegemonic, voluntaristic endeavours become at best saintliness or at worst an act of carelessness (Papastephanou and Angeli 2007:610). Halpern's understanding of the

'critical' aspect of critical thinking denotes an evaluation component (2003:7), in contrast, for Papastephanou and Agneli (2007:611) it denotes a problematisation component. It is this latter understanding which emphasises a need to reflect and consider what is taken for granted in our social context before undertaking particular tasks (Papastephanou and Angeli 2007:611). Here critical thinking is not simply the ability to choose the correct method of solving a problem, but includes the ability to question the system of values in which it takes place. As Benn (quoted in Bramall 2000:2) puts it:

> 'to be a chooser is not enough for autonomy, for a competent chooser may still be a slave to convention, choosing by standards he has accepted quite uncritically from his milieu'

Through this *aporetic* (question raising) dimension, problematisation opens a space for the imagining of alternatives which remain unsought after within the skills paradigm (Papastephanou and Agneli 2005:612).

Teacher-student relationship

Students occupy a subordinate position in relation to teachers in second-level education reflecting the general subordinate position of young people beyond the school. While control and discipline are seen as prerequisites for learning (Clark 1998) and teachers are expected to exercise authority over students (Tirri and Puolinatha 2000), there has been a neglect in researching the power relations between teachers and students (Lynch and Lodge 2002:147). Relationships with teachers are vital in shaping how students experience everyday life in second-level education and in shaping subjectivities, as along with peers they form the bulk of students school-life interaction. Through their direct influence within the classroom teachings can impact how subjectivities take shape through their own orientation of what the purpose of knowledge and school to be. Conflict is inherent within second-level education systems due to their compulsory nature. As Waller (1932:195) notes, schooling is not the

choice of children but rather is there for their 'good':

> The teacher-pupil relationship is a form of institutionalised dominance and subordination. Teacher and pupil confront each other in the school with an original conflict of desires, and however much that conflict may be reduced in amount, or however much it may be hidden it still remains. The teacher represents the adult group, ever the enemy of the spontaneous life of groups of children.

Yet despite this, Lynch and Lodge (2002:147-48) highlight the dearth of student voices in educational research, in which researchers seem content to speak for rather than with students. Such research operates as a form of colonisation as the expert in owning the data owns part of the participant (Lynch and Lodge 2002:147-48). However, there is a growing sense that power is not a possession but rather must be regarded as a set of relations (Foucault 1977) which have important educational consequences. Concomitantly, there is growing evidence that failure to respect student autonomy and individuality and to manage power relations between students and teachers results in negative educational consequences (Lynch and Lodge 2002:149).

Lynch and Lodge's (2002) research analysed 1,202 students' essays regarding times they felt they treated unfairly or unequally in their school. Lack of respect, most notably from teachers, was identified by 47% of students as a concern (Lynch and Lodge 2002:153-54). Although students were aware of their subordinate position, many did not accept the traditional hierarchical exercise of authority over them and insisted that teachers were not always right (Lynch and Lodge 2002:163). Similarly, students expressed claims to power through a desire to have their voices heard in the running of schools, most notably through student councils (Lynch and Lodge 2002:155-56). Considering their subordinate position their stories are a counter-discourse against power (Foucault 1977:209). Moreover, power understood as sets of relations entails that rather than teachers simply holding power, they are caught within the web of relations. While teachers in Ireland are relatively autonomous in

deciding their pedagogical approach, they are nonetheless exposed to a high degree of internal control, through principles and school managers, and external control – the pressure of preparing students for exams (Lynch and Lodge 2002:168-68). The Lynch and Lodge (2002) study also offered teachers an opportunity to voice their own concerns regarding equality in schools. Much of the teachers' concerns centred around the various distributions of status within the schools, one in particular deserves mention for the purpose of the work at hand; the status of the subject and the status of the teacher. The perceived importance of certain subjects can increase the status of those who teach them and afford those teachers with a greater influence over school policy and the allocation of resources (Ball 1987). Teachers within Lynch and Lodge's (2002) study appeared acutely aware of this hierarchy with those teaching subjects with a perceived low status, such as Art, expressing a sense of exclusion and alienation. In contrast, subjects such as Mathematics and Science were accorded the privilege of having smaller class sizes (Lynch and Lodge 2002:172). Although students occupy a subordinate position in schools the above concerns of teachers highlight that power is not 'all or nothing' as teachers suffer within power relations.

The power relations outlined above appear within the instructional orientations of teachers within the classroom. Two main orientations which can be distinguished are the constructivist and behaviourist perspectives which differ in their approach to knowledge, learning and teaching methods (van Veen, Sleegers, Bergen and Klassen 2001:177). The behaviourist view identifies knowledge as both tangible within books and the minds of the teacher, and thus directly transferrable to learners; emphasizing the central role of the latter as the authority to dispense knowledge (Shuell 1996). In contrast, the constructivist perspective moves from the transmission of knowledge to its active construction and accumulation where the teacher is no longer a deliverer of knowledge but a facilitator of students' active learning

(Shuell 1996; van Veen et.al 2001). Further, research shows a strong correlation between teachers' beliefs regarding the goals of education and the type of instruction they employ. Transmission-orientated approaches correlates with a view that gaining qualifications is the goal of education while more student-centred approaches correlate with a view that education involves a personal and moral development approach (van Veen 2001:177). While power relations may be more visible in the former approach, one empirical study by Gore (1998) identified inequalities of power across four different pedagogical sites, concluding that they are relatively continuous and present across content, level, methodology and progressive or conservative orientation.

Research within Irish second-level education highlights the dominance of an a-theoretical approach to teaching and learning (Sexton 2007; Gleeson 2012). Sexton (2007:83) found that "more than three times more respondents viewed knowledge-base of teaching as classroom-based and practical than viewed it as research based and theoretical" with the suggestion that teaching was an "inherently moral enterprise". There is then a sense among Irish teachers that education theory does not translate into the classroom. The instrumentalist influence of external examination and heavy reliance on textbook usage in Irish post-primary education means that teacher identities are shaped by didactic subject expertise rather than the significance of pedagogy (Gleeson 2012:5). Similar findings are articulated within the OECD's TALIS study (Gilleece, Shiels, Perkins and Proctor 2009:78) which found lower levels of student-orientated activities in Ireland than other participating countries, while Irish teachers showed the strongest preference for structuring practices such as homework review and stating learning goals. Despite this, Irish second-level teachers highlighted more positive relationships with students along with better disciplinary climates than those in other countries (Gilleece *et.al* 2009), findings which are echoed by Devine *et.al*

(2013:90) who found 62% of teachers rated respect and valuing student opinions as highly important. However, there is a sense in which the social and personal development of Irish students is undermined by overtly instrumental motives. Indeed, the 1994 *Report on the National Education Convention* stated that an over-emphasis on "economic and instrumentalist considerations in educational policy-making could have distorting effects, with deleterious consequences" (quoted in Murphy 2008:35). What underlies this statement is an understanding of the educational project as more than a goals based endeavour, but as involving a democratic remit vital to society. Coolahan (2002) identifies the need for educators to have cognisance of this greater understanding; indeed, as Apple (1986:180) puts it, teachers must develop learners' capacity to critically inquire about "the nature of 'teachers' and 'texts' and their relations to larger ideological, political, and economic dynamics". Such a position identifies the school as a site of inquiry rather than one of knowledge transmission, and empowers the student as an active critical participant rather than a passive receptacle of knowledge.

Progression to University

Disentangling the complexity of processes involved in the post-school pathway decision making of the young is an arduous task, fraught as it is with structural and individual factors. Although not of immediate concern in this work, numerous studies have identified the class bias within progression to university with middle-class students more likely to progress than working class students (Parker *et.al* 2012; Horn and Berger 2004; Rosenbaum 2001). It will be argued later that this norm results from an instrumental view of secondary education in which individuals come to see educational attainment as a means of self-investment and self-improvement. Beyond background determinants, such as social class, researchers have identified a number of other factors influencing students' decision making. High aspirations

are one such factor in motivating students as such values can become instilled in students from a young age (Khoo and Ainley 2000). Research has also identified a link between academic ability and post-school pathways as students with high-levels of numeracy and literacy skills more likely to attend university; in contrast, students with poor perceptions of their academic ability are more likely to opt for alternative pathways such as apprenticeships (Thomson and Hillman 2010). Similarly, Briggs, Clark and Hall (2012) highlight that although for many progression to university is accepted as the 'norm', others require substantial encouragement and guidance in preparation for becoming a student. Further, positive relationships between student and teacher are shown to be indicative of successful educational outcomes among students (Jensen 2010). Similarly, Khoo and Ainley (2005) highlight that students with positive attitudes towards school tended to have higher educational aspirations; corresponding with continuation in educational participation. Finally, parental expectations and encouragement have been identified as having the greatest influence on students' aspirations towards further education (Hossler, Schmit and Vesper 1998) and in encouraging career planning (Turner and Lapan 2002).

Although second-level education is marked by compulsion to attend, the attraction of education is nonetheless evidenced by 93% retention rates within the sector (Smyth 2012:269). Moreover, higher education is now the dominant pathway pursued by Leaving Certificate leavers with 55% of that cohort now progressing; an increase of 35% since 1980 (McCoy *et.al* 2014:13). Smyth and Banks (2012) highlight that for many students progression to university assumes a 'taken for granted' quality in which the decision is not whether to go to university, but which university to attend, and point out that such a quality is only partly related to social class. Recent analysis of young peoples' post-school decision making highlights that entry to higher education is the result of prolonged educational

engagement, with secondary education commandeering a central role (McCoy and Byrne 2011). This is largely due to the general nature of Irish second-level education which is heavily standardised through national curriculum and assessment providing strong signals to employers regarding educational quality, thus the level of educational qualifications are highly predictive of employment chances and access to high quality employment (OECD 2013; McCoy *et.al* 2014). The Leaving Certificate examination provides the main gateway to tertiary education; with students awarded 'points' for each grade achieved across a total of six subjects. Applicants to tertiary institutions are ranked according to 'points' achieved with the highest-ranking candidates offered places. A twelve year longitudinal study undertaken by McCoy *et.al* (2014) found that the highest performing group in the Leaving Certificate examination are those who progressed to higher education. Further, 90 per cent of the respondents attending further education articulated positive attitudes toward school, and three out of four felt they worked hard at school. Conversely, only 40 per cent of those completing apprenticeships felt they worked hard at school, and just over half admitting to liking school (McCoy *et.al* 2014:44). Similarly, a majority of those involved stated that their teachers had high expectations for them (McCoy *et.al* 2014:47).

Progression to post-school education is also related to respondents' reflections on their experiences of second-level education, with those attending higher education more likely to report being engaged and interested in school and working hard (McCoy *et.al* 2014:49). Similarly, those who progressed to higher education reported higher levels of positive student-teacher interaction than those doing apprenticeships or entering directly into the labour market (McCoy *et.al* 2014:51). Academic self-image was also predictive of post-school pathways, with those attending higher education being more positive about their ability to cope with schoolwork in exam years (McCoy *et.al* 2014:52). Young people with

aspirations of obtaining a professional job were far more likely to progress to higher education than other groups (McCoy *et.al* 2014:53). One interesting aspect of the study is the level of expectations on the part of parents that students would pursue a post-school education. Higher education was seen as a natural progression with an emphasis on which college to attend rather than whether to attend college (McCoy *et.al* 2014:65-66). However, the study emphasizes the agency of the respondents as the single most important influence in choosing a path was intrinsic, namely studying a subject that interested them, personal fulfilment, and finding an interesting job (McCoy *et.al* 2014:78). The research found that respondents were more reflective about their course in third-level than their choice of institution, with most motivated by interests developed at school, rather than by financial reasons (McCoy *et.al* 2014:86-89).

A common thread weaving between the competing understandings of educational goals is a notion of education as bringing self improvement. Underlying notions of self-improvement is an ideology of meritocracy which individualises achievements and failures. Indeed, today education is regarded as the engine of meritocracy which provides the main basis for social mobility (Tovey and Share 2003). Proponents of a meritocratic society believe it to be a more just and productive system where distinctions and achievements are earned through a combination of innate ability, hard work and having the right attitude, and which eventually diminish criteria such as race, class and gender (McNamee and Miller 2004). However, the notion of educational meritocracy presupposes the existence of a social hierarchy as it suggests that those who do not have the ability, the right work ethic or attitudes should not be reward. In societies where educational credentials mediate social and economic rewards, educational meritocracy therefore plays a role in legitimising social and economic hierarchies (Lynch 1985:85). Even accepting such hierarchies, proponents assume

that a clear dichotomy between ascribed and achieved qualities; however, such a view is challenged by the notion of cultural capital which emphasises the social inheritance of qualities such as values, attitudes, tastes and linguistic practices, often lacked by working class students, which are in accord with schooling and vital in determining success (Bourdieu 1974, 1977; Bourdieu and Passeron 1977). Further, the idea that ability is deserving of merit assumes that there is a lack of ability in society – otherwise there would be no need to proffer merits (Lynch 1985:87).

This latter aspect serves a dual purpose as it not only justifies the privileged position of dominant groups on the basis of their "giftedness" (Bourdieu 1977), but also elicits the acceptance of underprivileged groups by offering a means to social mobility (Kennedy and Power 2010:226). Yet, within the context of existing hierarchical societies the realisation of meritocracy is a logical impossibility as there are only limited number of prestigious and high paying occupational positions available (Lynch 1985:88). Nonetheless, the ideology of meritocracy persists within education embedded firmly as its engine. Much educational research identifies the rhetoric of meritocracy as providing a means for governments to transfer the responsibility for social and economic inequalities to the individual (Hill 2002; Hursh and Martina 2003) perpetuating existing unequal societal structures to the point that the current status quo appears 'natural' (Hill 2003). In Ireland, Lynch (1989:150) identifies the OECD's publication of the *Investment in Education Report* as a key factor in embedding the concept of meritocracy as the guiding principle for Irish education. The report emphasized that economic growth required investing in education in order to nurture the intellectual abilities of the talented few. The choosing of the talented few is reinforced by the individualising process of standardised examination which is predicated on quantifying objectifiable individual performance (Lynch 1989:150-152). A process evidently embedded

in Ireland where standardised national curriculum and assessment underlines the Leaving Certificate results as predictive of educational and occupational success (Lynch 1989). Moreover, Kennedy and Power's (2010) study which showed strong iterations regarding the link between such notions and education across public and private schools. Despite the problems regarding the ideology of meritocracy such notions remain embedded within educational thinking in Ireland.

Foucault's Toolbox

The relevance of Foucault's work is due in part to its ability to disconcert dominant liberal ideas of human progress through its critical analysis of social institutions as microcosms of larger forces. Attending to the operations of prisons, mental asylums and clinics, Foucault thought, reveals the strategies used to deal with opposition, construct self-identities and to manage collective power in society. Foucault's analysis is informed by a conception of power as ubiquitous and subtle; rather than hierarchical and monolithic, power is a "productive network which runs through the whole of the social body" (Foucault 1980:119). Power in modern Western societies is manifested as a 'micro-physics' power which:

> applies itself to immediate everyday life which categorises the individual, marks him by his own individuality, attaches him to his own identity, imposes a law of truth on him which he must recognise and which others have to recognise in him. It is a form of power which makes individuals subject. (Foucault 1982:212)

Such a view denies the essentialist view of the individual as a pre-given entity; rather, the individual is both a product and instrument of relations of power (Foucault 1980:73). Foucault's interest is in exploring how, and for what ends, this modern conception of the human subject is formed and put into practice through the social production of knowledge (Mourad 2001). Indeed, for Foucault, power and knowledge directly imply one another through their relations to discourses; the culturally and historically determined sets of rules

governing what can be said and thought, but also who can speak, when and with what authority within knowledge disciplines (Foucault 1972). As such, they are constituted by exclusions as well as inclusions, and imply an antagonistic relationship to other competing discourses. Discourse refers to more than a linguistic concept, it gains materiality by going beyond what people say to what people do; their practices (Hall 2010:72). As such they embody meanings and social relationships, they delineate the whole context in which particular groups of individuals, such as teachers and students are set; what they write, say, social habits etcetera. Every society contains its regime of truth, or "general politics of truth" delineating the types of discourse it holds to be true. Hence, society is an arena for a struggle to establish and reproduce a regime of truth where educational and other social institutions operate as sites for the transmission of cultural values considered to be true, thus, sustaining a particular notion of truth through the power of legitimacy (Pitsoe and Letseka 2013:24-25).

Accordingly, for Foucault, contemporary societies are not characterised by increasingly progressive civilisation, but by the subtle expansion of power and 'disciplinary technologies' ensuring particular norms and values are internalised by the subject. Modern disciplinary power is characterised by hierarchical observation, normalisation and examination which permeates a wide range of social institutions (Foucault 1977). Observation and examination are not neutral processes, but give rise to the objectification of individual cases that can be carefully monitored according to a norm. Normalising judgements creates binary dichotomies such as 'good-bad' or 'normal-abnormal' which serve as the basis for reward as well as punishment. They create the basis for classifying, excluding and creating boundaries as individuals can be ranked or graded according to qualities, skills and abilities. In secondary education teachers make normalising judgements over statements

of truth made by students; accepting discourses which comply as true while rejecting those regarded as false. As such students are enrolled into 'legitimate' knowing and behaviour, becoming subjects of a regime of truth (Edwards 2002:362). On this view education does not appear as intrinsically progressive or enlightening, but as an institution characterised by technologies of discipline aimed at social control.

Foucault's conception should not be interpreted as a negative conception of power simply enacted upon individuals in order to produce a particular subject. This negative power characterised pre-modern periods through the concern with territory and sovereign's right of life and death over their subjects. However, Foucault's later work argues that with the rise of modernity this concern with life transforms to a positive concern with the population within a territory and the management of life as a whole. Modern governmental power is concerned with the 'life of the people' and gives rise to a centralised bureaucracy attending to public health, living conditions, life expectancy, birth rates, education etcetera (Foucault 1981:141). This incorporation of biological life within the political Foucault terms 'biopower'. Foucault's earlier analysis of disciplinary power is not, however, supplanted, but rather it is put to work in delineating the control of life in general (Leask 2009). This gives rise to the problem of governing the self and others; Foucault utilises the concept of 'governmentality' refers to the “collectively produced thought which structures how we conceive of the appropriate conduct of self and others” (Korteweg 2006:109). Thus, the notion of governing is combined with a particular form of rationality, with the latter embedded in social institutions and as an often unscrutinised assumption. Subjectivities are shaped, rather than determined, through fashioning and refashioning conduct based on cultural norms and values in order to elicit a particular image of human beings. In this sense, observation is not just exerted hierarchically within secondary schools but permeates

horizontally also through the fashioning and reinforcing of correct conduct exerted by peers (Edwards 2002:362). Governing through this "conduct of conduct" renders members of a population as resources whose capacities are to be fostered (Dean 1999:20).

This is an important point as Foucault's understanding of power is often viewed as negating the agency of individuals and thus undermining any possibility of resistance. Schrag (1999:378-379) reads Foucault's use of terms such as resistance and struggle as nothing more than rhetoric, arguing that for Foucault passive individuals are normalised and dominated through totalising structures . While Taylor (1986:92) criticised Foucault's notion of power as incoherent devoid of any hope of liberation. However, Foucault's understanding of power relations requires a free subject capable of acting as they cannot be understood simply as negative impositions, but rather:

> power produces; it produces reality; it produces domains of objects and rituals of truth. The objects and rituals of truth. The individual and the knowledge that may be gained of him belong to this production. (Foucault 1977:194)

Power relations are all encompassing and inescapable, however, that "power is everywhere" (Foucault 1998:63) does not mean that domination is all pervasive. Rather, to every discourse there is a counter-discourse, every new truth has the potential to exert a new regime of truth and every emancipatory power relies on the counter-power to which it is opposed (Butin 2001:163). For Foucault, this involves:

> a total structure of actions brought to bear upon possible actions; it incites, it seduces, it makes easier or more difficult; in the extreme it constrains or forbids absolutely; it is nevertheless always a way of acting or being capable of action. A set of action upon other actions (Foucault 1982:220)

While this structuring of the possible field of actions does not necessitate conscious acts of willing participants, neither are power relations an unidirectional imposition upon the individual. A good student is not then simply made through the education system; this

subjectification is done with them, whether consciously or unwittingly. Power relations necessarily entail the possibility of action, thus, there is always the possibility of resistance, the lack of which cannot be taken to mean the lack of an ability to resist (Butin 2001:168). How then to account for the power of the state when power is no longer understood as overwhelming and unidirectional? Moreover, Foucault (1991:101) dismissed the state as "a composite reality and a mythologized abstraction, whose importance is a lot more limited than many of us think". While Rose (1999:5), following Foucault, identifies the state:

> simply as one element – whose function is historically specific and contextually variable – in multiple circuits of power, connecting a diversity of authorities and forces, within a whole complex of assemblages.

Yet, to describe the state as merely one element shaping the "conduct of conduct" seems to undermine its distinct role in enacting policy which governs the disciplinary practices of schools. In thinking about education it is hard to overestimate the importance of the state as the guarantor and provider of compulsory secondary education in Ireland, while also being the dispenser of policy which shapes the education system.

Foucault and Neoliberalism

At the beginning of his work, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, David Harvey (2005:3) notes that so pervasive is neoliberalism that it has become embedded "into the common-sense way many of us interpret, live in, and understand the world". Harvey's book is one of a deluge of scholarship which confronts neoliberalism, in this instance offering an historical trajectory of neoliberalism from its origins in the 'Chicago School' through its initial experiments in Chile to its effects through the regimes of Thatcher and Reagan, as well as the rest of the world. However, what is ultimately lacking in works which confront neoliberalism, including Harvey's, is an interrogation of the process in which neoliberalism became hegemonic (Read 2009:26). Read (2009:26) highlights that permeating these texts is an understanding of

neoliberal not as a new ideology but as a transformation of ideology in terms of its conditions and effects. In terms of the former, neoliberalism as an ideology is not generated by the state but rather it emanates from the market-place, the buying and selling of commodities, which expands across the social space reshaping society in its image. As such its effects are not limited to the political realm, but to all human existence; in place of an ideal it claims a reality- human nature (Read 2009:26). Any critical analysis of neoliberalism must address this emergence of a particular understanding of human nature and social existence (Read 2009:26). It is then a matter of understanding the discursive deployment of a particular form of rationality tied to particular form of governing the self and others; a task Foucault's concept of governmentality is suited for.

Neoliberalism can be understood as a new mode of governmentality which deploys discourses privileging notions of investment and competition. Classical liberal thinkers focused on mankind's propensity to "barter, truck and exchange" (Smith 1776**)** and privileged the market as an autonomous space separate from the state with its own rationality and efficiency. For Foucault, the market is not limited to a specific institution or practice, but rather it becomes a reinterpretation and critique of the state; exchange operates as the general matrix of society (Foucault 2008:12). While neoliberalism shares this general idea of man as an economic subject, 'homo economicus', as the basis for political and social relations the focus shifts from exchange to competition (Foucault 2008:139). This emergence of the competing creature involves a change in how human beings make themselves and are made as subjects by fostering the propensity to compete (Read 2009:28). This is aided by the expansion of the field and scope of economics which permeates the decision making process of human beings to such an extent that everything for which human beings attempt to realise their ends, from marriage, to crime, to expenditure on children, is underlined by a cost-benefit

analysis. Secondly, 'labour' and 'worker' are redefined to become 'human capital'; one invests in themselves through education and training to improve their capacity to earn income (Read 2008). For Foucault (2008:256), "*homo economicus* is an entrepreneur, an entrepreneur of himself". This neoliberal regime of truth shapes the competitive subject through a mode of governmentality which operates on interests, desires, and aspirations rather than on rights and obligations. *Homo economicus* is therefore distinct from the legal subject of the state, *homo juridicus* (Read 2009:29). Freedom is central to this neoliberal mode of governmentality as subjects require the freedom to choose between competing strategies; it does not curtail or mark the body, but shapes the conditions of human action. In this sense, neoliberalism is characterised by an intensification as power becomes less restrictive but saturates the field of actions and possible actions (Read 2009:29).

Peters (2001) identifies this emergence of the 'entrepreneurial self' and 'enterprise culture' as a cultural reconstruction which aims at limiting the role of the state, not through retrenchment, but by an intensification of moral regulation which expands the individualisation of society through the 'responsibilising of the self'. For Peters (2001:63), this cultural reconstruction was originally initiated under Thatcher's Conservative governments, but intensified throughout the 1990s to an extent that numerous White papers call for an 'entrepreneurial culture', while Tony Blair openly stated that 'we need a culture of enterprise'. Individuals simultaneously become responsible moral agents and calculative rational choice actors who establish their self through personal investment. In this sense education symbolises an optimistic future through which one reaps what they have sown, and along with science and technology forms an engine for economic growth and national prosperity. In order to eradicate the part education played in creating a 'culture of

dependency' education is in effect redesigned in order to better meet the need of business and industry.

Conclusion

While there is little research on the potential effect of neo-liberalism on Irish education, the literature on Irish education highlights the dominance of the instrumental paradigm guided by human capital theory. It is suggested that this instrumental orientation engenders a 'banking' model of education in which knowledge is transmitted to the passive student in preparation for examination. However, empirical research suggests that students favour such a model in preparing for exams. The research on high-stakes testing is contested, however, Au's (2007) recent research does point to such testing having a significant impact on curriculum and pedagogy. The importance of the Leaving Certificate is prevalent throughout the literature as it is identified as mediating progression to tertiary level which is viewed as the 'norm' among students. While much of the literature on education is concerned with social class, it is acknowledged that social class is only partly related to this taken for granted assumption. Within the literature on critical thinking there are competing conceptions of the term 'critical' denotes; with some authors arguing that instrumental paradigm promotes a conception of critical thinking concerned with problem solving and leaves untouched the system of values a problem is set in. Moreover, while there is a dearth of student voices within the literature on Irish secondary education, research which has included these voices identifies students concerns with inequalities of power between teacher and student. The following chapter will document the views and experiences of teachers and students regarding secondary education in order to further the research on these contested debates, before utilising the concepts from Foucault's work outlined in this chapter in order to provide an analysis of the themes raised.

CHAPTER FOUR

RESEARCH FINDINGS

Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to outline the ideas, issues and experiences of the students and teachers interviewed for this research. In total, twelve participants were interviewed: four current secondary school teachers and eight first year university students who have recently progressed directly from second-level to university; all names of these participants have been changed in order to ensure anonymity. It is my belief that interviewing both teachers and students provides a holistic understanding of the research question as concurrence and differences emerge across and within the classroom divide. As such it contains individual experiences and ideas regarding the kinds of knowing in secondary schools, the impact of exams, the place of critical thinking, hierarchy of knowledge and teacher-student relationships. While these themes are directly linked to the classroom experience both cohorts elaborated on ideas behind progression to university, how secondary learning impacts confidence, along with their views on the purpose of education and the differences between secondary and tertiary education. While individuals offered perspectives on many shared concerns, there were instances in which particular issues were emphasised by one cohort more than the other; at times the voices of students are amplified and at others it is the teachers' voices who come to the fore.

Kinds of Knowing

Rote Learning

- *Views of Students*

The starting point for my exploration of knowledge production in secondary education was to ascertain the experiences of students and teachers in regards to the kinds of knowing which they engaged in within the classroom. My question regarding the kinds of knowing experienced within the classroom elicited a common critique of the prevalence of memorisation in secondary education among students. It is significant that every student criticised the role of rote learning as this implies that Irish secondary education is heavily shaped by memorisation. This often included a distinction between the 'learning off' of rote learning and what they considered to be real learning; with the former a transitory possession to be lost once it's fulfilled the its requirement of doing the Leaving Certificate. As such it created a binary dichotomy between right and wrong knowledge with the authoritative teaching dispensing the definitive knowledge of each subject. One student was scathing in her description of the kind of knowing prevalent within secondary education:

> you're just told to learn it; you're not really even taught what knowledge is, because it's not knowledge it's rote learning. I've forgotten most, if I sat my Leaving Cert now I would do awfully, because it's all rote learning; I didn't know it, I learned it, and they don't care whether you know it or learn it so long as you put it down in the exam. (Ciara)

While another stated:

> ... our teachers would be at the top of the class telling us what to do, in terms of the subjects we were being told like, this is how the world is ... and then when you get through that you realise that there's actually, it's not all black and white, it's diverse, like, life and experiences is much more than just the black and white that you get in school. (Johnny)

- *Views of Teachers*

Teachers highlighted similar concerns regarding the role of rote learning in secondary education with one stating:

> I think it's too focused on rote learning and that'd be the one place where it is lacking, there's no benefit there to vast amounts of rote learning ... rote learning is giving too high a priority in our schools. (Andy)

While another teacher stated that there is an increasing drive towards 'banking education' from the Department of Education and Skills which narrows the possibility for discussion:

> we're really going back to the banking system of education, I actually think we're reverting back to it, we're regressing rather than progressing, in my view, cause I'm gonna have to change the way I teach, which I feel has worked well, cause I would use a lot of discussion and a lot of writing as well, but the inspector the other day said I should give them more notes, I don't think that's real knowledge... (Evelyn)

Active and discussion-based learning

- *Views of Students*

Yet while all students criticised the pervasiveness of rote learning within secondary education most also acknowledged that there existed a space for discussion and student participation within the classroom. For many students there existed a multiplicity of teaching methods within the school that allowed students to go beyond the memorisation of textbooks and to be more actively involved in the process. This diversity of methods made the learning space more enjoyable by breaking up the monotony of textbooks and rote learning. As one student states:

> ... I mean for English we'd watch a film or something, or we'd go out to see a play or something like that. And it's the same with German, we'd watch a German film instead of just learning textbook stuff... there was always people asking questions and the teacher would always encourage us to ask questions ... (Johnny)

While another student also highlighted that student participation interrupted the monotony of school while emphasizing that discussion based learning was more engaging by providing a wider range of perspectives on a topic:

> ... 'cause I think if it was just a case of going in everyday and sitting there and listening and reading things out of books it'd kind of just be monotonous, ya know, and I think whatever minimalist interest you might have in a subject if there's kind of a dialogue conversation going on in the class, ya know, it will make things more interesting ... (Steven)

- *Views of Teachers*

While throughout the interviews there was a reluctance among teachers to criticise different methods used by colleagues, three out of four teachers echoed the views of students' in emphasising the need for participatory learning. One teacher stated:

> ... I wanna hear a lot of different voices, rather than just my voice, I allow them to write on the board sometimes, themselves, I like there to be a lot of movement, a lot of discussion, a lot of interaction ... (Evelyn)

While another highlighted how students respond positively to participatory learning as it breaks the monotony of school:

> ... they're active, they're moving, they're using their hands, they're discussing in groups, so group work is another part of it, but anything that is different, anything that is different from other classrooms that kids will respond to positively. (Andy)

However, as noted above one interviewee identified herself as employing a more traditional 'chalk and talk' in order to maintain control of her classroom:

> I'd very much be speaking from the front of the class, power-points, pictures, using the textbook ... nowadays' you hear 'group work' which strikes the fear of god in me ... I would lose, like, my control ... (Joanne)

Useful knowledge

- *Views of Students*

Participants were questioned on what they felt constituted useful knowledge in order to highlight the kinds of knowledge valued by teachers and students in secondary education, and what they felt knowledge was for. Overwhelmingly, responses were set within the context of secondary education with students offering an evaluation of each subject they had studied. What emerged was an instrumental definition of knowledge in which knowledge was valued according to its relevance to the goals of each student. As one student put it:

> ... it depends on what you want to do and where you want to go, where you're seeing yourself going. So, for me useful knowledge is what's relevant to what I want to do,

> I'm going to go on to do psychology, and I've very little doubt that I'm going to go on to do a masters and I'm going to go on, and hopefully, do a doctorate ... (Ciara)

Another student stated that:

> ... useful knowledge would be knowledge that can get you through life, through what you're doing, through what course you're using. (Sarah)

While another student felt that in order for knowledge to be useful in secondary education it must be linked to examinations.

> I think for it to be useful in secondary school you kind of have to ensure that it's something to do with the exam, 'cause people will see that it is useful and it's more likely to stick in your head. (Steven)

- *Views of Teachers*

Among teachers there was a sense that secondary education was biased toward academic learning, offering little to students whose interests or talents lay elsewhere. This bias also translates into the denigration of non-academic achievements.

> ... cause not all students are academic ... you can't say 'well ya know what, I wanna stay in school, but I want to become a plumber, teach me plumbing, or teach me carpentry, or ya know, something else that doesn't necessarily mean a full Leaving Cert qualification' ... (Andy)

A similar point is made by another teacher:

> there's no extracurricular activities award given or anything like that, if they did really bad you remember that 'Oh John failed everything', so it's all about academics, you'll never say 'oh he failed everything, but he was fantastic now at the football' (Mike)

This academic bias often results in an emphasis on textbook learning rather than using the local knowledge of the student in order to build a discussion, as the following example highlights:

> we were talking about Wolfe Tone, and out of nowhere this kid says: “my father told me it cost twenty grand to be buried in Bodenstown, imagine, Miss, twenty grand for a plot in Bodenstown”, and of course I turned and said “he must be dying to get into it”, and of course laughing at myself, y'know ... so that was his contribution. (Joanne)

However, another teacher takes a position directly at odds with the one above:

> I would celebrate local knowledge, if it's relevant to the student, if the student makes a connection between this and that and what I'm teaching, well that's okay and I would allow that student to speak cause they're obviously trying to process what's going on. (Evelyn)

In contrast, this teacher adopts an approach which emphasises an organic aspect to knowing within the classroom. Here, relevance extends beyond the textbook or an exam as in her view students can use knowledge gained outside of the classroom in order to process what is being taught.

Differences between secondary and tertiary education

- *Views of Students*

Considering the overtly negative feelings toward their secondary school experience, I was interested in how students compared those experiences with their tentative experience of tertiary education. Indeed, often pre-empting my question, every student discussed the kinds of knowing they experienced through a comparison with their experience of university education. The latter was spoken of in overwhelmingly positive terms by students, indeed, for many it was everything that secondary education was not. The 'spoon-feeding' of second-level is replaced by an institution which demands one to think critically and to engage in independent learning. Knowledge, independence and responsibility are entwined in university which is perceived as a learning space in which the 'black and white' dichotomy of secondary education is removed and in which students can engage in critical thinking. One student said:

> you have to be very responsible for yourself ... you're very free to be yourself and to think for yourself, and I think it's far better, and the whole idea, you're learning the concept of something and you're encouraged to think critically when reading things, because that's how you should really, because people might say something but it mightn't necessarily be right. (Ciara)

While another student said:

> ... I found that there's no right or wrong answer, if you have argument and you actually phrase it in a way that makes sense and you've an argument that follows through on itself then none of the lecturers I've had anyway are gonna turn and go 'no, you're wrong, shut up' ... (Tara)

- *Views of Teachers*

Similarly, I was interested in how the teachers reflected upon their tertiary education and whether it corresponded to the positive views of students. Teachers were less enthusiastic about the university acting as a space for 'pure learning' which encouraged critical thinking and debating. It was common for teachers to recall learning off and regurgitating information for exams, along with an emphasis on credentialised knowledge which resembles focus on achieving a high points score in the Leaving Certificate. While acknowledging that 'you are expected in university to get on with it very much yourself', one teacher nonetheless outlined an experience reminenscent of the rote learning many students criticised secondary eduction for:

> I was in a massive building with two or three hundred other people with this woman at the top, I'm sure she's not still there, can't remember her name, and she's doing Irish History and I'm going "what's she talking about?", y'know, I'm going, and everybody else is writing stuff down, I'm going,"okay", and start writing down, "what's going on here?", hadn't a clue and it was like she was just up there, she spoke for the hour and then she left ... (Joanne)

Another was even more blunt in his assessment:

> I found that there was very little critical thinking taught, there was more encouragement about 'you have to learn this vast amount of information and you have to regurgitate it in the exam', so again it was similar to what's been going on in secondary school, 'look, learn, learn learn, get your 2.1, go for your masters if you want', and a lot of it came down to the grade you got, 'did you get a First Class, did you get a 2.1, a 2.2?'. (Andy)

Examinations

- *Views of Students*

Although respondents were explicitly asked about their experience of examinations, references to examinations are ubiquitous throughout the interviews; highlighting their centrality to experiences of secondary education. For students, learning was largely limited to what was needed for the examinations resulting in an emphasis on teacher-centred approaches and textbook learning, which recalls the distinction between 'learning off' and 'real learning' in the previous section.

> ... I'd no interest in Maths after, ya know, secondary school so they [teachers] said there was no point in teaching us things that wouldn't help us in the exam because there was that percentage of us that just weren't interested in Maths, so they taught and prepared us for the exams. (Steven)

While another student stated:

> ... you stuck to the books because that's what's coming up in the Leaving Cert, those books were your Leaving Cert and you had to say what was in those books and you had to pass your Leaving Cert with the most marks possible. (Annie)

Many students I interviewed spoke of their difficulty in dealing with the pressure of studying for the Leaving Certificate to the extent that social relationships were curtailed in order to devote more time to studying. For students, there was little escape from this pressure as not only did they face daily reminders regarding the examination in school, but students also dealt with the expectations of parents who emphasised the importance of doing well.

> ... like I had to break up with my girlfriend and things like that, ya know, so things like that the exams were hampering and as well my parents were kind of ... they weren't pressurising me but they were showing the importance that it was, ya know, once I had my exams done I'd be in college ... (Steven)

Another stated:

> ... like you will hear the word 'Leaving Cert' at least ten times a day, and coming up to like any type of exam that word will be used at least fifty times a day, and like they put so much emphasis on it, and obviously teachers put so much emphasis on it ' cause the better you do the better the school is ... the more people will see that this school is respectful and want to go here. (Imogen)

One student was willing temper her criticisms by acknowledging that she perceived some benefit to the system:

> ... this is like your future is at stake here, so it made you kinda focus more and learn more, yeah. I guess it makes you do work and makes you kinda motivated to do work and to do something for yourself to get into college, but yeah, yeah I would say that, because I think your results will also reflect that you're willing to be a hard worker, so, so it helps you be a hard worker because, yeah, hard worker. (Sarah)

- *Views of Teachers*

Teachers were highly critical of the Leaving Certificate examination identifying it as biased toward memorisation rather than critical and anlytical skills. In particular, time was raised as an issue as teachers questioned whether students could gain a deep understanding of subjects in the limited time alloted to each subject, while teachers also felt under pressure to complete the course programme in time for examinations:

> memorization is something that you're gonna do for the exam then forget about it, whereas the whole point of learning or the whole point of education is to build on it, but takes a lot longer and when you've got 7 subjects to that on and 42 classes a week, 42 teachers in front of you, 40 minutes each, ya know? It's tough to actually comprehend. (Mike)

While another teacher stated:

> ... we've two thirty-five/forty minute periods a week, I'm under pressure to deliver that course in that time, so literally we hit the ground running and I do not stop, because I want to make sure that my side of the bargain is being fulfilled and I've come to page three thousand and whatever it is by the time the exam comes round ... (Joanne)

Confidence

- *Views of Students*

Since students overwhelmingly articulated a view of secondary education as dominated by rote learning and preparation for examinations which distribute judgements on students as right or wrong, a good student or bad student, it prompted me to ask students whether or not the learning in secondary education impacted on their self-confidence. Throughout the

interview transcripts, education was seen as directly related to one's success beyond the school and I was therefore interested in knowing whether this was something students carried with them; was knowledge, in a sense, oppressive? Almost without exception, students acknowledged that failing in secondary school engendered negative perceptions about oneself. Since all of the students felt they had achieved what they wanted from secondary education by obtaining a place in university many of them spoke not of themselves but rather about watching the effect on fellow classmates. However, one student did state:

> ...I've two cousins that did the Leaving Cert same time I did and both did better than me and I would feel in relation to them not as successful ... (Mary)

While another student stated:

> I am happy with my Leaving Cert results ... [because] the results I got helped me get where I wanted to be ... [but] there was always that perception, ya know, people wanted to do well in the exams, 'cause if they didn't they'd think they were stupid. (Steven)

- *Views of Teachers*

Similarly, teachers acknowledged that doing poorly in examinations does not merely limit students' options beyond school, but rather it serves to render a judgement on them regarding their level of intelligence and whether they are a good or bad student. One teacher stated:

> ... the self esteem of kids who know they're weak and then they wait for three months when everyone else gets their results and they figure it out look at it, 'I am as weak as I thought, I'm shit at this, I'm crap' ... not just them it'll be their family around that'll be 'Oh how'd you get on?'. (Mike)

Another teacher expressed her regret at how in her view education in general operates as tool of judgement through a perceived link between education one's self-worth:

> ... cause again I would see people I know who are more highly educated within my life have higher self worth and I think that is sad that society has put so much value on that because I don't think that's the way it should be really ... (Joanne)

A Knowledge Hierarchy?

- *Views of Students*

Respondents' assertions regarding the prevalence of rote learning combined with a perceived emphasis on exam learning prompted me to enquire whether they felt this created a knowledge hierarchy. In other words, were some subjects regarded as being more useful and hence prioritised over other 'less useful' subjects? Almost without exception, student responses identified the core subjects of Maths, English and Irish along with Science as having a higher status than other subjects. Many students stated that within schools these subjects are identified as being 'serious subjects' vital to students' education and as such were accorded more time for exam preparation when necessary. Students also highlighted the idea of progressing either to a third-level institution or to the workforce as a reason for the centrality of such subjects in secondary education. Since these subjects were regarded as more difficult not succeeding in them limits one's opportunites, while also resulting in a judgement that one is not intelligent. One student stated:

> ... I did Music, and Music is just considered the "hippy subject" ... I did find that if you were missing a class to do music the teachers would look like at you and say 'you can totally miss that, that's fine', whereas if you say 'I'm missing this class to do an extra Maths class' teachers would be like 'oh my god, go on, certainly', especially the science subjects, science subjects were considered above anything else, as well as Maths and English, and for some reason Irish... (Ciara)

Another student stated that:

> ... it makes the kind of impression that if you're not good at the, like English, Maths and Irish, if you're not good at them then you're not intelligent, cause they're the ones they're so focused on. I think they're kinda seen as the ones that will get you real jobs. (Tara)

For one student, the importance of certain subjects was consistently emphasized by teachers within her school, as she explains:

> ... they'd say like "if you fail Maths or you fail Irish you're not going to get anywhere", I dunno why they said that, 'cause they said something, they said that if

you failed Maths you can't go into any course, like no course will accept you if you failed Maths ... (Sarah)

- *Views of Teachers*

Three out of the four teachers highlighted a knowledge hierarchy within their respective schools. Maths is once again underlined as being the most important subject as it is perceived to significantly increase students' options, particularly in the labour market. For instance, one teacher admitted:

> ... I would always tell the kids, it's not advertised but when someone looks at your CV or looks at your Leaving Cert results and they see 'oh wonderful you got an A in Irish, and ya got an A in History, but ya failed Maths' ... there isn't a huge amount of stuff out there that doesn't involve Maths in some way ... it is definitely seen that Maths is important and Maths teachers push that. (Andy)

One teacher expressed his disappointment that little time was made available to teach students about social issues in Civic, Social and Political Education (CSPE):

> CSPE is a great subject and it gets slated, absolutely slated, I think it's a fantastic subject, it's only once a week, 40 minutes, I look at it from the point of view, well politics, development, society, civic education, I think that's very important, but why does it only get 40 minutes per week? (Mike)

However, one teacher felt that timetabling issues acted to constrain student choice, rather than some subjects being regarded as more important than others:

> ... I to suppose, fit into the timetable constraints Music for the Junior Cert is only offered on one line, ... if you put Music on a couple of lines we would get more kids doing music ... [and] Music is up against the likes of Tech Graph in our place and the likes of Woodwork so there is a perception that some subjects are a little bit, wouldn't say important, but certainly they have a higher profile maybe. (Joanne)

While this teacher does not believe that subjects such as Technical Graphics are considered more important than those such as Music, there is nonetheless a construction of a hierarchy through the choices that are made available to students. There is a view here that rather than Music being a 'soft' subject with little to offer students, it would attract more students if it

were awarded the same profile as other subjects; yet what is lacking is the reasoning why some subjects enjoy a higher profile than others.

Critical Thinking

- *Views of Students*

Respondents' remarks regarding the kinds of knowing within the classroom and their experiences of exams provoked me to enquire as to whether they felt that critical thinking is encouraged in secondary education. Given the criticisms of rote learning laid out earlier along with the influence of exams over students' learning experiences it would appear that critical thinking does not occupy a primary position in secondary education. However, questions regarding critical thinking often produced a tangled set of responses from participants. For many, my enquiries produced a simple and direct response: that critical thinking had no place in their secondary level education. One student conjures up Freire's notion of 'banking education' when she states:

> ... it was very much in the box and you were taught an opinion, you always had to look at it from the perspective that the teacher taught you ... you'd formulate your own opinions but they were always wrong, it was 'oh, no, this is what they are looking for, they are looking for you to have this opinion'. (Ciara)

While for other students there was some space for critical thinking in the classroom, but it was not something to be done in examinations:

> Certain teachers, like they wouldn't let you away with just saying 'that's stupid' , “like why do you think that? ... [but] we were always being told like, what you put in class is fine ... but when you bring an opinion into an exam it's not in the marking scheme, it's more about ways of getting your marks than actually understanding the content and having an opinion based on it. (Tara)

- *Views of Teachers*

Given the perceived dominance of rote learning in secondary education which all respondents articulated, I was interested in ascertaining whether teachers felt that critical thinking was

important. All teachers felt that critical thinking was important, while acknowledging that it had limited space in secondary education. One teacher stated that:

> ... school in general kills creativity, we give them all the same book, we make them sit the same exam ... when they go into real life and they're in a business and they're faced with a really daunting situation, what do they do, or a bank, they don't go back to their textbook and flick around and see if they can find an answer, cause it won't be there ... (Mike)

While another teacher felt that teachers were hostage to a 'catch 22' predicament when trying to encourage their students to think critically:

> ... if I spend my whole time teaching kids critical thinking they'll be fantastic in workforce, but they'll only come out with two hundred and fifty or three hundred points in the Leaving Cert, but I could push rote learning and push it and push it and push it and my students would come out with great grades and great Leaving Cert and I'll look like the great teacher, but then they find themselves in the workforce and they find that 'Jesus like, I can't do anything here', so you're caught, it's a catch 22 situation ... (Andy)

In the views expressed by these teachers, standardised and universal secondary education system does not allow students to be creative in their work. What is particularly interesting is that in both statements critical thinking is related to problem solving and teachers should work to develop these skills as they are necessary in the workforce; while the latter also highlights an element of performativity for the teacher as their students' grades reflect back on them. However, another teacher was unsure of the place of critical thinking in secondary education:

> ... critically analysing the events of the Easter Rising 1916? No, just learn them, just learn them, just learn them [laughing] ... I certainly wouldn't be walking around the classroom going “let's analyse such and such a thing”, I do think it's important ... [but] because some kids would get it and others wouldn't, and I'd be why, yeah, no, just learn it ... (Joanne)

One teacher insisted that critical thinking was a necessary part of education that was practiced in her classroom:

> ... it's not a factory, it's a place of learning ... so they have to be able to ask questions, it's critically important because if I just give them notes and tell them this is what

> happened, this is what Sardata or what Gautama said about Buddhism, what does it mean? (Evelyn)

Teacher – Student Relationships

Authority

- *Views of Students*

An important aspect of the relationship between teachers and students is the holding of authority within the classroom. Interestingly, all students were emphatic about the importance of teachers' authority in the classroom. For them it was a necessity in order for teachers to garner the respect of students, while teachers' ability to control the class was also seen as pre-requisite to learning. One student explains:

> ... like some teachers can be friendly with ya but like they have, but like ya know they have the presence in the classroom that like if everyone's messing they will stand up and go "okay now, stop talking" and like you know this one is going to write something in my homework journal or ring my parents, I'm going to get in absolute crap when I get home if I piss her off. (Annie)

While another outlined what makes a good teacher in her view:

> ... being a good teacher would be like able to control the class, be able to like listen to students and maybe try to like teach them from their own methods and all that, yeah that'd be a good teacher. (Sarah)

- *Views of Teachers*

Perhaps unsurprisingly, all the teachers emphasised the importance of their authority within the classroom in order to maintain control of the learning environment, while it was also articulated as a necessity for learning to take place. One teacher stated that:

> I learned pretty quickly that there was no laughing, no talking, no moving, and once I had that then I could then at least begin to try to teach something'. (Joanne)

Another teacher stated:

> ... in terms of fostering a learning environment there has to be a leader in the class, there has to be someone who kinda says 'look we're all doing this, let's get on with it'

> and kids tend to follow that cause kids like leadership, they like to follow someone, they don't like this free for all ... (Mike)

This is interesting as this states that a learning environment requires a leader that the students can follow, and in his view students prefer to follow the authoritative figure of the teacher in learning rather than to play a more equal role in guiding and creating the learning space**.** In reply to a question regarding whether learning centred around a leader could foster critical thinking, this teacher replied:

> **...** my experience is that actually having an authoritative figure in the classroom can actually foster more learning, because students feel more comfortable with that ... [if] you say to students 'look, if you wanna go to Maths go to Maths, if you wanna sit in the corridor sit in the corridor, there's no problem', that's a very kind of free attitude towards their own learning, taking responsibility for their own learning, but is critical thinking, I think critical thinking is completely separate to that ... (Andy)

Care in the teacher-student relationship

- *Views of students*

Without exception all of the respondents acknowledged the student-teacher relationship as important. Many students identified their relationship with teachers as a determining factor in not only their engagement with and enjoyment of a class, but also as a factor in their exam performance. A distinction between a good or bad teacher was often made on the basis of perceived notions of care as good teachers took an interest in helping students improve as opposed to a more self-absorbed approach concerned with how individual grades affected their classroom average. This is an important point which relates to the pressure of 'perfomativity' teacher's feel in ensuring student's acquire good examination results that is outlined later in this chapter. In reply to a question regarding why the student-teacher relationship is important one student stated:

> ... it's when you actually know a teacher cares about how you're doing in the class and how your exams are doing it makes such a huge difference, to someone who's just standing there and will give out to you because well your grades have gone down ...

> ya do come across the odd person and they'd be like 'your grades have gone down, I need that to go up, you're lowering my average in the classroom' ... (Annie)

Another student answered:

> ... they'll actually care for your education, whereas for college, they don't care, you're on your own, you're put into, like, a lion's den or something ... (Imogen)

This sentiment was shared by a student who stated:

> ... like teachers went out of their way to look after a lot of students, if there's things going on at home most of the teachers would know about it and take it into consideration ... (Tara)

- *Views of teachers*

Similar beliefs regarding the relationship between teacher and student were found among teachers. All teachers articulated that building a safe environment for learning was a crucial aspect of their authority:

> ... ultimately what you want is for every kid that sits in front of you to get something in the thirty-five minutes, to be in a safe environment ... [where] nobody is gonna laugh at them if they say something stupid, nobody's gonna start calling out their name or, y'know, it has to be a safe environment ... (Joanne)

Another teacher offered a view of the teacher's job as encompassing multiple roles within the classroom. In his view a teacher becomes more than the authoritative dispenser of knowledge within the classroom:

> ... first of all to teach them manners because if you run into them after school the way that they speak to each other can be appalling at times ... they should know that when they go into work they can't be doing that ... I think that sometimes you're also there as councillor in the classroom ... ya know teenagers and drama is hand in hand, we're also there to make sure they get their courses,... and as a tutor it's pastoral, and discipline which is massive ... first years is very much baby-ing, you're Mammy and Daddy ... (Mike)

However, one teacher emphasised the importance of maintaining a professtional distance with students:

> If they feel respected and heard, that's great, but ya can't be their friend, you can't be going 'oh how are you and how's things?', and I just don't think that's professional, I think there are boundaries ... I've brought students to Vietnam twice to work with

> homeless children for the Christina Noble foundation, I think it's not I've a particularly good relationship with that student ... so in a sense I think when they look back at the relationship they'll think I was a good teacher, they won't say I was great craic ... (Evelyn)

While arguably going beyond what is required in accompanying students to Vietnam for volunteer work, her actions are based on a professional concern for the educational well-being of students rather than a personal relationship. Moreover, these particular actions imply a more holistic approach to education which goes beyond the classroom and examinations.

Benefits to learning

- *Views of students*

For many students there was a correlation in having a good relationship with a teacher and the kinds of knowing found in the classrooms of those teachers. Teachers with whom students felt a rapport with were identified as being those who encouraged students to actively participate within a class. In the context of a discussion of the novel, *Wuthering Heights*, one student highlights that having the confidence and willingness to think critically and question received ideas was dependent on their relationship with the teacher:

> ... I think it was like if we hadn't got the relationship with the teacher or hadn't been able to talk among eachother and make our own opinions no-one would have actually shared what they thought, so I think it makes a lot more difference in like gaining confidence and being able to talk to people to make an opinion. (Annie)

- *Views of teachers*

For teachers, having a good relationship with students was vital in engaging with students in order to persuade them to work as a more personal relationship based on mutual respect is developed. There was also an understanding among teachers that building a good rapport with students humanises the teacher in the eyes of students. One teacher stated that:

> If I dont have them on side I'd get absolutely nothing done for 3 hours a weeks, so and it takes a lot of time, respect them and they'll do their homework cause they respect you and won't want to let you down ... (Andy)

While another admitted:

> I think its important for teachers that they are wrong sometimes ... I think it's okay to tell them 'I don't know' as well, and I think that's a good idea, it's independent, normally kids look things up themselves and they'll have a bit more of a look at it ... (Mike)

Progression to University

- *Views of Student*

Considering that the student cohort interviewed as part of my research consisted entirely of current First Year students attending the same university, I was interested in whether it was always in their minds to progress to university. Among student participants, the notion of progression from secondary to tertiary education appeared as the 'norm' with students often identifying it as such. For students, progression to university was overwhelmingly viewed in a positive light, while also being regarded as the natural next step of their education; a view which was common among their peers. Moreover, it was often emphasised by parents who themselves had not attended post-secondary education. One student admitted her surprise that somebody would choose not to attend university:

> ... like my sister didn't go to college and I found it really weird, and I was like nine when she was doing the Leaving Cert and I found it really strange that she didn't go to college like ... I've no idea, like neither of my parents went to university. (Imogen)

Another student identifies the linear progression from secondary school to tertiary level to the end goal of obtaining a job:

> ... it's the normality or something, so because you see everybody else doing it you might think "yeah, I'll end up doing the same thing", like you see people go into secondary then college and they get a job, and you think "okay, if I do that I'll get a job too" ... (Sarah)

The opportunity provided by education to obtain their desired job was a common theme among students. This idea was associated with a meritocratic understanding of education as rewarding; hard work and ambition were necessary components in securing success. The reward of the hard work was the ability obtain a good job. As one student states:

> ... for me the centre of my life will be my job and to get to where I want to be in a job it is education ... and you're very much told this in secondary school ... I remember one of my teachers actually said that to me one day, her direct quote was 'you're going to end up in the Liberties', we all sat there going 'what!?', but we were told that, but yeah I definitely think, you're always told and I have it engrained in me and I believe it ... (Ciara)

Although this student admits her shock at her teacher's blunt remark, there is nonetheless a general concurrence that a good job is an important goal, and one dependent on working hard in education. Indeed, the teacher's remark illustrates an understanding of education which emphasises notions of 'self-improvement' in which those who fail to achieve have only themselves to blame; those who don't work hard at their education inevitably end up poor, without work and living in undesirable neighbourhoods. Interestingly, one student did voice concerns regarding her future prospects:

> Realistically, I'm going to have to do a masters to do anything with an Arts degree is what we were told the first day of college, so if I do well enough I'd be doing that, but like dreamingly I would love to become a playwright but then there's the old Irish realism that I'll probably end up teaching ... the job is always like the end goal not enjoying college or anything like that, it's always the job. (Tara)

- *Views of Teachers*

Yet, while students often emphasised a relationship between their educational success and their idea of a worthwhile job, the experience of teachers undermines this perspective. Although all stated that they enjoyed their work, all of the teachers admitted that becoming a teacher was never a desired goal during university. Rather, each teacher articulated various constraints or lack of opportunities which eventually influenced their decisions to become teachers. One teacher stated that despite her educational success, and the opportunity to

undertake a PhD, she felt obliged to limit her education in order to join the workforce as quickly as possible due to the constraints of coming from a low income family:

> I was offered a PhD at the time when I did my degree to go on to do a PhD, but I decided to be a teacher and also there were financial constraints as well because I come from a low income family also, so my mother is a separated parent ... (Evelyn)

Another teacher admitted choosing the profession after acting as a substitute teacher due to an inability to find work in his preferred career field of computer programming:

> ... it was a lack of work and I needed work, but I fell into it, and now I'm not sitting here going 'I hate teaching' because I don't, but would I have done something else? I probably would have done something else if the opportunities or the jobs were there y'know ... (Andy)

Purpose

- *Views of students*

After listening to respondents discuss the importance of progressing from secondary education to third-level, I was interested in ascertaining what they felt the purpose of secondary education is; and what is the function of the knowledge produced there. The question elicited mixed responses among both sets of respondents. Perhaps unsurprisingly for a cohort made up of first year university students, responses were overwhelmingly disparaging about the purpose of secondary education with it oftened being described as 'useless' or 'pointless'. For many, the purpose of second-level was not receiving a formal education, but rather their social development among their peers. One student stated:

> The education aspect was kind of pointless, they weren't really teaching you anything, it was more rote learning ... [but] socially, secondary school was very very useful to me because it was a very safe environment but not over-protective. It was very very easy to grow as a person in secondary school, your peer group was bigger than it was in primary school so you feel like you are expanding and I felt that that was the best thing that came out of secondary school ... (Ciara)

Similarly, most students felt that the knowledge produced through the broad curriculum of secondary schools was superficial and prejudiced a deeper understanding of topics rendering it unhelpful for third level studies. As one student put it:

> ... it's trying to be broad enough so you can do whatever you want, it's not, it doesn't go into as much depth because like, it was kinda just skimming along like you know the stuff, and then you get into college and you're like 'oh, I know absolutely nothing, ... (Tara)

One student conceived the purpose of secondary education in terms akin to a factory conveyor belt 'pumping' students into tertiary education. For her, teachers in secondary school were constantly emphasising not just progression to university, but progression to the most prestigious institutions.

> ... in my school it was just constantly like "yeah you have to get the points, like we hope you're all going to like Maynooth, UCD, Trinity, DCU, some of youse might be going NUIG", they wouldn't mention another college to ya or anything ... [and] they literally just push you the entire way through the six years and sure once you finish 'em, like they don't care, they really don't care, like once you're out of their system ... (Annie)

Students also displayed an eagerness to discuss contemporary social issues happening around them with one stating his view:

> I do think there should be things that like, sit ya down and ya can talk about things going on in the world, talk about like issues and talk about like issues that are coming up every day and like what you think about it, cause I know like that when there's a referendum about abortion or whatever ... (Johnny)

However, despite the popularity of disparaging assessments regarding the purpose of secondary education it was not universal among the students interviewed. Some students expressed their views that secondary education helps students to identify interests and provides them with a foundation from which they can choose a potential subject for further education. One of these students stated that secondary school:

> ... prepares you and gives you a taste of what you want to do, it kind of prepared me to go on into university and I knew what I wanted to do and I think university will then, kind of, educate me and prepare me in the same way as secondary school for the

> career that I want, ya know, so I'll be getting my idea for career from university the same way I did from secondary for university ... (Steven)

- *Views of teachers*

The notion of progression as the purpose of education figured prominently in the responses of teachers. These responses articulated the purpose of secondary education as to help students progress to third level, and to provide those who do not progress to third level with the basic skills required to operate in the labour market. However, there was a view among teachers that this was a narrow understanding of the purpose of education:

> I think the purpose of secondary education is just to educate students and try to get as many of them into college as quick as possible, that seems to be my estimate of it, I don't think there's many people in secondary education encouraging a child to become an artist, or 'yeah, go set up your rock band', or 'yeah, you're a fantastic footballer, go for it' ... (Andy)

The teacher who earlier stated that critical thinking was possible within the classroom identifies a drift away from critical thinking to preparing students with the basic social skills to operate in the workforce:

> I think we're moving away from encouraging critical thinking ... you're talking there about how students would be taught like basic social skills, so they can, they can cope within the workforce cause I think the expectation is may they're basic social skills aren't good enough for the workforce ... (Evelyn)

This is an interesting statement as it uses a different conception of critical thinking than the teachers quoted earlier who saw it as a pre-requisite for the workforce. Teachers also expressed a view that the purpose of secondary education should incorporate a social aspect. Among teachers there was a desire to bring social issues into the classroom, in outlining what changes he would like to see happen in secondary education one teacher stated:

> I'd also have a lot more development education classes so that we can actually teach them about social injustice for example, what currently happens around them, poverty, feminism, womens' rights, you know, give them a sense of this is what actually happens, this is the world we live in ... (Mike)

Conclusion

Rote learning occupies a privileged position as the dominant kind of knowing practised in secondary schools in virtue of its necessity for exam preparation. Critical thinking is viewed as valuable but offers little use in the realm of secondary education which aims to funnel students onward toward tertiary education. The position of the teacher is magnified as teacher and student are cast into their respective roles of information dispenser and passive receiver. While there is criticism of this system of education, the values underlining it appear dominant as those who espouse criticism nonetheless share meritocratic understandings regarding success and failure. The Leaving Certificate operates not only as gateway to the next stage of education, but also as a dispenser of judgement announcing one as intelligent or stupid. There is a belief that hard work earns rewards with the most diligent students achieving places in third level institutions. It is a narrowly instrumental conception of education emphasizing a linear progression from secondary school through tertiary education and finally to one's desired job. Success in school is entwined with particular knowledge that is perceived to increase students' opportunities. Having outlined the ideas, issues and experiences articulated by students and teachers interviewed it now remains to analyse these in conjunction with the issues highlight in the literature review, and this is the purpose of the next chapter.

CHAPTER FIVE

ANALYSIS

Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to analyse, in conjunction with the literature review in chapter three, the findings which materialised over the course of my interviews with students and teachers. In doing so it argues that the dominance of the instrumental paradigm within Irish education fosters a neo-liberal subjectivity underlined by the notion of self-investment. Although there are criticisms of rote learning, there is nonetheless an instrumental view of knowledge as an acquisition through which individuals obtain the reward of a desirable job. Despite the dominance of the instrumental discourse through which attempts to elicit a particular rationality, counter-discourses are at times enacted although they are ultimately undermined by the centrality of examinations which mediate progression. As such, this process should not be understood as determining the subjectivity of a powerless agent, but rather it operates through fashioning the "conduct of conduct" (Foucault 1982) so that individuals are actively involved in making themselves. The chapter is divided into five sections: kinds of knowing, examinations, critical thinking, teacher-student relations and progression to university. The themes of confidence, a knowledge hierarchy and purpose documented in the previous chapter are not analysed here under individual sub-headings, but rather they are weaved throughout the chapter informing the analysis of more pronounced themes.

Kinds of Knowing

It will be recalled from chapter three that the kinds of knowing which exist between students and teachers in the classroom are important in understanding how the production of knowledge in secondary education shapes subjectivities. For Freire (1970) the 'banking'

concept of education disempowers students by rendering knowledge an external acquisition to be passively received rather than something to be actively created. Lynch (1989) argues that the 'banking' model of education is dominant throughout Irish secondary education due to the rationing of class time and a standardised national assessment; a key point for Lynch is the role of the Leaving Certificate which provides third level institutions and employers with a criterion for selection. The student occupies the role of passive receiver of the required knowledge necessary for sitting their examination. My research provides evidence to support Lynch's claims. All respondents highlighted the centrality of rote learning in the classroom signifying that ‘banking education' is pervasive in Ireland. It will be recalled that one student, Johnny, highlighted the authoritative role of the teacher at the top of the class dispensing definitive knowledge about the world. However, only Joanne, a teacher, identified this form of learning as a positive, with all other respondents criticising the emphasis on rote learning. Indeed, students differentiated it from what they considered 'real learning' while Johnny's own reflections on secondary education lead him to question the definitiveness of such knowledge.

Chapter three also highlighted recent research which identified students' preference for copying notes from the board and to have teachers to explain topics as the most useful methods of learning, suggesting contentment with teacher-centred approaches (McCoy *et.al* 2014). While discussions with teachers did rank highly in this survey, it was the only interactive form of learning to do so. This is not reflected in my research as the students and teachers interviewed here overwhelmingly articulated preferences for participatory learning. These included discussions with teachers, but the use of films, class dialogue and movement were also identified as positive features of participatory learning. While students and teachers identified rote learning as dominant, there nonetheless exists a space for

participatory learning; however, this point is tempered by students' view that their opinion was neither expected or wanted in examinations- a point I shall return to later in this chapter.

Lynch (1989) asserts that Irish secondary education fosters an instrumental and individualistic understanding of learning in which students learn for extrinsic gain rather than the intrinsic value in the work itself. Again, my research provides evidence to support Lynch's assertion as students and teachers identified a hierarchy of knowledge within schools in which particular subjects, such as Maths and Science, were perceived as necessary in obtaining 'real jobs' or progressing to university. This is stated explicitly by one teacher, Andy, who impresses upon his students the importance of succeeding in Maths in order increase their post-school opportunities. Learning becomes tied to obtaining a job or a third level course with the result that subjects such as Music and CSPE are viewed as less valuable as they are not seen to improve one's opportunities of success. While participants are often critical of this hierarchy there is nonetheless an identification of useful knowledge as knowledge which is relevant to the pursuit of their individual goals; to completing their examinations and to what they hope to do beyond school. It will be recalled that one student, Ciara, neatly articulated this understanding in saying that useful knowledge: "... depends on what you want to do and where you want to go, where you see yourself going ...".

Almost without exception, students and teachers were critical of the emphasis placed on rote learning, while most engaged in participatory learning in the classroom. In this sense, students and teachers are not simply credulous dupes upon whom a hierarchical and monolithic power acts and shapes; there is resistance in that students and teachers did not passively accept 'banking education', but rather engaged in it as a necessity to completing exams. However, while this kind of knowing in secondary education is criticised throughout the interviews there is nonetheless an uncritical articulation of an instrumental view of

knowledge. As evidenced in chapter three, since the *Investment in Education Report* (1965) Irish educational discourse and policy has entwined education with the needs of the economy. However, this is not limited to the confines of secondary education, but rather it is a cultural transformation through the discursive deployment of a particular rationality. Policy documents consistently underline the centrality of human capital theory to Irish secondary education; citizens are called upon to invest in themselves through the attainment of information and skills which simultaneously increase their capacity and provide a competitive edge to the economy.

Examinations

Although participants were questioned about their experience of exams, references to the Leaving Certificate examinations continually emerged throughout the interviews highlighting exams as a key experience for participants in the production of knowledge. The Leaving Certificate in Ireland falls into the category of high-stakes testing as it provides the criteria for selection in both third level institutions and the labour market. It will be recalled from chapter three that the impacts of high-stakes testing are contested among researchers. My research supports Au's (2007) claim that high-stakes testing fragments subject content into isolated pieces which are prioritised for the examination. This is evidenced in the previous chapter in Steven's example of how his Maths class were prepared for the examination, rather than a wider engagement with understanding mathematics. Whether this leads to a teacher-centred approach to learning as claimed by Au (2007) is more contested. In the previous section it was noted that while 'banking' education was dominant, there remained a space for participatory learning. However, in contrast to this, one teacher, Joanne, explicitly stated a view that her teacher-centred approach was determined by the necessity of ensuring that students were adequately prepared for their examination. Moreover, there was a view among

teachers that they were caught in a ‘catch twenty-two' situation where it was necessary to focus on rote learning for examinations.

Au (2007) further claims that high-stakes testing contracts the curricula to tested subjects; what emerges in the findings of this research is that while there was no mention of subjects being removed from the curriculum, almost without exception participants identified a hierarchy of knowledge. One's ability in particular subjects, such as Maths, English and Science designated one's intelligence and they were also seen to provide better opportunities than CSPE or Music beyond school. As such, privileged subjects such as Maths often intruded upon the time allotted to other subjects. In chapter three it was noted that Smyth and Banks (2012) highlight the problematic nature of much research on high-stakes testing due to the lack of input from students. These authors suggest that students may differentiate learning for an examination from other forms of learning, while their research highlights a strong preference for interactive forms of learning among Irish students. The present research supports this as there was an overwhelming preference for interactive learning, with most students and teachers engaging in this form of learning although it is clearly demarcated from what is necessary in examinations. However, while Smyth and Banks (2012) highlight that students' preference veers toward more teacher-centred approaches in their final year due to exams; this change is entirely lacking in the interviews I conducted. On the contrary, almost all participants were critical of the teacher-centred memorisation of rote learning.

In chapter three it was highlighted that control of curricular content and pedagogy is mediated through policy structure, with high-stakes testing identified as concomitant with a centralised author (Au 2010). In Ireland, the Department of Education and Skills exerts a centralised control over curriculum and assessment, setting the criteria for success and failure along with their concomitant rewards and punishments; in effect a form of “steerage from

distance" (Menter *et.al* 1997). While students and teachers show a willingness to engage in interactive learning, it does not bring success within the education system. Due to the Leaving Certificate's role in mediating entry to third level institutions and labour market, reaping of rewards in secondary education in Ireland necessitates entry to the dominant educational discourse. As Foucault notes, observation and examination are not neutral processes, but serve to objectify individuals as cases to be monitored according to a norm (1979). The norm appears here within the prizing of particular 'legitimate' knowledges such as Maths and Science through which students can be judged as good or bad students; they are ranked according to abilities which forms the basis for the distribution of rewards and punishments. As noted in chapter three, Irish education is dominated by an instrumental paradigm, this is reinforced by examinations which aim at "detailed prescriptive outcomes [and] targets that are easily coded on a manager's spreadsheet" (Long 2008:125). While competition was not explicitly mentioned in the interview transcripts, the standardised assessment combined with an instrumental paradigm promotes useful knowledge as that which is relevant to personal investment and orients education toward idiocy; private and self-centred individualism (Parker 2005). While teaching for assessment is the "dominant protocol" (Long 2008:123), recalling Foucault (1982), power entails resistance; students and teachers do resist to some extent through interactive learning. However, this is a limited resistance as in order to invest in oneself through the acquisition of information and skills one must play the game; as such, 'good' students and teachers participate in making themselves (Butin 2001:168).

Critical Thinking

Chapter three highlighted how concerns about the 'development of skills' are now dominant within debates regarding the relationship of education and critical thinking (Papastephanou

and Angeli 2007:605). Moreover, the development of useful and effective skills is central to the instrumental paradigm underlying Irish educational discourse. My research provides evidence to support Papastephanou and Angeli's (2007:605) assertion that the objective rationality of the 'skills paradigm' rests upon the perception of a universally valid criteria devoid of "emotions, context and prejudice". Many students felt that their ability to think critically was undermined by a focus on learning toward the examination in which a particular answer was required. Moreover, when critical thinking was encouraged within the classroom it was on the understanding that it was not something to be utilised in the examination, as one student, Tara put it: "it's not in the marking scheme". This is further supported by statements from teachers who highlighted the 'death of creativity' in schools as the centrality of examinations places an emphasis on rote and textbook learning. The necessity of objective rationality linked to textbook learning emerges strongly in the example of one teacher, Joanne, in a class about Wolfe Tone; the local knowledge of the student is passed over in order to focus on the textbook. However, it will be noted from the previous chapter that another teacher, Evelyn, highlighted the importance of local knowledge, while she also emphasised that critical thinking was encouraged in her classroom. Yet, at various times throughout the interview, Evelyn admitted that the necessity of preparing students undermined her emphasis on encouraging critical thinking through discussion. This emerges in her views on the purpose of education as she identifies a move away from critical thinking to preparing students for the workforce. This implies an understanding of critical thinking beyond the 'skills paradigm' and its focus on useful and effective skills required in the labour market; a view which contrasts with that of two teachers who identified critical thinking as an ability to be efficient in the workforce.

The instrumental paradigm of secondary education in Ireland assumes an objective rationality which privileges a universally valid criterion in order to judge students' knowledge. This prioritises a means-end approach to learning with an emphasis on effectiveness and performativity as students are rewarded or punished according to this success; likewise, the quality of teachers is judged on the success of their students in examinations. The centrality of the Leaving Certificate in Ireland concomitant with the dominance of rote and textbook learning favours a conception of critical thinking in which the 'critical' aspect denotes an evaluative component (Halpern 2003:7). As such, critical thinking is equated with problem solving, a key skill for the labour market, and reinforces situatedness by not taking into account the system of values it operates in (Papastephanou and Angeli 2007:608). It is immersed in the dominant socio-political discourse which favours the instrumental paradigm of secondary education. Such a conception neglects an understanding of 'critical' as denoting a problematisation component which aims at a critical examination of one's milieu. This is evident in the denigration of CSPE which, as pointed out by one teacher, Derek, receives only one class a week; whereas Maths and Science classes often intrudes upon the time of 'lesser' subjects. Interestingly, two teachers criticised the role of rote in undermining the fostering of the critical thinking necessary in the workforce, suggesting that the instrumental orientation of examination is not fit for purpose. Again there is evidence of a counter-discourse, as one teacher, Evelyn, attempts to foster a critical thinking not aimed at preparing students for the labour market; however, the sheer necessity of examination as distributer of awards and punishments means that such a counter-discourse gains no purchase.

Teacher-Student Relationships

Although students occupy a subordinate position in relation to teachers in secondary education power relations between the two have often been neglected by researchers (Lynch & Lodge 2002:147). It will be recalled from chapter three that Irish second-level teachers enjoy more positive relationships with students and a better disciplinary climate when compared against teachers in other OECD countries (Gilleece *et.al* 2009; Devine 2013). This is supported by my research as both cohorts of participants identified the importance of the relationship with students acknowledging that their second-level teachers cared about their education while also paying attention to personal circumstances. Moreover, it will be recalled from the previous chapter that teachers creating a safe environment was important to teachers, who often adopted multiple roles in caring for their students. These findings contrast with those of Lynch and Lodge (2002) who found that students were concerned by a lack of respect shown to them by teachers, while also being hostile to the authority exercised over them. Moreover, while that research also found that students made claims to power through student councils in order to have their voices heard (Lynch and Lodge 2002:155-156), no such concerns were raised by the students I interviewed. Students interviewed in my research linked respect to a teacher's ability to exercise their authority. Teachers' ability to exercise their authority in order to maintain control of the class was viewed by both teachers and students as pre-requisite to learning. Indeed, one teacher, Mike, stated that fostering a learning environment in the classroom required a leader who can guide and structure the process. Moreover, for Mike, there was no contradiction between authoritative leadership and fostering critical thinking. This view is supported by students, while students were critical of rote learning, as already mentioned they nonetheless identified authority as a pre-

requisite for learning; and this included more interactive learning as is evidenced by Annie's example of a teacher giving students the confidence to discuss *Wuthering Heights*.

Since students occupy a subordinate position within the school, one which reflects the general subordinate position of young people in wider society, their stories are a counter-discourse against power (Foucault 1977:209). However, based on the findings here, students do not articulate a counter-discourse to the authority of the teacher. As already mentioned, this contrasts with the findings of Lynch and Lodge (2002), one possible explanation for this disparity is the composition of the student participants in each study. While Lynch and Lodge draw on an analysis of essays regarding personal experiences of unfair treatment in school involving a wide diverse composition of secondary school students, the present research involves the voices of the 'good' students who have successfully navigated the "regime of truth" and have been rewarded with places in university. This explanation is supported by an overwhelming belief among students that education is linked to self-improvement, while it will also be recalled from chapter four that although the Leaving Certificate impacts on students' confidence, these students ultimately achieved what they wanted from secondary education; a place in university. That students and teachers identify the authority of the teacher as a crucial pre-requisite for learning underlines that power relations are always operating within the classroom. In chapter three it was highlighted that inequalities of power exist across different pedagogical sites (Gore 1998). While power relations may be clearly visible in the dominance of teacher-centred rote learning in Irish secondary schools, they do not dissipate in approaches centred on student participation. Returning to the example of *Wuthering Heights* above, while students engage in open discussion with one another, it is nonetheless reliant on the authoritative role of the teacher who through their authority leads, structures and controls the environment. Yet, rather than

simply possessing power, the teacher is caught within this web of power-relations which they are exposed to a decree of control – as was identified earlier in the chapter; this mostly notably takes the shape of external control through the Leaving Certificate which influences approaches to teaching.

Progression to University

It will be recalled from chapter three that although much research on educational progression identifies a social class bias in favour of middle class students, the 'taken for granted' assumption toward university progression among many students is only partly related to class (Smyth and Banks 2012). This taken for granted assumption is supported by my research. The previous chapter demonstrated progression to university was considered the 'norm' among the students interviewed with one student, Sarah, admitting that she found it "really weird" that her sister did not progress to tertiary education. It will be recalled from chapter three that progression to university is strongly influenced by a personal fulfilment of obtaining a desired job (McCoy *et.al* 2014) and by parental expectations and encouragement (Hossler *et.al* 1998). My research provides evidence to support both claims as progression to university was often viewed as a means of self-improvement through which one reaps the reward of their desired job and avoided 'ending up' in perceived undesirable neighbourhoods, such as the Liberties. Moreover, many students viewed secondary education as providing them with an interest in a career they desire; an interest which can be furthered in university. However, while progression was usually linked to explicit notions self-improvement, this was not always the case as for some, such as Sarah, it was a case of following the preconceived path to gaining a job. Students, such as Steven, also identified the role of parents emphasising the importance of doing well in exams and the opportunities that possessing a university degree provides. Further, my research corresponds to that of McCoy *et.al's* in

identifying students' feelings that teachers had high expectations. Indeed, for Annie, teachers emphasised not only progression, but progression to particular prestigious universities. However, the stories of the teachers captured in the present research undermines the notion of self-investment as key to earning desired outcomes as all of the teachers stated that teaching was not there goal during university.

The instrumental paradigm of Irish secondary education engenders an understanding of education as the basis for self-investment. A linear progression emerges as students navigate through secondary education and university in order to obtain a job; educational self-investment appears as the means to obtain desirable jobs. Through this personal investment students are simultaneously called upon to act as calculative rational agents building their human capital while also as moral actors (Peters 2001:63) who should avoid 'ending up' in the Liberties. Notions of meritocracy are bound up within this discourse as the hard work of education is seen to bring rewards. While the stories of the teachers in my research punctuate the ideology of meritocracy education as means for self-investment and reward remains a powerful but unscrutinised idea in the dominant rationality. Progression to university as part of one's personal investment is considered a cultural 'norm' as evidenced by the expectations of parents. This discourse is not enforced upon students but rather operates through the "conduct of conduct" (Foucault 1978) which involves the fashioning of conduct through the horizontal observation of peers, as evidenced by Sarah's remark that going to college in order to get a job is what everybody does. Resistance to the norm of progression was mostly lacking throughout the interviews, raised only by Tara, who admitted that her hopes of being a playwright were unlikely; as a result she would mostly likely become a teacher. As noted in chapter three, since power relations necessitate the agency of individuals they thus entail the possibility of action; this lack of resistance cannot be taken as lack of an

ability to act, but rather this subjectification through education is done with the student (Butin 2001:168).

Conclusion

Irish secondary education is shaped by an instrumental discourse underlined by human capital theory. The Leaving Certificate assumes a privileged position as the arbitrator of opportunities upon which students gain access to university, and thus, increased possibility of obtaining a desirable job. Progression to university appears as an unquestioned norm linked to notions of self-investment through education. This instrumentalism elicits a neo-liberal subjectivity as the individual is encouraged to become an entrepreneur of their 'self'. While students and teachers are critical of exam focused rote learning and practice a counter-discourse through interactive learning, this is nonetheless undermined by the centrality of examinations. Progression requires participating in the "regime of truth" where through the Leaving Certificate rewards and punishments are meted out. Indeed, for students, education is seen as a vehicle of self-investment as they assume the simultaneous role of calculative rational agent and moral actor in pursuit of a desired job and avoidance of privation. As such, this subjectivity is not imposed, but rather it is fashioned through the "conduct of conduct" in which the acceptance of cultural norms and values mean that students are actively involved in making themselves.

CHAPTER SIX

CONCLUSION

Conclusion

Education maintains a unique position in contemporary due to an often unquestioned assumption of its inherent work and value. It is often viewed simultaneously as a vehicle for self-improvement through social mobility and as a key ingredient to fostering human well-being. The failings of the education system do not impact on the underlying valorisation of education's promise; it is an enduring faith. Where education fails to meet expected public standards it is viewed as in need of improvement, where it fails to address, or perpetuate, inequalities it seen as in need of reform (Peim 2012). This work has sought to problematise the taken for granted assumptions regarding the underlying valorisation of education through focusing on knowledge production in Irish secondary education. The work of Michel Foucault is particularly suited to disconcerting dominant ideas regarding the movement of human progress through its analysis of social institutions as microcosms of larger forces. By attending to the operations of prisons, asylums, clinics, and schools, we can perceive the strategies used to shape self-identities, and to manage collective power and opposition. However, such strategies do not amount to the imposition of hierarchical and monolithic power, but rather they involve fostering and eliciting attributes through structuring the possible field of actions (Foucault 1982). Power relations are all encompassing, they are productive as well as negative, and necessarily involve resistance. The individual is always free to act, as such subjectivity is not determined, but can only be shaped.

This work has argued that secondary education in Ireland in guided by human capital theory which engenders an instrumental view of education. While Ireland may lack the characteristics of neo-liberal reforms in education which occurred in other developing

countries over the past two decades, it is argued that Irish second-level was already orientated toward neo-liberal values due to this emphasis on human capital theory. The instrumental view of education treats knowledge as an external acquisition as part of a self-investment in pursuit of individual goals. This notion of self-investment in which useful knowledge is constituted by what is relevant in achieving one's goals arises prominently throughout my interviews. Moreover, it is entwined with an understanding of education as a means to improvement as participants articulated a view of a linear progression from secondary education through university to obtaining a job. Such is the dominance of this view that progression to university arises as a 'norm' where to deviate it from it appears unthinkable. The role of the Leaving Certificate is pivotal to the dominant instrumental discourse. There are clear criticisms of the type of rote learning it induces, along with a form of resistance through a willingness to engage in interactive and participatory learning. However, the role of the Leaving Certificate as the ultimate adjudicator of who constitutes a 'good' or 'bad' student and simultaneous distributer of rewards and punishments encourages students to enrol in the dominant “regime of truth”. In the classroom, the teacher's authority is paramount with it overwhelmingly viewed as pre-requisite learning; interactive learning too is dependent upon the authority of teacher who controls, structures, and guides the learning environment. Critical thinking is undermined in Irish secondary education due to the emphasis on examinations, while some teachers articulated a conception of critical thinking which denotes an evaluative component which is concerned with problem solving. As such, the system of values is not questioned; power goes uncriticised- an approach reinforced by the hierarchy of knowledge in which Civic, Social and Political Education is denigrated and instrumental-technical knowledge of Maths and Science exalted. Critical thinking is embedded

in the dominant socio-political context in which education acts as a means to develop the 'entrepreneurial self' through self-investment. It is then a private and self-centred affair.

As already noted, resistance takes place in schools, however, it is a minimal resistance as students and teachers nonetheless participate in the “regime of truth”. As such, individuals participate in making their 'self' either willingly or unconsciously through their acceptance of and participation in dominant cultural norms and values; as such, subjectivity is shaped rather than determined. Students and teachers are always free to engage in counter-discourse and resistance although it may come at the cost of sitting a successful Leaving Certificate. This is relevant to Taylor's (1986) criticism that Foucault's conception of power is devoid of any liberation. Yet, why should a student resist the imposition of standardised state examinations when it would be to their detriment. For Foucault (1998), power relations are unavoidable and inescapable; however, this is not to say that everything is bad, but rather that everything is dangerous and some circumstances are better than others. Yet, in the sheer fluidity of power one can question the use of resistance which lacks a target. Butin (2001) defends Foucault against charges of denying resistance by highlighting Foucault's own involvement in a struggle for prison reform. What is interesting is that such a struggle inevitably has a target in mind, the state, as it is within the state's domain to enact reform in the prison system, and so too in the educational system. The state cannot be understood as a mere element in the circuits of power, it is the guarantor of compulsory education. It is through the enacting of policy embedded in human capital theory that the Irish state plays a crucial role in structuring the fields of possible action. As such, in understanding how power relations operate the state deserves attention as not one element among many, but as an element which is crucial. Moreover, the possibility of collective struggle for educational reform emerges as an area for further research considering that the criticism of the system here was inevitably muted by

individuals' participation in it. Further, I would suggest more qualitative work is required to understand teachers approach to pedagogy, while studies suggest Irish teachers take an a-theoretical approach, evidence here suggests a preference for more interactive and participatory methods which is undermined by examinations. Finally, I suggest that further work should be done in examining the ontological dimension of education. Rather than assuming the virtue of education, one which may be in need of reform or improvement, researchers should aim to illuminate the 'normative machinery' (Peim 2012) of education in contemporary societies.

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