

The Institution and Social Control

Reformation, Refurbishment or Abolition?

Power - Personal or Political

The late Albert Victor Kelly, author of the highly acclaimed work *The Curriculum - Theory and Practice*, opened the fifth edition of his text with: 'For Katherine, my granddaughter, who has still to survive the system.' (2004). Arguably, this dedication encompasses the beginning, middle and end of any honest school system analysis. The sliver of hope is that in recent years Irish education can be seen to confess of its shortcomings. It has commenced the casting of light upon the 'shades of the prison house.' (Kelly, 2004, xii). The school institution as it stands immovable and omnipresent will not be tackled in its entirety. However some flaws in the foundations can be identified through a curricular investigation. Here, critical analysis will make use of the notion of democratic education, freedom and joy in light of all learning through the findings of various educationalists and theorists. This can then be placed next to the post-primary model. The national contemporary effort to democratise education by way of the Junior Certificate School Programme (JCSP) exemplifies an initiative that has the potential to galvanize the necessary transformation for a new and radical institutional curriculum. These findings aim to highlight the viability of institutional changes which could and would, in turn, enhance the lives of citizens. However, this discourse sets out to address the problem of power and politicisation of education. It seeks to determine whether or not the democratic and emancipatory approaches are tainted when still under the thumb of the curriculum planners who mold educational ideology into tailored intellectual ideology which sustains a particular political ideology (Kelly, 2004, p. 25).

Doom and Disparity - Examining Winning and Losing

Many still shiver in the shadow of Ireland's dark past. The authors of *Children of the Poor Clares: The Collusion Between Church and State That Betrayed Thousands of Children in Ireland's Industrial Schools* wrote of the absence of accountability and casual law-breaking in the whole system of the survivors of the industrial schools and laundry-reformatories (Arnold and Laskey, 2012). The failings of the educational system, as far as child protection goes, long ago signified the fundamental need for critical evaluation and reform. School corporal punishment was prohibited in 1982 by an administrative decision of John Boland, then Minister for Education. (Seanad Éireann debate - Wednesday, 21 Oct 2015, 2020). Quality of education has, of course, changed since physical chastisement was outlawed in Irish schools. In consideration of our outrageously recent history, to distrust a system which failed to formally enforce that protection of schoolchildren for a further fifteen years could be regarded as healthy. The prospect that today two of three government ministers for education have connections with the same political representation that Boland had could be viewed as unprogressive, if not detrimental. It points at what Kelly describes when he refers to politicisation being linked with the 'politically motivated quangos' in control of curriculum (2004, p. 23). He goes on to describe the abuse of devices such as assessment and inspections to achieve what are fundamentally political goals. When discussing the nature of human knowledge and the ways in which the distribution of knowledge is manipulated in society for political ends maintains that the debate is 'strongly political' (2004, p. 22, 25).

And though the aforementioned abuse and negligence portray a motif from a former picture of Irish schooling, a similarly destructive capacity can be easily regarded as

inextricably tethered to the curriculum. The notion of punishment and whether it has truly been abolished from the current system is worth observing. Do we still cling to aspects of penalty in contemporary, more 'acceptable' ways? Let us consider the examination factor of assessment as a type of psychic harm endured by students. The terminal post primary exam promotes competitiveness in the form of the Leaving Certificate at the end of a mandatory two or optional three year programme. Is it acceptable that the more socially perceived 'exceptional' and privileged students are the ones who are excelling and finishing up school over the students who learn in different ways, who have different oppressive factors hindering their lives and learning? The Leaving Certificate process can be endured as punishment and humiliation for some or utilised as a rite of passage for others. This competitiveness arguably extinguishes any constructive development acquired throughout the entire five or six years of post primary learning. All in a matter of a week or two - the student's character, career, capacity to retain information and their given mood and stamina in that refracted period of time determines whether they will bother to go and get their results, thus compounding social oppression and misery. The ones who are concerned about marks and entry into university will suffer too. Although their suffering will not be endured as for the ones who are 'failing' at the game. The disparity between Delivering Equality of Opportunity In Schools (DEIS) and non DEIS schools is reflected in all this. Division, 'luck' and inequality all factor into how school curriculum steers pupils. Journalist Owen Jones asserts that for huge numbers of working-class kids, education simply does not seem relevant (2011, p.176). While educational policies and curricular developments appear comprehensive and ambitious, the concern remains that the outer appearance fails to match the internal workings of the system and how that system is experienced by students. The hope for acquiring a trade and the sad knowledge that the industry simply no longer exists for such labour reflects the current economic and social climate and remains a cloud

hanging over the future for the disadvantaged student and the social stratification to which they belong.

Democratic Education - *Character or Capital?*

Ivan Illich's *Deschooling Society* asserts the tendency of school to confuse process and substance whereby students are led to associate grade advancement with education, to confuse a diploma with competence and to mistake the rat race for productive work (1973, p. 9). The syllabuses and prescribed materials are chosen based on the exams that will be set and this is all based on a disarray of topics, principles, values, modes of learning, homework, detention, rules and lanyards which all exist amongst unresolved resentments, unaddressed prejudices, overlooked fundamental pathologies within personalities and the education system itself, systemic disease and ailing on a staff room basis. Teacher and author of *Dumbing Us Down: The Hidden Curriculum of Compulsory Schooling* John Taylor Gatto proffers the same, stating that the hierarchy of school experience violates and teaches confusion, arguing that 'meaning, not disconnected facts is what sane human beings seek' (2002, p.5). The relationships between student and classroom, teacher and student, teacher and principal, parents and teacher, school and society, curriculum and character, personality and assessment are all equally disparate. These are profound systemic issues that must be kept in mind when acknowledging any and all of the more surface level assets or flaws of the education system.

It can be seen that where post primary senior programmes are failing, Higher Education is advancing. The government Action Plan for 2019 states its commitment to broaden undergraduate entry in order to reduce the complexity of choice for second-level students and lower the level of competitiveness driving the system (p. 22, 2019). The imbalance is widely acknowledged at third level whilst the senior portion of second-level remains largely uninspired by the same sentiment regarding transformation. Primary level advances have been a source to look toward since before the turn of the 2000's. The

assistant chief executive of the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) posits that the revised curriculum for primary school articulates, not only the content to be learned and the outcomes to be achieved, but a wide range of approaches to learning, the curriculum does not just set out course content, but lists the skills to be acquired by the children (Fallon-Byrne, 1999). Since 2010 JCSP has been implementing significant educational advances for junior level post primary students. While 'early school leaver' and Leaving Cert. completion statistics may remain steady and Traveller entry into Higher Education may be on the rise, there remain two main factors in need of interrogation: curriculum and corruption along with democratic education. Ranging from the curriculum theories of Kelly to the radical emancipatory educational values of bell hooks(sic), the fact of a right to education is the stronghold binding these two theorists. Both writers refer to 'democratic education' in their pedagogies. Irish educational curriculum is coordinated and determined by the Minister for Education and Skills and NCCA. The curricular development consists of the structure as well as the manner in which the subjects which are taught are to be assessed (Department of Education and Skills, 2020). But there remains the ubiquitous punishment in failure and the system that persists in intentionally or unintentionally failing its students by setting them up to do so. One part of the problem resides in a vital social and cultural omission from curriculum content.

Advances have been made to diversify to create inclusivity yet Irish Traveller culture and heritage remain absent. This monumental area of Irish history has yet to be formally introduced and incorporated into the Irish school curriculum. Indeed, the term 'Traveller' is scarcely uttered in the classroom. This brings us back to the point of education being inherently politicised and in ways, certainly for Travellers the experience of mainstream schooling is depersonalised. Meaning they really ought to leave their identities at home, since although their school mission statement may proffer the value of all encompassing heritage, ethnicity and uniqueness. Even the phraseology 'reason for inclusion' as outlined in

the Higher Education Authority Access Plan highlights the fact that inclusion needs to be mandated and justified. Rightly so, but it is telling that the innate sense of warmth and welcome to ethnic minorities in education is nonexistent. Some ministers of the current government advocate the right to education for all, yet councillors from the same political party have 'boasted and expressed their 'delight' at a Traveller housing scheme being scrapped in their area in a 2014 letter to constituents (Mc Connell, 2019). If failing provisions for Traveller accommodation and tradition is celebrated by one councillor of a party whose minister rallies for Traveller pathways to education, it is understandably apt to create cynicism and mistrust. These ethical inconsistencies reflect the confusion and inconsistencies of the senior cycle post primary curriculum. The political policies that hide in plain sight are deeply embedded in the curricular formula. The language of their policies is dehumanising and impersonal as well as seeming to objectify and instrumentalise groups that fall under official terminology such as 'disadvantaged', 'underprivileged' and 'socio-economic groups that have low participation in higher education' (Higher Education Authority, 2015).

In *Teaching Community - A Pedagogy of Hope*, bell hooks regards the issue of public school teaching that college is not the 'real world' and that book-learning offers no relevance in the world outside university walls. She goes on to quote Parker Palmer asserting that learning is not just about getting information and getting a job, it is about healing, wholeness, empowerment and liberation (2003, p.42). Again, in spite of all the progress in the way of social inclusion as presented by the Department of Education and Skills in a 2019 press release: "The gap in retention to Leaving Certificate between DEIS and non-DEIS schools continues to fall and while enrolments overall have risen, the absolute number of early school leavers remains fairly steady." However inclusive the system may appear or strive toward, the fact is that the educational curriculum perpetuates rigidity, lack of and authoritarianism. The broader the scope of society to whom the curriculum impacts, the more control the NCCA and DES have over a wider stretch of society in terms of the imposition of their values that champion competition, cultural capital and even market principles in education. However cynical the outlook, it is a fact in the current climate and a historical analysis of curriculum will quickly reveal that it seems to be moving with the times in that it tailors that which is values according to current economic climates. In other words, the philosophies and policies that underpin each era of curricula in Irish education from 1831 - 2000 may have modernised but at the core, they are still in pursuit of domination. To consider breaking the spell is a call for revolution beyond what JCSP can deliver. "Learning must be understood as an experience that enriches life in its entirety" (hooks, 2003, p. 42).

The first step is the admission of the direct and systematic linkage between curriculum and capitalist oppression and the labour force followed immediately by the acknowledgement that, if tolerated, this means the cessation of lifelong learning, which is a key concern in of Democratic Education as presented by emancipatory educator, bell hooks. 'Education and training that sets out to equip people with knowledge and skills needed to

achieve their potential and to participate fully in society and the economy' (Source: Central Statistics Office (CSO) Labour Force Survey and Quarterly). The values and goals put in place within schools by government representatives appear to be winning if retention of students is the aim. They also appear to be prevailing if they orient their notion of success as building toward ensuring engagement with the economy. Phrasing the access to education proposal in this way divorces the student from the society to which they belong. It is dehumanising and expresses the failure to hold lifelong learning at the heart of the national plan, but of course more contributors to the economy means more money. Can the joy of learning be held in equally high regard when the question of capital enters the equation? What of this joy and of the continuation of learning upon entry to the workforce? Amongst the alienation from learning due to imposed misconceptions of the irrelevance and lack of benefit of education in 'the real world', as posed, both by Jones and hooks, (2003, p. 42, 2011, p. 175, 176) there remains the tragedy of the political complexion of modern Irish curriculum healthy on the outside but rotten to the core. Seen this way, it is clear that transformation and freedom is not what the institution of education truly promotes.

Teaching Transformation - A Pragmatic Revolution

If the institution, like the state, cannot be abolished, then what are the alternatives in order to radicalise the current state in which it exists? An approach of 'engagement-with' was put forward by political theorist Chantal Mouffe in the context of the reformation of art institutions from within (Mahony, 2014). Some aspects of education can potentially be used to revolutionise the system from within, but we have yet to see even the Leaving Certificate admit defeat. Students are not taught to be autonomous, they are taught to be dependent on a system that frightens them, much less rewards them. They are not encouraged or given tools to critique the system. "Few teachers would dare to teach the tools whereby dogmas of a school or teachers could be criticised since everything must be accepted" (Gatto, 1991). In Simon Critchley's theory the approach of utilising facets of the very system in order to denounce it is called 'interstitial distance' in the context of the art institution. The research will close in proposing that JCSP has the capacity to enable an interstitial distance strategy to be applied by students within the institution of school. This initiative holds the creative and collaborative power to make school politic rather than political. In her 2014 study, Dr. Emma Mahony describes the final of three responses to the neo-liberalisation of the public art institution with the post-Operaist strategy: 'exodus'. Arguably, this approach of complete abandonment is exemplified in an academic context by unauthorised absence from school. But this act of abstinence does not empower the most vulnerable students who, as described earlier, endure the worst of the system. Its design manages to enervate any attempt at protest or dissent, whether that manifests as a retort, an expression of joy such as laughter, or any act that is seen as a distraction or an imposition to the cohort or even an

undermining of the teacher as an individual or as part of the institution. "Working class students are far more likely to truant than their better off peers" (Jones, 2011, p. 176).

In the study of resistance theory, failure to learn is seen "not as evidence of innate disability in the student, but as political resistance. In self-defeating attempts to fight back the student resists being defined by the school as a person of less worth than others" (Alpert, 1991, p. 351). There is a way to allow for and even embrace the often unwelcome nuances of the school day in light of the contributions of 'at risk' students, along with their 'behavioural problems' and the common issues that come with the class and culturally variegated DEIS school. "Acceptance and compliance will be dominant in classrooms where the teacher incorporates students' personal knowledge in the instruction and facilitates a responsive style of classroom discourse" (Shuy, 1986). JCSP equips candidates with a sort of control over their own experience of being assessed at junior level in post primary. It introduces a new approach that encourages group and project work, research, creative and critical thinking skills. This ceases after the Junior Certificate and the final exam remains a 'sat' procedure. In considering JCSP, continuous assessment must also be carefully observed. One more long term model that reflects the reformed Junior Cycle model is the Educate Together second-level school body. Paul Rowe, the CEO of Educate Together, the representative organisation for primary & secondary multi-denominational schools in Ireland agrees with the application of continuous assessment at junior-level in that it may continue to inform the students' education and retain them throughout senior years and through to graduation. (The Irish Times, 1999)

Such students may endure social, familial and financial problems and this may still inhibit their progression to Leaving Certificate and even if they do 'make it' they may be the type of learner who does not do well on a 'once-off' exam occasion. Fortunately the options are expanding for Post Leaving Certificate (PLC) candidates, due to the evaluations and concerns mapped by the Education and Training Board along with the Higher Education

Authority on acknowledging the need to diversify studentship in third-level institutions. As stated by the Central Applications Office (CAO), for certain courses in Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) there is a reserved quota of places for applicants presenting QQI FET/FETAC level 5/6 awards. So, if PLC courses are “training people for jobs that don't exist” (Brennan, 2018), then at least they have a safety net, if they fit the criteria and are suitable to fulfill the HEI quota. A refreshing truth was aired in a recent Irish Times article: “Today's schools are host to different nationalities, ethnicities, religions and heritage, but the face at the front of the classroom remains overwhelmingly white, Irish, settled, Catholic and female” (2019). The reality is stark - there are too many middle-class teachers in education. The very students who are failing are JCSP candidates, are ‘at risk’, are not ‘on task’, are potential ‘early school leavers.’ It is logical to propose that a working-class or Traveller face and voice would be an impactful reframing of Irish education as we know it and would increase the likelihood of oppressed students being empowered and encouraged. The ability for the students to identify socially with their educator is a crucial consideration that has been long overlooked. The curriculum may not, after all, need to be dissolved nor the institution completely reconstructed if the staff profile can be diversified. In this instance a laissez-faire evolution would be possible. The school system is a refracted projection of the larger social system to which it belongs and the distortion perpetuates disharmony and a tragic lack of affinity. The anger and exhaustion that this injustice creates has the power to motivate change. The redevelopment of an education that is free of politics, one that places more emphasis on the personal, one that esteems the society above the school and which values the experience over the exam is a revolution that Ireland is ready for.

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