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Lynch, K. and M. Moran (2006) 'Markets, Schools and the Convertibility of Economic Capital: the complex dynamics of class choice. *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, Vol. 27, No.2: 221-235.

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Key words

Social Class,  
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Ireland

*ABSTRACT While economic capital is not synonymous with cultural, social or symbolic capital in either its constitutional or organisational form, it nevertheless remains the more flexible and convertible form of capital. The convertibility of economic capital has particular resonance within 'Celtic Tiger' Ireland. The State's reluctance to fully endorse an internal market between schools has resulted in middle class parents using their private wealth to create an educational market outside State control in the private sector to help secure the class futures of their children.*

*Using data from recent studies of second-level education in Republic of Ireland, and data compiled on the newly emerging 'grind' schools (businesses selling educational programmes on a purely commercial basis outside the control of the Department of Education and Science), we outline how the availability of economic capital allows well-off middle class parents to choose fee-paying schooling, or to opt out of the formal school sector entirely to employ market solutions to their class ambitions. The data also show that schools are not passive actors in the class game; they actively collude in the class project to their own survival advantage.*

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*Focusing too much on the dynamics of parental choice between schools leads to a neglect of the markets in education being created outside of the school system: the 'choice' that exists is no longer simply between schools, but also between schools and private businesses. Focus on parental choice also forecloses debate about the central roles that schools themselves play in perpetuating class inequality.*

## **Creating Markets and Choice ?in Education:**

### **The role of schools and private businesses**

#### **Introduction: Recontextualizing School Choice**

Since the 1980s, the international educational landscape has been characterized politically, ideologically and often structurally by the thematics of choice. The inter-related drive to increase choice, raise standards and shift control from the bureaucratic school to the sovereign consumer may be regarded as representative of a broader political shift towards the right, where a distinctive neo-liberal interpretation of fairness and efficiency based on the moral might and supremacy of the market has taken root (Apple, 2001, Bonal, 2003, Thrupp, 2001).

There is an extensive literature deconstructing the ideology of 'choice' within an educational context, especially in the UK (Ball, 2003, Gewirtz et al., 1995, Lubienski, 2003, Reay & Lucey, 2003, Whitty et al., 1998). This research has greatly illuminated our understanding of the adverse effects of choice on working class parents and their children, while also highlighting how middle

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class choices operate as acts of exclusion, and class reproduction. The literature demonstrates how few choices exist for low-income households. What choices exist are generally between equally limiting class options. Low income families cannot afford to prepare their children for the types of examinations that will enable them to enter the more selective school or universities, or to live in neighbourhoods that would place them in the catchment area for such institutions. Options promising significant class mobility are alien, risky, and potentially costly socially, psychologically and financially (Archer & Yamashita, 2003, Lucey & Reay, 2002, Munns & McFadden, 2000, Taylor & Woollard, 2003).

It is clear from the literature also that choice ideology legitimates class reproduction and silences class dissent by fostering illusions of opportunity. It is, in many respects, a logical extension of meritocratic individualism that underpinned the liberal equal opportunities projects of an earlier era, assuming that those who have the 'talent' and who '*choose* to make the effort' should and would be meritorious (Young, 1958). Both choice and meritocratic ideologies blind us to the fact that there needs to be equality of condition to promote substantive as opposed to formal equality of opportunity (Baker et al., 2004, Lynch, 1987, Tawney, 1964). Thus choice functions not only mechanistically at the level of practice to exclude those who do not possess sufficient economic, social or cultural capital to avail of and benefit from the array of choices, but also ideologically, as it hides the disjuncture between the will and the means to choose behind a façade of equal opportunities rhetoric. If the ultimate objective of our analytical concern is to eliminate class inequalities in education, focusing so much attention on 'school choice' as a key dynamic of class reproduction redirects our attention too far away from the binding power of economic capital in producing classed outcomes.

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Most of the literature critiquing the choice agenda has emerged from countries where education is clearly defined as a market commodity at an official policy level, most notably in the UK and Australia. Within the UK, the government has introduced a competitive internal market within the state system, while Australia has implemented state subsidization for schools outside the state system. In comparison with these, Ireland does not have a market-driven, choice-based education system, having outlawed league tables, eschewed the possibility of a voucher-based system and discouraged competition between schools by prohibiting selection of students on the basis of academic attainment. Yet to posit that the mechanics of choice do not operate in Ireland, or indeed to suggest that the narrative of choice is not therefore a constitutive feature of Irish public discourse is to disregard the fact that Ireland's educational decisions have, as much as those of other more obviously 'pro-choice' countries, taken place within an international educational context where choice has been established as a centrally defining logic. Moreover, school choice has existed in Irish education since the foundation of the State, arising from the constitutional provisions protecting both parental rights over the education of their children and denominational interests in education.

Recognizing that school choice is but one engine of class reproduction and that class inequality may exist where choice does not operate at an officially sanctioned/policy level as a market-led educational strategy, involves breaking down the concept of choice to reveal its location within a broader matrix of historical, political and material forces. Analyses that situate choice solely at the level of parental decision-making in the school system are problematic because they fail to

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situate choice synchronically, as a part of a larger global market-oriented discourse of neo-liberalism, or diachronically, as a strategy in what is a well-established pattern of maximization and maintenance of middle class privilege in and through the education system. Locating the literature on choice within a diachronic review, that takes into account class differentiated outcomes in education prior to the choice era, allows for the recognition of choice as a recent, albeit powerful, expression of a historically manifest pattern of class reproduction (Gamoran, 2001). Meanwhile, the synchronic contextualization of choice within a broader discourse of individual and market "freedoms" allows us to recognize that choice may simply be one of many strategies or discourses derived from and fed by the larger global neo-liberal narrative. Even where market-driven choice has not been instituted as the *modus operandi* of a given education system, as is the case in Ireland, a globalised market ideology exists that informs individual decisions and enables alternatives to schooling to develop outside of the state-regulated education system. For this reason it may be helpful to disaggregate the concept of choice into its constituent elements and phases, and to examine at its operation at policy, at school, and at individual level. This enables us to differentiate between the different ideological endorsements of the rhetoric of choice and the myriad ways in which the dynamic of choice may be played out across the educational and political landscape.

The paper will draw on a number of different sources to substantiate the claims made. It will use some previously unpublished data on what are known as 'grind schools' that is schools run as businesses. It will also draw on findings from the research undertaken by one of the authors for *Equality and Power in Schools (EPS)* (Lynch & Lodge, 2002), The EPS study was undertaken in the late 1990s using a triangulated research strategy. It examined the role schools played in either

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promoting equality or challenging inequality by analysing the ways schools selected, grouped and educated students. The fieldwork involved intensive study of all aspects of school policy and practice in twelve strategically chosen schools in seven different counties. Each schools was visited on at least 3 occasions with a full 2 and 3 weeks being spent in each; 162 classes were observed and audio recorded; 1,557 students and 380 teachers answered questionnaires about their schools, and 70 focus groups were held involving 280 students. In addition, extensive dialogues were held with principals, and with teaching staff about the findings. Their views were accommodated in the final publication.

### **Making Markets within the School System**

#### *National Policy Level*

From the late 1990s, Irish public policy-making has been driven by neo-liberal assumptions regarding the supremacy of the market as the primary producer of cultural logic and cultural value (Allen, 2003, Kirby, 2002). Educationalists operate in a global and national framework where the market reigns supreme (Sugrue, 2004). However, not only have most educational stakeholders not endorsed the market logic, most have strongly resisted it. The Church bodies, which exercise powerful governance functions, have repeatedly challenged the 'materialism' implicit in giving primacy to the market in society. Well-organized teacher union resistance found clearest expression in a series of strikes and stoppages involving the largest second-level union, the *Association of Secondary Teachers of Ireland* (ASTI) from 2001-2003. Parent organizations, although calling for greater accountability for teachers, also have fears of a

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'payment by results' system, especially given the widely cited adverse effects of such a system in the late nineteenth century. Teacher union resistance to the introduction of more market principles into education led to a 'reforming' minister for education being moved in a 2004 cabinet reshuffle in favour of a more conciliatory minister (herself a former teacher).

Perhaps one of the reasons why the ideology of market choice in particular has so little resonance with education stakeholders is because choice already exists but within a more morally plausible discourse of religious and parental freedom. Parents are defined as the 'primary and natural educators' of the child under the Irish Constitution (Article 42) and are free to send their children to any school they wish. The underlying rationale for parental choice is religious freedom (Articles 42 and 44). While options are limited by school transport arrangements, local regulations regarding school 'catchment' areas, and, where it arises, personal resources, there is a great deal of flexibility in the system. Half of all second-level students do not attend their nearest school; those who are most mobile are middle class children (Hannon et al., 1996).

Ireland's choice-based system has devolved from a colonial past riven with religious tensions, and as such, has a very different profile to other marketized or partially marketized school systems (Drudy & Lynch, 1993). Choice was officially implemented on denominational grounds, and constitutionally protected on the grounds of natural law (parental rights). While the origins of 'choice' lay in religious difference and not in the pursuit of greater efficiency or adherence to market ideology *per se*, the Irish education system produces classed outcomes as much as education systems with more obviously commercial intent (Whelan & Layte, 2002). Thus it is inappropriate to neatly categorize the Irish education system as either 'privatised', where this



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refers to the movement of former state run institutions into the private sphere, or as 'marketized', where this refers to the introduction of market mechanisms into a state run system (Whitty & Power, 2000). The trajectory of the Irish experience seems to run in the opposite direction to that assumed usual by the current theorists of school choice – the Irish experience is of a denominationally privatised system which has gradually come to be subsidized by the state. While it is useful to understand the Irish education system as partially choice-driven, it is necessary also to bear in mind the formative historical (and decidedly non-commercial) factors in this development.

#### *Educational Policy Context*

One of the most significant characteristic of the Irish education system is that *all* schools (with the exception of a very small number of completely private primary schools) are state-funded for the greater part of their current costs; most importantly for teacher salaries. Certain capital costs are also State funded, although capital investment is heavily weighted towards the non-fee sector.

The second-level fee-paying sector is strongly Dublin-based (62% are in the Dublin area) and small only 8% of all second-level schools are fee-paying; in addition, 3% of schools that are free to day students have boarders [2] (Department of Education and Science (DES), *List of Post-Primary Schools*, 2002-3). However, the proportion of pupils attending fee-paying schools has grown considerably: in Dublin 32% of all students attend a private second-level school, compared with 24% twenty years ago (DES, 1983, DES, 2003). The majority of counties outside of Dublin have only one fee-paying school at most and these , tend to be either schools for minority religions or a single sex Roman Catholic schools. A number of counties (6 out of 26)

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have no boarding or fee-paying school of any kind (Mayo, Roscommon, Leitrim, Offaly, Longford, Carlow). Outside of Dublin, most parents therefore are constrained in their choices by the geography of schools, and indeed by the steady decline in boarding schools especially in the Roman Catholic sector.

State subsidisation of the fee-paying schools is regularly challenged as being unjust and creating unfair class advantage. It is typically rationalised, however, on the grounds that it protects religious minorities, particularly Anglican, Protestant or other religious groups that do not have schools in their own neighbourhoods (approximately half of the fee-paying schools are for minority religions, mostly Church of Ireland/Anglican, although only 3.7% of the population belong to Christian faiths other than Roman Catholicism (RC); 88.4% of the population are RC (CSO, 2004)). Although the special 'block grant' given to Protestant schools (the majority of which are fee-paying) supports the constitutional right of parents to have their children educated in denominationally appropriate schools (Glendenning, (1999), research by Woulfe (2002) suggests that many of the students who attend are not Protestant but are admitted on other grounds, which by definition must include the ability to pay the tuition or boarding fees.<sup>1</sup> In a study of thirteen schools in selected middle class areas in the south of Dublin city, Woulfe (2002) found that the majority of students attending Protestant secondary fee-paying schools were not members of either the Anglican Church (Church of Ireland) or the other three main Protestant churches. While there is no doubt that one of the reasons such schools take students from other religions, including Catholics, is to maintain the school as a going concern, they are

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simultaneously operating to help maintain class advantage. Clearly the fee-paying, Roman Catholic schools are also working to a class agenda. Given the size and spread of the Catholic population however, they generally do not need to recruit fee-paying students from other religions to survive as educational entities.

### *The Role of the School*

While 'choice' research has almost always adverted to the over-riding impact of the structural conditions of capitalism in framing the choice issues, it has nonetheless focused most of its research attention on choice itself. Sociological attention has been centred in particular on the demand side of the choice equation rather than the supply side. Yet schools themselves are active collaborators in the class game: they actively interpret and redefine the rules of the game as it is played out on their own stage. Schools are not passive recipients of parents' class choices; they actively determine the parameters of choice. They operate many discrete selection and organisational mechanisms that are governed by the politics of survival in what are often very competitive local contexts (Woods & Levacic, 2002). The power that schools exercise over parents is evident from the way that certain charter schools require parents of prospective students to make substantial monetary and time commitments to the school as a condition of enrolment (Whitty & Power, 2000). Schools respond to threats of middle class withdrawal by providing advanced tracks, thereby actively protecting the school's future (Kariya & Rosenbaum, 1999, McGrath & Kuriloff, 1999). Professional parents are welcomed as active consumers, while

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working class parents and students are more likely to be perceived as a liability or risk to the status of the school (Reay & Ball, 1997). Moreover, schools are generally managed and controlled by middle class and upper class people (trustees, boards of governors, teachers, professionals from local authorities, etc.), to whom the survival of the school has been entrusted. In the Republic of Ireland for example, the governance of schools is determined by legislation that gives the school owners, trustees and teacher representatives overriding influence over schools (Education Act, 1998). While parents are represented they do not exercise much control (Drudy & Lynch, 1993, Lynch, 1990). Working class parents in particular are very isolated (Hanafin & Lynch, 2002). Thus, while the focus on choice is vital for challenging the false premises and promises of market-driven ideology, it needs to be complemented by a more substantive focus on the class operations of schools organisationally and educationally, and on the structural and local class conditions within which schools operate.

**The findings of the *Equality and Power in Schools* (EPS) study demonstrate that the issue and problematics of choice are not confined to the system or policy level.**

Schools are autonomous entities interested in their own survival. As bodies representing the classed interests of a particular locale, they produce and construct themselves so as to exclude or include on the basis of class. In a wider ideological environment where knowledgeable middle class parents are schooled in what almost amounts to a rights-based discourse of choice, schools can introduce the mechanics of choice on a subtle and unofficial level and often to a very receptive audience. Through a series of strategies, and as a result of historical factors beyond their immediate control, schools place themselves and are in turn placed in a hierarchy of class-bound desirability.

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What was very evident from the EPS study is that schools do not have to have a selective entrance test to be effectively socially selective. Although all the schools were open to applicants from different social classes within their catchment area, in practice schools had means at their disposal to discourage applicants from social class groups that they did not wish to serve. Moreover, it is only those schools with a historical and current intake of middle class students that have sufficient symbolic and economic capital to market themselves as exclusive. In the parents' case, it is only those parents with sufficient economic, cultural, social and emotional capital who have the knowledge, confidence, time and resources to select the exclusive schools. Among the factors that facilitated an unofficial dynamic of class exclusion to operate effectively were school traditions, extracurricular activities, voluntary contributions (indirect fees) and uniforms.

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*School Traditions* Schools have identifiable inherited, classed identities. While some of these identities do change over time, the social class history of the school is part of its current public persona. Schools that have traditionally served lower income groups find it very hard to change that identity even when their social-class profile and their rates of academic achievement change. In the EPS study, this was especially the case for Ollan, a community college (co-educational) that was formerly a vocational school educating students from working class and small farm backgrounds. Despite developing a strong academic record, it was regarded as the lowest status school in the town, and attracted relatively few middle class students (28% were from classes 1 and 2 and 9% from class 3) . Its inherited classed identity as the local "tech" was, in the view of the principal and teachers, a major factor deterring middle class choices into the school (Lynch & Lodge, 2002, p. 202, pp. 46-48).

On the other hand, schools that were not charging fees but were once socially and / or academically selective still retained relatively elite profiles. The best example of this was St. Patricks (a Catholic girl's school that had once been a relatively elite boarding and day school which was now in the general free scheme). St. Patricks actively promoted itself in its prospectus, yearbooks and other publications as a middle class school with images of girls playing middle class sports (hockey) and musical instruments (violin and chello) being a centrepiece of the school prospectus. reactive class action St. Patricks (including prohibiting the introduction of soccer as it was not 'lady like') helped maintain the perception, and consequently the reality, of a relatively socially select school : 64% of students were upper middle class (class 1 and 2).

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In the case of religious-run schools, the social class profile of the religious order/group that owns and manages the school is also part of its classed identity. Schools under Anglican or Protestant management generally have high prestige because of their traditional association with the Anglo Irish ascendancy and their concentration in the fee-paying sector. That such schools maintain a high social class profile was evident from the class and religious composition of St. Ita's (a minority-religion, fee-paying school) in the EPS study. The majority of the children did not belong to the religious denomination of the school, and 91% were from social classes 1 and 2.

Given the overwhelming Roman Catholic profile of the population, RC schools do not have to recruit students from other religious denominations to survive. However, status distinctions between religious orders are very real and have significant social consequences for the class intake of the schools, even where they are geographically located in areas with a predominantly upper middle class intake such as St. David's and Dunely. St. David's (fee-paying boys school) was run by a religious order with a long tradition of servicing the upper middle classes and the school intake reflected this: 93% were from social classes 1 and 2. In contrast, Dunely, a secondary boys school in an affluent town, was run by a religious order that had not traditionally educated the upper middle classes: only 42% of its intake were from classes 1 and 2. In the matter of school choice therefore, schools have histories, biographies and traditions that can and are used to retain or develop a particular class profile. In the EPS study it was very evident that the school principals and senior managers were aware of their classed identities and worked actively to use this to their own school advantage.

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*Extracurricular Activities* Sport also plays a particularly important role in projecting the class identity of the school to the wider community (Hargreaves, 1987, Light & Kirk, 2000). In the EPS study, the extracurricular activities promoted in the schools, especially the sports, were used systematically to signal the social class, gender and racial identity of the school (all children in brochures were white). The higher status girls' schools (St. Cecilia's and St. Patrick's) displayed images of uniformed girls playing classical music or hockey together, while the prospectus for St. David's boys' school used images of boys on the rugby pitch – all defining middle class activities. The high status schools also emphasised their achievements in different international competitions in their promotional materials (activities that could only be afforded if parents could pay for the travel), and informed parents about expensive trips and activities, organised annually for students, including skiing and horse riding. Several teachers also outlined the classed identity of different sports. Boxing was definitively working class, while soccer was 'respectable' working class, but for boys only. Rugby and hockey were upper middle class while Gaelic games (Gaelic football, hurling and camogie) were seen as more lower middle class in larger cities but more multi-classed in rural areas or small towns. Talk about sport took euphemistic forms generally. There were references giving a 'wrong impression' if the school offered a sport like soccer, which was deemed to be working class. There was also a tacit acceptance that schools with a largely middle class intake could only 'afford' to offer particular sports if it wanted to attract middle class students. The proposal to introduce soccer was met with a telling silence in St. Patrick's when it was mooted at a staff meeting attended by the researchers.

*Indirect Fees: the Voluntary Contribution* The way in which funding procedures reinforce social class-based 'choices' is also significant. Although all Irish schools are state-funded, in terms of



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major capital and current costs (teacher salaries), most schools also fund some of their current expenses (outside of salaries) from what are called 'voluntary contributions' requested from parents. The amount that parents are asked to pay on the voluntary scheme varies greatly with the social class composition of the school intake. The Labour Party estimated in 2004 that it was, on average, €120 per child for second-level students and €70 for a child in a primary school. There are huge variations on this however with some schools charging nothing while some charge up to €700 in voluntary contributions (2005 rates). Many schools also charge for optional extras such as art materials, music lessons, and even photocopying, all of which raise the cost of the ostensibly non-obligatory charges. Although schools cannot require parents to pay the voluntary contribution, there is a moral expectation to pay it, which can in some cases be communicated publicly in the school to the student. Inevitably, schools with a high proportion of well-off parents contribute a disproportionately higher amount to the school annually resulting in differences in extracurricular activities, sports and related facilities, and in the number of part-time or support staff the school can employ (Lynch, 1989, Lynch & Lodge, 2002).

Schools play down the importance of the voluntary contribution; it is difficult to get information about the amount expected, and about the procedure for paying it. None of the schools in the EPS study published the level of contribution expected in prospectuses or web-sites. All of this creates a sense of uncertainty and mystery that acts as a real barrier to parents who are already quite marginalised in the educational system (Hanafin & Lynch, 2002, Lyons et al., 2003). Parents who have had little experience of second-level education often do not fully appreciate that the contribution is voluntary; they are unsure of what they will be asked to pay, when and how often. A number of teachers in the EPS study observed that the voluntary contribution had a real class

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disincentive effect on low-income parents. Teachers noted at meetings that certain parents would feel that their children would be disadvantaged in a school if they could not pay the voluntary contribution, so they would opt to send them to schools where no voluntary contribution was required (generally lower status schools). They also observed that although it was voluntary, parents often referred to it colloquially as a 'fee'. This suggests that at least some parents saw it as compulsory. Thus, the voluntary contribution was really an indirect fee; it was a psychological barrier to entry even though the amount involved was relatively small in many cases. Only parents with adequate levels of *social* as well as economic capital – those who moved in the 'right' circles and who were sufficiently knowledgeable about and unintimidated by the discrete threat represented by the voluntary contribution – were in a position to freely 'choose' a school with a voluntary contribution for their child.

*Uniforms* Over 95% of Irish second-level schools have uniforms. While school uniforms are often lauded as a mechanism for class levelling within schools, they tend to serve a more invidious purpose in terms of their function as markers of distinction between schools. School uniforms are class (and gender) [4] signifiers, with the more socially selective and elite schools having costly and elaborate uniforms. Schools display their class status to the public through uniforms. In the EPS study, schools that educated students from predominantly low-income families had low-cost, chain-store-available uniforms (for example, in St. Dominic's, Ballycorish and St. Peter's). Often one school's uniform was almost indistinguishable from another. Schools targeting upper middle class students on the other hand, had highly specific, expensive, and extensive outfits available only in designated department stores (e.g. St. Ita's, St. Cecilia's, St. Davids). The school uniform thus functions as both a signifier of the class status of the school

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and a creator of that status. The uniform operates silently as another tool of class selection by indirectly discouraging and encouraging different kinds of parents to apply to the school.

*Concluding Comments on Choice at the level of the School* Although selection on the basis of prior academic attainment is prohibited in Irish schools, schools nevertheless use indirect measures to project class images that actively discourage or encourage particular classes of student from applying. As can be seen in Figure 1, the professional and managerial classes were disproportionately represented in fee-paying schools and in those secondary schools with higher voluntary contributions, more restrictive and expensive uniform requirements and stronger traditions of academic achievement.

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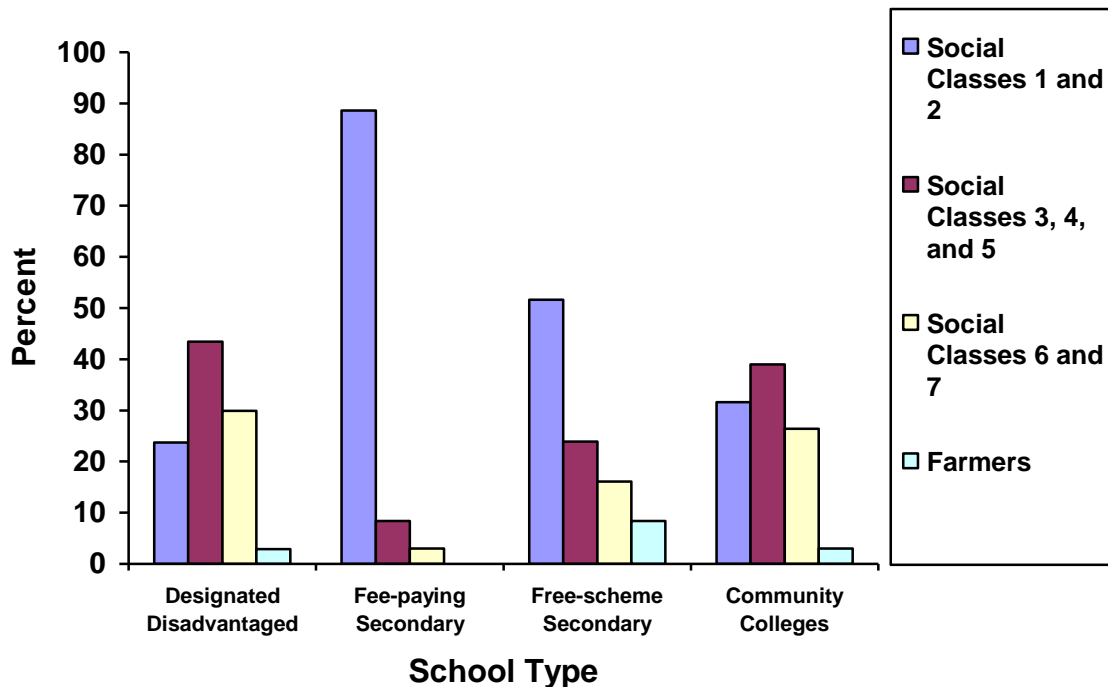


FIGURE 1. Social Class Profile of School Types

Source: Lynch, K. and Lodge, A. (2002) *Equality and Power in Schools*. London: Palgrave.

Meanwhile, the lower white collar, skilled, semi-skilled and farming classes were disproportionately represented in the community or designated disadvantaged community and secondary schools, which have only basic uniform requirements, minimal or no voluntary contributions, and a history of vocationally-based education. Despite the constitutionally enshrined 'right' of parents to send their children to their school of preference (Article 42.2, subsection 3), schools can and do deflect undesirable class 'choices' and encourage desirable ones as their own institutional survival as a particular type of school demands it.

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## **Making Markets outside of Schools**

### *The Role of Private Businesses*

Ireland does not have school league tables and rankings. School examination results are not published and there is an ongoing debate about the desirability of such a development. There is strong opposition to the potential institution of school league tables from the teacher unions (see, for example, ASTI, 2004)), who are widely recognised as the most influential body in the education sector, and from the Joint Managerial Body (JMB; the body representing all secondary school managers). National parent bodies also oppose league tables although they have called for more accurate information on schools so they 'can make the best possible choice for their child' (cited in skooool.ie, 2004). The case for full disclosure of results has been taken to the courts by a number of national newspapers but has not succeeded to date. The absence of information about examination results within the state system is in sharp contrast to the private sector, where private colleges or 'grind schools' actively market their results albeit with no reference to the fact that they can and do select the students they will take.

### *Grinds and Grind Schools*

Private tuition centres, colloquially known as 'grind schools', are businesses set up to prepare students for examinations, especially the Leaving Certificate on a purely commercial (for profit) basis. Currently there is at least one major 'grind school' in most cities, while there several in

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Dublin and at least five in Cork city. There is no complete list of these businesses or of the students attending them. Although the Department of Education and Science (DES) does write to all of 'grind schools' publicly listed, or known to them by other means, there is no legal obligation on the 'grind schools' to give information to the DES as they are legally constituted as private businesses. Through our own research on the internet and through various directories and listings, we have identified 27 'grind school' businesses, 13 of which offer full-time leaving cert courses, although the DES only obtained information from 11 when they requested it in 2003. In the 11 centres (mostly the bigger and better known operations) that responded to the DES request, 2,282 students were reported as studying full-time for the Leaving Certificate in 2002-3. This represents about 0.7% of the entire leaving certificate cohort for that year. The DES claim that the numbers attending 'grind schools' full-time are much higher than this, though they currently have no way of establishing a comprehensive tally (direct communication from the Department of Education and Science, July 2004).

Paralleling the 'grind schools' is a substantial private market for individual tutors, again colloquially known as 'grinds'. The procedure is purely commercial and very private. The parent pays the person per class (generally 1 hour) for a tutorial in a given subject, either in the student's or the tutor's home. These tutors are almost always qualified teachers with examination preparation experience. Many of the grind teachers teach in schools by day and offer private grinds at the weekends. What evidence is available suggests that there is a far higher rate of take-up of 'grinds' in more middle class schools (Lynch & O'Riordan, 1998). Although there is no reliable national data on the current rate of participation in completely private tuition or in individual 'grinds', it is believed however that the rate of participation is considerably higher than

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it was ten years ago. At that time, research by the Economic and Social Research Institute found that almost one third of students preparing for the Leaving Certificate examination took grinds outside of school. While the rate of participation was highest among the middle classes, with just over half of all students taking grinds, one fifth of students from working class backgrounds were also taking grinds (Figure 2).

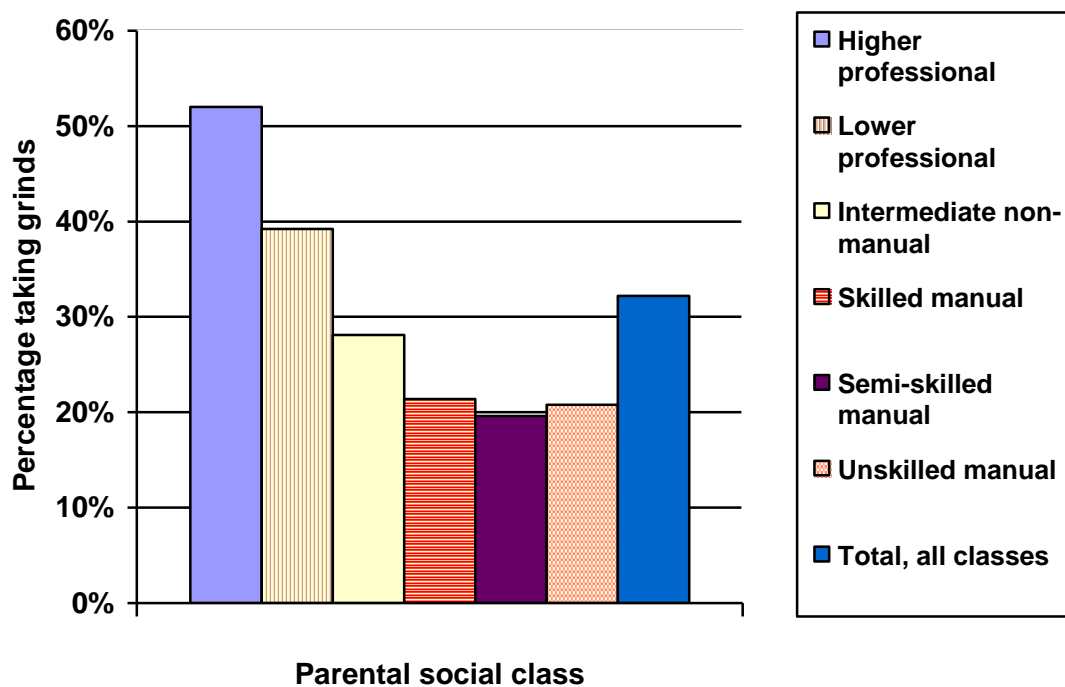


FIGURE 2. Participation in grinds (private tutorials or classes outside of schools) by parental social class: Leaving Certificate  
Co-education and Gender Equality Database, ESRI (1994).

Figure is based on a national sample taking the Leaving Certificate examination in 1994.

Note: all figures are weighted to take account of sampling.

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How effective grind schools are in promoting educational advantage is not known as there have been no major studies comparing their intake and examination outcomes with comparable cohorts in regular schools with similar resources. What is clear is that grind schools and individual tutors are primarily targeting a wealthy group. It costs €5,100 on average per annum for a full set of leaving certificate courses in a grind school in 2003/2004, while the average rate of pay for individual tutoring or grinds (generally in a student's own home) is at least €30 per hour with fees for individual tuition in Leaving Certificate higher level courses generally being higher than this.

## **Conclusion**

To understand how the dynamics of choice impact on classed outcomes in education, we need to identify the multiple ways in which choices are operationalised across the educational landscape. Parents are but one set of actors in the 'choice' play, and schools are only one of the stages where the play is acted out. While parents can and do make choices between schools, some schools also exercise choice in terms of the kinds of children they encourage or discourage to attend. Even when schools cannot 'choose' entrants on the basis of prior academic attainment, or simply by catchment area, data from *EPS* study in Ireland show that they can and do operate discrete selection mechanisms that result in strongly classed school identities (Lynch & Lodge, 2002). Schools are active players in the choice process, with their own status and survival playing a vital role in facilitating particular classed outcomes.



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However, what the Irish case also shows is that choice is no longer just about parents choosing between schools or schools choosing between different types of children; there is now a choice between schools and the private market. Even when the State does not endorse the market model of league tables, vouchers and selective entry systems, middle class parents use their highly convertible economic capital to open up markets in education outside of the school system itself. There is little doubt that there can be no equality of opportunity without equality of condition in education (Lynch and Baker, 2005). The irony of the emerging market of 'grinds' and 'grind schools' is that the original rationale for 'choice' in Ireland did not emerge from a neo-liberal ideology but came as a result of historical national and political tensions which were often mobilized around religion and the place of religion(s) in the education system. Parents' constitutional rights to be 'the primary and natural educators' of their children, granted to secure religious freedom, has facilitated a choice-based system driven by entirely market principles.

Choice therefore needs to be located synchronically as part of a larger contemporary market-oriented discourse of neo-liberalism, which, in the Irish context, was facilitated by the piecemeal growth of private and public education around already existing religious and political divides. Choice must also be recognized to operate diachronically as part of a well-established pattern of maximised class privilege in education. It is set against a structural background of economic and social policies in taxation, housing, health, welfare and inheritance that places upper and middle class families at a considerable advantage economically and therefore educationally (Cantillon et al., 2001, Fahey et al., 2004, Healy & Reynolds, 1998, Lynch, 1999, Nolan et al., 2000). Those who have superior economic resources can exercise choice, not just between schools, but between schools and the private market.

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While the 'right to choose' is not endorsed officially by the Irish State in the sense of encouraging competition between schools, the ideology of the market reigns within wider society (Allen, 2003, Kirby, 2002). Thus a significant change that *has* arrived with the hegemonic prevalence of neo-liberal sentiment is the widespread moral endorsement of strategies for advantaging your own children. It is now not only condoned within the public sphere, but there is a growing moralized pressure on parents to 'do the best for their children' by paying for extra education outside of that provided in regular schools. As a result of this hegemonic dominance of neo-liberal conceptions of justice, new strategies for advantaging one's own child are multiplying and increasingly sanctioned within the public sphere. These include the choice to educate your children for the Leaving Certificate in institutions that are run as for-profit businesses, namely grind schools. It is to this wider climate of neo-liberal values to which we must look if we want to understand the recent shifts in the Irish educational landscape, where the growth of grind schools is unchecked, where the newspaper frenzy implicitly endorses and adds to the profit-oriented sector, where the National Parents Council actively supports the state subsidization of the fee-paying sector – where market choice, although officially outlawed at the level of the state in education, has slipped through the cracks to become an underground defining feature of the Irish educational landscape. The privatisation-for-profit of Irish second level education is well under way, albeit outside the state-financed and state-controlled educational system.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> That there are low-income Protestant families who cannot afford to attend these schools is beyond doubt (personal communication from a former member of the Education Board of the Church of Ireland), although this issue has never been the subject of public debate.

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- [1] The number of these schools is declining steadily as most were set up specifically to recruit people to religious life for the Roman Catholic Church. There are no longer any nuns and priests to staff these schools. In addition, the cost of paying staff to run them as boarding schools is too high for the type of middle income clientele that such schools served originally.
- [2] This is generally not the case outside of Dublin however. Protestant boarding schools in rural areas, particularly those situated in areas with a mixed religious population, can have up to 95 per cent Protestant attendance.
- [3] The way in which school uniforms and regulations are highly gendered, operating as tools of surveillance over young women in particular, is examined in considerable detail in the EPS study and in *Inside Classrooms*, Lyons et al, (2003).

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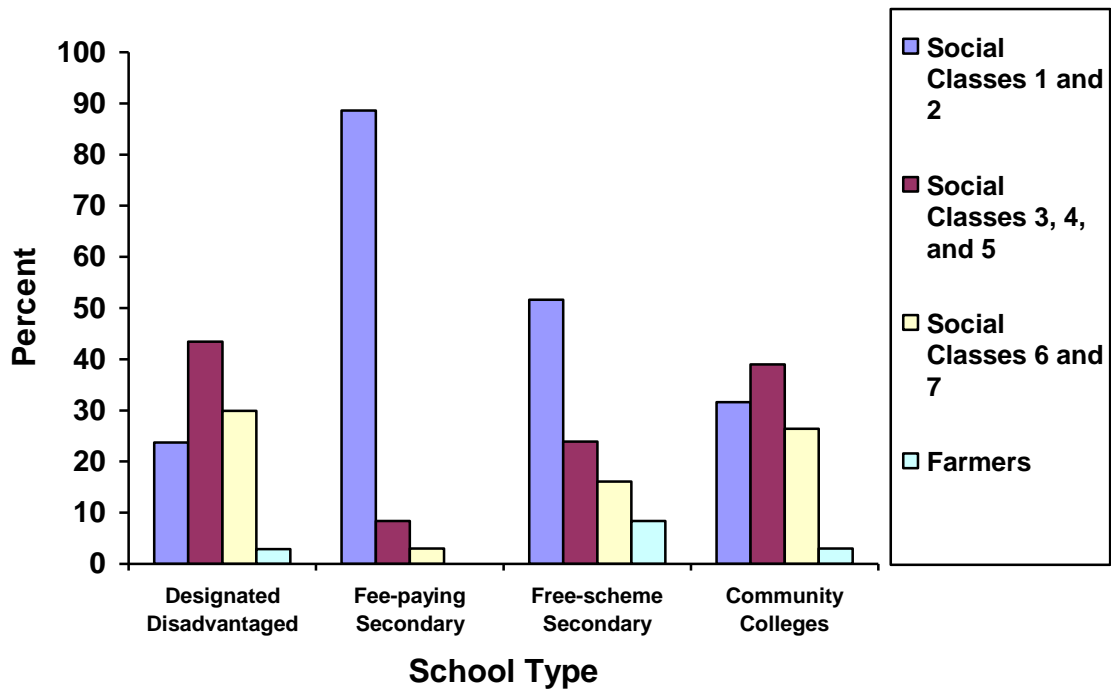


FIGURE 1. Social Class Profile of School Types

Source: Lynch, K. and Lodge, A. (2002) *Equality and Power in Schools*. London: Palgrave.

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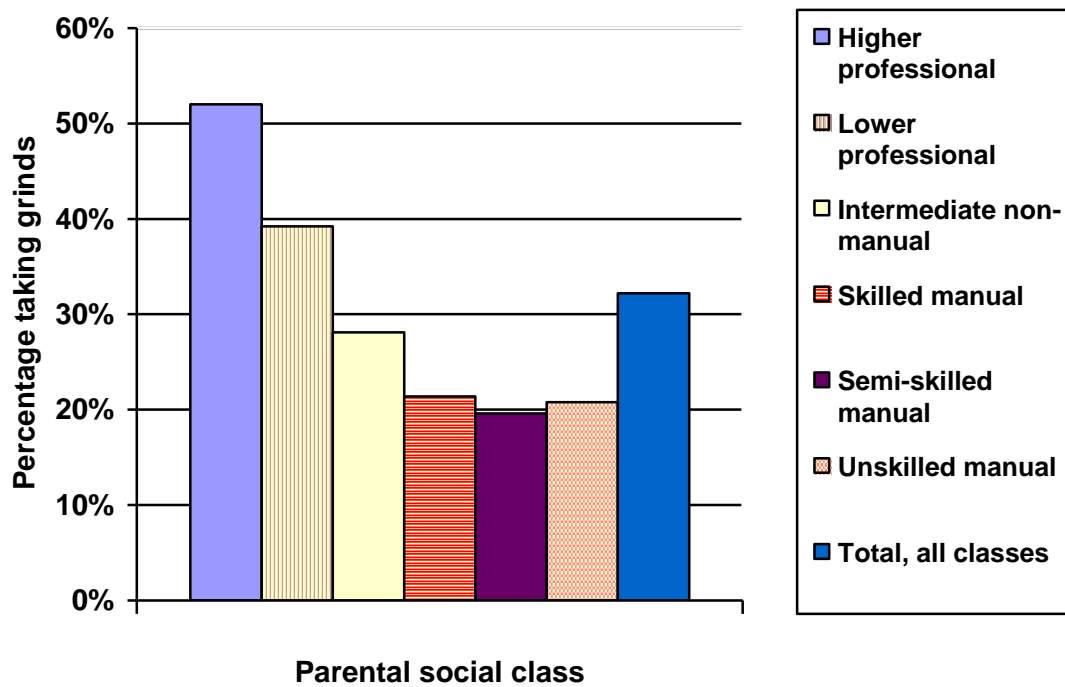


FIGURE 2. Participation in grinds (private tutorials or classes outside of schools) by parental social class: Leaving Certificate

Source: direct communication with Dr. Emer Symth, Senior Researcher,  
Economic and Social Research Institute, Dublin

Figure is based on a national sample taking the Leaving Certificate examination in 1994.

Note: all figures are weighted to take account of sampling.

<sup>1</sup> That there are low-income Protestant families who cannot afford to attend these schools is beyond doubt (personal communication from a former member of the Education Board of the Church of Ireland), although this issue has never been the subject of public debate.