

Symposium on "Equality of Opportunity in Irish Schools"

Editorial Introduction

PATRICK CLANCY*

University College, Dublin

The papers in this symposium are concerned with an assessment of an important recent publication in Irish education on *Equality of Opportunity in Irish Schools* (Greaney and Kellaghan, 1984). It is no longer a matter of surprise that the findings of a research study on equality of opportunity in education should become the centre of controversy. Some of the most intense academic debates in the international social science literature have involved such studies, the most spectacular example being, perhaps, that which surrounded the publication of the Coleman Report in the United States (Coleman *et al.*, 1966). In recent decades education has emerged as a key instrument of social policy. This development is related to the transformation of the occupational structure of our society and to the pivotal role of education in the reproduction of the class structure. The decline in the percentage of the work force engaged in agriculture and other forms of self-employment together with the growth in professional, white collar, technical and other skilled occupations has resulted in a situation where increasingly the link between social origins and destinations is mediated by education. While considerations of economic growth and development may have been the key factors which precipitated the expansion of the educational system, the evaluation of this expansion has tended to concentrate on its contribution towards the reduction of inequality.

Equality of Opportunity in Irish Schools is a longitudinal study of a sample

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of 500 children identified in 1967 when they were 11 years of age. Extensive base-line data were collected on each of the children at this stage and their subsequent educational and early vocational careers were monitored. The purpose of the study was to identify factors which were associated with the differential attainments and achievements of the students. More specifically, having identified equality of educational opportunity as an objective of public policy in Ireland, the authors set out to assess the extent to which this was realised for this particular cohort. The degree of equality of opportunity was assessed by the extent to which a student's success in the system and his or her first occupational position after leaving school could be described as having been "achieved" rather than "ascribed". The authors regarded success as having been achieved if it was found to be dependent solely on educationally relevant variables such as ability and effort. If, however, success depended solely on "educationally irrelevant" variables such as one's gender, social class and geographical location then it was regarded as "ascribed". Ultimately the authors were primarily concerned with the relative importance of ability and socio-economic status. Greaney and Kellaghan's final conclusions are stated as follows:

The fact that ability played such a dominant role in the educational progress of students in our study suggests that the meritocratic ideal is at least being approached if not quite being attained (p. 263).

The weight of this judgement is underlined by the authors who pointed to a number of distinctive features of their study. They claim that it overcomes the weaknesses of many existing studies of inequality which have focused on disparities in social class participation in post-compulsory education. Their study was longitudinal rather than merely cross-sectional and it also included a measure of ability, thus permitting a test of the meritocratic principle.

Greaney and Kellaghan's assertion concerning the meritocratic ideal "being approached if not quite being attained" represents the starting point for the other respondents' papers in the symposium. The questions raised by the contributors are both theoretical and methodological. Lynch's concerns are primarily theoretical. Two key concepts in the study, those of "meritocracy" and "ability" are analysed. These concepts, she argues, are not neutral scientific concepts. By elaborating on the complexities of these two concepts she demonstrates how the categories within which we formulate research issues are themselves based on presuppositions which are value-laden. The main burden of her criticism of Greaney and Kellaghan's study is that in failing to treat these concepts analytically and critically, they greatly oversimplify the problem of social and educational equality.

Lynch's examination of the presuppositions underlying the concept of ability, as measured by a score on a verbal reasoning test raises a number

of important questions. She is especially critical of the authors' failure to explore adequately the relationship between ability and social class. It is her contention that ability, as measured, is at least partly a form of ascribed "cultural capital". Thus, she rejects the achieved (ability) ascribed (social class) dichotomy which is central to the authors' test of meritocracy.

The papers by Whelan and Whelan and by Raftery and Hout are primarily concerned with methodological aspects of the study. The two papers illustrate alternative strategies in data re-analysis. Whelan and Whelan confine themselves to a re-analysis of the published data available to them in the monograph. In contrast, Raftery and Hout sought and were given access to the raw data and following some recoding they carried out their own analysis.

Whelan and Whelan were in fact the first to challenge Greaney and Kellaghan's findings having been surprised by the discrepancy between them and their own findings on social mobility. Their paper included here is a summary of a more extended critique (Whelan and Whelan, 1984). Their first criticism of the study concerns the socio-economic status classification employed in the study, a criticism which is also made by Lynch. Whelan and Whelan also criticise the inadequate attention given in the study to the likely causes and consequences of class-related variations in ability. However, their main criticism of the study is the failure to specify and test a formal model of meritocracy and to recognise important interactions between ability and gender in estimating the effect of class on the probability of survival in the educational system.

Using log-linear analysis Whelan and Whelan demonstrate that the basic meritocratic hypothesis can be refuted. They proceed to examine the outflow patterns from socio-economic origins to educational destinations predicted on the basis of the best fitting association model. In addition to documenting the degree of departure from meritocratic principles Whelan and Whelan highlight one of their conclusions which is directly contrary to that of Greaney and Kellaghan. From an examination of educational transition probabilities they conclude that the socio-economic inequalities in the probability of survival increase substantially as one moves up through the system. Greaney and Kellaghan had concluded that the role of socio-economic status diminished as students advanced through the system. The statistically informed reader will wish to evaluate the empirical evidence for the respective claims. However, the less statistically sophisticated reader with, perhaps, an interest in the policy implications of research findings will wonder how two different pairs of researchers can reach contrary conclusions from the same data.

Raftery and Hout's re-analysis concentrates on five variables from the original data set: ability, social class (recoded to Hope-Goldthorpe scale values), type of second-level school attended, gender and highest educational

level attained. Logistic regression analysis is used to measure the direct and indirect effect of each of the first four variables on the probability of remaining in the educational system at each of five transitions from "entry to post-primary school" through to "entry to third level". Their choice of a different methodology stems from their dissatisfaction with that used by Greaney and Kellaghan which, they argue, suffers from "the lack of any uniformly applied statistical approach". They claim that there was an over reliance on bivariate analyses, especially on a series of part/whole comparisons. Furthermore, they are unhappy with the particular form of multivariate analysis (discriminant analysis) which was used on occasions.

Perhaps the most interesting feature of Raftery and Hout's re-analysis concerns the size of the effect of social class. Their findings, they argue, are at variance with Greaney and Kellaghan's conclusion that the meritocratic ideal is being approached. They find that the effect of class on the probability of remaining in school at each of the second-level transitions is virtually as great as that of ability. However, in agreement with Greaney and Kellaghan and contrary to Whelan and Whelan's assertion, they find no evidence of a class effect on the probability of entering higher education for those who do sit the Leaving Certificate. A further important substantive finding to emerge from Raftery and Hout's analysis is that type of school has a significant effect on survival rates at each second-level transition. A vocational school student has a much higher probability of dropping out at each stage than a secondary school student from the same background and with the same ability. Indeed, Raftery and Hout found that type of school explains more of the variation in drop-out rates at second level than class and ability together.

Greaney and Kellaghan's rejoinder represents a vigorous defence of their study. They recognise that it was their final conclusion suggesting that the meritocracy ideal is being approached if not quite being attained which evoked the close scrutiny which their study has received. In responding to their critics, for the most part, Greaney and Kellaghan eschew the more emotive and problematic issues of meritocracy and equality of opportunity and instead concentrate on an assessment of the evidence in respect of the factors which are related to level of educational attainment.

In commenting on the two papers which re-analyse the data they point out that the overall conclusions to the re-analyses seem substantially similar to their own. This is particularly true in the case of Raftery and Hout's analysis. They acknowledge differences in detail in the findings of the analyses, especially between those of Whelan and Whelan and their own. The major differences in findings are related to the use of alternative analytical and statistical models. In response to the accusations of their critics of their failure to use an adequate statistical model they point to the problems

which arise “when there is bias in the selection of a model and when inferences are made on the basis of a model which, when examined, are found to be inconsistent with aspects of the original data”. They suggest that the Whelan and Whelan re-analysis is especially vulnerable in this respect. The point at issue here is of paramount importance and its implications for researchers extend well beyond the present controversy. With the availability of ever more complex statistical models researchers will increasingly be confronted with the possibility of discrepancies between inferences based on a model and those based on the actual raw data which the model purports to represent. This danger will be particularly acute when the numbers involved are small. Greaney and Kellaghan respond more favourably to Raftery and Hout’s analysis. They note that with one minor exception, involving attrition rates during the senior cycle, the conclusions drawn from the logistic regression model are consistent with the actual data. Indeed, they are prepared to concede that the best overall picture of the relative effects of socio-economic status and ability is to be found in this analysis.

The debate between the researchers on the statistical findings may even be less important than the disagreement on the interpretation of the findings. Raftery and Hout and Whelan and Whelan argue that Greaney and Kellaghan have overstated the case of ability versus class. Greaney and Kellaghan respond by suggesting that the other researchers have placed undue emphasis on the role of socio-economic status. It is clear that the “perception of difference” may sometimes be more important than the actual differences. This will always be a dilemma for social scientists where the subject matter under study can never be totally abstracted from the value judgements of the researchers. The question of values as Lynch’s paper demonstrates, does not of course intrude only at the point of the interpretation of findings. Her concerns on this score are unlikely to be dispelled by Greaney and Kellaghan’s rejoinder. Our understanding of a phenomenon will always be circumscribed by the assumptions and pre-suppositions which underlie our choice of categories and the type of analysis undertaken.

It is not to be expected that this symposium will resolve the intractable valuation and empirical problems which arise in a consideration of equality of educational opportunity. However, the papers represent an important contribution to Irish educational and social science research. In a sensitive policy area, such as is under consideration here, it is important that research studies be subject to critical peer review. This has been difficult in Ireland because of the small size of the academic community and the inevitable sensitivities attending colleague criticism. We are indebted to the contributors to this symposium for setting a headline which it is hoped will be followed by other members of the academic community.

REFERENCES

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