From Dialogue to Governance: A Critical Analysis of the School Completion Programme in the Republic of Ireland 2002 to 2016

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Abstract

The School Completion Programme (SCP) was first established in Ireland in 2002 with what appeared to resemble a 'bottom up' model of support. The programme was based on authentic effort at partnership with schools, parents and relevant agencies through local management committees and enjoyed a fair share of autonomy in how they would best support students from disadvantaged backgrounds. The aims of SCP include: retention of young people in the formal education system, improving the quality of participation and educational attainment of targeted children, offering positive supports in primary and secondary schools in countering educational disadvantage.

This democratic model of SCP as a local service responding to local need has substantially shifted policy direction in recent years to a more centralised and reductionist approach. The preponderance of macro policy objectives set within an expedient model of economic return have taken preference over a former shared ethos and responsibility for SCP. The radical pedagogy of Freire, McLaren and Hill and Foucault's Politics of Health frame this critical study of SCP policy and clearly demonstrate that the former dialogic, transformative and relational stance has become increasingly difficult to maintain. We chart this cycle

> *of disadvantage through a critical analysis of key SCP policy documents. In keeping with an agenda mapped out by Global, European and Irish austerity economics we show how this particular SCP programme is rendered more bureaucratic and less effective. We conclude by drawing on Freire and Greene to consider Posner's (1998) idea of a curriculum of conscience as a valuable counterweight to contemporary educational reform.*

Keywords: School Completion Programme, Critical Analysis, Politics of Health, Curriculum of Conscience

Introduction: What is the School Completion Programme?

The *School Completion Programme* (SCP) in the Republic of Ireland (Ireland) has been in existence since 2002 (DES, 2005; SCP, 2005, 2006a, 2006b, 2008, 2012a, 2012b, 2012c, 2014). There are a range of supports in each specific school-based project depending on local needs, mindful that local socio-economic and cultural factors can influence early school leaving. Until Ireland's financial collapse in 2008 the programme appeared to be based on authentic partnership efforts with schools, parents and relevant agencies through local management committees who enjoyed a fair share of autonomy in how they best supported students from lower social class backgrounds. The aims of the programme included: retention of young people in the formal education system, improving the quality of participation and educational attainment of targeted children and offering positive supports in primary and secondary schools in interrupting educational disadvantage.

The SCP was set up as part of *Department of Education and Skills* (DES) DEIS Strategy – *Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools* (DES, 2015b). The programme aimed to increase the numbers of young people staying in primary

and secondary schools and in doing so improve the number of pupils who successfully complete Senior Cycle, or equivalent.

SCP operates in 470 primary schools and 224 secondary schools. Primary schools in Ireland are for children aged 4 to 12 years of age. Secondary schools are for young people aged 12 to 18 years old. There are 124 local SCP projects employing 248 full-time, 627 part-time and 2,211 seasonal and other staff. Each of the 124 local SCP projects is led by a management committee comprising school principals, *Home School Liaison Service* co-ordinators, parents and voluntary and statutory agencies. At a national level, SCP is supported by a national leadership team within the Senior Management Team of the *National Educational Welfare Services* of the Child and Family Agency (TUSLA, 2014).

SCP focuses on targeting and providing supports to young people identified to be most at risk of early school leaving and includes: identifying and supporting children at risk of not reaching their potential in the educational system because of poor attendance, participation and retention via initiatives such as breakfast clubs; homework clubs; afterschool supports; mentoring programmes; and therapeutic interventions; ensuring that schools have in place the appropriate procedures to monitor, identify and respond to attendance, participation and retention issue; implementing transfer programmes to support young people transitioning from primary to secondary school.

SCP offered an opportunity to operate a Freirean type pedagogy of 'limit acts' 'directed at negating and overcoming, rather than passively accepting, the given.' (Freire, 1970) The idea being that the interventions and supports provided by SCP would counteract the 'limit situations' that disadvantaged children find themselves in. That they could as Paulo Freire says 'transcend'

their limits and as Maxine Greene writes they could reach beyond their self-interest and toward the untapped possibility of what can be. (Greene, 1973, 1988, 1995) Nonetheless we are strongly reminded that engaging this level of teacher agency and criticality in the school may be akin to wishful thinking in a global capitalist world order where the field of education has become increasingly colonised by an economic imperative for competitive individualism (McLaren, 2015) and where all workers, including teachers, operate increasingly within precarious contracts and conditions of uncertainty (Hill, 2012).

The lead researcher has reflected (see below under *Critical Reflexivity*) on his experiences as an insider and project worker liaising with young people and their families, offering holistic supports in collaboration with disadvantaged groups within an understanding of transformative education espoused by Freire, Greene and others. He has found many recent reforms and infrastructural changes in SCP governance in Ireland to be comparable with many European Union and international neoliberal led policies of smart sustainable growth designed for what are nowadays called 'knowledge based economies' (European Commission, 2010; European Union Parliament Website).

Critical Reflexivity

As lead researcher I have been a project worker with North Monaghan School Completion Programme since January 2009. I work in three primary schools and one DEIS secondary school. I share responsibility for identifying and 'targeting' children deemed 'at risk' of early school leaving based on criteria such as: poor school attendance, participation and behaviour. These identification procedures are outlined in the SCP guide on Student Referral Procedures published by the *National Educational Welfare Board.* (NEWB, 2011,2012, 2014)

My professional duties include mentoring, providing academic support in one-on-one and small groups to targeted students in these schools. Interventions include after-school, in-school and out-of-school activities as well as holiday supports. Activities include homework clubs, breakfast clubs, healthy eating programmes, transition programmes for students moving to secondary school, self-esteem programmes and cultural awareness programmes. Along with my co-ordinator I organise activities for summer camps and school holidays. The aim is to have a positive impact on retention of young people at risk of early school leaving.

In the eight years I have been in this role I have seen considerable changes in policy and procedures. There has been an increasing emphasis on quantifiable results based practice and a demand for justification of *value for money* in how allocated funds are spent. In 2012 SCP and the Home School Liaison Service was brought under the umbrella of the *National Educational Welfare Board* in their policy document *One Child, One Team, One Plan* (NEWB, 2012). Increased modes of public accountability, streamlining of services and scrutiny from authority resulted. The former responsive nature of SCP was replaced by what Glatter (2003) terms "contractual models of accountability" (Glatter, 2003, p.27) Contractual models of accountability are measureable and surveillance-based whereas responsive models are local and flexible. The preponderance of macro policy objectives over individual learning objectives had taken preference over the former dialogical and relational ethos of SCP reflecting Looney's "overview of contemporary curriculum discourse (*which)* shows a worrying drift to the technical in current curriculum debates, technique is winning out over substance, procedure over principles." (Looney, 2001, p.149)

Having worked in the SCP since 2009 I have become increasingly disillusioned and have many critical questions regarding the paradoxical nature of this

programme. My 'targeted' (SCP policy language) students come from disadvantaged backgrounds including Irish travellers, immigrants, children with learning and behavioural difficulties and those living in areas of rural isolation. The paradox I find is that I am imposing an 'education' of middle class neo liberal values that is not relevant to their lives. It appears that no matter what 'interventions' or 'supports' they may receive from me, their environment, family, economic and social conditions will confine the majority of these children and young people to academic and social exclusion. Even if these young people complete school, what of their futures? The life chances of these young people leaving their families and communities and travelling to another city are minimal.

However it is my role as a professional and member of my community to encourage my fellow citizens to see beyond the limitations of the curriculum, their economic and social circumstances and to embrace and tap into the possibilities that surround them. In a Freirean sense I want them to fulfil their full potential not only in an academic sense but in a personal and human way. This is done in a spirited sense of collaboration and cooperation that involves home visits, engaging parents and families to encourage the idea of pursuing education as a liberating force. In other words creating Greene's sense of a 'wide awakeness' or Freire's idea of 'conscientizacao'. In recent years in particular I do this work while at the same time ensuring I fulfil duties of cumbersome reporting and technocratic planning.

Economic Factors Shaping Contemporary SCP Policy

Carter and O'Neill (1995) identify international perspectives of education policy and reform as 'the new orthodoxy'. Concepts such as the 'learning society' and the 'knowledge based economy' symbolise as Ball calls it; "The increasing colonisation of education policy by economic policy imperatives." (Ball, 1998,

p. 122) It is now recognised that *The European Union's Lisbon Strategy* failed to achieve its aims by 2010 (European Parliament Website) and has been supplanted by a new policy directive, the European Council's *Europe 2020* strategy document for jobs and growth: "Smart, sustainable and inclusive growth, notably by equipping citizens with the skills and competencies which the European economy and European society need in order to remain competitive and innovative, but also by helping to promote social cohesion and inclusion." (European Commission, 2010, p. 1)

Irish policy documents for the education and care of vulnerable children and young people appear framed within the neoliberal and neoconservative thinking found in their European counterparts. Themes of public accountability, competition, high-stakes testing and a strong connectivity between education and the economy belong to this new 'Europeanization' of education. (Grek et al. 2009, p. 7) This has resulted in increased emphasis on quantitative data gathering such as, attendance monitoring and accounting of numbers of interventions by programme providers. The qualitative nature and contextual data arising from such studies of the School Completion Programme has seen a sharp decline in importance in this timeline.

So What has Changed?

As a Youth Activities Officer with SCP the lead researcher engages daily with young people who are officially labelled 'at risk' and identified as failures from the outset. The current paternalistic and patronising usage of identifying students as being at risk within a system that takes existing social arrangements for granted without addressing the reasons why is frustrating and has prompted this study. Mc Graw writes: "The reasons for poor attendance at school, resistance, disengagement and early school leaving lie in the institutional preference for dividing and selecting, for noting and disregarding, favouring the

privileged and treating the others as 'at risk'". (Mc Graw, 2011, p.105) The goals of 'social cohesion' set out in the Lisbon Strategy and Irish policy document can appear as solely rhetorical. These are key documents from which School Completion Programme are taking their policy imperative. The narrow view that current reform efforts to combat underachievement and educational attainment can be achieved without addressing the broader social contextual and educational inequalities is highly contradictory.

Berliner argues that 'school reform efforts for poor children almost always will be unsuccessful if they do not consider the outside of school conditions that affect the ability to teach and learn successfully inside of school.' (Berliner, 2005, p. 163) There is a need to 'invest in student lives outside of school to increase achievement inside schools.' (Berliner 2005, p. 162) Cummins suggests *advocacy education* with the purpose of learning and teaching collaboratively with students. Such collaborative power creation would 'start by acknowledging the cultural, linguistic, imaginative and intellectual resources poor children bring to school.' (Cummins, 1986, p.653) This does not easily align with the European Union's or the Irish government's technicist and managerialist perspectives that public provision of education is to be more 'effective, responsive and transparent.' (Giddens, 2007)

If programmes aimed at tackling educational disadvantage are to succeed they must work in tandem with wider socio-political and contextual initiatives to empower the learner not only within the confines of the school building but in the wider community. The current trend of labelling some children 'at risk' is symbolic violence and creates an 'otherness' which limits the (re)frames the social problem of poverty as a problem of the individual. Modes of public accountability and outcomes-focused planning restrict the work of school completion staff under the constraint of a neoliberal policy imaginary, seen in

the movement of SCP from the *Department of Education and Skills* to the *Department of Health* (Ball, 1999, 2010).

For the lead researcher this has resulted in less time with the children and young people and more time in the office, reporting, filing and accounting. It is clear from this critical analysis that policy imperatives driven by the *Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development* and echoed by the European Union, with their restrictive focus on education for the work and jobs have filtered uncritically into Irish educational policies and are having a direct impact on how educational programmes operate, such as, SCP described here.

The Significance of Public Accountability

Public accountability replaces qualitative educational measures with quantitative ones. 'We are drawn into the fallacy of replacing what is important with what is measurable". (Nikel & Lowe, 2010, p, 596) For example, NEWB's attendance measuring is used as a way to measure the impact of investment in education disadvantage. Increasing attendance figures are used in a direct causal way to indicate that levels of participation in schools are increasing. The quality of education and participation is not taken into consideration by this rather simplistic mode of accounting. This is endemic of a top-down policy approach. The direction of *School Completion Programme* policies and reforms cannot be considered in isolation without critical analysis of the broader context, nationally and internationally.

The *Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development* (OECD) has played a unique role in the orientation of education policy in Ireland for more than 40 years. Galvin (2009) provides a chronological overview of these dominant policy imperatives. Lynch (2012) highlights that the DES used the language of the market in key strategy documents including 'Implementing the

Agenda for Change' in 1996. Strategy statements from the DES retained this mercantile orientation into the new millennium where the language of 'customers and clients' replaced that of students (Gleeson & O'Donnabháin, 2009: 30). The broad remit of the OECD is economic and its defining purpose is to build strong economies. The EU Lisbon policies were one response to the OECD's drive for performance and results. (OECD, 2014)

Methodologies and tools such as value for money evaluations, performance management development systems and so on, have resulted in a long polity of austerity measures for all public services, found in the *Transforming Public Services* programme. (Department of the Taoiseach, 2008) The NEWB works within the framework of the wider public service policy and mirrors OECD policy when it proclaims that: "NEWB's challenge is to articulate how its work contributes to the achievement of broad social and economic goals, to have clearly identified targets, outputs and outcomes and a strong culture of planning and accountability." (NEWB, 2011, p.8)

'Governance' & the Politics of Health

Novoa and Yariv Marshal (2003) argue comparison is itself a new mode of governance (DICE, 2012). By this they mean that comparison is used to provide evidence that legitimise political actions, through such devices as the 'international spectacle' of 'success' or 'failure' and the 'politics of mutual accountability' through performance league tables. The constant collection of data that apparently estimate or reflect 'public opinion' produces a continuing and relentless need for further data that justify activity. It is "a regime of urgency that provokes a permanent need for self- justification." (Novoa & Yariv Marshal, 2003, p.427)

The rate of educational reforms started to change after Ireland's financial crash in 2008-2010 and the arrival of austerity economic policies resulted in rapid and unprecedented policy changes. SCP quickly became a political 'football' and was moved first from the Department of Education of Skills (DES) to the new Department of Children and Youth Affairs in 2013 and, then most recently, in January 2015 has been brought under the newly established *Child and Family Agency* TUSLA in the Department of Health. The resulting focus on economic expediency meant that each individual School Completion Programme was required to have its own retention plan and budget which it submitted to this agency on an annual basis. The political importance of this localised dataset can be seen in recent DES publications on school retention rates (DES, 2011, 2014, 2015a).

Shifts in governance from The Department of Education and Skills to new Department of Children and Youth Affairs and later to the Department of Health exemplify what Foucault calls "The Politics of Health" (Foucault, 1994). State investment in human capital is presented as a necessary function of government this is nowadays interpreted more tightly as a policy imperative to 'invest' in children for a measurable and visible outcome. The former notion of the *Social Welfare State* (SWS) has been replaced by a new vision of the *Social Investment State* (SIS) which takes the neoliberal view that state spending occurs, if and only if, it creates immediate measurable monetary return.

In this way it is argued that state spending on *Early Childhood Care and Education* (ECCE) brings a greater return than spending later on life. (Saint-Martin, 2007, p.292). In a Canadian context Bundy (2012) explains that the SIS framework only applies to children and not parents or guardians. Bundy uses Foucault's *Politics of Health* to explain state control of populations. She explains how Foucault's work on bio-politics demonstrates the ways

populations can be taught to maintain and self-discipline themselves with minimal state intervention. (Bundy, 2012, p.596) It is too early to tell but the shift in governance of the School Completion Programme from the Department of Education and Skills to the Department of Health may well be part of a wider neoliberal strategy in Ireland resulting in a new *Social Investment State* framework.

The SIS regime according to Saint Martin (2007) and Mahon (2008) is closely interrelated with a neoliberal policy imaginary. It seeks to diminish the state's involvement in the economy and instead allow market forces to determine social investment programmes. (Mahon, 2008, p.344, Saint- Martin, 2007, p.282.) Investing in early childhood education is seen as beneficial to future society. It is argued that ECCE spending brings a far greater return than spending in later years (Jenson & Saint Martin, 2003, p.92; Saint Martin, 2007, p.292; UNICEF, 2008, p. 11) Bundy problematizes the SIS model arguing that it only focuses on children, because children are seen as offering the best 'return' on investments. Parents and guardians only become part of this discourse in so far as they relate to their children: "By concluding that investment in children offers equality of opportunity, there is the potential for further indifference to structural forces of inequality, such as class, race and gender. Therefore, by minimising the need to solve problems that impede inequality there is a crystallisation of the discourse of individual choice leading to poverty." (Bundy, 2012, p. 595) In Ireland there is currently concern that the schools ultimately selected for the School Completion Programme may only be primary schools. If so then it would appear to be line with early intervention approaches as seen in Canada and elsewhere. Only time will tell.

The European Union and the 'New Orthodoxy'

The *Reducing Early School Leaving Project* in the EU 2013-2018 is a study of nine EU countries that seeks to uncover the specific configurations of variables and contexts influencing processes related to *Early School Leaving* (ESL)- European Commission (2013). The project states its political objectives as: "European level conceptualisation of ESL considers the Lisbon strategy of 2000 as its point of departure." (p.6).

Carter and O'Neill (1995) identify international perspectives of policy and reform as 'the new orthodoxy'. Concepts such as the 'learning society' and the 'knowledge based economy' symbolise as Ball calls it "The increasing colonisation of education policy by economic policy imperatives." (Ball, 1998, p. 122) The *Europe 2020* strategy aims to reduce the share of early school leavers to less than 10% citing positive effects on work, jobs and growth as the motivation behind the strategy. The NEWB strategic plan and the increasing emphasis on best practice (Morris & Parashar, 2012) reiterates the view that education is to serve the greater economic need: "The Board views Education as a key enabler to help children enjoy their childhood, realise their full potential and make a valued contribution to the economic, social and cultural life of their community." (NEWB Strategic Plan, 2010-2011)

As a project worker in the *School Completion Programme* the lead author has found his role increasingly becoming one of report writing, outcomes focused planning and becoming more fluent in technical jargon to be able to explain to policy actors and funders what he is doing and how he is doing it. Mandatory *Continuous Professional Development* courses take workers out of the field of practice and into boardrooms to learn managerial speak and report writing processes. This additional bureaucratic requirement for fulfilling the needs of new modes of surveillance can lead to decreased time supporting young people.

A Curriculum of Conscience

However, there may well be a counterweight to reductionist discourse trends. Looney (2001) suggests a relationship between the contexts of curriculum practice, curriculum text production and contexts of influence based on c*ritique.* This relationship would arise from ongoing critical dialogue within and between the various actors and contexts. This would seek to expose the ideological positioning of the context of influence. Looney argues that such a dialogue would lead to the development of what Posner (1998) calls a 'curriculum conscience'. This curriculum conscience offers an alternative to the technical bias of the dominant Tyler rationale in education policy making. The Tyler rationale in curriculum planning has been the dominant perspective in western curriculum planning since 1949. Tyler's linear rational procedure fails to transcend the dichotomy of curriculum as fact and curriculum as practice. Looney's notion of creating a curriculum of conscience to begin critical reflexivity may offer an alternative counterweight to the contemporary drift toward the technical and the linear rational.

Recognising the relationships between these contexts Taylor et al.(1997) note: 'It is important to recognize policy processes as inherently political in character and involving compromises, trade -offs and settlement.' (Taylor et al., 1997, p.26) The School Completion Programme in former times offered an opportunity for a Freirean type pedagogy of 'limit acts' 'directed at negating and overcoming, rather than passively accepting, the given.' (Freire, 1970) The idea being that interventions provided by SCP would counteract the 'limit situations' that disadvantaged children find themselves in. That they could as Freire says 'transcend' their limits and as Greene states they could reach beyond their self-interest and toward the untapped potentiality and possibility of what can be. (Greene, 1973, 1988, 1995) This former practice of School Completion Programme has an element of Greene's concept of 'wide awakeness' which she

describes as "a heightened sense of agency in those we teach, empowering them 'to pursue their freedom and perhaps, transform to some degree their lived worlds." (Greene 1995, p.48) The programme had been one of agency and activism 'where educators could respond 'to those once called at risk, once carelessly marginalized, as living beings capable of choosing for themselves.' (Greene, 1995, p.42)

However, the democratic nature of the programme's practice as a local service responding to local need has radically and substantially shifted to a more centralised and reductionist approach in the past five years. Apple (1998) has argued that this is part of a global paradigm drift from considering what should be taught and why, to how to organize curriculum and evaluate it. Looney reiterates this in the Irish context when she says: "The curriculum has become something for teachers, students and schools to overcome, to manage, to conquer. There is little empowerment associated with it." (Looney, 2001)

The lead researcher agrees with this critical consciousness argument as he grapples on a daily basis with a curriculum that many disadvantaged students can neither relate to nor make sense of. Looney supports Ball's idea of 'theoretical isolationism' (1997) Theoretical isolationism is a failure to place education in a broader social policy context and a tendency to overestimate the influence and effects of schooling on social inequality. Trying to convince disadvantaged families of the merits of the education system and staying in school brings the concept of theoretical isolationism into everyday sobering reality.

The incorporation of the School Completion Programme under the remit of the *National Educational Welfare Board's* 2010-2011 strategy ensures that the local response to educational needs of students are nowadays closely monitored so as

to assure an education system that will help graduates participate as competitive individuals in the global economy. It is becoming increasingly difficult to retain local identity and culture under the influence of this globalisation agenda of market forces as set out by current European and Irish policy. A re-democratisation of local projects is clearly needed to help ensure that authentic local responses are meeting local needs. In the writings of Maxine Greene and Paolo Freire both considered equality, freedom and social justice to be core, foundational prerequisites of the democratic project in education. They invite educators to reach beyond their 'limit situations' toward the untapped possibility of what can be. According to Greene teachers should 'challenge that which is taken for granted, the given, the bound and the restricted...to me teaching is about more than educating the child for our economy, which is of course important but it has become the central focus of our education system.' (Greene, 1973)

What next for School Completion Programme?

'Targeted' students in SCP come from disadvantaged backgrounds and minority groupings including Irish travellers, immigrants, children with learning and behavioural difficulties and those living in areas of rural isolation. The paradox is in imposing an 'education' of middle class neoliberal values on young people that is not relevant to them. It appears that no matter what 'interventions' are provided, their environment, family, economic and social conditions continue to confine the majority of these young people to social and academic exclusion.

The *School Completion Programme* attempts to address inequalities in the school setting only, not in society or the wider community where the school is situated. This is made explicit in policy guidelines on identifying young people at risk of early school leaving. "Area interventions interfere with the market-areas should be left to decline or recover since interfering with these processes

may do more harm than good." (TUSLA, 2014, p.5) The programme offers disadvantaged children and young people supports and opportunities to help them attain academic success whilst paying lip-service to the neoliberal ideals of the middle class state. This policy framework gives undue emphasis to excellence, competition, standards and performance. These characteristics give credence to strategic rather than social relations. Despite the aspirations of policy documents the need to give consideration to the fate of others has been considerably lessened by the inroads of neoliberalism and neo-conservatism and the rhetoric of value for money and competitive individualism.

Ball argues that education policy which does not acknowledge or deal with social, political and economic inequalities only serves as rhetoric and is no more than arm's length philanthropy (Ball, 1998, 1999, 2010). It appears that the School Completion Programme as currently framed will merely serve as this philanthropic arm for the foreseeable future in an overall policy scheme that does little or nothing to erase differential relations between income and opportunity and privileges middle class values of competitive advantage over those of 'community', whereby issues of poverty and disadvantage are (re)framed as individual issues of deficit rather than public policy concerns of some importance.

In this article we want to assert that there are alternative ways to counter this worrying polity drift to the technical and procedural in educational practice. Clarke and Drudy (20016) believe that Teacher Education programmes could be improved. Starting with student teachers' conceptualisations of diversity, social justice and global awareness new teachers could improve how they manage their classrooms. *Advocacy Education* as suggested by Cummins (1986), whereby teachers and students learn collaboratively, and Posner's (1998) idea of creating a *curriculum of conscience* demonstrate that despite contemporary

reductionist reforms strongly directed toward the institutionalisation of poverty and disadvantage we have some albeit limited means of emancipating those we seek to educate.

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