

## **Educational Inequalities Among School Leavers in Ireland 1979-1994**

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*Abstract:* The extent to which inequalities in educational outcomes persist in modern Ireland has been the subject of much debate. This paper investigates whether the rapid expansion in educational participation rates over the 1980s and early 1990s has led to a reduction in social class and gender inequalities. Using data from the annual surveys of school leavers conducted by the Economic and Social Research Institute, analyses highlight marked changes in female educational participation, particularly in the third-level sector, but a remarkable persistence in class inequalities in educational attainment. Contrary to findings based on other sources (Clancy, 1995), no reduction in socio-economic inequalities is apparent in access to third-level education.

### I INTRODUCTION

The extent to which inequalities in educational outcomes persist in modern Ireland has been the subject of much debate. Analyses of educational attainment among the adult population have indicated the persistence of social class inequalities, contrary to the predictions of liberal theory (Breen and Whelan, 1996; Breen and Whelan, 1998; Whelan and Hannan, in this volume). In contrast, there have been changes across cohorts in the educational attainment of Irish women with higher levels of Leaving Certificate completion evident among younger cohorts of adults (Whelan and Hannan, in this volume). It could be

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argued that the rapid educational expansion experienced since the early 1980s is likely to result in a reduction of class and gender inequalities. If this is the case, any such changes should be especially evident among young people leaving the educational system in recent years. Indeed, an analysis of patterns of third-level entry suggests some reduction in gender and socio-economic inequalities over the late 1980s and early 1990s (Clancy, 1995). This paper uses a particularly rich source of information on young people's life-chances, the annual surveys of school-leavers conducted by the Economic and Social Research Institute, to assess whether any reduction in social class and gender inequalities has taken place since the early 1980s.

International research has indicated a consistently significant effect of social background, usually conceptualised in terms of social class, on educational outcomes (see, for example, Jencks *et al.*, 1972; Halsey *et al.*, 1980). Comparative studies have shown that the pattern of association between social class background and education tends to be similar, even in countries with very different educational systems (Shavit and Blossfeld, 1993; Ishida, Müller, Ridge, 1995). Parental education has a similar association with children's education, with higher rates of educational attainment found among those with university-educated parents (Shavit and Blossfeld, 1993). Social background effects have been apparent in relation to both the level of education reached and academic performance at various stages within the educational system. In the Irish context, adults of working-class origins are found to have significantly lower levels of educational attainment than those of middle-class origins (Breen and Whelan, 1996). Among Junior and Leaving Certificate pupils, working-class pupils are found to achieve significantly lower exam grades relative to their initial ability levels than their middle-class counterparts (Hannan, Smyth *et al.*, 1996; Smyth, 1999).

Socio-economic background is shown to have a stronger effect at earlier stages of the educational process, declining in relative terms as students move through the system (Shavit and Blossfeld, 1993; Raftery and Hout, 1993). Two explanations have been advanced for this pattern. First, the life-course hypothesis proposes that older students are less dependent on family resources, cultural and economic, in making decisions about continued educational participation (Shavit and Blossfeld, 1993). Second, it has been argued that this process reflects selection effects since those working-class students who do go on to higher levels of education are likely to be atypical of all working-class students entering the educational system (Mare, 1980).

The causes of inequality in educational outcomes have been the subject of much debate (see, for example, Tyler, 1977). Two sets of factors are seen to influence class inequality of educational outcomes: differences between social classes in academic "ability"/performance ("primary effects"); and differences

between social classes in their level of educational participation, controlling for prior academic performance (“secondary effects”) (Boudon, 1974).<sup>1</sup> Differences in academic performance are seen to reflect differing cultural resources in the home environment (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977), and/or class bias within the school (see, for example, Willis, 1977). However, it has been argued that such performance differences are not large enough to explain existing levels of inequality in educational attainment nor why children from different social classes with similar performance levels differ in their tendency to remain in full-time education (Erikson and Jonsson, 1996).

One approach to explaining this pattern is the “rational choice” model adopted by Erikson and Jonsson (1996; see also, Goldthorpe, 1996). From this perspective, educational choice is regarded in terms of the costs and benefits associated with continued participation, with variation in outcomes related to a number of factors.<sup>2</sup> First, lack of economic resources will limit participation if families cannot afford the direct and indirect (opportunity) costs of such participation. The relative costs of schooling are likely to vary by social class and family income levels. Second, different social class groups differ in their cultural resources. Parents with higher levels of education will have greater knowledge of the educational system and will be better equipped to help their children with homework and study. Among recent cohorts, the effects of cultural resources (such as parental education) have become stronger than those of economic resources (Erikson and Jonsson, 1996; De Graaf and Ganzeboom, 1993). Third, the perceived benefits of educational participation may differ between class groups. The middle-classes have more to lose by not staying on in education since they risk social demotion, whereas in high unemployment areas, young people from working-class backgrounds may not see much benefit to staying on at school. Fourth, the probabilities of success within the educational system may differ between social groups (Erikson and Jonsson, 1996).

## II CHANGES IN SOCIAL INEQUALITIES OVER TIME

The second half of the twentieth century has been a period of considerable expansion in educational participation in many countries. This expansion has been accompanied by a marked reduction in gender inequalities in educational

1. The concept of “academic ability” is far from unproblematic (Gardner, 1987; Lynch, 1985). However, prior academic performance (in standardised tests or examinations) is found to be highly predictive of educational participation decisions.

2. The rational choice perspective has also been applied to gender differences in educational participation (Breen and Goldthorpe, 1997). Thus, it is argued that previously low female labour force participation resulted in a lack of incentive for parents to “invest” in female education. However, educational participation among young women may also represent a response to the lack of alternatives in terms of employment and/or marriage (see Smyth, 1993).

attainment, with female attainment surpassing that of males in some countries (Shavit and Blossfeld, 1993). In spite of such large-scale educational expansion, there has been a remarkable consistency in the relationship between social background and inequality in educational outcomes (Shavit and Blossfeld, 1993; Breen and Whelan, 1996). Among countries for which comparable data are available, only Sweden and the Netherlands have shown any consistent tendency towards increased equality of educational participation between the different social classes<sup>3</sup> (De Graaf and Ganzeboom, 1993; Jonsson, 1993).

A reduction in inequality in educational participation can generally be attributed to one of two processes.<sup>4</sup> First, such changes may result from a reduction in social class differences in income and life-chances, thus leading to a change in the relative costs attached to educational participation for working-class and middle-class families. Sweden can be regarded as an example of this effect. It has been argued that changes over time in educational inequality in Sweden can be attributed to diminishing social class differences in economic security (through increased equality in income and living conditions) in the context of an educational system which maximises educational choice by postponing the timing of educational selection (Erikson, 1996). In contrast, the lack of change in other countries has been attributed to persistent inequalities between social class groups in financial and cultural resources, along with continuing differences in the perceived benefits and success rates associated with educational participation (Erikson and Jonsson, 1996). Ireland can be seen as an example of the latter case since, if anything, the dispersion of earnings has increased in recent years (see Barrett *et al.*, 1997).

Second, in the absence of significant changes in the distribution of economic and cultural resources, it has been argued that educational inequality will only decrease when the demand for education among the upper middle classes has been saturated (Raftery and Hout, 1993). Thus, inequalities in the transition from primary to secondary education among males in Ireland were found to have diminished as demand for education at this level by the upper middle classes was saturated. Given the recent expansion in those completing lower second-level education (or junior cycle), it could be argued that such a saturation in demand would be evident among the very youngest cohorts. This hypothesis is tested in the following sections of the paper.

3. Recent evidence suggests some tendency towards an equalisation of educational opportunity in Germany, albeit with a higher level of inequality than in Sweden or the Netherlands (Erikson and Jonsson, 1996). In addition, there is some evidence of a decline in inequality of educational outcomes in Scotland during the early 1980s (Gamoran, 1996; Paterson, 1997).

4. An alternative hypothesis, that of the liberal theorists, proposes that processes of modernisation will automatically lead to a diminution in inequality; for a refutation of this theory in the Irish context, see Breen and Whelan (1996).

### III DATA SOURCE

The analyses in this paper are based on a regular survey of those exiting the second-level education system<sup>5</sup> in Ireland. The School Leavers' Surveys have been conducted annually by the Economic and Social Research Institute since 1980. The survey involves personal interviews with those who have left second-level education in the previous academic year; thus, those who had left school in the academic year 1978/79 were interviewed in 1980, and so on. A sample of 3 per cent of school-leavers is drawn from a sample of 25 per cent of all schools in Ireland, resulting in a total sample of approximately 2,000 respondents per year. As well as information on educational level reached and qualifications attained, the survey collects data on parental employment status and social class.

In this paper, the six-category Irish social class classification is used with the amendment that farmers are considered as a separate group due to their distinctive profile in educational terms. However, contrary to many other studies of social background and education, a "dominance approach" (Erikson, 1984) is used in the definition of social class. Thus, social class is based on the mother's rather than the father's position if she is in employment and has a higher social class than her husband.<sup>6</sup> Other Irish studies have tended to use father's social class as the basis for analysis even where data on mother's position have been available (see, for example, Clancy, 1995).

### IV PARTICIPATION IN SECOND-LEVEL EDUCATION

The period since the early 1980s has been one of rapid change in levels of educational attainment, that is, in the stage at which young people complete their education. Table 1 indicates the changes which have taken place among school-leavers over the period 1979<sup>7</sup> to 1994. Among both males and females, there has been an increase in the proportion completing Leaving Certificate level, with a concomitant decrease in those leaving without sitting any formal examinations ("no qualifications") and those leaving at the end of the junior cycle. The decline in those leaving without qualifications has been particularly marked in the early 1990s. Clear gender differences are apparent over the whole of the period, with young women more likely to stay on to complete the Leaving Certificate.

5. The survey includes all those leaving from secondary, vocational, community and comprehensive schools, including those leaving from Post-Leaving Certificate courses.

6. There is evidence that maternal educational level has an additional effect on school participation and performance, over and above that of social class (Smyth, 1999). Unfortunately, information on parental education is not collected in the annual school leavers' surveys.

7. The 1979 cohort refers to those who left school during the academic year 1978/79 and who were surveyed in 1980, and so on.

Table 1: *Educational Level Completed by Gender and Year Left School*

	1979		1986		1994	
	Males	Females	Males	Females	Males	Females
	%	%	%	%	%	%
No Qualifications	9.2	7.2	9.1	5.3	4.1	2.4
Intermediate/ Junior Certificate	38.8	23.4	26.5	18.8	18.5	10.9
Leaving Certificate	52.0	69.5	64.4	75.9	77.5	86.8
N	1,783	1,609	1,071	1,026	1,547	1,488

The overall pattern of change — an increase in Leaving Certificate completion with fewer early leavers — is apparent within each of the social class groupings<sup>8</sup> (Tables 2a and 2b). By 1994, the majority of young people from each social class stay on to the Leaving Certificate, with second-level completion rates doubling among the unskilled manual group over the period from 1979. In spite of a general increase in educational attainment among school-leavers over the period, social class differences are still apparent. Second-level completion rates are particularly high among the professional groups, with the vast majority of these young people staying on to the Leaving Certificate. Rates of early leaving (“no qualifications”) are highest among the manual, especially the unskilled manual groups; among the 1994 cohort, over one-tenth of young men from unskilled manual backgrounds leave school without sitting any formal examination while this is the case for fewer than 1 per cent of those from higher professional backgrounds.

Controlling for social class, young women are more likely to stay on to the Leaving Certificate than young men. These differences are particularly marked among those from farming and manual backgrounds. The pattern among those from a farming background is likely to reflect differential strategies on the part of farm families for their sons and daughters. Involvement in the family farm appears to act as an incentive for earlier withdrawal from full-time education among males, although this effect seems to have diminished over time, most likely in response to the contraction of the agricultural sector. In contrast, educational participation is likely to represent a more important route to employment for young women from a farming background.

The nature of social class differences, and the extent to which these differences

8. The exception to this pattern is found among young women from higher professional backgrounds. This pattern appears to be due to sampling variation as Leaving Certificate completion rates are over 90 per cent for other years in the late 1980s and early 1990s.

Table 2a: Educational Level Completed by Social Class Background: Males 1979 and 1994

	Higher Professional		Lower Professional		Other Non-Manual		Skilled Manual		Semi-skilled Manual		Unskilled Manual		Farmers	
	1979 %	1994 %	1979 %	1994 %	1979 %	1994 %	1979 %	1994 %	1979 %	1994 %	1979 %	1994 %	1979 %	1994 %
No Qualifications	1.4	0.6	2.3	1.4	3.7	1.7	13.0	5.5	12.1	4.9	20.3	10.6	9.7	2.9
Junior Certificate	15.0	6.1	21.3	13.0	36.3	9.4	50.3	23.1	48.2	27.0	50.6	30.8	39.0	17.8
Leaving Certificate	83.6	93.3	76.5	85.6	60.0	88.9	36.7	71.4	39.7	68.1	29.1	58.5	51.3	79.3
N	220	172	233	281	196	152	364	337	334	135	157	188	214	249

Table 2b: Educational Level Completed by Social Class Background: Females 1979 and 1994

	Higher Professional		Lower Professional		Other Non-Manual		Skilled Manual		Semi-skilled Manual		Unskilled Manual		Farmers	
	1979 %	1994 %	1979 %	1994 %	1979 %	1994 %	1979 %	1994 %	1979 %	1994 %	1979 %	1994 %	1979 %	1994 %
No Qualifications	0.6	0.3	0.9	0.5	3.8	1.5	10.3	2.3	11.6	3.8	15.4	5.5	3.5	0.6
Junior Certificate	7.9	10.2	12.8	4.9	15.7	8.7	38.4	13.8	24.0	13.0	47.0	19.2	20.6	4.7
Leaving Certificate	91.5	89.5	86.3	94.6	80.6	89.7	51.3	83.9	64.4	83.2	37.5	75.3	76.0	94.7
N	233	148	224	271	139	143	314	311	303	143	124	197	222	224

have changed over time, can be assessed using a multinomial logit model.<sup>9</sup> The results from this model are presented in Table 3 separately for males and females, with completion of the junior and senior cycles contrasted against leaving school

Table 3: *Multinomial Logit Model for Males and Females of Educational Level Completed (contrasted against No Qualifications; additive estimates)*

	<i>Intermediate/ Junior Certificate</i>		<i>Leaving Certificate</i>	
	<i>Males</i>	<i>Females</i>	<i>Males</i>	<i>Females</i>
Constant	.837***	.678***	.199	.600***
Social class:				
Higher Professional	1.116**	.832*	3.593***	3.638***
Lower Professional	1.228***	1.222***	3.257***	3.410***
Other Non-Manual	1.223***	.390	2.357***	1.845***
Skilled Manual	.407**	.249	.693***	.780***
Semi-skilled Manual	.517**	.233	.941***	1.065***
Farmer (Reference: Unskilled Manual)	.508**	.753***	1.358***	2.243***
Year	-.010	.007	.066***	.081***
Social class* Year:				
Higher Professional	.060	.087	.055	.031
Lower Professional	-.017	-.046	-.049	-.072*
Other Non-Manual	-.058*	-.000	-.025	-.016
Skilled Manual	.016	.025	.041*	.045*
Semi-skilled Manual	.005	.015	.010	-.008
Farmer	.034	.017	.044*	.048
Log-Likelihood	-12691		-10237	
Chi-sq. (improvement over null model)	2603.9		2130.5	
Degrees of freedom	26		26	

Note: \*\*\* p<.001, \*\* p<.01, \* p<.05.

9. A multinomial logit model allows us to assess the effect of the explanatory variables on the log odds of departing following the Intermediate/Junior Certificate and the Leaving Certificate versus leaving school without qualifications. A positive coefficient indicates increased chances of leaving school at that level while a negative coefficient indicates reduced chances. Thus, in Table 3 a female from a farming background (+2.243) is more likely to leave school after the Leaving Certificate than those in the reference category of unskilled manual backgrounds. This coefficient can be transformed into an odds ratio whereby young women from a farming background are nine times more likely to complete the Leaving Certificate than those from an unskilled background.



without qualifications. Significant class differences are evident in educational level completed. The odds of completing the Leaving Certificate are highest among the higher professional group; being from a higher professional background increases the odds of completing the Leaving Certificate among females by a factor of 38 relative to being from an unskilled manual background. Interestingly, rates of staying on to the Junior or Leaving Certificate are somewhat lower among the skilled manual group than among semi-skilled manual families, a pattern which may reflect some "pull" out of education into apprenticeships among young men from skilled manual backgrounds (see Hannan *et al.*, 1997). Being from a farming background is found to significantly increase the chances of Leaving Certificate completion, with a more marked effect among females than males, a pattern consistent with differential parental strategies for farm sons and daughters.

Controlling for social class, there has been a significant increase in the odds of Leaving Certificate completion over the period 1979 to 1994 but no discernible trends in junior cycle completion relative to leaving without qualifications. Testing for changes over time in the effect of social class membership indicates some differences for particular class groupings. For example, the odds of Leaving Certificate completion appear to have increased for skilled manual workers and farmers relative to unskilled manual workers, with some evidence of a decline in the relative difference between lower professional and unskilled workers, though the latter effect is significant for females only. Leaving Certificate completion has also disproportionately increased over time for farm males, perhaps in response to contracting employment opportunities in the agricultural sector. In spite of these shifts, there is no evidence that educational expansion resulted in a net decline in social class inequalities in educational attainment over the period considered.

Table 4 allows us to assess the nature of both gender and social class differences in educational participation rates over the period 1979 to 1994. A number of non-significant terms have been removed from the model for ease of interpretation. Young women have higher odds of staying on to the Leaving Certificate as opposed to leaving without qualifications, but lower odds of junior cycle completion, relative to young men from the same social background. Social class relativities are broadly similar for junior and senior cycle completion, with the highest rates of completion found among the higher professional group. The rates for those from a farming background fall between those for the non-manual and manual groups. While the pattern of social class inequalities is broadly similar for young men and women, some differences are apparent. In particular, being from a farming background has a stronger effect on Leaving Certificate completion for females than for males, a difference which reflects gendered farm inheritance patterns. In addition, being from an "other non-manual" background

appears to have a weaker effect on second-level completion for females than for males.

Table 4: *Multinomial Logit Model of Educational Level Completed (contrasted against No Qualifications; additive estimates)*

	<i>Intermediate/ Junior Certificate</i>	<i>Leaving Certificate</i>
Constant	.832***	.140*
Female (Reference: Male)	-.160**	.547***
Social Class:		
Higher Professional	1.383***	3.851***
Lower Professional	1.230***	3.320***
Other Non-Manual	.822***	2.227***
Skilled Manual	.348***	.733***
Semi-skilled Manual	.452***	1.015***
Farmer	.516***	1.381***
(Reference: Unskilled Manual)		
Year	-.002	.071***
Year * Social Class:		
Lower Professional	-.029	-.057**
Skilled Manual	.018	.043***
Farmer	.026	.045**
Gender * Social Class:		
Other Non-Manual	-.372*	-.508**
Farmer	.238	.841***
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Log Likelihood	-23061	
Chi-sq. (improvement over null model)	5536	
Degrees of freedom	26	

Note: \*\*\* p<.001, \*\* p<.01, \* p<.05.

All else being equal, there is a significant increase in the odds of Leaving Certificate completion over time but this trend does not appear to result in a clear reduction of class inequalities in educational outcomes.<sup>10</sup> There is some reduction in relative differences between lower professional and unskilled workers, with an increase in the odds of Leaving Certificate completion for

10. The time variable is treated as linear in this analysis; similar results are found if years are grouped into discrete time-periods.

skilled manual and farmer groups relative to unskilled workers. However, in spite of some changes among the class categories, there is no evidence of a lessening in the relative advantage of professional groups in securing educational qualifications in spite of levels of participation among this group which would appear to approach saturation point.

### V THIRD-LEVEL PARTICIPATION

Due to the timing of the school leavers' surveys, we cannot assess social class differences among those who complete third-level education. The surveys do, however, indicate whether young people are participating in full-time third-level education<sup>11</sup> nine to twelve months after leaving school. While there is likely to be some disparity between these figures and third-level completion due to drop-out, this is not likely to affect the overall pattern substantially.

Participation in third-level education has increased substantially over the period 1979 to 1994; 14 per cent of those who left school in 1979 went on to third-level compared with 39 per cent of the total 1994 cohort (Table 5). The growth in participation has been even more marked among young women (with an increase from 14 per cent to 43 per cent), and among the 1994 cohort young women are more likely than their male counterparts to be in full-time third-level education. This significant increase in third-level entry on the part of women must be seen in the context of broader social changes, such as higher female labour force participation and increasing numbers in professional occupations, which are likely to have affected the incentives for female participation in higher education.

Table 5: *Third-Level Participation by Gender and Year Left School*

	1979	1986	1994
	%	%	%
Males	14.9	25.8	36.4
Females	13.7	22.8	42.5
Total	14.3	24.3	39.4

*Note:* The figures refer to participation in full-time third-level education nine to twelve months after leaving school.

11. Third-level participation is defined as attendance at universities, Institutes of Technology (formerly Regional Technical Colleges) or other third-level (including private) colleges. Post-Leaving Certificate courses are not considered as "third-level" for these purposes.

Table 6: *Third-Level Participation by Social Class, Gender and Year Left School*

	Higher Professional		Lower Professional		Other Non-Manual		Skilled Manual		Semi-skilled Manual		Unskilled Manual		Farmers	
	1979 %	1994 %	1979 %	1994 %	1979 %	1994 %	1979 %	1994 %	1979 %	1994 %	1979 %	1994 %	1979 %	1994 %
Males	32.7	66.0	25.0	51.7	20.7	41.6	10.1	24.7	6.0	24.6	5.6	14.2	3.5	10.1
Females	26.8	70.7	24.9	55.8	16.2	59.1	7.0	34.3	8.4	28.8	4.5	16.2	11.6	36.6
Total	29.6	68.2	25.0	53.7	18.8	50.1	8.6	29.3	7.2	26.8	5.1	15.3	10.9	41.2

Within social classes, the 1979 cohort of males were more likely than females to attend third-level education, while the position was reversed among the 1994 cohort. Gender differences in participation are less marked among the professional, semi- and unskilled manual groups, but are particularly evident among the farming group with females three times more likely than their male counterparts to attend third-level institutions (Table 6).

A growth in third-level participation has taken place within each of the social class groups, with a particularly pronounced increase among those from farming backgrounds. However, Table 6 indicates the persistence of substantial class differences in third-level participation; among the 1994 cohort, over two-thirds of those from higher professional backgrounds attend third-level institutions compared with 15 per cent of those from an unskilled manual background.

Table 7 presents a multinomial logit model which estimates the factors associated with third-level participation; this analysis is restricted to those who

Table 7: *Logit Model of Third-Level Participation Among Males and Females Completing Leaving Certificate Level, 1979-1994*

	<i>Males</i>	<i>Females</i>
Constant	-1.511***	-2.403***
Social class:		
Higher Professional	1.534***	1.475***
Lower Professional	1.107***	1.529***
Other Non-Manual	.793***	.848***
Skilled Manual	.571*	.488*
Semi-skilled Manual	.088	.650*
Farmer	.729***	.962***
(Reference: Unskilled Manual)		
Year	.030	.076***
Social class * Year:		
Higher Professional	.045*	.065**
Lower Professional	.036	-.001
Other Non-Manual	.013	.032
Skilled Manual	-.010	.008
Semi-skilled Manual	.035	-.015
Farmer	.017	.030
Log Likelihood	-6593.0	-7875.2
Chi-sq. (improvement over null model)	832.9	1344.2
Degrees of freedom	13	13

Note: \*\*\* p<.001, \*\* p<.01, \* p<.05.

have completed the Leaving Certificate level since third-level entry in the Irish context is contingent upon completion of (and performance in) the Leaving Certificate. The pattern of change over time is positive for both males and females, reflecting the growth in third-level provision over the 1980s and early 1990s. However, the increase is statistically significant only for female school-leavers. There are strong class differences in participation for both males and females. In the case of males, the odds of third-level participation are increased by a factor of 4.6 for those from a higher professional background relative to the unskilled manual group. In general, the effects of social class background on third-level participation have not changed significantly over the period 1979 to 1994. The only exception to this pattern is a slight but significant widening of the gap between higher professional and unskilled manual groups.

Pooling the data on male and female school-leavers allows us to directly test gender differences in third-level entry while controlling for the effects of social class. The negative coefficient for gender indicates significantly lower third-level participation rates among young women than young men at the beginning of the period. However, the gender-year interaction term indicates a much sharper increase in women's participation over time (Table 8). Class effects on third-level participation operate in a similar manner for men and women. The exception to this occurs among the farming group, where female participation is significantly higher than that of males due to differential patterns of farm inheritance and their implications for educational participation.

This pattern is quite different from the one suggested by a recent survey of third-level entrants. Clancy (1995) has indicated that estimated participation rates derived from data on third-level (HEA) entrants suggest a decrease in socio-economic inequalities in participation over the period 1980 to 1992. The discrepancy between the two sets of analyses may be attributable to a number of factors. First, the definition of socio-economic background differs since Clancy uses fathers' socio-economic group while analyses in this paper are based on parental social class (defined in relation to the "dominant" parent). However, these differences do not account for the discrepancies found since analyses of the school leavers' surveys using fathers' socio-economic group reveal very similar patterns of change over time to those based on parental social class.

A second source of variation could relate to changes over time in the method of data collection used for the HEA survey. In 1980 and 1986 information on socio-economic background was provided by students as part of their application to the Central Admissions Office. For the 1992 survey, however, this practice of collecting information on socio-economic group was discontinued. Instead the information was collected by a separate postal questionnaire where the opportunity was taken to improve the quality of the data by collecting information on principal economic status and by the provision of an explanatory note

Table 8: *Logit Model of Third-Level Participation Among those Completing the Leaving Certificate, 1979-1994*

<i>All Leaving Certificate Leavers</i>	
Constant	-1.715***
Female (Reference: Male)	-.765***
Social Class:	
Higher Professional	1.657***
Lower Professional	1.484***
Other Non-Manual	1.031***
Skilled Manual	.535***
Semi-skilled Manual	.471***
Farmer	.946***
(Reference: Unskilled Manual)	
Year	.045***
Year * Female	.045***
Year * Social Class:	
Higher Professional	.040***
Gender * Social Class:	
Farmer	.218**
Log Likelihood	-15683

Note: \*\*\* p<.001, \*\* p<.01, \* p<.05

requesting precision in recording parental occupation (Clancy, 1995, pp. 45-46). The 1992 survey would, therefore, appear to provide more precise information on socio-economic background than the earlier surveys. In this respect, it is interesting to note that the distribution of participation rates by socio-economic group from the School Leavers' Survey for the same year-group is very similar to that found in the 1992 HEA survey. In contrast, the HEA and school leavers' surveys provide very different estimates of changes in participation by socio-economic group between 1980 and 1986, and between 1986 and 1992. For example, HEA data indicate only very slight increases between 1980 and 1986 in third-level participation among those from a manual background but rapid expansion in rates between 1986 and 1992. In contrast, the school leavers' surveys indicate a steady increase in participation over the early 1980s, in line with expanding third-level provision, within all social class groupings. In the absence of substantive changes (such as a rapid decrease in income inequality) and more

especially in the context of a lack of change in the relative pattern of participation at second-level, it appears that no overall reduction in social inequalities in access to third-level education can be assumed.

## VI CONCLUSIONS

Previous analyses of educational change in Ireland have indicated that a saturation in demand for education at a certain level on the part of the upper middle classes will result in a reduction in social inequalities in educational outcomes (Raftery and Hout, 1993). However, international experience indicates that educational expansion is often accompanied by a reduction in gender, rather than social class, inequalities in educational attainment (Shavit and Blossfeld, 1996). The rapid expansion of the completion of lower and upper second-level education in Ireland over the 1980s and early 1990s would appear to provide an interesting test case for comparing the relative effects of gender and social class background on educational participation.

Analysis of data from surveys of school-leavers indicates that there has been a continuing reduction in gender inequalities in educational attainment among the younger cohort. In fact, the proportion of young women entering third-level education now exceeds that of young men, a pattern which contrasts strongly with that found among the adult population (see Whelan and Hannan, this volume). This shift must be seen, at least partially, as a response to broader social change in terms of female labour force participation and employment patterns. In contrast, educational expansion has not resulted in any significant reduction in social class inequality in recent years. In spite of an overall increase in the proportion of young people completing second-level education, the relativities between social classes have been maintained. Other findings to the contrary (Clancy, 1995), the effects of social class background on third-level participation do not appear to have changed substantially over the period. Indeed, there is some evidence of a widening gap between the higher professional and unskilled manual groups.

The persistence of social class inequalities in educational outcomes in Ireland raises a number of issues for policy formulation. Recent reforms in the education system, including the introduction of new programmes at junior and senior cycle, have been aimed at increasing second-level completion rates among young people. Additional measures have been introduced to target resources on schools in disadvantaged areas and a number of third-level institutions have developed specific initiatives to encourage access among working-class pupils (see Smyth and McCabe, 1997). While it is too early to assess the impact of such measures, such reforms are unlikely to result in a marked reduction in social inequalities in educational outcomes unless they are underpinned by broader measures aimed



at enhancing life-chances, and thus reducing the relative costs of educational participation, for young people from working-class backgrounds. Such interventions are particularly important in the context of the strong link between educational background and labour market integration in the Irish context (Hannan, Raffé, Smyth, 1996).

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