

## **Class Inequalities in Educational Attainment among the Adult Population in the Republic of Ireland\***

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*Abstract:* Substantial increases in participation rates at secondary and third level in recent years have often been assumed to be associated with increased equality of opportunity. However, there is little evidence from elsewhere that expansion *per se*, except when it takes the form of saturation of the demand from higher classes, leads to a reduction in class inequalities. In exploring the factors that contribute to trends over time, or to a distinctive position in comparison with other countries, we have drawn on the recent literature to argue that the crucial factors are those which affect decisions to continue in education. We have also operated on the assumption that students and their parents rationally consider the costs and benefits associated with educational choices. The most recent evidence relating to the adult population provides no support for the existence of any trend towards equality of educational opportunity. It is, rather consistent with the class reproduction perspective that stresses the ability of privileged classes to maintain their advantages.

### I INTRODUCTION

**I**n this paper we will address the issue of class inequalities in educational opportunities among the adult population in the Republic of Ireland.<sup>1</sup> The

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1. The situation with regard to recent school leavers is considered in E. Smyth (1999), *Educational Inequalities among School leavers in Ireland 1979-1994* (this issue). The results of our analyses with regard to both class and gender inequalities are largely complementary.

issue of *persisting barriers* has in recent years generated a range of lively theoretical debates and an impressive volume of research. At the centre of this debate have been differing expectations concerning the consequences of the processes of social and economic change experienced by industrial societies; involving fundamental restructuring of the class structure, increasing rationalisation and substantial expansion of educational participation. (Blossfeld and Shavit, 1993.)

The "liberal theory" of industrialisation views the expansion of the educational system as arising in response to the functional requirements of industrial society. From this perspective ascription gives way to achievement as the educational qualifications become more important for occupational placement and educational selection becomes more meritocratic. (Treiman, 1970). An alternative perspective views the association between education and class origin and destination, respectively, as integral parts of the social reproduction process. Educational attainment is considered as one among several strategies for reaching a high social position. (Erikson and Goldthorpe, 1992, pp. 303-307). The capacity of privileged groups to adjust their strategy in the light of changing circumstances suggests that liberal theory can be accused of underestimating the extent to which education will come to act, not simply as a means by which people can be allocated to jobs, but also as a factor mediating and maintaining class privilege.

As Erikson and Jonsson (1996, p. 47) note, the Republic of Ireland provides a particularly appropriate test of the ascription to achievement hypothesis. As a consequence of late and rapid industrialisation, recent surveys include cohorts who have experienced the transformation of agrarian society alongside those whose formative experiences preceded such change. Together with this transformation in the class structure a dramatic expansion in educational participation has taken place such that at present four-fifths of each cohort complete the higher stage of secondary education and two-fifths third level education. In the past thirty years absolute opportunities for educational and class mobility have never been higher and it is not our intention to deny the significance of such change. (Whelan, 1999). However, the objective of this paper is to go beyond a descriptive account of the expansion of educational opportunities in order to test whether the distribution of new opportunities in the second and third level sectors reflected a significant reduction in educational inequalities.

An adequate assessment of the consequences of such expansion for class inequalities in educational participation has only recently become possible. If we take the age of twenty-five as a cut-off point by which the majority of people will have exited the education system, then it is clear that it is only since 1980 that any of the cohorts which benefited from free education would have appeared in our surveys. Rafferty and Hout's (1993) influential study was based on a

combination of a nation-wide sample of men drawn from the Irish Mobility Study of 1973 and a sample of men and women born in 1956. Their assessment of the impact of educational reform is consequently based on a highly restricted period relating to the earliest stage of free secondary education. Even in the most recent analysis based on the 1987 ESRI Survey of Living Conditions (Breen and Whelan, 1993) the critical group was restricted to those born between 1955-1962. With the 1994 Living in Ireland Survey this is now extended to 1955-1969.

## II EXPLAINING EDUCATIONAL INEQUALITIES

Goldthorpe (1996) and Breen and Goldthorpe (1997) propose a model in which persisting class variation in educational decisions is accounted for through the operation of three mechanisms.

- (i) Their model assumes that families from different classes seek to ensure that their children acquire a class position at least as advantageous as that from which they originate or, in other words, they seek to avoid downward mobility. Families in different classes therefore have identical *relative* risk aversion they want to avoid, for their children, any position in life that is worse than the one from which they start. What is essential is that there should be some measure of risk associated with continuing in education.
- (ii) Class differences in academic ability and expectations of success.<sup>2</sup>
- (iii) Class differences in the proportion of families in each class whose resources exceed the costs of their children continuing in education.<sup>3</sup>

It is necessary to distinguish between the general decline in the influence of costs, which is reflected in overall participation rates, and a change in the pattern of costs across classes which might be expected to lead to declining relativities.<sup>4</sup> What is at issue here is not increasing affluence as such but the absence of any

2. There is no assumption regarding the extent to which ability is fixed or inherited. What is acknowledged is the evidence that children from more advantaged backgrounds perform better on average than children of less advantaged backgrounds on standard tests, in examinations etc. Such differences at a particular point in time are hypothesised to influence subsequent participation decisions. Breen and Goldthorpe (1997, p. 277) note that this type of effect enters into their model: "but, fortunately, in such a way that we need not take up the vexed and complex question of the extent to which they are genetic, psychological or cultural in character."

3. This theoretical position was developed, as Goldthorpe 1996, p. 488) elaborates, as an alternative to explanations which start from some supposed connection between class and culture. The latter Goldthorpe argues fail to account both for absolute educational expansion and rapidly declining gender differentials.

4. See Goldthorpe (1996, pp. 492-496).

evidence that it has been associated with any significant reduction in class differentials in income, or in the stability of earnings over the life-cycle. In the case of the Republic of Ireland, the available evidence for the period with which we are concerned is consistent with the persistence of substantial class inequalities. (Breen *et al.*, 1990; Breen and Whelan, 1996, Nolan and Whelan, 1999.)

Erikson and Jonsson (1996, pp. 9-10) identify two general sets of factors that govern inequality of opportunity. The first concerns differences in academic ability and educational performance between the offspring of different classes and the second concerns differences between classes in their propensity to continue to higher levels of education. This distinction they note is akin to that proposed by Boudon (1974) between *primary* and *secondary* effects. The latter, Goldthorpe (1996, p. 491) suggests, can be understood as comprising all influences that shape the distribution of academic ability at the early stages of schooling and which establishes the range of educational outcomes. With educational expansion the constraints on choice that primary effects impose ought to weaken. Educational expansion also combines with each of these factors to influence the extent of class inequalities. Since the mechanisms relating to primary socialisation and other conditions that produce the relation between social background and educational performance are entrenched in Western societies, Erikson and Jonsson argue that the relationship is likely to be relatively invariant. Consequently, the search for an explanation of the particular characteristics of educational inequality in any particular society is likely to be found in the cumulative and interactive effects of educational decisions and the proportion of students admitted at each level.<sup>5</sup>

Educational systems differ in the set of decisions which pupils face and in the significance of ability to navigate the school system with potential consequences for class differentials in performance, expectations of success and perceived returns to participation. Erikson and Jonsson (1996, p. 33) identify a set of factors that have potential relevance. They include:

... the length of various branches of study; barriers and opportunities; the size of the educational system; the proportion of transferring students from one level to the next and the significance of elite institutions and schools financed by fees.

5. Goldthorpe (1996, p. 491) also develops the argument that it is on secondary rather than primary effects that attention must centre if the question of change, or rather absence of change, in class differentials, under conditions of educational expansion is to be addressed.

### III THE INSTITUTIONAL AND SOCIAL BASES OF INEQUALITY WITHIN THE IRISH EDUCATIONAL SYSTEM

There are essentially three aspects of Irish educational achievement at second and third level that might help to explain the nature and extent of class inequalities:

- the structure and nature of the Irish educational system at second level, and its relationship to local social stratification systems;
- the nature of local/communal status systems and the linkages to local and national economic opportunity structures: with severe inter-individual and inter-class competition for desired but scarce positions in the Irish labour market;
- the nature and strength of the relationship to, and feed-back from, selection for further education/training and employment.

#### *The Particularities of the Irish Second Level System*

A separate vocational/technical school system had been present in Ireland from the mid-nineteenth century onwards, but was greatly strengthened and expanded after the 1930 Vocational Education Act. Effectively these were to be local trade/commerce/industrial vocational training schools set up to cater both for those 12-14 year olds not provided for by the secondary school system as well as to provide continuing education and vocational training leading to entry to local labour markets. These schools had separate vocationally oriented curricula and a specific final examination<sup>6</sup> which, although nationally standardised, were also expected to be directed toward the needs of the local labour market. (Hannan and Boyle, 1987.) By the mid-1960s the majority of urban and rural communities were effectively provided for by this bipolar system.<sup>7</sup> Middle-class children went to the local fee-paying schools or to boarding schools; while the local vocational school catered for children from local working class or small farmer families.

The original intentions of the 1960s educational reforms, which provided for free secondary education, was first to strengthen and broaden the base of vocational education and rapidly expanding comprehensive education, before strengthening or expanding financial support for secondary grammar education. This however did not happen with the unexpectedly rapid introduction of the "Free Scheme" in 1967 — which effectively replaced secondary school fees with a state grant to these voluntary schools; as well as rapidly expanding provision for comprehensive education and additional funding for vocational schools. At

6. The Group Certificate.

7. Although with significant regional variation.

the same time curricular and examination reforms incorporated the vocational system into the mainstream second level system — allowing such schools for the first time to teach the full range of the secondary/general educational curricula and for the same examination system — in theory abolishing the bipolar system.

Table 1 documents the rapid growth in participation by level of education from the 1960 onwards: showing the proportion of the age group reaching both junior and leaving certificate levels. Over 90 per cent of the cohort had completed the junior cycle terminal examination by the late 1970s. This figure has subsequently risen more slowly as it approached 100 per cent by the mid-1990s. The rate of increase in participation at senior cycle level was even more dramatic. The percentage continuing to the Leaving Certificate more than doubled between 1967 and 1974 and by that stage accounted for almost one in two students; by 1970 the figure had risen 70 per cent. It then rose gradually to reach almost 80 per cent for males and 90 per cent for females by 1994.

Table 1: *Percentage of the Age Group Taking the Junior (15/16 Group/Inter) and Senior (17/18, Leaving) Certificate Examinations from 1967 to 1994*

	1967	1974	1979	1986	1994
<i>Junior Cycle %</i>					
Male	44	72	91	91	96
Female	38	61	93	95	98
<i>Senior Cycle %</i>					
Male	22	42	52	64	78
Female	21	49	70	76	87

Numbers in secondary schools more than doubled by 1974. This was accompanied by a rapid expansion in provision of places in vocational and community/comprehensive schools. Subsequent to that period the most rapid growth in senior cycle provision occurred in vocational, community and comprehensive schools — with both more than doubling their numbers between 1974 and 1984; with a further doubling in the following decade. Secondary school experience of expansion over the last twenty years has been somewhat slower; rising by 36 per cent between 1974 and 1984 and by a further 24 per cent in the decade that followed. The disproportionately rapid growth of vocational and community and comprehensive schools, however, still left the voluntary secondary sector with around two-thirds of all pupils by the end of the 1980s.

*Local Social Stratification and School System Selection*

Local, communal stratification systems in Ireland were quite elaborated. In these socially divisive status conditions being *sent to the tech.* was, for most middle-class and aspiring middle-class parents, a fate with which to threaten one's more errant children with. In reality it was to be avoided even for the least able child. The Investment in Education (1966) report shows clearly the high degree of class differentiation that was characteristic of local secondary and vocational schools at that time. Even with the extent of upward mobility that has occurred since that time, as well as the extraordinary growth in educational participation, these school level distinctions still exist:

- Over half of all second level pupils effectively pass another school on their way to their own school. So active selection/rejection of local schools is the norm — particularly for the middle class and with no effective state regulation of such local inter-school competition.
- Almost 80 per cent of vocational schools for instance reported severe local competition for pupils, with their schools suffering most from “cream-off”.
- Secondary schools on average having an intake of almost half from “middle” to upper middle-class pupils, compared to only 25 per cent in vocational schools whereas 55 per cent of the pupil intake to the latter are working class compared to just over 30 per cent for secondary schools. (Hannan, Smyth *et al.*, 1996, p. 8. Selection on the basis of academic ability is almost as severe. (Hannan and Shortall, 1991.)

There appear to be at least four ways in which class inequalities are reinforced in second level schooling;

- By the concentration of middle class and the most academically able in selective secondary schools.
- Vocational schools particularly are not as well provided with higher level academic courses particularly at upper secondary or senior cycle level.
- These distinctions become accentuated in schools with a high proportion of working class and lower ability pupils, by streaming/banding practices. (Hannan, Smyth *et al.*, 1996).
- Finally, the selection mechanisms used for third level entry and access to better positions in the labour market appear to be more discriminating and less favourable to working class achievement than in other European countries. (Muller and Shavit, 1998; Hannan, Rafe and Smyth, 1996.)

*The Characteristics of the Education/Training – Labour Market Linkages in Ireland*

Selection for third level courses in Ireland now depends almost completely on achievement levels in the Leaving Certificate. Given tight constraints on entry this means a very high degree of “level congruence” (Allmendinger, 1989) between second level performance and such entry. Requirements for third level have come to have a dominating influence on the expectations of pupils competing at second level. Despite the absence of institutionalised education-work linkages, there is a high degree of “level congruence” between educational performance and labour market outcomes. Whether due to screening/queuing or the application of human capital type criteria in making employment and promotion decisions, there is no doubt that there is a high rate of return to educational achievement in the Irish labour market (Breen, Hannan, O’Leary, 1995; Hannan, Raffe, Smyth, 1996). This “back-wash” effect on school and pupil behaviour intensified the academic and “general education” pressure on schools and pupils: accentuating the uni-dimensional academic biases of teaching/learning and selection; and erecting further barriers to the achievement of working class children.

*Implications*

Allmendinger (1989) proposes a typology of educational systems based on two dimensions: the *standardisation* of educational provisions, and the *stratification* of educational opportunity. The former refers to “the degree to which the quality of education meets the same standards nation-wide and the latter to the ‘extent and form of tracking’ at the secondary level”. Comparative analysis of the educational system in the Republic of Ireland has tended to represent it as a highly standardised but weakly stratified system with an absence of specific vocational linkages. (Muller and Shavit, 1998.) However, the connection between education and class position has then been found to be a good deal stronger than might be expected on the basis of this particular profile. (Breen and Whelan, 1998.) It may then be hypothesised that strong standardisation overrides weak differentiation. The alternative argument that we have developed is that standardisation and stratification are both potent factors in the system. The form of stratification, although not adequately captured by a distinction between academic and vocational education, has deep historical roots and pervades the system.

#### IV DATA AND VARIABLES EMPLOYED IN THE ANALYSES

Our data on adults is drawn from the Living in Ireland Survey, which was conducted in 1994. The survey provides a random sample of non-institutional

households and of adult member within such households. The data has been re-weighted in line with independent population estimates.<sup>8</sup> Restricting our analysis to those aged between twenty-five and sixty-four years old we are left with 5,458 valid cases. The class schema we employ in the analysis of our adult sample is the widely used seven-class version of the Goldthorpe (1980/1987) schema. We measure educational credentials in a relatively straightforward fashion, using the highest level of formal education qualification possessed by the individual. We identify four levels of educational achievement:

1. Primary Certificate or no qualifications;
2. Group or Intermediate Certificate (Junior Cycle);
3. Leaving Certificate (Senior Cycle);
4. Third Level Qualification.

## V TRENDS IN EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT

In order to examine change over time we distinguish three “synthetic cohorts” for our adult sample. These cohorts cover those born 1930-1939, 1940-1954, 1955-1969. As we would expect from our earlier analysis we observe a great deal of change over time between the cohorts. For both men and women, as the results set out in Table 2 show, a steady decline is observed, in the number leaving without qualifications, from approximately 60 to 20 per cent; although the decline is somewhat less sharp for women. Over time men become much more likely to have junior cycle qualifications while women are much more likely to complete the Leaving Certificate; reflecting the traditional pattern of labour market segregation. The number achieving third level qualification doubles for both groups while men continue to enjoy an advantage.

Table 2: *Higher Education Qualifications by Sex, 1930-1939, 1940-1954 and 1955-1969*

	<i>No Qualifications</i>	<i>Intermediate or Group Certificate</i>	<i>Leaving Certificate</i>	<i>Third Level</i>
<i>Men:</i>				
1930-1939	62.6	12.9	13.1	11.4
1940-1954	44.2	22.6	16.5	16.6
1955-1969	18.6	34.0	27.3	20.2
<i>Women:</i>				
1930-1939	56.0	16.9	18.9	8.2
1940-1954	40.8	23.7	24.0	11.5
1955-1969	20.8	21.9	42.0	15.4

8. Further details of the sample are provided in Callan *et al.* (1996).

## VI CHANGES IN THE CLASS ORIGIN EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT LINK

In Table 3 we set out the relationship between class origins and educational attainment for men and women. For men aged between 25-64 we find that the percentage holding a Primary Certificate as their highest level of educational qualification rises from 3 per cent for those with origins in the professional and managerial class to 51 per cent for the non-manual class, and finally to 66 per cent for agricultural workers. The reverse trend for third level qualifications sees the figure falling from 57 per cent at the top of the class hierarchy to 6 per cent for non-skilled manual men; and to a mere 2 per cent for agricultural workers. The pattern of advantages seems rather similar for women with the major difference being that women in the farming and agricultural worker classes enjoy substantial advantages over their male counterparts. After the service class, the picture we find is one of a clustering of the routine non-manual class, the petit bourgeoisie and women from farm origins who appear to enjoy a rather similar pattern of advantages. Men from farm origins and skilled manual workers form the next group. The unskilled manual group and daughters of agricultural workers occupy what appears to be a somewhat more disadvantageous position and the sons of agricultural workers fare worst in the educational stakes.

One caveat that must be entered in relation to these findings relates to the role of selective emigration. In our analysis of trends over time we make use of age groups from a set of cross-sectional surveys to make inferences about the experience of birth cohorts. It is well known that the method has a number of potential difficulties although these are often ignored in practice.<sup>9</sup> If this exercise is to be valid then it is necessary that these synthetic cohorts are indeed representative of the age cohorts of which they are a part. We require that attrition of the original birth cohorts should be independent of the variables of interest in the study. In countries with histories of large-scale emigration this is likely to be problematic. If emigrants are disproportionately drawn from among the less well-educated, analyses such as ours will tend to overstate the level of educational attainment in the true cohorts. Breen *et al.* (1999, pp. 197-98), using the British General Household Survey (GHS) to analyse the distribution of educational qualifications of Irish emigrants, show that this indeed is the case. However, this conclusion holds across cohorts and the trend in educational attainment is also sharply upwards for emigrants. This makes it less likely that conclusions relating to trends in educational attainment will be undermined.

Breen and Whelan (1999, pp. 337-340) also show that the relationship between

9. See for example Breen and Jonsson (1997).

Table 3: *Highest Educational Qualifications by Social Class of Origin and Gender*

	Professional and Managerial (I+II)		Routine Non-Manual (III)		Petit Bourgeoisie (IV a+b)		Farmers (IVc)		Skilled Manual (V/VI)		Non-Skilled Manual (VIIa)		Agricultural Workers (VIIb)	
	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women
No Qualification	3.1	5.1	21.8	28.9	21.2	25.2	40.8	24.6	32.7	39.1	50.8	51.7	65.5	56.3
Intermediate and Group Certificate	9.4	12.4	20.2	18.1	26.0	17.5	25.7	20.4	33.3	26.2	28.1	24.5	28.0	26.5
Leaving Certificate	30.8	41.2	30.0	38.1	29.4	41.6	19.7	39.9	20.5	26.9	14.9	19.9	4.4	16.4
Third Level	56.8	41.3	28.1	14.9	23.3	15.8	13.9	15.0	13.6	7.9	6.2	3.9	2.1	0.8

class origin and educational attainment is weaker for migrants to Britain. Thus our survey evidence over-estimates to some extent the strength of class inequalities in educational opportunity in the original cohorts. However, in order to affect our conclusions regarding trends in class inequalities we would need evidence that a significant reduction in such inequalities was observed among emigrants over time. The numbers available to us do not allow us to perform a reliable test of this hypothesis. Overall it seems unlikely that such data if it were available would lead us to significantly revise the conclusions to which our analysis of the Living in Ireland Survey leads us.

### *Educational Transitions*

In order to provide an adequate picture of stability and change in the educational system it is necessary to take into account the fact that the educational attainment process involves a sequence of transitions; with decisions whether to continue or not being made at each point.

In Table 4 we set out details of variation in educational transition rates by cohort and sex. The series of transitions we specify are as follows:

1. From no qualifications to junior cycle qualification;
2. From junior cycle qualification to senior cycle;
3. From senior cycle qualification to third level qualification.

Table 4: *Education Transitions by Sex and Cohort*

	<i>Transition to Intermediate or Group Certificate</i>		<i>Transition to Leaving Certificate</i>		<i>Transition to Third Level</i>	
	<i>Men</i>	<i>Women</i>	<i>Men</i>	<i>Women</i>	<i>Men</i>	<i>Women</i>
1930-1939	36.7	46.5	63.9	57.8	34.1	16.8
1940-1954	54.9	60.0	57.3	58.0	35.4	18.1
1955-1969	82.9	83.1	58.9	73.4	22.8	17.0

Our analysis is based on the so-called “Mare model” (Mare, 1981) which results in parameters whose values are not affected by the degree of educational expansion. The educational attainment process is viewed as a sequence of transitions with the odds of continuing at each point being determined by a set of exogenous variables such as parents’ social class. The unit of analysis is the transition rather than the individual with the modelling of transition rates proceeding by means of a sequence of logistic regressions. At each stage the dependent variable is the log odds of success versus failure in making the

transition from completion of a particular level to completion of the next highest level. The baseline model assumes that transition rates are the same for all transitions, cohorts and class origins. We then proceed to introduce interaction terms that allow effects to vary in order to provide a satisfactory account of the data.

Our final model which is described in detail in Equation (i) of Appendix Table 1 allows for an interaction between class origins and transition, for all two-way interactions and the three-way interaction between farming origins, transition and sex and all two-way interactions between transition, cohort and sex. This final set of terms captures the fact that differences in transition probabilities between men and women vary by transition with women in general having higher rates for the first two transitions but a lower one for completion of third level. The extent of these transition specific gender differences varies by cohort; with differences narrowing over time for the first and final transitions while for the intermediate one a modest advantage for males is translated over time into a substantial advantage for women.<sup>10</sup> However, for our present purposes the crucial set of terms are those involving interaction with social class, together with those absent from the model of terms involving the interaction of class origins and cohort and those representing the three-way interaction between origins, transition and cohort. The absence of these terms confirms that the impact of class origins on transition probabilities shows no variation across cohort. The pattern of class inequalities has remained constant over time.

The observed pattern of declining origin effects across transitions is familiar from previous research. The most widely involved *substantive* explanation of this pattern is that with increasing age students come to rely less on the resources of their family and are increasingly in a position to make decisions based on their own aspirations. The alternative explanation proposed by Mare (1981) attributes it to the differential drop-out rates by social origins leading to systematic variation across transitions in unobserved homogeneity. If only the most able working-class children survive the earlier selection points while significantly less able children from middle-class origins do so, then origins becomes less and less correlated with other determinants of success such as motivation. With a reduction in the role of such indirect effect the overall impact of class origins declines. It is impossible to exclude the possibility of such unmeasured heterogeneity. However, in evaluating the relative merits of competing hypotheses it is possible to take into account what they imply for the relationships we can observe. Blossfeld and Shavit (1993, pp. 9-10) note that

10. The finding of significant gender interaction differs from the results reported by Raftery and Hout (1993, p. 45). However, their information on women was entirely confined to their sample born in 1965. The pattern we have found seem entirely consistent with our understanding from other sources of gender differentiation in the educational system.

the former hypothesis, which they label the *life-course hypothesis*, implies that, as educational participation expands at the lower levels, class origin effects at the higher levels will remain less significant. This is so because student preferences become more important relative to the preferences and economic circumstances of parents. If the decline in the extent of selection is accompanied by the same *pattern* of selectivity then we would expect to observe a decline in effects across transitions but stability across cohorts. The alternative hypothesis, which Blossfeld and Shavit label the *differential selection hypothesis* implies that educational expansion will be associated with a trend over time towards stronger *observed* class effects for later transitions. This is accounted for by the fact that class differences among the students who remain in the system on unmeasured variables, such as motivation, will decline across cohorts.

The results conform to a pattern of stability across cohorts but decline across transitions with no significant interaction between origins and cohort across transitions.<sup>11</sup> We cannot be certain that we are not underestimating the effect of class origins on later transition. However, the stability of the transition effect across cohorts suggests that variation in unmeasured heterogeneity is not the sole cause of the widely observed decline in origin effects across transitions. The pattern we find differs in some respects from that observed elsewhere. First, origin effects for men from farming origins do not vary across transition. This outcome is consistent with the pursuit of different reproduction strategies for inheritors and others. Non-inheriting sons come to resemble their “sisters” in terms of their prospects of educational attainment at the final transition. In addition, while there is a consistent pattern of declining origin effects at the second transition the differences are not statistically significant for the routine non-manual or petit bourgeoisie classes. For the final transition the decline is not significant for the skilled manual class. Thus while the general pattern of declining effects across transitions is consistent with the evidence from elsewhere in terms of statistically significant differences the pattern is not uniform across transitions or origins.

The pattern of overall class advantage revealed in the tables corresponds to that, already described in detail, arising from our earlier analysis. In Table 5 and Table 6 we make use of odds ratios to summarise our results. In each case the reference category is the least favoured group. The odds ratio shows the odds of the more favoured group completing a particular level of education compared to the least favoured group divided by the corresponding odds for non-completion. The decline in odds ratios across transitions is most striking for the professional and managerial class and for women from farming origins.

11. The addition of a two-way and three way interaction terms to our approved model produces a  $G^2$  of 43.1 for 30 degrees of freedom.

For the former the odds ratio of 20.2 declines to 10.8 for the second transition and finally to 4.4 for the last decision point. For the latter the corresponding figures are 4.7, 3.2 and 1.6. For the routine non-manual and petit bourgeoisie classes we observe a decline from odds ratios in the region of four at the first transition to ones approximating two in the final transition. Raftery and Hout's (1993) earlier analysis showed that the declining impact of class origins across transitions resulted in a situation in which class background was unrelated to entry to third level. However, we find evidence of significant persisting class effects on the likelihood of completing third level.

Table 5: *Odds Coefficients for Effect of Social Class on Educational Transitions by Transition*

	<i>Junior Cycle</i>	<i>Senior Cycle</i>	<i>Third Level</i>
Professional and Managerial	26.20	10.74	4.44
Routine Non-Manual	3.83	3.91	2.11
Petit Bourgeoisie	4.60	3.45	2.02
Farmers			
Men	1.68	1.73	1.47
Women	4.68	3.19	1.6
Skilled Manual	1.95	1.5	1.52
Non-Skilled Manual	1.00	1.00	1.00

### *The Role of Parents' Education and Childhood Economic Circumstances*

As Goldthorpe (1996, p. 483) points out, findings of the kind we have presented relating to marked temporal stability, extending over decades, not only pose grave difficulties for liberal theory but present class theory with the challenge of developing explanations of how such inequalities are created and sustained.<sup>12</sup> In attempting to "unpack" the effects of class origin we make use of information available in the 1994 data set on parents' education and economic circumstances in childhood. For the former variable we take the parent with the highest level of education and distinguish the four categories employed for respondents in our analysis to date. For the latter we make use of responses to the following question. *Thinking back to when you were growing up, how would you say that your family was able to make ends meet.* Respondents were offered a set of categories running from *with great difficulty* to *very easily*. This variable was treated as a continuous one and, together with a set of dummies representing parents' education, was added to the set of variables contained in our earlier

12. See also Breen and Rottman (1995).

logistic regression.<sup>13</sup> Detailed results are provided in Equation (ii) of Appendix Table 1.

The odds ratios relevant to our present discussion are set out in Table 6. Not surprisingly, the inclusion of the additional variables leads to a substantial reduction in the direct effect of class origins. This is particularly true for the professional and managerial class with the consequence that the relativities between it and all other classes are compressed. However, even with the inclusion of the controls the former enjoy an advantage over the non-skilled manual group of 6:1 at the first transition; almost 4:1 at the second and over 2:1 at the third. Averaging the effects for the non-manual classes.<sup>14</sup> We observe corresponding figures of 3:1, 2.5:1 and 1.5:1. In assessing the reduction in relatives between the non-skilled manual group, routine non-manual and propertied classes one could be equally impressed by the differentials which persist as by the reduction which is brought about. The results suggest the need to identify resources other than parental education and economic circumstances which are somewhat more evenly spread across the non-manual classes.<sup>15</sup>

The strength of the impact of parents' education is clear. Even controlling for class origins and economic circumstances in childhood, those from backgrounds where a parent had either a Leaving Certificate or Third Level qualification enjoyed a 5:1 advantage, over those where neither parent possessed any educational qualification, in the odds of making the transition to a junior cycle qualification. Even for those benefiting from a parent with a junior cycle qualification the advantage was of the order of 4:1. Thus for the first transition the existence of some type of educational qualification seems to be most important. For the later transitions the pattern of effects is somewhat more differentiated; the odds ratios relating to comparisons with the reference group without qualifications range from, approximately, 4:1 to 2:1 for the transition to senior cycle; and from 3:1 to 1.4 to one for a third level qualification.

The impact of childhood economic circumstances involves a somewhat different pattern. The ratio declines from the first to the second transition for 1.30 to 1.18 and takes on a insignificant value of 1.03 at the final stage. Those from households that were perceived to make ends meet very easily enjoyed an advantage over those who were judged to have great difficulty of 3.7:1 for the transition to junior cycle; this fell to 2.3 for senior cycle and less than 1.2 for third level completion. Subject to the earlier reservations relating to variations

13. Entering this variable as a set of dummies does not significantly alter our conclusions.

14. Excluding men from farm-origins.

15. One plausible candidate is variations in economic security which are not captured by our economic circumstances variable.

in unmeasured heterogeneity, our results suggest that both parental education and economic circumstances are extremely important determinants of success at the first transition with education the most potent factor.<sup>16</sup>

Table 6: *Odds Coefficients for Effect of Social Class, Parents' Education and Economic Circumstances in Childhood on Educational Transitions by Transition*

	<i>Junior Cycle</i>	<i>Senior Cycle</i>	<i>Third Level</i>
<i>Social Class:</i>			
Professional and Managerial	6.1	3.7	2.1
Routine Non-Manual	2.1	2.4	1.5
Petit Bourgeoisie	3.0	2.4	1.6
<i>Farmers:</i>			
Men	1.4	1.3	1.3
Women	4.0	2.8	1.5
Skilled Manual	1.5	1.2	1.3
Non-Skilled Manual	1.0	1.0	1.0
<i>Highest Level of Education of Parents</i>			
Third Level	5.6	4	3
Senior Cycle	5.3	3	1.9
Junior Cycle	3.9	2.1	1.4
No Qualifications	1.0	1.0	1.0
<i>Economic Circumstances in Childhood Able to make ends meet?</i>			
Very Easily	3.71	2.29	1.15
Fairly Easily	2.86	1.94	1.12
Easily	2.20	1.64	1.09
A Little Difficulty	1.69	1.39	1.06
Some Difficulty	1.30	1.18	1.03
With Great Difficulty	1.0	1.0	1.0

G<sup>2</sup> Improvement over Zero Slopes Model 2,957.8; DF 47.

Turning to the impact of the additional variables we find that both follow the familiar pattern of declining effects across transitions.<sup>17</sup> The impact of parental education declines less rapidly across transition than does economic circum-

16. Given the distribution of the variables the extremes of the economic circumstance variables involve a substantially greater polarisation than the education variable.

17. The interpretation of this pattern is, of course, in both cases affected by the possibility of the existence of the type of unmeasured heterogeneity discussed earlier.

stances. By the final transition economic circumstances play no significant role. The pervasive effect of parental education is thus a striking feature of our results. However, the relatively important role of economic circumstances at lower level transitions is in contrast with the results reported for Sweden by Erikson and Jonsson (1996).

## VII CONCLUSIONS

The rhetoric of equality of opportunity has figured prominently in policy discussions in the Republic of Ireland since the seminal Investment in Education document. The substantial increase in participation rates at secondary level has often been thought to necessarily imply progress in pursuit of this target. Those who are familiar with the literature on educational inequalities are likely to start by being sceptical of such claims. There is little evidence from elsewhere that expansion *per se*, except when it takes the form of a saturation of the demand from higher classes, leads to a reduction in class inequalities. In exploring the factors that contribute to trends over time, or to a distinctive position in comparison with other countries, we have drawn on the recent literature to argue that the crucial factors are those which affect decisions to continue in education. We have also operated on the assumption that students and their parents rationally consider the costs and benefits associated with educational choices.

Turning out attention to transitions we found no evidence for the declining effect of class origins across time. Subject to methodological caveats, our analysis showed a familiar pattern of declining effects at the higher transitions. However, unlike earlier research class origins continued to exert a significant effect on the likelihood of achieving a third level qualification for those who had completed the senior cycle. Both parents' education and childhood economic circumstances were found to mediate the impact of class origins. Of these influences education was the most important but, unlike the case in Sweden, the role of economic circumstances was substantial at the earlier decision points. Even when controlling for these factors the influence of class was significant reflecting our need to further explore the manner in which class differences are mediated.

The persistence of educational inequalities in Ireland is demonstrated by just how well Raftery and Hout's (1993, pp. 56-57) description of *maximally maintained inequality* continues to describe the system. This outcome, which is consistent with a radical version, of class reproduction theory, is one in which the effects of social origin do not change except when the demand for a given level of education is saturated for the upper classes.<sup>13</sup> As long as that situation has not been achieved the higher classes support efforts to expand educational participation whether by lowering fees or increasing capacity. As Raftery and

Hout (1993, p. 60) note, the politics of across the board increases tend to be somewhat easier to implement than those involving redistribution. This was particularly true in the Republic of Ireland where the reforms of the 1960s, were presented in populist terms as part of the policy of economic development and of the *rising tide* that would raise all boats. In fact, as was fairly quickly recognised, free secondary education provided a “windfall” to middle-class families who were already in the process of sending their children to secondary school. (Tussing, 1978).

As Raftery and Hout (1993, p. 56) observe, “maximally maintained inequality” is a description rather than an explanation of class inequalities. Our explanation, as does theirs, takes a rational action form. Economic change has not eroded class advantages in income and security. Furthermore, the manner in which the connection between the Irish educational and occupational system has developed with a high degree of level congruence has involved the maintenance of a series of barriers to working-class achievement in a system dominated by the academic needs of college bound middle-class students. The institutional features of the educational system seems to be such as to accentuate class differences in educational achievement, risk aversion and perceived likelihood of success and make particularly relevant the advantages enjoyed by middle-class parents in navigating the system. A good deal remains to be explained and while, we would tend to look in the direction of factors such as economic security, and associated risk aversion others might suggest that we have been too dismissive of cultural explanations. In any event, our results do suggest that the remaining resources are ones that are rather evenly spread across the non-manual classes.

The accumulating evidence provides no support for the existence of any trend towards equality of educational opportunity although the period covered was associated with a substantial expansion in participation rates. It is, rather consistent with the class reproduction perspective that stresses the ability of privileged classes to maintain their advantages. The success of this strategy is not dependent on concerted or foresightful action leading to collective action aimed at obstructing movement towards equality of opportunity or calculated strategies of cultural dominance.

All that is required is that they succeed in sufficient numbers in maintaining their own and their family’s position by setting their superior resources

18. As Breen and Goldthorpe (1997) note maximally maintained inequality does not imply that a decline in class differentials can only commence at the point at which all children of more advantaged class origins continue in education, rather this effect occurs once all those who perceive it to be in their best interests to continue are able to do so.

strategically against whatever changes — in institutional arrangements, public policy etc. — may appear threatening to them (Erikson and Goldthorpe, 1992, p. 394).

The middle classes of the Republic of Ireland have succeeded admirably in this while continuing to espouse the rhetoric of equality of opportunity and denying the reality of class.

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Appendix Table 1: *Logistic Regression of Determinants of Educational  
 Transition. Additive Coefficients*

	$\beta$ (i)	$\beta$ (ii)
Professional and Managerial	3.26***	1.86***
Routine Non Manual	1.34***	0.77***
Petit Bourgeoisie	1.53***	1.11***
Farming	1.54***	1.38***
Farming* Male	-1.02***	-1.04***
Skilled Manual	0.67***	0.42***
Professional & Managerial* Leaving Cert.	-0.89***	-0.50
Professional Managerial* Third Level	-1.77***	-1.08***
Routine Non-Manual* Leaving Cert.	0.02	0.11
Routine Non-Manual* Third Level	-0.60**	-0.37
Petit Bourgeoisie* Leaving Cert.	-0.29	-0.26
Petit Bourgeoisie* Third Level	-0.82***	-0.67**
Farming* Leaving Cert.	-0.38*	-0.36*
Farming* Leaving Cert.* Male	0.41*	0.43*
Farming* Third Level	-1.07***	-1.01***
Farming* Third Level* Male	0.93***	0.95***
Skilled Manual* Leaving Cert.	-0.27*	-0.25*
Skilled Manual* Third Level	-0.25	-0.19
Male	0.12	0.15
1940-54	-1.37***	-1.37***
1930-39	-2.13***	-2.11***
Senior Cycle	-0.60***	-0.39
Third Level	-2.45***	-1.91***
Male* 1940-54	-0.06	-0.07
Male* 1930-39	-0.22	-0.21
Male* Senior Cycle	-0.67***	-0.70***
Male* Third Level	0.48***	0.48**
Senior Cycle 1940-54	0.53***	0.47***
Senior Cycle* 1930-39	1.13***	1.08***
Third Level* 1940-54	1.56***	1.48***
Senior Cycle* 1930-39* Male	2.17***	2.10***
Senior Cycle* 1940-54* Male	0.80***	0.86***
Senior Cycle* 1930-39* Male	1.20**	1.19**
Third level* 1930-54* Male	0.27	0.30

	$\beta$ (i)	$\beta$ (ii)
Third Level* 1930-39* Male	0.20	0.16
Parents Education		
Junior Cycle		1.36***
Senior Cycle		1.66***
Third Level		1.72***
Junior Cycle* 1930-39		-0.61**
Junior Cycle* 1940-1954		-0.58*
Senior Cycle* 1930-1939		-0.30
Senior Cycle* 1940-1954		-1.01***
Third Level* 1930-39		-1.01***
Third Level* 1940-54		-0.62**
Childhood Economic Circumstances		0.26
Childhood Economic Circumstances* 1940-54		-0.10*
Constant	0.84	0.09
G <sup>2</sup> Improvement Over Zero Slopes Model	2,480.3	2,957.8
DF	35	47

\*p <.1\*\* p<.01\*\*\*p<.001

