

Dominant Ideologies in Irish Educational Thought: Consensualism, Essentialism and Meritocratic Individualism

KATHLEEN LYNCH*

University College, Dublin

Abstract: Through the analysis of the works of Irish (the analysis is confined to the Republic of Ireland) educationalists (over the last 30 years) three prominent ideological paradigms are evident in the literature. The first of these involves a particular conception of society itself (consensualism); the second involves a particular conception of the individual (essentialism), while the third involves a particular conception of the relationship of the individual to society (meritocratic individualism). The paper will begin with a brief discussion of the research procedure, and the concept of ideology. The main part of the paper will be divided into two sections. The opening section will be devoted to identifying the existence of the various ideologies in educational literature and discussing their implications and interrelationships. The second part of the paper will attempt to explain why educational intellectuals in Ireland have adopted these particular paradigmatic assumptions.

I INTRODUCTION

This paper presents an analysis of some of the major paradigmatic assumptions of academic educationalists in the Republic of Ireland from the late 1950s to the present day. During the last thirty years educationalists have been both more numerous and more prolific than hitherto (Coolahan, 1984a). Hence, a review of their background assumptions is timely.

Before outlining the major theses of the paper it is necessary to make some comment on the research methodology adopted. The analysis of theoretical assumptions presented here is based on documentary research conducted over the last 2-3 years. This involved analysing writings in Irish educational journals, books and articles published by Irish authors, and major government-funded

*The author acknowledges the receipt of a small grant from the Committee for Social Science Research in Ireland which helped in preparing this paper for publication. I would like to thank Dr. Patrick Clancy, Sociology Department, UCD for his helpful comments on earlier drafts of this paper. This manuscript was prepared in co-operation with Bernie Mac Giolla Phádraig, Education Department UCD who typed it.

reports and documents on education. As it is not possible to comment here on every single book or article in detail we will focus on research and discourse pertaining to second-level education, as an exemplary case. Not all the works reviewed, however, will be exclusively concerned with second level. Secondly, analysing the paradigmatic assumptions of educationalists through their published works has its limitations. Due to heavy teaching commitments many academic educationalists in Ireland do not publish widely. Furthermore, as Nettl observes, only ideas which have gained a certain social acceptability get published (1969, p. 59). Hence, intellectual assumptions and ideologies may be far wider than those which find their way into print. The fact that certain ideas do find their way into print, however, does inform us as to which paradigms dominate educational discourses in the public spheres of the written word.

Finally, it is necessary to make some comment on the central concept in this paper — ideology. The study of ideology is a discipline in its own right, hence it is not intended to examine the concept in detail here. The term “ideology” is used here to refer to the scientific and analytic beliefs or assumptions of educationalists. Equating ideologies with beliefs — without evaluating them as true or false — is a common practice in contemporary social science (see, for example, the work of Abercrombie, *et al*, 1980). It is based on the premise that all ideas are social in origin — be they scientific, philosophical or whatever. The realization that ideas have social bases does not suggest, however, that certain beliefs are true or that others are false. Knowing the social determination of ideas “gives us clues as to the validity of beliefs, but it cannot establish their validity.” (Abercrombie, *et al*, 1980, p. 188). It locates for us the interests which are likely to be reflected in ideas, not their truth or falsity. We are not using the concept of ideology therefore in the traditional Marxist sense — i.e., defining ideology as *false* beliefs — because we do not think that one can draw very clear dichotomies between true and false ideas in the manner in which the Marxists suppose.

The paper begins with a discussion of some (but by no means all) of the dominant ideologies identifiable in educational discourse, their implications and interrelationships. The latter part of the paper will attempt to explain why educational intellectuals in Ireland have adopted these particular paradigmatic assumptions.

II DOMINANT IDEOLOGIES IN EDUCATIONAL DISCOURSE

Through the analysis of the works of Irish educationalists we have identified three prominent ideological standpoints in the literature. The first of these involves a particular conception of society itself (consensualism); the second involves a particular conception of the individual (essentialism), and the third a

particular conception of the relationship of the individual to society (meritocratic individualism). As we shall see later, both essentialism and meritocratic individualism are common assumptions among educationalists internationally. Consensualism is, however, a much more uniquely Irish phenomenon.

Consensualism in Educational Thought

Liam O'Dowd has observed recently that "most Irish intellectuals, until recently at least, seem to take a communal/national rather than an explicitly class view of social order" (1985, p. 6). Indeed, he suggests that they have not traditionally existed as "an 'independent' group adopting a critical or dissenting role in periods of rapid social change." Rather, they have generally "been identified with particular interests, usually those of the upper classes to which they often belong" (1985, p. 6). O'Dowd's comments here refer, of course, to the entire intelligentsia, not specifically to educationalists. However, there is ample evidence to suggest that educationalists also adopt what we will call a "consensual understanding of the social order" in their work. As for the class position of educational intellectuals, we shall reserve our comments on this issue until the end of the paper.

When we suggest that educationalists have adopted a consensual view of the social order what does this mean? It means that society is represented as an undifferentiated whole. It is assumed that there is agreement within all sectors of that whole as to what is the so-called "public interest" or "collective interest" in education. This does not suggest that educationalists do not use concepts such as class or gender, at least occasionally in their analysis, although it must be said that there is almost no reference to gender divisions in society in most of the literature. Indeed sexist language abounds, not least in the almost universal usage of the male personal pronoun to represent both females and males. What we are suggesting, however, is first, that issues of class (especially) or gender are rarely adverted to in the analysis of education. Secondly, when class or gender differences are discussed they are not represented as central dynamics or generative forces, within the social system. Conflicting class or gender interests are not represented as potent forces determining the direction of the educational system.

Consensus views in official documents and government-funded reports

There are two types of published works in which one finds the consensualist ideology in evidence — in government-funded reports and official government documents, and in the published writings of individual academics. We will begin by commenting on the former. We will address the analysis to three different types of material as each represents a different form of consensualism. First, one finds the consensualist ideology to be implicit in prescriptive documents such as *The Teacher's Handbook Part 1* for the New Primary School Curriculum. In its outline of the aims of primary education, for example, it is stated that:

The scale of values in a society will inevitably determine its educational aims and priorities. We in Ireland have our own scale of values.

Each human being is created in God's image. He has a life to lead and a soul to be saved. Education is, therefore, concerned not only with life but with the purpose of life (p. 12).

What this statement presupposes is that there is universal agreement in Ireland as to the "scale of values" which should direct the educational process. There is no recognition of the fact that several groups do not share the religious assumptions expressed in the aforementioned statement.

The consensus view evident in the essentially prescriptive *Teacher's Handbook* is distinctive from the form of consensualism evident in analytical documents such as *Investment in Education*, (Department of Education (DoE), 1965). It is in the authors' use of language that their consensualism becomes evident in the latter. In their analysis of participation rates, the authors of *Investment in Education* certainly recognise that Ireland is far from being an equal place. However, they do not interpret regional or social differences in rates of participation as either injustices or inequalities. Indeed they do not even use the term "social class" in their analysis at all. Thus regional conflicts and class conflicts become subsumed under the neutral terminology of "social groups" and "social differences" (cf. pp. 148-176).

The recently published *Partners in Education: Serving Community Needs* (DoE 1985) also represents another type of document which utilises consensus language — namely, a government discussion document. The title of the document, for example, refers to "community" (the word is also used within the text (p. 9)) but there is no attempt within it to define what is meant by that term. From the context within which it is used it could be surmised that "community" refers to a territorial or geographic entity. Such an assumption ignores that growing body of social science research which suggests that "community" is an increasingly redundant concept when used to signify locality-based neighbourliness. This is especially the case in urban areas including urban Ireland (McKeown, 1985). The term community seems to be used therefore for rhetorical purposes: to help create a climate of consent rather than to represent what is actually the case.

Consensualism among "independent academics"

Consensus ideology is not confined, however, to government-funded reports, discussion documents or statements of guidelines. It is also evident, though in a more latent form, within the writings of "independent academics" (i.e., among those working independently of government). One finds it in all types of analyses including those in the curriculum, historical and empirical fields. A brief review of some of the major works in these areas will demonstrate the point.

Mulcahy's work, for example, *Curriculum and Policy in Irish Post-Primary Educa-*

tion (1981), provides a valuable analysis of second-level curriculum policy, combined with a series of proposals for change. The author is critical of the lack of attention given to aims and objectives in education and proceeds from this to identify four major "demands of living" which he suggests should provide the focus for the second-level curriculum (Chapters 3 and 6). Mulcahy does not address the fact, however, that the "demands of living" (vocational, recreational, philosophical and practical) in a highly stratified society such as Ireland are by no means identical for all class and gender groups. His consensual understanding of society is epitomised in the following paragraph introducing us to a discussion on the "demands of living":

One way of viewing the demands of living is to see them as being social . . . in origin. Thus one can say that society demands of us that we abide by its customs and mores and that we play our parts in promoting and sustaining its well being. To meet these demands normally calls on one to engage in some socially productive activities and to adopt certain attitudes and skills in interpersonal behaviour. For, in important respects man is a social being, and the adoption of a socially acceptable life-style is necessary for his own survival and for the survival and continuity of society (1981, p. 82).

Neither here nor elsewhere does Mulcahy refer to the fact that schools are agencies of social selection and allocation as well as agencies of socialisation. Consequently his work does not address the ways in which educational "aims" in a stratified society are closely interwoven with the class and gender hierarchies of the given system.

Crooks and McKernan (1984) do not utilise the concepts of class and gender in their analysis of curriculum either. Undoubtedly one could argue that class and gender differences in curriculum change was not the central focus of their analysis — no more than it was in Mulcahy's work. Hence, the authors should not be expected to use these concepts in their discourses. While this argument has legitimacy with respect to the overall theme of *The Challenge of Change* it is less tenable when one examines particular discussions within it. In Chapter 5, for example, participation rates and class group allocation are both discussed without reference to gender or class. Yet work by Clancy (1982), Rottman *et al.* (1982) and Hannan *et al.* (1983) all show that class and gender are major determinants of both.

One of the most important empirical works published recently has been Greaney and Kellaghan's *Equality of Opportunity in Irish Schools* (1984). In so far as the study identifies gender, class and "ability" as major independent variables in their analyses, one cannot say that it ignores the stratified nature of society. However, recognising differences does not amount to identifying conflicts of interests as central dynamics of society. Greaney and Kellaghan's work is very much within the tradition of abstracted empiricism (what Karabel and Halsey

term "methodological empiricism" (1977, pp. 1-85). It presents statistical evidence as fact without identifying the conceptual frameworks of analysis which inevitably inform the interpretation. The absence of a theoretical perspective, no matter what its orientation, has two-fold consequences. First, explanation of the interrelationships between the phenomena in question are confined to what is immediately observable. Secondly, in the absence of theory, statistical (or indeed any) evidence assumes an unwarranted objectivity: the implicit assumptions of the authors, incorporated in their statistical interpretations, remain unarticulated. When we analyse Greaney and Kellaghan's book more closely the consensual nature of the authors' assumptions is what becomes evident. The hierarchical assumptions of the meritocratic "ideal" are not called into question; the class biased nature of their concept of "ability" is left unexplored (Lynch, 1985). Furthermore, the concepts of class and gender are represented as reified, abstracted categories not as dynamic social entities. What we are suggesting therefore is that the focus of explanation centres on the individual rather than social groups. Class and gender are treated as attributes of individuals not as dynamic social forces arising through particular group interests. Thus, class and gender conflicts are not identified as vital social processes in education.

There have been a number of works published subsequent to Greaney and Kellaghan's publication which challenge the validity of their methodology, conceptual frameworks and findings — notably the work of Whelan and Whelan (1984) and the analyses of Lynch (1985) and Raftery and Hout (1985). These, and works such as those of Clancy (1982) and Breen (1984) all represent a departure from the consensus model in education. With varying degrees of success these authors attempt to locate class interest as a central dynamic in the educational process. To the extent that they attempt and achieve this purpose they signify an emerging shift towards a conflict model of analysis in the area of empirical research — especially in sociological research on education. Emergent, however, is what the conflict perspective remains in education.

If we analyse the work of historians — who after all have occupied a central role in educational discourse for most of this century (Fontes, 1983; Coolahan, 1984a) — we find that the consensus view is also implicit in their thinking. This is not to suggest, however, that the parties to conflicts are not identified in their writing. Rather, the parties' interests are described without reference to the structural interests which they reflect. For example, in his historical account of the Association of Secondary Teachers of Ireland (ASTI) Coolahan identifies all the parties to the conflict leading to the ASTI strike in 1969 — the Department of Education, the ASTI, the Church, the Irish National Teachers' Organisation, the Vocational Teachers' Association, etc. (1984b; pp. 267-316). However, there is no reference to the fact that secondary teachers were a very particular kind of middle class interest group who were intent at the time on maintaining status and income differentials between themselves and other teachers, and, in a

more general way, between themselves and manual workers. The fact that teachers are not structurally located in class terms means that the class character of their interests never comes to light.

In summary, therefore, what we are suggesting above is that Irish educationalists — be they government or independent intellectuals — have tended to adopt a consensual view of the social order in their analyses of educational events. By representing society in this symbolically consensus form they preclude class and gender conflicts from becoming part of the vocabulary-of-analysis in educational thought.

The consensus mode of analysis also has implications for our understanding of the individual in education. The predominance of the consensualist tradition has meant that neither indigenous or imported conceptions of the individual have been subjected to much critical scrutiny. In particular, we would suggest that consensualist thinking predisposed educationalists toward an essentialist view of the individual — that is to say, it predisposed them to define the individual as having a given and fixed nature which in turn predetermined her or his educational needs. How did this happen? By defining society in consensual terms, educationalists had to look to the individual to explain social variability. Differences in the educational context (differences in attainment especially) could not be explained by reference to structural conflict or forces as structural conflicts were not assumed to exist in the consensual view. Consequently differences had to be accounted for in terms of the essential or given nature of the individual. We are not suggesting here, however, that the essentialist view is unique to Ireland — unlike consensualism, essentialism is an international phenomenon. Educationalists as diverse as Jackson (1968), Bourdieu (1974) and Bidwell (1980) have all noted the tendency in educational research generally to explain differences in school attainment in terms of individual rather than structural attributes. White has observed also that individual development in education has been popularly defined in terms of allowing “the pupils’ inner capacities to develop to their fullest extent” (1980, p. 177). What makes Ireland unique, however, is that consensualism has forestalled any critique of essentialism or indeed of meritocracy. While a vast array of literature has been published internationally challenging the essentialist view of the individual — especially as expressed in IQ theory — no such tradition exists in Ireland.

The Essentialist View of the Individual in Education

The most pervasive understanding of the individual which one finds in Irish education is one which defines the person in terms of fixed, or given (sometimes innate) talents, abilities or intelligence. Indeed talent or intelligence are frequently defined in purely intellectual terms. One of the first writers in recent history who clearly subscribed to the primacy of intellectual ability was Seán Ó Catháin. We see evidence of his essentialism and intellectualism in the series of

articles which he published in *Studies* from 1951 to 1956. In these he proclaimed the view that the development of what he termed God-given gifts — especially intellectual ones — was the primary aim of secondary education. Writing in 1955, for example, he stated that the aim of secondary education was to prepare the pupil “to lead a full life, to make the most complete use possible in the way meant by God of the gifts he has received from God” (p. 393). While he regarded the development of the intellect, the will and the emotions as all within the educational ambit he attached primary importance to the intellect. In his 1956 article he set out “the formal aim of the classroom work” as being “to inculcate intellectual excellence because the use a man makes of his intellect determines, in the natural order, how he will act, how he chooses and decides between alternatives that may present themselves” (p. 50).

Essentialism in government-funded reports and official government documents

Ó Catháin’s essentialist view of ability was by no means confined to himself in the late 1950s and early 1960s. The Council of Education report was a collective publication and it also reflected this tradition. In the context of discussion on the organisation of the pass and honours syllabuses for the Intermediate Certificate, the authors identify three types of students “the slow, the average and the really bright” (DoE, 1960, p. 108). Later in their dismissal of the ideal of “free secondary education for all” as “untenable”, the writers also appeal to the notion of limited talents to justify their claim. They suggest that the notion of “secondary education for all” should only apply those “able and willing to profit by it.” They claim that “only a minority of pupils would be capable of profiting by secondary (grammar school) education” (DoE, 1960, p. 252).

The opening pages of the *Teacher’s Handbook* for the New Primary Curriculum show that official thinking on ability was still rather essentialist ten years after the Council of Education report. The handbook opens by recognising the importance of environment in determining the pupils’ development. It also asserts, however, that the child is born with “the stamp of his heredity” and that the curriculum must be designed to take account of the fact that children vary widely in their “natural endowment” (1971, pp. 12, 14). Later on in the introduction to the handbook the influence of Piagetan essentialism is what comes directly to the fore. The authors endorse the claim that there are definite “stages” in the child’s development, suggesting of course that the sequence and not the rate of progress is what is fixed. Factors such as social and cultural background as well as natural endowment are then identified as the major factors affecting “the individual’s rate of progress” (1971, pp. 18, 19).

In the 1970s two major reports pertaining to second-level education were published: the report by Madaus and MacNamara on *Public Examinations* (1970) and the *Intermediate Certificate Examination Report* (ICE) published in 1975. As their

titles imply these reports were primarily concerned with the pragmatics of school assessment. Hence, there is little reference to the theory of education. Despite this there are indications that the authors of both subscribe to the notions of individual ability which are the by-products of essentialism, if not its pure representation (cf. Kleinig, 1982, for a discussion of this distinction). For example, the authors of *Public Examinations* imply that students who enter the teacher education colleges must be "bright" as they have obtained high grades in the leaving certificate examination (Madaus and MacNamara, 1970, p. 109). In the ICE Report it is suggested that many pupils are not suitable candidates for the intermediate examination. Responsibility for their difficulties, however, is not located in the school or in social structures but in the character of individual pupils: pupils' differing interests, aspirations *and* abilities are documented as the major cause of their difficulties (Department of Education, 1975, p. 31).

Nineteen eighty saw the publication of another publicly-funded report on second-level public examinations, *The Public Examinations Evaluation Project*. The authors here (Heywood, McGuinness and Murphy) are very explicit in their expression of the view that the individual's intelligence (IQ) is a major determinant of his/her educational success and that the individual can be ranked in terms of the amount of intelligence they possess. In the context of a discussion on the content validity of tests and sub-tests they claim that:

Among fifteen year olds it might be expected that the level of general intelligence would make a substantial contribution to performance in school work and examinations in which case those with high intelligence quotients would do well across the range of sub-tests while those with low intelligence quotients would do badly (Heywood, McGuinness and Murphy, 1980, p. 29).

From the evidence of both official government documents and government-funded reports, therefore, we can see that a highly essentialist understanding of individual ability has underpinned public thinking in the last 25-30 years. It is assumed that individuals are characterised by the possession of a quantifiable entity called "intelligence". "Intelligence" or "ability" is generally interpreted as a given entity, something which remains fixed through time. Indeed some official documents clearly state that differences are due to innate factors.

Before ending our commentary on government-related work, it is important to note that the concept of ability is not only essentialist, it is also primarily intellectual — to have ability is to be competent in intellectual labour. One sees this very clearly in the ICE Report. It is imputed there that the "intelligent" pupils are the intellectually oriented ones. Pupils who are competent in the manual sphere are not defined as "intelligent". Rather they are the "weak" students who fail to make the intellectual grade. Thus one sees how schools disqualify manual labour by failing to define manual skills as commensurate — in

ability terms — with intellectual skills. Indeed dichotomies are falsely drawn between the intellectual and the manual because, as Gramsci noted, there is a certain amount of “creative intellectual activity” in all physical work (1971, p. 8).

Essentialism and “independent” academics

Having shown how essentialist views of ability pervade government-funded reports and official publications we will now comment on academic work which is removed from government control — work in the colleges and research institutes. We will devote most of the discussion here to commentary on the work of the Educational Research Centre at Drumcondra as it is the only publicly- or privately-funded centre for educational research in the Republic of Ireland. Undoubtedly the Institiúid Teangeolaíochta Éireann and The Economic and Social Research Institute also conduct some educational research — especially, in the latter’s case, in recent years; however, it is not their primary remit. Furthermore, there has been very little public or private funding available for educational research in the Republic apart from that given to the Drumcondra Institute.

As the work of the Educational Research Centre has spanned a wide range of themes since its inception 20 years ago — including work on educational disadvantage, testing, school effect and equality issues — it is not possible to analyse it in any great depth here. What we can do, however, is to analyse the understanding of the individual which is evident in a sample of the works of one of its best known researchers, Thomas Kellaghan. Such understanding is generally implicit rather than explicit. This reflects of course the applied nature of both his work and that of the Research Centre generally. (As much of Kellaghan’s work is co-authored with other Research Centre personnel one must assume that the assumptions identified below are not exclusive to Kellaghan alone.)

In line with international trends in empirical research throughout the last two decades one of the Research Centre’s major research concerns has been identifying forces influencing the academic attainment of pupils in schools. Much of their work, especially throughout the 1970s, has also been concerned with the development of standardised tests and the assessment of their impact on teachers and pupils. Within these works the educational individual is defined, almost inevitably, in intellectual terms. Hence human ability is increasingly equated (by default if not by design) with intellectual academic-type ability. The equation of ability with intellectual ability is clearly evident in an article co-authored by Kellaghan and Neuman in 1971. “Giftedness” is in fact equated with scoring within the top 10 per cent on the Drumcondra Verbal Reasoning Test. The authors suggest that while some investigators “might not regard all such children as ‘gifted’ ... since they are well above average in verbal ability, they may be regarded as academically talented and they obviously contain valuable intellectual resources for their society” (Kellaghan and Neuman, 1971,

p. 5). Owing to the applied nature of much of the work of Kellaghan and his colleagues such explicit statements as to the nature of ability are not easily identified. However, Greaney and Kellaghan, in a joint study in 1984, also equate "high ability" with intellectual-type ability. A score of 108+ on the Drumcondra Verbal reasoning test (DVRT) was taken as a cut-off point for distinguishing the "more able" students from the "less able" in that study (Greaney and Kellaghan, 1984, Chapter 9). Furthermore, in an article published in 1973 Kellaghan equates intellectual ability with intelligence — intelligence refers, he says "to the higher order abstract skills" (1973, p. 24). It is not, however, the equation of "ability" or "intelligence" with intellectual capacities which proves that Kellaghan and his co-authors adhere to the essentialist position. It is rather their allegiance to the view that ability — defined generally as intelligence or intellectual capability — is fixed and measurable. One sees such allegiance in *Equality of Opportunity in Irish Schools* (1984). Although the authors of this work do not comment on the stability of Verbal Reasoning Ability (VRA) (their measure of ability in this study) over time certain features of the work indicate that they regard VRA as a relatively fixed entity:

First of all, the students were tested only once (at age 11 years) on a standardised verbal reasoning test and their score at this time was used throughout the analysis as a measure of their ability. There is no indication given by the authors that they regarded this as an arbitrary procedure or that they believed that a student's ability may have changed over time. Secondly, their frequent references, at all stages of the analysis, to pupils as being 'more' or 'less' able (pp. 151, 207, 209, 217, 219, 222, 248), and even at one time to 'brighter' students (p. 165), suggest that the authors regarded some pupils as essentially lacking in some mental ability at all stages of their careers. Indeed their unquestioning acceptance of the 'loss of talent' thesis (pp. 222, 261) is also evidence of the fact that they see ability as a fixed entity (Lynch, 1985, p. 92).

In their reply to these comments on their study, Greaney and Kellaghan did not deny that they held an essentialist-type view of mental "ability". They merely stated that they had "epistemological problems" with terms such as essentialism (Greaney and Kellaghan, 1985, p. 144).

Apart from Greaney and Kellaghan a variety of other educationalists also subscribe to essentialist views of human ability. Writing in 1978, for example, Desmond Swan attributed considerable importance to the "individual's genetic endowment" in determining his/her ability to read. Indeed he suggested that "general intelligence" is perhaps more important than "any other single factor" in determining "reading standards" (Swan, 1978, p. 67). Thus, it is implied — in the context of this discussion on the determinants of reading standards — that intelligence is itself a product of genetic endowment. Swan also uses evaluative

and essentialist-type terms such as "bright" and "dull" to categories pupils in his analysis (*ibid.*, pp. 6, 15). As in Kellaghan's work it is assumed that abstract-reasoning type abilities constitute the essence of intelligence (*ibid.*, pp. 14-16).

Hitherto most of the authors whose works have been reviewed are those of educational psychologists. The essentialist perspective, however, is by no means confined to them. With the exception of some work by Desmond Bell (1978) — in which he questions the essentialism of child-centred pedagogy — sociologists do not seem to regard the prevailing definitions of intelligence or ability as problematic either. In their re-analysis of Kellaghan and Greaney's work, for example, neither Whelan and Whelan (1985) or Raftery and Hout (1985) make any reference to the narrow essentialist definition of ability contained in the study. By their silence, therefore, they seem to acquiesce implicitly to the definitions proffered by Greaney and Kellaghan.

Finally, there are two articles published in *The Irish Journal of Education* which show — albeit in very different ways — the extent to which essentialist views of human ability are pervasive in Ireland. In Volume 3 of the *Journal* there is an article by Cyril Burt in which he proclaims his hereditarian views of intelligence with full force (Burt, 1969, pp. 75-94). Not alone was Burt given a platform to popularise his views but (in so far as we can discern from Irish educational literature) his views went unchallenged. Certainly they were never subsequently challenged in *The Irish Journal of Education* itself. Secondly, in an article published in 1983 Fontes, *et al.*, show that Irish primary teachers are more likely than their American colleagues to believe that innate factors have an important role to play in determining one's intelligence. Furthermore, comparing the attitudes of American and Irish adults in general they found the Americans (including teachers) to be "more environmentalist, interventionist and egalitarian" (Fontes, *et al.*, 1983, pp. 56, 65).

In summary therefore what we have suggested above is that the conception of the individual which predominates among Irish educationalists, is a basically essentialist one. The individual is defined primarily in terms of the "amount" of "intellectual ability" or "intelligence" which he/she is deemed to possess. This has a number of implications. First, because intelligence is equated with academic, intellectual-type ability, schools effectively either demean or disqualify non-academic labour. That is to say, schools are the principal institutions in our society for transmitting, credentialising and thereby publicly legitimating cultural forms. The cultural practices which schools certify become part of the public socio-cultural agenda; those which they do not certify become marginal. Because schools (and by schools we mean all educational institutions) only partly credentialise manual labour and do not (and perhaps cannot) credentialise domestic labour or love labour (i.e., the labour required to reproduce relationships *per se*) these latter cultural forms become devalued and marginalised.

Secondly, by defining the individual in terms of given talents, educationalists (including teachers) are predisposed to regard educational development as having definite limits with certain kinds of people. After all if the individual's ability is judged fixed by a given age then it is very likely that teachers will set limits to what they will subsequently expect him/her to attain educationally. Related to this is the issue of social class. On most, if not all, standardised tests purporting to measure mental ability, working class pupils tend to score lower than middle class pupils (the Drumcondra Verbal Reasoning Test is a case in point). Thus, there is a particular danger that working class failure in school will be attributed to the individual member's lack of so-called "intelligence" or "ability" and thereby be seen as inevitable and/or justified. As Lawler (1978), Gould (1981) and others have shown, however, tests of mental ability are themselves class biased. They are not valid measures therefore of pupils' abilities. The relatively low scores of working class pupils on standardised tests and their higher rates of educational failure are the products of a variety of cultural, political and social forces which, we would suggest, have little or nothing to do with individual differences in "fixed mental abilities". Essentialism as expressed in the fixed ability thesis, therefore, merely provides an ideological facade behind which policy makers and even practitioners can hide when they wish to eschew public accountability.

Meritocratic Individualism

The third ideology which we would like to comment on — albeit more briefly than on the others — is that of meritocratic individualism. The meritocratic ideology is a way of conceiving the individual's relationship to society. (It is by no means, of course, exclusive to Irish educationalists, though, as with essentialism, it has not been subjected to analytical critique here unlike elsewhere). It suggests that those individuals who have talent and who make the effort deserve to be rewarded in society, namely, that $IQ + \text{Effort} = \text{Merit}$ (Young, 1961). It is based on the premise that social rewards are and should be given on the basis of achieved rather than ascribed criteria. In many respects the meritocratic ideology represents an extended form of essentialism. Not only do its adherents suppose that talent can be measured accurately but they go on from there to claim that those with measured talents should be rewarded highly.

We referred above to the ideology emanating from the meritocratic perspective as individualist, this is something which it is also necessary to comment on. It means that the individual is defined within the meritocratic perspective in asocial terms — that the individual is defined as relating to society *qua* individual. She or he is not seen as a relational being attached to particular social groups whose educational choices therefore are highly contingent on group membership. Rather, the equation " $IQ + \text{Effort} = \text{Merit}$ " supposes that any individual can succeed as well as the next provided that she or he makes the

effort and has the talent. Success is, as it were, entirely a function of individual attributes and effort. As we well know from educational research, however, this is far from being the case. Class, gender and race are major determinants of the level and/or kind of educational credential any given individual is likely to attain.

Meritocracy and government-funded reports and documents

Because allegiance to the meritocratic ideal is so pervasive in educational discourse, it is rather arbitrary to identify it with any group or individual. The works identified here, therefore, are the representatives of a tradition, not its sole bearers. Secondly, the espousal of meritocratic principles does not often come in Ireland in simple meritocratic language. Rather it is represented frequently as the underlying procedure for equalising educational opportunities. Greaney and Kellaghan show this to be the case, for example, in their review of government policies on education in the 1960s. They point out that at least some ministerial statements indicated "that ability or aptitude ... was a consideration in determining equality of opportunity" (Greaney and Kellaghan, 1984, p. 26). The "poor" child was to be given the chance to reach the top of the educational ladder provided she or he had sufficient ability (*ibid.*, p. 27). The Department of Education obviously endorsed this policy too as *Ár nDaltai Uile: All Our Children* expressed similar views in 1969. The document suggests that the aim of equalising educational opportunities was to ensure that: "Every child, without exception .. will receive the best possible education suited to his or her individual talents" (*ibid.*, p. 4). More importantly perhaps the *Investment in Education* Report also espoused the cause of equality of opportunity although it too remained meritocratic in spirit. Its basic message was that the talent needed by the Irish economy was being wasted due to the low educational participation of particular social groups. Equality of opportunity was necessary therefore primarily as a means for securing and selecting talent. (See Chapters 6, 8, 12 for example).

That the government's preoccupation with meritocratic goals persisted into the 1970s and 1980s is evident from the nature of the government-funded reports published during this period. A lot of the major reports published on second-level education particularly were concerned with the assessment of ability — Madaus and MacNamara's Report on *Public Examinations* (1970); *The Intermediate Certificate Examination Report* (1975) and *The Public Examinations Evaluation Project* (1980). While these do not discuss either equality of educational opportunity or meritocratic issues *per se* they are none the less premised on the assumption that effective selection of the so-called "talented" is very important in society.

Meritocracy and "independent" academic work

Whether other Irish educationalists subscribe to the meritocratic view is not

always clear from their work. What is clear, however, is that the concept of meritocracy has not been subjected to critical analysis. It could be argued therefore, that, because they do not treat it as problematic, Irish educationalists implicitly place a value on meritocratic individualism. As we have suggested elsewhere, this is especially true of Greaney and Kellaghan's study on *Equality of Opportunity in Irish Schools* (Lynch, 1985). However, it should be remembered that Kellaghan did display clear allegiance to the meritocratic ideal in an earlier paper written jointly with Neuman. In the context of a discussion on the "gifted" they claim that "talent" in Irish society was being wasted due to the low rates of participation in education by certain social classes (Kellaghan and Neuman, 1971).

Whelan and Whelan's study on *Social Mobility in the Republic of Ireland* (1984) is, in many ways, similar to Greaney and Kellaghan's research in its treatment of meritocracy. This is largely because, like all mobility studies, it implicitly endorses the meritocratic ideal as a desirable goal. They assume that the "able" working class should move up the social ladder and that if they do not, society is unequal. The fact that a meritocratic system is also an unequal one — albeit in terms of different criteria — does not seem to be called into question.

Other studies, such as those on educational participation by McGréil (1974), McCluskey (1977), Clancy and Benson (1979) and Clancy (1982), do not discuss the issue of meritocracy *per se*. However, in so far as they identify regional, class and gender differences in participation rates, they draw attention to the meritocratic ideal and the extent of its realization. In effect, what is being suggested here is that meritocracy is the yardstick by which the success of the Irish educational system tends to be measured.

To conclude we will examine some of the educational and social implications of meritocratic individualism. First of all the meritocratic ideal helps perpetuate the existence of a hierarchical social order. The idea that "ability and effort should lead to reward" implicitly suggests that those who do not have ability or who do not make the effort should be given lesser rewards. The hierarchy remains, only the criteria change. Secondly, the work of Clancy (1982), Rottman and Hannan *et al.* (1982) and Whelan and Whelan (1984) all raise serious questions as to the legitimacy of using meritocratic mechanisms such as educational credentials to select people for occupations. They have found that there is a high probability that children from the upper socioeconomic groups will get a disproportionate number of the more valuable (third level) credentials in the first place. The meritocratic ideology therefore may merely provide a smoke screen behind which privilege is perpetuated — albeit through cultural rather than economic practices. Thirdly, the notion of meritocracy also perpetuates the belief that "talent" is limited in society. Even if one does accept the debatable assumption that there is a scarcity of talent for certain jobs, this scarcity is a function, in many ways, of the hierarchical orderings of society itself.

In an economically unequal society such as ours, many groups lack the opportunity to develop their talents in the first place. Scarcity of talent is thus a by-product of social inequality, not an intrinsic characteristic of individuals (Tumin, 1953). Finally, the realization of the meritocratic ideal is a logical impossibility given the present structure of the labour market — there are, for example, only a small proportion of jobs available which are prestigious, high paying and obtainable by educational credentials. It is nonsense to suggest therefore that anyone who has “talent” and “makes the effort” can attain one of these jobs; they simply do not exist in large enough numbers to accommodate all those who would be technically eligible for them.

Both essentialism and meritocratic individualism have one other serious implication for education. They imply that failure or success in school is a function of what the individual *qua* individual is or does. By representing the individual in abstract terms, rather than as a relational being, they encourage us to look for educational solutions through changing individuals rather than by changing social structures. Very often individuals cannot change until the structures within which they are located change first to accommodate them. Furthermore, when responsibility for success or failure is attributed to the individual *per se* those who fail are likely to feel that they lack some vital human ability (IQ) required in society (and therefore that they are lesser human beings than others) and/or that it is their own fault for not trying hard enough.

Explaining the Consensus View

There are at least four factors which help explain the predominance of the consensus model of society among Irish educationalists. First, the Republic of Ireland is a country which experienced a national revolution in the relatively recent past. As a post-colonial state trying to establish its own identity internationally there was, almost inevitably, a strong emphasis laid on developing a unitary nationalist consciousness. Education was indeed a major instrument of this purpose. Schools were used deliberately to propagate nationalist views and values (Coolahan, 1981). What we are saying therefore is that consensus theory is a by-product of the nationalist perspective emanating from the new state.

Secondly, the Republic of Ireland has been a predominantly rural society for the greater part of the 20th century. Conflicts have consequently centred more on proprietorial rights over land rather than on class divisions between workers and employers. For example, as late as 1951, 46.2 per cent of all employed persons (male) were self-employed (mostly farmers). It was only from the late 1960s to the 1980s that the balance shifted and Ireland became a more urban employee society with 68.8 per cent of the employed labour force (male) being employees in 1979 (Whelan and Whelan, 1984, p. 21). A society dominated by a proprietorial peasantry and their offspring was not a very fertile soil for the generation of left-right dichotomies in either political or intellectual life. Indeed, in so

far as educationalists have tended to come traditionally from western counties and farm families (Clancy, 1982, pp. 21, 43) they were especially likely to be influenced by the consensus tradition of their origins.

Perhaps the most important reason for the perpetuation of the consensualist view has been that identified already by Liam O'Dowd, namely, the influence of the Catholic Church on Irish intellectual life (O'Dowd, n.d.). Catholic religious personnel have exercised administrative control over the socialisation of most educationalists at primary and second level for the greater part of this century. That control still exists today although it has declined somewhat recently. For example, in 1980 there were 1,175 entrants to the colleges of education in Ireland, all but 152 of these (12.9%) were in colleges under Catholic management (Clancy, 1982, p. 10). Furthermore, while most staff in the colleges of education and the university education departments are not now religious, it is reasonable to suggest that they are still predominantly people who have been trained professionally in Catholic colleges of education or in education departments controlled by Catholic religious personnel.

One must ask then what is the significance of all this for consensualism? Because the Church has dominated so many educational institutes, it exercises a powerful role in setting the intellectual agenda for other educationalists. One of the most pervasive themes in Catholic social commentary has been the view that rural society most closely approximates the ideal Catholic social order. Rural society is in turn idealised as a place devoid of class conflict and dissension. It is represented as a repository of Catholic virtue, neighbourly solidarity and goodwill. There is no reference to the real socioeconomic and gender inequalities which exist within it in the real world as opposed to the ideal one. What we are suggesting, therefore, is that the consensual view of society — which O'Dowd (1975, 1985) claims has dominated Irish intellectual thought in the 20th century — is itself a product of Catholic influences on intellectual discourse. (Peillon (1982, pp. 65-66) also adverts to this phenomenon). The Catholic view of the good — in terms of the social order — has been transformed from being a religious ideal into a conceptual model of the world which purports to represent empirical reality. In other words, educationalists (among other intellectuals) have uncritically borrowed an ideal from the religious site and translated it into an analytical construct in the educational one.

A further factor propagating the consensus view in recent years has been the nature of the post-graduate socialisation of educationalists. The trend throughout the 1970s and 1980s has been for Irish educationalists to pursue post-graduate studies either at home or in the United States. The dominant educational paradigm in the US, however, is still the empiricist one. Indeed, until very recent times there was little discussion among American educationalists of the powerful role which scientific paradigms and perspectives play in the interpretation of evidence. If one is never trained to realise that there

are a variety of perspectives for interpreting data and therefore for explaining educational phenomena, the question of perspective never arises. Consensus models of society are not called into question as there is no framework for contesting them. The influence of the atheoretical approach of the American positivist tradition has, we would suggest, therefore, helped guarantee the perpetuation of consensualism in Irish educational discourse.

Explaining the Persistence of Essentialism and the Meritocratic View

The strong belief in the essentialist view of the individual and in the related meritocratic ideal, is also largely accounted for in terms of the factors outlined above. As stated already, it is only since the 1970s that Ireland could be classified as an urban society. The Irish intelligentsia has been drawn therefore from a rural (predominantly peasant) society in which one's livelihood was (and indeed still is) often dependent on the whims of nature. In such a society it was almost inevitable that naturalistic explanations would hold sway. It predisposed people to accept essentialist explanations for differences. Rural society has also tended to be strongly hierarchical both within the family (patriarchal) (Hannan and Katsiaouni, 1977) and in terms of the general social order (Arensberg and Kimball, 1940). Again we would suggest that this predisposed the intelligentsia emanating from it to accept a meritocratic ideology, in so far as both traditional and meritocratic views are premised on similar hierarchical views of the social system.

Catholic teaching and church organisation must also have played a role, however, in facilitating acceptance of essentialism and the meritocratic view. There is a strong appeal in Catholic teaching, for example, to the "natural law" as an explanatory paradigm. Thus educational models which attribute the cause of success/failure to an individual's given nature can readily be absorbed by an intelligentsia reared in a "natural law" tradition. Secondly, in terms of its internal social organisation, the Catholic Church tends to be both hierarchical and patriarchal. Again it would seem likely that people educated within such an organisation are likely to be predisposed toward seeing the hierarchical order as "natural". Thereby they fail to take the hierarchical assumptions of the meritocratic view to be problematic. In other words, as Gouldner (1970, pp. 29-52) observes, the "domain assumptions" of researchers can have a profound influence on the theoretical models they adopt.

Another major reason why meritocratic and essentialist ideologies persist is because these paradigms have widespread acceptance among educationalists internationally, especially in the United States. In fact it would be safe to say that the US is the home of the essentialist-psychometric model of the individual (Gould, 1981). Given the longstanding associations between Irish and American educationalists in the US, it is not surprising to find that neither the essentialist nor the meritocratic views are called in question.

It should be noted too that Irish universities, colleges of education and research institutes are themselves strongly hierarchical. For example, control is exercised in university departments and in research institutes undertaking educational research almost exclusively by the heads or director. Thus, working conditions are likely to predispose educationalists to view the hierarchical order as natural and/or inevitable. This accords well in turn with a meritocratic view of the social system.

Finally the absence of a strong sociological (or indeed philosophical) tradition — of a critical kind — in Irish education must also help explain the persistence of all three ideologies identified here. Sociological thought, emanating from the philosophical traditions of critical theory and neo-Marxism, has been the main source of critique for meritocratic, consensual and essentialist ideologies elsewhere. Critical perspectives, however, are still marginal in Irish educational discourse. Indeed they are still far from being central to Irish sociological thought as well (Clancy *et al.*, 1986, pp. 1-17).

III CONCLUSION

The ideologies of Irish intellectuals both reflect and reinforce their own class position as members of the intelligentsia class in society: that is to say, they both reflect and reinforce their position as members of that class whose claim to power is based on their educational credentials. In what way do the ideologies outlined above reflect and reinforce the intelligentsia's position? First, the meritocratic and essentialist ideologies provide an ideal rationale for intelligentsia rule. They imply that only a small number are gifted in society and that these must be selected and rewarded if society is to survive. In other words they glorify the intelligentsia as indispensable to society's existence. The meritocratic and essentialist ideologies, therefore, both reflect and reinforce the myth of intelligentsia superiority.

Secondly, it was noted above that educationalists tend to adopt a consensual model of the social order in their analysis and that this consensualism is indicative of perspectival blindness. The fact that intellectuals do not present their views within their perspectival limits means that they are locating themselves (be it inadvertently or intentionally) beyond paradigmatic allegiance. This claim to perspectival neutrality must be seen for what it is, however, a legitimating mechanism for gaining access to power. It is similar in character to the general legitimating mechanism used by intellectuals in claiming the right to rule — namely claims to "objectivity" and "expertise". The consensualism and related perspectival indifference of Irish educationalists, therefore, is in some respects an attempt by an intelligentsia class group to legitimate their claim to power (cf. Konrad and Szelenyi (1979) for a discussion of this point regarding

Hungarian intellectuals). By purporting to be perspectively neutral and objective they conceal the real class interest of their own position.

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