

Decision-making: From ‘participatory citizenship’ to active citizenship. A feminist activist ethnography of parent-school relations in a DEIS school context

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Declaration

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Abstract

Background

Citizen participation in policy decision-making is a key principal of government as part of creating an inclusive society. The critical policy literature on the discourse of social inclusion/exclusion argues that this dialectic is constitutive of a mental model of a benign inside of society in contrast to a problematic outside. This is further argued to orientate policy work towards bringing the excluded inwards away from the 'problematic' sphere of exclusion, but in to what is actually an unequal sphere of inclusion. Orientated this way, the effect of policy work on the reproduction of inequality and exclusion, is argued to be made invisible. Alongside Ireland's long-existing social inequality, this literature sets the backdrop for this critical inquiry into what is occurring in the policy-work of 'participation'.

Problem or research question

This study critically explores the meaning of decision-making as it is constituted in the discourse and practices of neoliberal policy-making in Ireland. In order to examine this question, the aims of the study are to inquire into how this meaning is informed, how this relationship is held in place, and the effect this has on those lower down on the social hierarchy. The study also explores the implications of these processes for society more generally. Finally, the study examines if ideas for an alternative and inclusive process of decision-making exist, and if so what this might look like.

Methodology: participants, setting, procedure of study, data analysis.

The study uses a feminist activist ethnographic approach to inquiry for exploring the study problem in the micro context of school-parent relations. Participant observation was undertaken in a DEIS primary school setting, over a nine month period. Interviews and a focus group were carried out with school staff, and with parents. Data analysis was an iterative process of moving between field, theory, and writing. The research was underpinned by a feminist ethics of care, reciprocity, empowerment and emancipation.

Findings

Study findings make visible conditions constitutive of school-parent relations that are de-politicising and reproductive of inequality. This was evident in a complex context of power relations, within and between the government, school and parents, argued to be informed by an intensification of a neoliberal market logic. While productive of an 'ideal' type of decision-making subject, these processes were also shown to be constitutive of an inequality of access to that position. This was held in place in relations that make up the wider agenda-setting arena, notably characterised by support and kindness, but relations that were individualising and thus simultaneously silencing of dissent. An added complexity was found where perspectives shaped by concerns of risk and respectability held this unequal and de-politicised dynamic in place. The study forecasts an increasing social polarisation should we continue along this trajectory. Notably, resistance to the status quo was evident among parents and/or the school. Based on the constitutive nature of social relations this offers us hope in that we can choose to create an alternative future. Drawing from knowledge learned from those excluded from decision-making, ideas for informing policy work and mapping a collective way forward are identified.

Conclusion

For real inclusion to occur policy researchers and practitioners must begin their work from a presupposition of equality.

Summary

Methods

A feminist activist ethnographic approach to inquiry was used in this study. This is a reflexive approach to inquiry focused on the relationship between knowledge and power, with a particular focus on making visible marginality and power differentials produced in social relations. The methods used include participant observation, semi-structured interviews (school staff (n=5), parents (n=5) and a focus group (n=1). Analysis was an iterative process of moving between field, theory and writing, informed by feminist principles of care, reciprocity, and emancipation.

Key findings

At the broadest level, the study found that the structural conditions that shape the policy work of inclusion, not only among practitioners but also in research, can be de-politicising and reproductive of inequality. Notwithstanding this, the study finds that policy work, undertaken reflexively, can also serve for creating a space for a real democratic politics.

The 'Ideal' Type and its Unequal Counterpart

Work processes in the school were found to be constitutive of an 'ideal' type of decision-making subject; the subject of competition, investment and interest, while simultaneously producing unequal access to that position. This occurred in a complex interplay of government action and inaction as this related to recent policy reforms at the macro level, work undertaken in the school in general and with parents more specifically. In this complex field, the investment of time as work related value, and self-improvement as a key focus of work are promoted, thus argued to simultaneously go towards a changed meaning of productivity, and the exclusion of marginalised voices, respectively. A presupposition of inequality is the wider backdrop to these recent and not so recent policy related changes, one where competition is accepted as the organising principle of social relations, the retention of which, it is argued is beneficial for some, and exclusive of others. The study shows that the work of policy researchers needs to be examined in these same ways.

Generosity and Silencing: A Complex Combination

For school staff navigating the contradictions of their role as 'right and left hand of the state' (Bourdieu 1998) often resulted in acts of generosity and support for parents/guardians in the form of informal support, and adapted in-house policies for helping with anxieties and mitigating the effects of poverty respectively. While appreciated by parents, these acts are argued to also be individualising where in the process of informal support provision, the political underpinnings of parents struggles become blocked from view. The effect for parents of the de-politicisation of school-parent relations is the silencing of dissent, evidenced in the unwillingness of parents to speak out about money worries with their children's schools. The prominent position held by behavioural management practices, as evidenced in the emphasis on 'positive' relations is argued to hold this tension between generosity and silencing in place.

Risk and Respectability: A Stabilising Force

The effects of the extended meanings of risk and respectability, originating from within the self, and a quality of the self respectively were key themes found to shape participants thoughts and

actions in ways that held the complex unequal and depoliticised relations found in place. For school staff, the risk of losing the status of 'good' worker was linked to the very work practices found to go towards reproduction. For parents, unwilling to speak out about poverty and exclusion in the school was a matter of respectability, tied to the very real risk of losing face in the eyes of the school, and community, attached to notions of the 'good' parent. Resisting the power of neoliberal governance in this context was found to exist, but in its weak form.

Future Implications for Decision-Making and Society

The findings are suggestive of a trajectory towards a more polarised future. This is a society comprising three different economies: (a) the private economy, the citizen oriented towards self-interest faced with the risks of downward mobility; and at the upper end (b) the off-shore economy, the citizen, unattached to community or nation, making decisions based on profit devoid of considerations at local, regional or national level; and (c) social exclusion (not non-citizen) where access to credit is not possible and with that any chance at all of speaking out. Social cohesion is compromised in this kind of future.

An Alternative Trajectory: Collective and Emancipatory Action

In the act of listening to what the excluded have to say the findings make visible knowledge for an alternative inclusive approach to decision-making. These findings point to decision-making processes that begin with 'the part that has no part', are heard by those with more power, and worked on collectively for moving forward in ways that are inclusive of all. What was found here were responsibilised parents, wishing to take up the role of supporting their children's education, but in a social context where the state takes up its responsibility of making the opportunities available for parents in their supportive role. This approach underpinned by the values of justice and equality is argued to be the antidote to the divisiveness that is a key feature neoliberal governance.

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Chapter 1 Introduction

1.1 Developing a Framework for Study

This thesis began as the result of my experience working as a researcher on an evaluation of a school health promotion initiative during the years 2009 to 2012. The evaluation work was being carried out in a wider context of a national recession and global economic crisis that was being experienced on the ground in the form of rising unemployment, wage reductions, tax increases and welfare and service funding cuts. The research was concerned with evaluating the effectiveness of a 'healthy schools' initiative, operationalised through the running of a range of co-ordinator facilitated activities in the school for improving the health and well-being of children in working class communities. Parents were identified as one of a range of stakeholders in the design and implementation of the initiative. Of particular interest to me was the absence of parental input into the programme design and implementation, from the parents, at whose children, the health promotion initiative was targeted. Of note is that the particular initiative was being run *in* the schools, driven by philanthropic and government funding, rather than *by* the schools, *per se*. Programme design occurred prior to implementation in the schools, and was informed by a community level needs analysis in the form of a survey in which families in the wider community took part. Despite this, policy initiative implementation was effectively 'top-down' in nature in the sense that the various programmes and activities occurring in the school were received by children and parents, rather than driven by them, a fact that is essentially contrary to much of the theory underpinning health promotion (World Health Organisation 1986). While this seems straightforward in terms of what was wrong with the decision-making process, the point that I could not reconcile was that this was not seen as being particularly problematic by various stakeholders in the project across funders, the schools, research teams and even the parents themselves. This was the starting point for this study.

While the scope of the health promotion policy initiative was narrow in focus, it served as a springboard for posing more critical questions about participation in policy decision-making. A discourse of social exclusion/inclusion has been to the forefront of public policy since the 1980s throughout Europe (Daly 2006), and Ireland followed suit, most notably in the language shift from 'The National Anti-Poverty Strategy in 1997, to the National Action Programme on Social Inclusion in 2007 (O'Cinnéide 2010). The discourse around social inclusion/exclusion has long been a preoccupation for sociology and social policy (Daly 2006). Drawing from my own background in anthropology, I began to read the critical literature in this area, with a view to developing a research question that would encapsulate the problem I felt existed, but could not quite name. The next

section provides a brief summary of the thinking process underpinning the development of the rationale, and key questions for my study.

The discursive work of Koller and Davidson (2008) on the British policy-making context provided me with a useful point of departure. Their work employs a critical cognitive semantics approach. It involved analysis of five different policy related genres: policy documents, implementation documents, political speeches, academic work and interviews with practitioners working in the area of 'inclusionary' programmes. These were analysed with a view to understanding the impact that 'social exclusion', as discourse and metaphor has in terms of constituting domains that were the target of policy. Broadly they found that used as a spatial metaphor, 'social exclusion' has a very particular effect of constituting 'a mental model of an abstract target domain', that being inclusion, or 'inside', and away from its opposite, 'outside' (p. 308).

1.1.1 Problematising the notion of Social Exclusion/Inclusion

Koller and Davidson's (2008) analysis of policy discourse add that social exclusion as the conceptual 'outside' is associated with ideas of vulnerability created through the use of a language of 'social protection' which communicates policy as being centrally concerned with preventing the population from experiencing social exclusion, and thus uncritically suggestive of being concerned with the welfare of the population. In addition, a foregrounding of a discourse of protection as representative of social inclusion, contributes towards blocking thoughts or questions of an agent, or cause of exclusion (Koller & Davidson 2008), as thought is orientated towards a bringing-in to, or prevention from falling out of, the inside. In this sense the sphere of social exclusion, although peripheral and problematic, is pliable, in the sense of being communicative of the possibility for moving inwards. This framing is also supported in the use of the nominalised form 'social exclusion' in policy language, where although a verb and not a noun, is more often used as a noun having the effect of communicating exclusion as a state disconnected from any agent or cause (Peace 2001). Ideologically, the authors argue, this interplay of foregrounding and backgrounding between ideas of inclusion and exclusion, suggestive of a disconnection between the two spheres, serves to de-politicise any causal link between them (Koller & Davidson 2008). In terms of my own interest in the lack of any critical inquiry by stakeholders into why parents were not at the policy initiative decision-making table, these ideas contributed to the opening up of the frame of inquiry for further questions, including in particular the question of the function of this kind of de-politicisation.

Unlike the use of language to suggest that degrees of 'social exclusion' exist found in Koller and Davidson's (2008) analysis, only one state of inclusion was apparent. The authors highlight this in their finding that in social inclusion/exclusion discourse, "[t]he most socially excluded does not have a corollary – the most socially included" (Koller & Davidson 2008, p. 313). This absence of any sense

of degrees of inclusion, the authors suggest, go towards the production of a mental model of an homogenous inside space, a benign and unproblematic sphere of inclusion serving to block thought from scrutinising this sphere. As such, this conceptualisation serves not only to communicate the inside as unproblematic and the end goal but that the sphere of exclusion becomes the emphasis for change. This functions more broadly for shaping thinking in policy work on bringing the excluded inside; thinking that is simultaneously propped up by the idea that nothing positive exists on the outside.

Drawing on the work of Steinert (2003), Koller and Davidson (2008) point out how their inquiry mapped onto his horizontal mental model of the social containing a simple dichotomous picture of continual movement from a problematic and troublesome outside to a normal inside, seemingly unhindered by challenges of access. When contrasted to a vertical model of society, the horizontal model, according to Steinert (2003), papers over the asymmetrical power relations that make up a more realistic view of the sphere of inclusion as one that is actually unequal. Ultimately, in this discursive interplay between the policy discourse of exclusion and inclusion, the authors Koller & Davidson (2008) argue that rather than the language of inclusion orientating thought and action towards the transformation of inequality, identified as a central aim in policy rhetoric, it instead orientates political thought and action towards its reproduction. In terms of this current study then, this critical thinking about the sphere of inclusion challenged my thinking in terms of orientating the study towards a the simplistic question of bringing parents in to the decision-making sphere, if the sphere of inclusion is an unequal sphere. In the context of the renewed emphasis on participatory citizenship¹ in policy-making discourse in post crisis Ireland, and the concomitant collapse of social partnership in 2009, this seemed to me to be an important opening up of the framework for thinking in the Irish context. This was confirmed in light of the continued exploration that I undertook, set out below, with a view to developing questions for framing the study.

1.2 Exploring the Sphere of Inclusion

1.2.1 Income Inequality

Understood in practice, the sphere of inclusion is anything but benign. Not only is it a picture of inequality, but one of both a changing and widening gap in inequality. The Inclusive Development Index 2018 (World Economic Forum 2018) describes Ireland as having high income inequality. Eurostat figures for the EU28 countries on the Gini coefficient of equivalised disposable income before social transfers (pensions excluded from social transfers) shows Ireland as having the highest

¹ For example in national policy like the Health Promotion Strategic Framework (HSE 2011) and globally in Ireland's joining of the Open Government Partnership with increased citizen engagement as its first aim (OGP 2014) <http://www.ogpireland.ie/>

rate of gross income inequality (Wickham 2017). The picture in Ireland is one of continual income accumulation at the top. For example, Wickham (2017) found that between 2015 and 2016 the share of total income taken by the top 10 per cent in Ireland declined slightly, which could be interpreted as a shift towards greater equality, but by contrast the top 1 per cent of income recipients increased their share of total income from 10.95 per cent to 12.05 per cent. This highlights how wealth accumulation is increasingly concentrated at the very top of the income scale.

1.2.2 Disposable Income

In real terms, disposable income in Ireland, the actual amount a person has to spend, differs to the gross income measure. Disposable income comprises market income (wages and salaries, income from self-employment and assets) along with social transfers, welfare benefits, and direct tax related deductions. The Survey on Income and Living Conditions (SILC)² provides detailed, equivalised,³ information on income and living conditions on a yearly basis.

Table 1.1: Trends in Ireland's Income Distribution 2007 – 2012

	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012
Deciles	%	%	%	%	%	%
Bottom	3.4	3.5	3.6	3.2	3.0	3.0
2	4.9	5.1	5.2	5.0	5.0	4.9
3	5.7	5.9	6.1	5.9	6.0	6.0
4	6.6	6.8	7.0	6.8	6.9	6.9
5	7.7	7.9	8.1	7.8	7.9	7.9
6	9.0	9.1	9.3	9.1	9.2	9.1
7	10.6	10.4	10.6	10.3	10.5	10.5
8	12.3	12.2	12.3	12.0	12.4	12.4
9	15.1	14.7	14.8	15.2	15.2	15.2
Top	24.7	24.4	23.2	24.7	24.0	24.0

Source: Collins 2014, from CSO, SILC data, various years

² The annual Survey on Income and Living Conditions (SILC) Data is the official source of data on household and individual income, and a number of official poverty indicators. The database contains information from up to 120 households in Ireland each week, giving a total sample of between 4,000 and 6,000 households each year. <https://www.cso.ie/en/silc/aboutthesilc/>

³ Equivalised - meaning the data has been adjusted to reflect the number of adults and children in a household and to make it possible to compare across different household sizes and compositions.

Table 1.1 provides a picture of income distribution over the period immediately prior to the economic crash, or end of the Celtic Tiger years, through to the near ending of the recession period (2008 – 2013). The picture is one of very little change in income distribution over that time.

In 2016, and in the context of being at the other side of a so-called recovery, the gradient remains similar where the SILC data shows the top 10 per cent of the population continue to receive almost one quarter of the total income (24.1 per cent), and the bottom decile receiving 3.4 per cent (CSO 2017). This translates into the top ten percent receiving over 7 times the share of the bottom 10 per cent (Social Justice Ireland (SJI) 2018a). Another reading shows that the poorest 60 per cent of households receive a very similar share (38 per cent) to the top 20 per cent (39 per cent) of income (SJI 2018a). Based on these realities, the sphere of inclusion, rather than being benign and uncomplex, as was found in Koller & Davidson's (2008) work, is instead a picture of enduring inequality. This raises the question for this study of whether a relationship exists between how inequality in access to policy decision-making is constituted and the enduring inequality that is a feature of Irish society.

1.2.3 Poverty

The gap in inequality includes high rates of poverty and deprivation. Table 1.2 shows that the poverty rate dipped during the years of recession, in line with the dip in mean household income⁴, but began to grow again as the country moved out of recession levelling out in 2016 at pre-recession rates. Social welfare transfers played a key role in this process.

Table 1.2: Recent Trends in Ireland's Poverty Rates

	2007	2008	2009	2010	2013	2016
	%	%	%	%	%	%
Poverty Rate	16.5	14.4	14.1	14.7	15.2	16.5
Poverty Rate Pre Transfers	41.0	43.0	46.2	50.2	38.4	44.9

Source: Collins, 2014, CSO, EU-SILC various years.

At Risk of Poverty

At the time of undertaking the fieldwork for this study (2012/2013), the 'at risk of poverty'⁵ rate of 15.2 per cent (2013) was slightly lower than the previous year (16.5 per cent in 2012) (CSO, SILC 2015). The 2013 figure translated into 15.2 per cent of the population having an equivalised

⁴ Mean household income rose approximately €1,000 in 2008 to 49,043, followed by a drop each year until 2012: – €45,959 in 2009, €43,151 in 2010, €41,819 in 2011, €40,505 in 2012.

⁵ This is calculated by assessing the numbers beneath a poverty line, which is set at 60 per cent of the median equivalised disposable income.

disposable income of less than €10,531 euro per year⁶ (CSO, SILC 2015). Figures for 2016 show a rise in the 'at risk of poverty' rate to 16.5 per cent which translates into over 16 people in 100 (or 782,034 individuals) living below an income poverty line of €236.83 per week for a single adult (SJI 2018).

Child poverty levels make up approximately one third (the largest group) of the total number of individuals living in poverty in Ireland.

Table 1.3: Child Poverty levels Expressed in Numbers of People

	2006	2009	2012	2016
Overall	719,593	639,209	794,710	782,034
Children (under 16 yrs)	191,412	176,422	205,830	207,239
Children (under 18 yrs)	250,418	223,084	240,797	247,905

Source: SJI 2018, pgs. 36, 39. Calculated using CSO SILC Reports (various years) and CSO online database of population estimates (which are for April of each year).

In 2016 child poverty accounted for 26.5 per cent (SJI 2018) of the total poverty figures. Based on the Eurostat measure⁷, 2015 figures show that 28.8 per cent of children (0-17) were at risk of poverty and social exclusion. While this represents a fall from 34.1 per cent since 2010, this figure remains higher than the European average of 27.1 per cent (Eurostat 2016). Child poverty is a stain on any society, and begs the question again of why it is left to persist and worsen in a wealthy modern society.

Deprivation and Consistent Poverty⁸

This starkly unequal picture continues when we examine deprivation rates⁹. **Deprivation rates** consistently rose over the years of the recession. The 2016 figure of 21 per cent is a notable drop from a staggering rate of 30.5 per cent in 2013. However, a rate of 21 per cent remains

⁶ Based on a national equivalised disposable income figure of €17,551(SILC 2015).

⁷ The Eurostat method of child poverty is based on the sum of children (0-17) who are at-risk-of-poverty or severely materially deprived or living in (quasi) jobless households (i.e. households with very low work intensity (below 20%) as a share of the total population in the same age group.

⁸ These two measures are arguably more sensitive measures of poverty where the 'at risk of poverty' measure is based on income only and exclusive of, for example, savings or other assets like property. Material deprivation actually relates to buying power.

⁹ Material deprivation is where a person cannot afford at least two of the eleven goods or services considered essential for a basic standard of living. 1) Two pairs of strong shoes, 2) A warm waterproof overcoat, 3) Buy new not second hand clothes, 4) Eat meat, chicken, fish or a vegetarian equivalent every second day, 5) Have a roast joint or its equivalent once a week, 6) Had to go without heating during the last year through lack of money, 7) Keep the home adequately warm, 8) Buy presents for family or friends at least once a year, 9) Replace any worn out furniture, 10) Have family or friends for a drink or meal once a month, 11) Have a morning, afternoon or evening out in the last fortnight for entertainment.

approximately double that of the 2007 pre-recession rate. The 2016 rate (21 per cent) translates into 1 million people (SJI 2018).

Table 1.4: Deprivation - General Population

%	2007	2008	2009	2010	2013	2016
Deprivation Rate	11.8	13.7	17.1	22.6	30.5	21.0

Source: Collins 2014; EPAN; SJI 2018.

Consistent poverty is the measure combining poverty and material deprivation. It calculates the proportion of the population simultaneously experiencing poverty and registering as deprived of two or more of the basic items on the material deprivation list. Consistent poverty rates for 2013 stood at 8.2 per cent, up on the 2012 rate of 7.7 per cent. CSO figures for 2016 show that this percentage has risen one point to 8.3 per cent. This translates to almost 400,000 people (SJI 2018).

Deprivation rates in Ireland are even more stark when contextualised in a wider European context. Research conducted by Freidrich-Ebert-Stifung (FES), the oldest political foundation in Germany, into inequality in Europe shows that based on Purchasing Power Standards in 2015 the two lowest quintiles in Ireland (Q1 and Q2) were among the poorest quintiles in the EU in 2014.

Children, Consistent Poverty and Deprivation¹⁰

Once again, the figures for children show a damning account of child material deprivation and consistent poverty.

Table 1.5: Children, Material and Consistent Poverty

0-17 years	2008	2015	2016
Material Deprivation	17.9%	31.4%	25.2%
Consistent Poverty	6.2%	11.5%	11.1%

Source: (CSO, EU-SILC 2018)

In terms of household composition the 2015 data shows that nearly 58 per cent of lone parent households, or three in every five, were experiencing material deprivation, double that of the also

¹⁰ Consistent poverty means that these children are living in households with incomes 60 per cent below that national median income and experiencing deprivation. Material deprivation relates to not being able to afford at least two of a list of 11 goods or services deemed essential for a basic standard of living. This can mean not having a winter coat, two strong pair of shoes, or enough food or heat in the home.

worryingly high percentage of two parent families (25.2%). A question this raises for this study, is whether a relationship exists between the policy-making process and poverty as this relates to the decision-making process.

1.2.4 Stability and a Changing Gradient

Of note in the Irish context is that stability is a feature of the structure of Ireland's net income distribution over the years of boom and bust (Collins 2014). However, stability in terms of top line figures, Collins (2014) argues, blocks the view to changes that are occurring in the nature of stratification in Ireland. The measure used to express the state of play in terms of inequality is the Gini coefficient¹¹. In 2016 Ireland's net income Gini coefficient stood at 30.6, having oscillated between 30 and 32 not just over the period of the 2008 economic crisis and recession, but over the last few decades (Collins 2014, SJI 2018). This has dipped and risen in line with fluctuations in the economy including the recent economic crisis, but regardless remained relatively stable. Social transfers play a significant role in maintaining this stability in Ireland. For example, market income inequality in Ireland rose by nearly 7 percentage points between 2007 and 2010, the biggest increase in the OECD, while in disposable income terms, inequality actually decreased (OECD Income Distribution and Poverty Database, in Wickham 2017).

Collins (2014) makes the point that in the Irish context the stable picture of income inequality overall, blocks the view to the changing nature of income inequality within the social gradient. In particular he points to the large number of households living on low incomes even after welfare transfers. In another paper looking at earnings and low pay in the Republic of Ireland, Collins (2015) examined the structure of gross household income distribution (earnings plus transfers) in 2011¹². His analysis showed that 33 per cent of households had a gross annual income of €27,000 and 66 per cent of households had a gross income of less than €50,000. At the other end of the scale, 12 percent of households had a gross income above €100,000, while 2 per cent of households had gross incomes above €200,000 per annum. The large number of households living on low incomes even after welfare transfers stands out here. Added to this was the astounding finding that in 2012 more than half the Irish population would sit under the poverty line were it not for social transfers (Collins 2015).

Low-Wage Earners/Working Poor/Under-employed

Implicit in the picture of stability over time is a skewed notion that all incomes include an earned income, but as Collins (2015) states, many earn nothing and are entirely dependent on transfers,

¹¹ An overall inequality measure ranging from 0 (no inequality) to 100 (maximum inequality).

¹² With no adjustments for household size and composition.

while others earn incomes but at low levels. Eurostat data from the 2010 Structure of Earnings Survey estimated that 20.7 per cent of Irish workers were low paid (Collins 2015). Low wage earners are defined here as employees who earn two thirds or less of national median gross hourly earnings. Data from 2014 saw a rise in this percentage for Ireland to 21.6 per cent. This is comparable to a rate of 17.2 per cent of low-wage earners in the EU-28, and a rate of 15.9 per cent in the euro areas more generally (Eurostat 2018). Ireland is ranked 7th for its percentage of low-wage earners among the EU-28 (Eurostat 2018).

SILC data on the percentage of people at work and 'at risk of poverty' (income below 60 per cent of median income), that is, the working poor, shows percentages of 14.3 per cent in 2009 at the height of the recession, falling to 13.3 per cent in 2015, and remaining at this same level in 2016 (SILC 2015b, Social Justice Ireland 2018, p. 37). Expressed in numbers this equates to a rise from 100,133 adults in 2012, to 104,011 in 2016 (SJI 2018, p. 39), accounting for emigration during the height of the recession. Nugent (2017) taking a more nuanced exploration by focusing on deprivation rates¹³ as a measure for in work poverty, found that the proportion of 'working poor' more than doubled between 2004 and 2015, from 7.2 per cent to 16.4 per cent respectively. This is an even higher jump when considered from a low of under 5 per cent in 2007 just prior to the financial crisis. But what Nugent (2017) found was that unlike the dips and troughs of employment indicators which are broadly in line with macroeconomic indicators, deprivation rates continued to rise for workers overall to 2014 with a slight dip in 2015.

Underemployment figures, that is the number of people working part-time but who have fewer work hours than they are willing to work, are collected in the Quarterly National Household Survey¹⁴ compiled at the Central Statistics Office. Figures for 2017, demonstrate that by Quarter 3, underemployment stood at 116,200 people, or almost 5 per cent of the total labour force (CSO, QNHS 2018). Groups affected the most in the Low Wage/Working Poor/Underemployment categories tend to be young people, migrants, women, and lone parents (Nugent 2017). This brief overview of statistics providing a view to a tension between a culture of stability and simultaneously, a changing gradient in the nature of inequality, raises the question for this study of if, and how, this relates to the reproduction of inequality in policy decision-making.

¹³ Nugent focused on deprivation rates, - i.e. those not able to afford at least two out of a list of 11 officially recognised items - to eliminate the critique that 'at risk of poverty' rates can potentially be skewed due to individuals having assets and/or savings.

¹⁴ The Quarterly National Household Survey (QNHS) is a large scale nationwide survey of households in Ireland. It is designed to produce quarterly labour force estimates that include the official measure of employment and unemployment in the state (Central Statistics Office).
<https://www.cso.ie/en/qnhs/abouttheqnhs/whatistheqnhs/>

1.3 Inequality is Bad for Society

Of course one of the bigger issues that the data to this point foregrounds is the issue of inequality itself and the question of this reality being the constant backdrop to Irish society. For example, in their best seller, *The Spirit Level*, epidemiologists Wilkinson and Pickett (2009) present the robust argument that inequality is not only bad for those lowest down on the social hierarchy, but bad for all members of society. Their study calls for a rethink of the current valuing of economic growth over equality in wealthy societies, based on their findings that show the more equal societies are in terms of income the better all members of that society do across the range of social outcomes. This they show through analysis based on around 200 different sets of reputable sources¹⁵, where on almost every index of quality of life, wellness, or deprivation, there is a gradient showing a strong correlation between a country's level of economic inequality and its social outcomes. Basing their exploration on 25 different countries, the authors found that when they examined how societies fared in terms of a range of health and social problems, the more equal societies were in terms of income, the better all individuals scored regardless of which health or social problem was examined. That is, greater income equality meant better scores in terms of mental illness, obesity, levels of trust, life expectancy, teenage births, homicides, imprisonment rates, social mobility scores, and so on. Key to Wilkinson & Pickett's (2009) argument was that inequality being bad for society also means inequality is bad for social cohesion.

Notably, Wilkinson and Pickett's theory came under considerable attack. Numerous challenges were made including, for example, that it was a left wing polemic, or that it was selective in its choice of health and social problems in order to suit its main argument. The work was (wrongly) accused of being based in a discipline (sociology) that has not been able to provide the evidence and tools to create a better society, and of being selective of the countries that it has chosen to demonstrate its thesis, among other critiques. The authors published a detailed response of the criticisms¹⁶, locating themselves in the field of epidemiology, stating that they do not align with any political party, and engage with all of the main political parties in order to disseminate their work. The authors also provide detailed rationale for the databases that they utilised along with the criteria for why particular sets of data over others were drawn from within those sets. In addition, data for outlier countries was also included in *The Spirit Level* showing divergences from their main argument. But these outliers were argued to not disprove their overarching thesis that a consistent tendency exists among the countries they examined for health and social problems with social gradients, where poorer outcomes for all members were more common in societies with bigger income differences.

¹⁵ Including the United Nations, the World Bank, the World Health Organisation and the US census.

¹⁶ <https://www.equalitytrust.org.uk/sites/all/themes/equalitytrust/images/responses-to-all-critics.pdf>

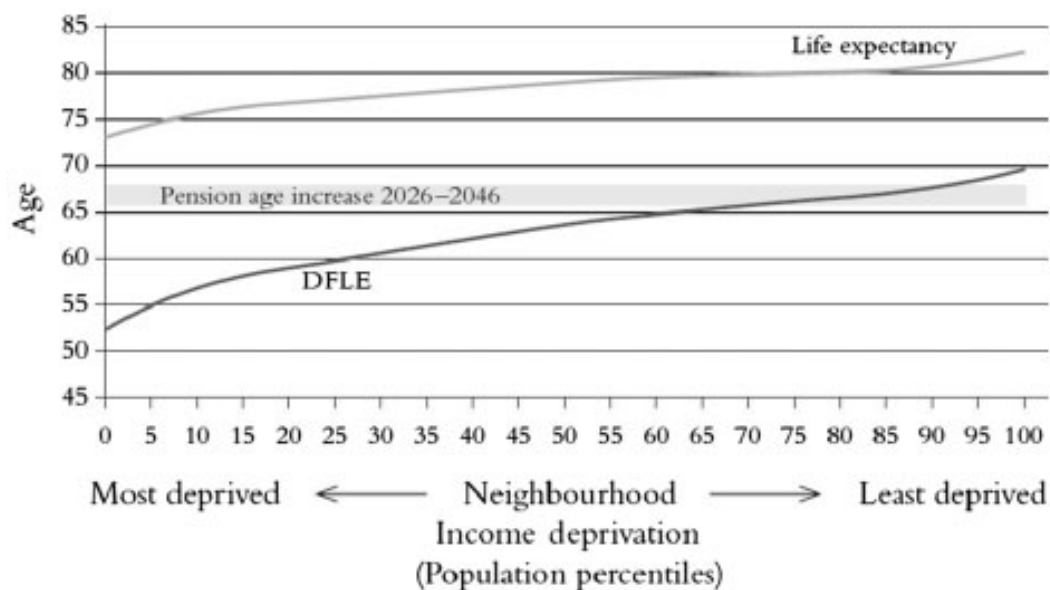
The argument that income inequality is bad for society is not Wilkinson & Pickett's alone. Two key authors in this field are Michael Marmot and Anthony Atkinson. Michael Marmot's work on health inequalities is rooted fundamentally in the argument that the gap in health is bad for everyone. The social determinants of health according to Marmot (2017, p. 1312), are "the conditions in which people are born, grow, live, work and age; and inequities in power, money and resources that give rise to inequities in the conditions of daily life". Marmot (2017) argues that both relative and absolute poverty play a central role in the health gap at country level. This is because of the link he identified between poor health and the accumulation of disadvantage relative to the prevailing standards¹⁷, but also the effects that an actual lack of money has on daily life; on food, housing, the nature of care that can be provided for children, and the degrees of stress that an individual or family experiences depending on the resources or supports available in that country/region. For Marmot, it is this consistent experience of inequality in health that leads to civil unrest or in other words a social environment that is discriminatory and that will do little for social cohesion¹⁸. The evidence shows that this far from inevitable reality means that the opportunities of the next generation are limited for those at the lower end (Marmot 2017, Atkinson 2015). But in the work undertaken for *The Marmot Review* (Marmot *et al.* 2010)¹⁹ it is also clear that the degree of absolute poverty that exists accounts for the worse health and shorter life expectancy of those near the top also, compared to those at the top. The graph below shows differences between life expectancy and disability-free life expectancy at birth in England from 1999 to 2003. While acknowledging that the poor suffer the most, the graph shows that the gradient in health has implications for everyone along the continuum.

¹⁷ Using cross country comparisons Marmot (2017) makes the point that in actual money terms the poor in the US are rich when compared to the average income earner in India, but male life expectancy in India is nearly two years longer than his test site (Baltimore) in the US. Marmot (2017) argues that this is because the poor in e.g. Baltimore are deprived relative to the standards prevailing in Baltimore and the determinant of health is the accumulation of disadvantage over the life course.

¹⁸ The gilets jaunes (yellow vest) protests in France are just one recent example of civil unrest produced from the conditions of inequality being experienced by people in their daily lives.
<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/dec/03/who-are-the-gilets-jaunes-and-what-do-they-want>

¹⁹ *The Marmot Review* is an independent review for the then Secretary of State for Health in the UK for the purpose of proposing the most effective evidenced based strategies for reducing health inequalities from 2010. The report identified action on six policy objectives: give every child the best start in life; enable all children, young people and adults to have control over their lives; create fair employment and good work for all; ensure healthy standard of living for all; create and develop healthy and sustainable places and communities; strengthen the role and impact of ill-health prevention.

Figure 1: Life Expectancy and Disability Free Life Expectancy at Birth In England From 1999 to 2003



Source: The Marmot Review (2010)

1.3.1 Outcomes in Ireland

There are a range of health and well-being outcomes that show Ireland moving in the wrong direction. For example, obesity figures show stark consistent rises over the last two decades. These figures continued to increase into the Celtic Tiger period, rising from 8 per cent to 26 per cent in men, and from 13 per cent to 21 per cent in women between 1990 and 2011 (Irish Health Foundation (IHF) & Social Justice Ireland (SJI) 2015). There has been a dramatic two-to-fourfold²⁰ increase in obesity in Irish children aged 8-12 years since 1990. The most up to date current rates are set out below.

Table 1.6: Obesity Rates in Ireland by Age

Group	Years	%
Pre-Schoolers	2-4 years	3%
3 years	–	6%
Children	7-11 years	7.2%
Teenagers	17-23 years	7.5%
Adults	18-64 years	24%
Older People	Over 50's	36%

Source: Irish Heart Foundation and SJI 2015

²⁰ Depending on the definition of obesity and cut-off points used (IHF & SJI 2015).

As reported in *Healthy Ireland* (Department of Health 2013) (DoH), Ireland's framework for improved health and wellbeing 2013-2025, overall in Ireland, 61 per cent of all adults and 25 per cent of 3-year-olds are overweight or obese, and 26 per cent of 9-year-olds have a body mass index outside the healthy range (Morgan *et al.* 2008, Growing Up in Ireland 2011, Layte *et al.* 2011). Obesity is associated with a higher prevalence for cardiovascular disease (Leahy *et al.* 2014) and is the leading cause of cancer in non-smokers (WHO 2008). Heart disease, cancers, and type-2 diabetes (including type-2 diabetes in children) are set to increase (Balanda *et al.* 2010).

Ireland has seen consistently rising rates of food poverty²¹. The 2010 rate of 10 per cent equates to almost 450,000 people in food poverty, giving an indication of its current extent (IHF & SJI 2015). Along with obesity, the long-term nutrient deficiencies implications of food poverty also include anaemia and diet related diseases such as diabetes and certain cancers (*ibid*). The impact of food poverty on obesity is identified as one diet related impact from a poor diet and lack of nutrients. Table 1.7 shows the consistent rise in the food poverty over recent years.

Table 1.7: Food Poverty

	2010	2011	2012	2013
Food Poverty	10%	11.4%	11.8%	13.2%

Source: Department of Social Protection (2014) Social Monitor 2013.

Households identified as being most vulnerable to food poverty were those with a low income, three or more children under 18, where the head of household is disabled, or unemployed, and lone parent households with child/ren (Carney & Maître 2012).

It is reported in *Healthy Ireland* (DoH 2013), drawing on the work of the World Health Organisation (2008), that mental health is a growing health, social and economic issue and it is expected that depressive mental illnesses will be the leading cause of chronic disease in high-income countries by 2030. A frightening statistic linked to this is that more Irish young people die by suicide than in other EU countries (Scoliers *et al.* 2009). In the 15-24 age group, the mortality rate from suicide in Ireland is the fourth highest in the EU (National Office for Suicide Prevention 2010). The question of why inequality is not a central focus of policy in Ireland seems crucial based on what we know about the relationship between income inequality and poorer social outcomes for all. The latter

²¹ Carney C & Maître B (2012) developed three indicators of food poverty: (1) can't afford a meal with meat or a vegetarian equivalent every second day; (2) can't afford a weekly roast dinner or equivalent; (3) missed a meal in the last two weeks due to money.

question seems vital also based on the predictions that certain key outcomes are to get increasingly worse. This study sets out to inquire into this question.

1.4 Inequality is Bad for the Economy

The economic implications of poor health and well-being outcomes are staggering. In terms of the issue of obesity alone, projected obesity levels for 2030 place Ireland as having the highest percentage of population who are obese among twenty-seven European countries, at just under 45 per cent (Breda 2013), followed by Greece at 40 per cent. This is suggestive of a trajectory towards much greater income inequality based on Wilkinson & Pickett's (2009) thesis. Currently, the direct cost of overweight and obesity to the Irish health service is already almost €400 million every year (IHF & SJI 2015). Perry *et al.* (2013) calculated that if the present trend in obesity continues and no policy interventions are made the cost of obesity will rise to over €4.3 billion in 2020 and €5.4 billion in 2030. Based on the 2030 projections of 45 per cent, and taking the indirect costs into account (reduced productivity due to premature mortality, work absenteeism and a reduced effective labour force) obesity will cost the state more than €15 billion by 2030 (IHF & SJI 2015).

These estimates show clearly, in line with the arguments set out by Marmot *et al.* (2010) in relation to the UK context, that health inequalities are bad for the economy. *The Marmot Review, Fair Society, Healthy Lives* (Marmot *et al.* 2010) estimates that the annual cost of health inequalities in England is between £36 billion to £40 billion through productivity losses, reduced tax revenue, higher welfare payments and increased treatment costs for the NHS. The review, examining health inequalities in England highlighted the need to not only orientate resources at some segments in society, as is the traditional government approach, but instead argues for universal action across the gradient. This is in order to reduce the steepness of the social gradient but with a scale and intensity that is proportionate to the level of disadvantage that exists at the various strata. For Marmot *et al.* (2010) addressing health inequalities in this way is an issue of social justice, together with being an issue of economy. *The Marmot Review* adds to the strong case for policies that reduce income inequality, based on the projected costs to the economy that have been identified. Notably, the negative economic implications for society that are recognised in the official and critical literature, strengthens the question for this study raised above, of why the reduction of inequality is not the central focus of the policy.

1.5 Neoliberal 'Economy'

The argument that the current driver of policy is the economy (Wilkinson & Pickett, 2009) then led me to ask the question of what is the meaning of 'economy'? In exploring this, I drew from the work of David Harvey (2010), in his book entitled *The Enigma of Capital and the Crisis of Capitalism*. Harvey points out that the notion of 'economy' under capitalism, the dominant organising system

in wealthy Western societies, is concerned with wealth creation accumulated in the process of capital flow (Harvey 2010). How capital flow occurs varies in different societies, which, in turn, is interlinked with varying kinds of wealth creation. The relationship between capital and labour, or how that is manifest, is a determining factor of the kind of capital flow that occurs (Harvey 2010). Neoliberalism is the dominant ideology currently shaping the capital labour relationship. Neoliberalism, according to Harvey (2005) in his book entitled *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, is a theory of political economic practices. The defining features of neoliberalism are “an institutional framework characterised by strong private property rights, free markets and free trade” (Harvey 2005, p. 2), within which, it is held, human well-being through the liberation of individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills, can be advanced. Within neoliberalism, the role of the state has become one of the creation and preservation of the institutional framework to facilitate these practices. As such, neoliberalism has brought with it a continual withdrawal of the state from many areas of social provision, alongside the other central characteristics of neoliberalism, which are deregulation and privatisation (Harvey 2005). Harvey’s definition of neoliberalism can be summarised as the intensification of the influence and dominance of capital where capitalism is elevated, as a mode of production, and an organising principle of modern society, into an ethic, a set of political imperatives, and a cultural logic.

1.5.1 Neoliberal Financialisation

The introduction of neoliberalism in the 1970/80s brought with it, a fundamental change in the capital-labour/capital flow relationship²² (Harvey 2010). Introduced by Reagan and Thatcher, neoliberalism saw a crushing of organised labour, visible in the orchestrated confrontations with big labour (e.g. Margaret Thatcher’s standoff with the miners and print unions) along with the strategic creation of unemployment. One of the unintended outcomes of this was wage stagnation, which resulted in reducing people’s purchasing power, negatively affecting capital accumulation; the central rationale of capitalism. In order to address this, the need for cheaper goods was identified with the aim of boosting consumption, and therefore profit. The globalisation of productivity answered this problem which drew on cheap labour from poorer countries²³ in order to produce consumer items comprising parts made in a number of different countries round the

²² Labour, having been identified as the main barrier to sustained capital accumulation, the central objective of capitalism, became the target for crushing. Prior to the introduction of neoliberalism, labour was well organised, reasonably well paid, and had political weight through trade unions. In order to meet capital’s need for cheaper and more passive labour, limitations to immigration were loosened in the 1960s in the US and across much of Europe²². Automatisations, as a cheaper form of labour, was also mooted but met with resistance from labour along with demands for productivity agreements (Harvey, 2010). These were mostly met in exchange however for higher prices of goods, in order to meet higher labour costs, but disregarded in the late 1970s as competition between manufacturers, particularly in the opening up of the global automobile market, began to put pressure on prices.

²³ This global search for cheap labour was instrumental in the production of a feminisation of labour and of poverty.

world at cheap prices. Barriers to trade between countries were reduced or reengineered and alongside this a global financial architecture was created in order to facilitate the flow of capital to wherever in the world it could produce the most profit.

Parallel to these changes, a programme of privatisation was promoted under neoliberalism which results in previously state run services being sold off to global investors, always in the name of 'cost-effectiveness' and 'efficiency' a move heavily criticized by the left as a move that merely appeases capital at the expense of labour. This is due to profit becoming the primary measure of success, often at the expense of secure and/or meaningful jobs.

While labour was now no longer a problem for capital, the problem of peoples buying power persisted in the context of global capitals power to keep wages low. A new method for ensuring that consumption continued was required, and the solution arrived at was the production of credit. In the US, this was given at first to workers with stable earnings, and then, as profits from this became exhausted, to low income workers²⁴. From this point onwards credit provision went global, evident in the loans provided to third world countries in the 1970's, the global interlinking of financial markets that occurred with the linking up of the UK and US stock and financial systems in the mid-1980's, and deregulation that was aggressively pursued across the global banking system in order to eliminate barriers to the flow of capital into individual countries (Harvey 2010). In terms of this current study, a question emerges as to if and how credit plays a role in the inequality of access to policy decision-making.

1.5.2 Financialisation and the Intangibility of Value

Unhindered capital flows have accompanied a change in the nature of investments by those with wealth, from investment in production, to investment in asset values. What this means is that investment is associated with financial products that can make a profit regardless of whether the companies that these investments are linked to are actually doing well in terms of actual productivity (Harvey 2010). This shift to financialisation has changed a central underpinning of an earlier neoliberal argument: that the rich getting richer is not of concern for society due to their reinvestment of wealth in the economy, which ensures work and income for those lower down. Instead, the act of financial investment itself communicates that a company is doing well and therefore putting money in the stock market causes the value of stocks to go up regardless of any material or productivity basis, meaning that the labour-capital relation becomes downgraded in terms of actions driven by the pursuit of profit (Harvey 2010). The negative consequences of the

²⁴ The supply of housing as the major form of credit for workers (along with every other kind of consumer good), was now in the control of finance, as was its demand.

credit bubble created by this new reality began to emerge in the subprime crisis that erupted in the US in 2007 (Blackburn 2008) with the knock-on effects of the resulting credit crunch there for countries globally. Irish banks, heavily indebted to foreign finance and having issued loans within Ireland to the tune of a very dangerous housing bubble was just one such story (O’Rian 2017, McCabe 2015, Allen 2015). The domino effect of the crisis in the form of its devastating effect on the lives of the Irish population became evident in various ways. These included the skyrocketing rates of unemployment, the loss of homes, austerity related cuts to services, indirect tax hikes, and stricter welfare criteria (Kinsella 2017), taken together as an example of the effects of the financial turn on the capital-labour relationship. In the Irish context, labour suffered in order for capital to survive, as austerity was endured in order to meet the conditions of a loan from the Troika that ensured that finance (the banks) remained liquid (Coulter 2015, Allen 2015).

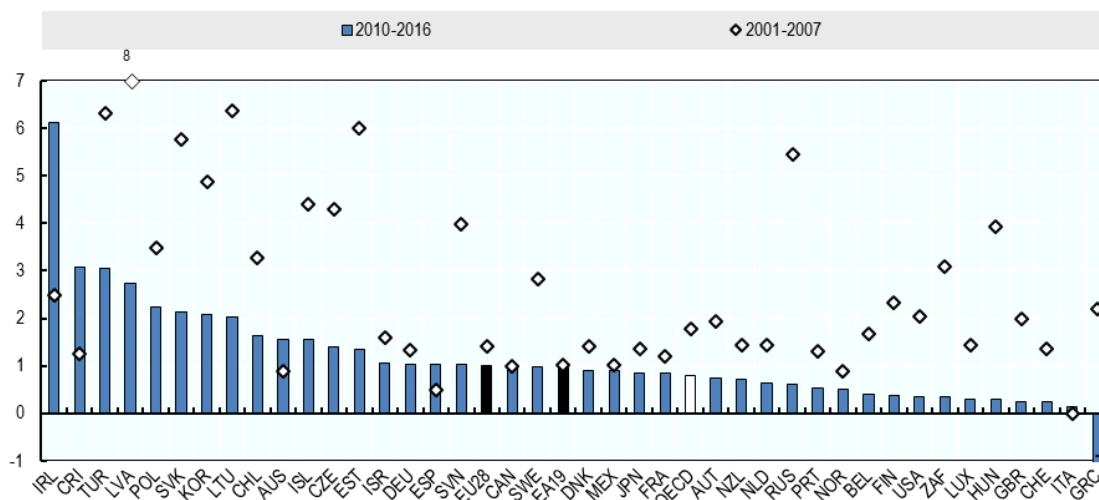
1.5.3 Labour Productivity Stagnation

A brief look at labour productivity growth before and after the crisis as set out in Figure 1.1 tells its own story in terms of an ongoing trend in the reduction of labour productivity related growth across the OECD (2018)²⁵. According to the OECD, job creation in the post-crisis period has occurred mostly in activities with relatively low labour productivity, dragging down overall labour productivity. For example, across the OECD the GDP point between 2001 and 2007 stood at 2.62. In the period between 2014 and 2016, the GDP point was at 2.15. Within the European Union (EU28), the 2001 – 2007 GDP point was 2.27 and in the period between 2014 – 2016 the GDP point was 2.14. Overall, this is a picture of productivity stagnating rather than growing. The OECD comment also that labour compensation levels correlate highly with labour productivity levels, and so more jobs in lower labour productivity activities has also meant more jobs with below average wages in most economies, working to weigh down on average salaries in the economy as a whole (OECD 2018)²⁶.

²⁵ Ireland’s apparently comparatively high rate of labour productivity growth is related to a problem of ‘total economy’ definition, a concept which is examined in the next paragraph.

²⁶ <http://www.oecd.org/sdd/productivity-stats/oecd-compendium-of-productivity-indicators-22252126.htm>.

Figure 2: Labour Productivity Growth Before and After the 2008 Financial Crisis
(GDP per hour worked, total economy, percentage change at annual rate)



Source: OECD Productivity Statistics (database), February 2018.

Ireland would seem to be an outlier in Figure 1.1. 2015 post recession figures for Ireland show growth as having accelerated to a rate of 26 per cent of GDP, the highest annual growth reported anywhere in the western world. This suggested a major upward surge in Ireland's economy since the crash of 2008, but an upsurge that did not seem to translate into reality on the ground, as evidenced in the statistics discussed earlier in the chapter. Indeed, when unpacked it was found that the figure was problematic, in the sense that it included profits from the Multi-national Corporation (MNC's) sector that book their operations in Ireland in order to benefit from the low rate of corporation tax (of 12%) but profits which are actually repatriated rather than being banked in the domestic economy. This along with wages earned by cross-border workers, and dividends of foreign owned companies operating in Ireland make up what turns out to be a significant difference between GDP and a domestic measure GNI (Gross National Income). This is referred to as the dual nature of the Irish economy (Irish Congress of Trade Unions 2006). GNI is a more realistic expression of the real economy in the context of the lives of people domestically. For example using GDP as the indicator the value of the Irish economy in 2016 was 275bn, using GNI this reduced to 190bn. This translated to a figure of debt as 75 per cent of GDP, but 106 per cent of GNI (Boland 2017).

A report by the National Competitiveness Council (NCC) (2018) shows that based on GNI with the additional deduction of the contribution from the substantial rise in capital deepening²⁷ Ireland's multi factor productivity actually stagnated (0.2 per cent growth) over the 2006-2014 period.

²⁷ Capital deepening is growth in the capital intensity of labour, i.e. the amount of capital available per hour worked (CSO 2018).

Drawing from CSO (2018) productivity statistics the report added that these trends are further exacerbated if the 2015-2016 period is included in the analysis (NCC 2018). In light of the changing economic culture that this literature suggests, another question for this study is if and how this shapes the culture of decision-making in the local context.

1.6 Wealth Inequality: Ireland

Alongside productivity stagnation, the picture evident in the literature is also one of profitability. These conditions are predicted to intensify where Ireland is described as being faced with “soaring wealth inequality” in their report on Growth and Development and Intergenerational Equity and Sustainability (World Economic Forum 2018).

Comprehensive information on wealth inequality in Ireland has been difficult to access until more recently (McDonnell 2014) for the simple reason that there has not been high-quality distributional data that could measure household wealth over time. However, this is changing and more recent work by Staunton (2015) in a report for TASC, the Think-tank for Action on Social Change, provided analysis of the distribution of wealth in Ireland based on two recent studies, a 2014 Credit Suisse ‘Global Wealth Report’ and ‘Global Wealth Databook’, and the 2015 CSO ‘Household Finance and Consumption Survey’ (HFCS). The latter is a more recent addition to Irish data sources. These studies complement each other in the sense that they both have limitations that are somewhat addressed by each other²⁸.

Staunton’s (2015) work shows that the top 10 per cent of the Irish population had over half the share of net wealth according to both the HFCS (53.8%) and the Credit Suisse survey (58.5%). This is a considerable jump from Nolan’s 1991 (in Staunton 2015) estimate of *The Wealth of Irish Households*, where the top 10 per cent of households were estimated to hold 42.3 per cent of household wealth.

Staunton’s (2015) analysis also found that for those at the top of the wealth divide, finance is more representative of the kind of assets held, over, that is, other kinds of assets like property or land. For example, Staunton’s (2015) findings show that a large proportion of the wealth of the top decile (52.5%) continues to be made up of equity in private business and listed companies, land (only 10%

²⁸ For example, the CSO study is a voluntary survey, subject therefore to opt out, and to underreporting of wealth holdings, which has implications for the distribution data produced particularly due to the unreliability of top wealth holdings data. However, it provides good details of individual household wealth profiles, something which the Credit Suisse dataset lacks. The Credit Suisse data utilises analysis models that provide estimates, rather than accurate predictions, of the holdings at the top of the distribution spread providing statistics that help to counterbalance the CSO deficiencies at the top end (Staunton 2015).

of households have land) (HFSC), and is held by those on higher incomes (top 20% have 39% of net wealth). In relation to being in debt, a measure that is relevant in terms of any calculation of wealth distribution due to its impact on net wealth measurements, the top 10 per cent have the second highest share of all debt (16.2%) after those in the bottom 10 per cent, the group one would assume to have a high debt percentage. What the figure for the top 10 per cent highlights is that their wealth holdings are high enough for them to be in the top 10 per cent for net wealth even with the high rates of debt owing (Staunton 2015). In wealth Gini²⁹ terms, which measures the differences in the distribution of wealth, wealth inequality has increased by over 10 points in the past five years. In terms of this study then, the picture of Ireland's economy as one conducive to profitability, informs the question of whether and how the culture of economy, as it is constituted in the local context, might be linked to this reality.

1.7 Inequality is Bad for Politics

As well as being bad for society and bad for the economy, the negative implications of inequality for a democratic politics have also been highlighted (e.g. Atkinson 2015, Picketty 2013). The French economist, Thomas Picketty, in his best seller *Capital in the 21st Century*, discusses this in the context of (global) wealth inequality. His argument is based on a view of the economy underpinned by the current model of growth that will eventually lead to the concentration of wealth among a relatively small group of ultra-rich people. His argument is that the main driver of this eventuality is the tendency of return on capital (3 - 4%) to exceed the rate of economic growth. This will result in the continual flow of profit upwards, and ultimate accumulation of profit at the top. According to this thesis, Picketty is challenging the neoliberal theory that the rate of growth and the reduction of inequality go hand in hand. Picketty (2013) argues that the current growth trajectory is instead one moving towards an extreme unequal distribution of wealth.

Indeed, capitals project of profit accumulation continues to be a roaring success. The 2017 Global Wealth Report points out that across all regions globally, and tilted heavily towards the US, wealth inequality rose from 2007 to 2016, a period which has seen the fundamental change in patterns in wealth creation and wealth inequality since the 2007 financial downturn (Shorrocks *et al.* 2017). Global wealth inequality in terms of wealth versus poverty is staggering, evidenced in the finding that "[o]nce debts have been subtracted, a person needed only USD 3,582 to be among the wealthiest half of world citizens in mid-2017 (Global Wealth Report 2017). Globally, while the bottom half of adults collectively own less than 1 per cent of total wealth, the top 10 per cent own 88 per cent of global assets, and the top percentile alone accounts for half of total household wealth

²⁹ Higher Gini coefficients signify greater inequality in wealth distribution, with 1 signalling complete inequality and 0, complete equality.

(Global Wealth Report 2017). The post 2008 crisis period has seen a situation where the top wealth holders have benefited particularly. According to Oxfam International, 82 per cent of all wealth created in the last year (2017-18) went to the top 1 per cent, and nothing went to the bottom 50 per cent (Pimentel *et al.* 2018).

Picketty (2013) points out that a society with an extremely unequal distribution of wealth will also have an extremely unequal distribution of income due to the fact that the wealthy will drive and manipulate political directions and shape economic structures in such a way as to ensure increasing growths in rates of profit, and therefore its upward accumulation, is sustained. For Picketty (2013), one of the key mechanisms of profit accumulation will be inherited wealth, and therefore, those with the most power and influence economically, socio-culturally and politically will be what he calls the 'heiristocracy'. Despite this becoming all too real in the form of the Trump presidency, Picketty (Goldhammer 2017) suggests that we are far from the limit of this current trajectory, which he sees as perhaps running its course in a half century or so.

1.8 Class Polarisation and the Changing Nature of Citizenship

This prediction is particularly worrying in light of the evidence in the ethnographic literature (Wacquant 2008) on the relationship between the increasing polarisation of society, the changing nature of citizenship, and the effects of same, not only on those at the lower end of the social hierarchy, but also the middle classes. Wacquant's (2008) work, entitled *Urban Outcasts, A Comparative Sociology of Advanced Marginality*, examines comparatively the inter-relationship between various strands of economic and socio-political change under neoliberalism in the US, France and the UK, as these were being experienced by already marginalised communities. While Wacquant (2008) found differences between these countries in terms of social change, he also found overarching similarities that suggested the different countries were just at varying stages along a similar change trajectory. What was common were the components of a structural violence that he defined as the result of a set of mutually reinforcing socio-political and economic changes that have resulted in large numbers of the unskilled labour force experiencing economic redundancy and social marginality (Wacquant 2008). Structural violence as defined by Wacquant (2008) comprised three inter-related components: mass unemployment, relegation to decaying neighbourhoods and stigmatisation. In the US context, the author argues, the most marginalised (predominantly poor black communities) are produced to serve a reproductive function, in the sense that they are held up as an example of how bad things can get if one does not put in the appropriate effort into avoiding the same fate. This adds a new dimension to Gans' (1971) argument on the 'Uses of Poverty', encapsulated in thirteen functions that allow the more affluent get on with being upwardly mobile. Gans' (1971) work highlighted how this used to occur through,

for example, the more affluent distinguishing themselves from the poor or unburdening themselves from the 'dirty work' that needs to be done in society, or indeed acquiring work that involved 'saving' the poor. In Wacquant's (2008) work, the poor are seen to function as a constant reminder to the more affluent that falling down the social ladder, this downward trajectory in life circumstances, is a distinct possibility for everyone now that can only be avoided by ensuring one scrambles to stay in the game³⁰. Staying in the game, according to Wacquant (2008), means being a competition citizen, achieved through investing one's efforts in ways that are orientated towards the interests of self.

1.9 Interrogating the Concept - Decision-Making

The literature used heretofore by way of critique of the simplistic and dualistic conceptualisation of the social produced in the use of the policy discourse of inclusion/exclusion, is simultaneously suggestive of the discursive production of a society that aligns with what Cameron & Palan (2004) identify instead as *The Imagined Economies of Globalisation*. What the authors posit is that while social change is occurring, evident in concrete processes of technological, economic and institutional change, a re-writing of the collective imaginary of the entire social field is being produced in discourse and practice. This particular conceptualisation of the social moves beyond the confines of Anderson's (1983) imagined community (or nation) to one of globalisation made up of a tripartite set of economies: the offshore (or global), the private (economy of self-interest), and anti-economy (citizens of society but outside of the economy). Foucault (1972) argues that epistemological framing, here a social field with globalisation at one end and exclusion at the other, becomes the boundaries of thought itself, the bounds of what is proper to, and therefore properly left out of the framing. Cameron & Palan (2004) argue that with this changed framing has come a changed relationship between the state, citizen, economy and polity, which is occurring as part of the discursive production of globalisation as an unproblematic concept. Understanding how this comes into being, a necessary question if we want to assess whether this is the trajectory that we desire, requires, the authors argue, a reflexive examination of the meaning of globalisation as it is being produced, rather than the unquestioned acceptance of the concept of globalisation as a social fact. This reason and perspective towards inquiry informs the rationale for the first key aim of this study, to undertake an examination of the meaning of policy decision-making that is being constituted, and how it is informed, in order to make visible the kind of citizen and society that we are producing in this process.

³⁰ The swing among white, blue-collar and union household voters to Trump in 2016, as well as the overall drop in Democratic voters (Moody 2017) could be interpreted as a consequence of the downward mobility (and fears of same) that Wacquant (2008) identified in his work.

1.10 Empowering and Emancipatory Research

A final key question here relates to how this kind of study might be achieved. A paper by the sociologist Tom Inglis (1997) entitled *Empowerment and Emancipation* provides a useful framing for interrogating this question. Inglis' (1997) work provides insight into a distinction between empowerment and emancipation. He points to the need for a definition of power and its relationship to the self as key for understanding this difference. Drawing from the organisational literature, Inglis identifies a relationship between the concept of empowerment and the notion that a true self (Habermas 1984, 1987) exists. Power in this framing is recognised as existing at the organisational (systemic) level, and the goal in empowerment terms is the equipment or upskilling of the self with the capacity to work most effectively and efficiently within and/or around the power related blockages that are an accepted part of organisational reality. Unlike empowerment, emancipation is concerned with changing the system (Inglis 1997). Its basis comes from the argument that to assume an essential self can be realised by constituting a self that is able to work around the power structures that exist, is simultaneously to constitute individuals that adhere to a self-regulating and self-disciplining form of social control. This is perpetuated within an empowerment framing in the lack of analysis of power structures, that is, an examination of how power has come to be the way it is and how it impacts on individual lives. Changing the system, an emancipatory perspective, requires an understanding of power itself. This requires understanding how power has come to be the way it is, and acceptance of the idea that the self comes into being in the matrix of power relations that are located in discourse and practice (Foucault, 1978, in Inglis 1997). While the Habermasian position suggests that the self can step outside of power relations in a way to navigate them, the Foucauldian position takes this to be an impossibility. An emancipatory perspective equips individuals to think in terms of a social act rather than an individual one, where the orientation is towards changing the structures that constitute individual lives rather than individuals *per se*.

A final but crucial difference is that from an empowerment approach where change is instigated by teachers/trainers/managers who shape learning with the purpose of equipping learners, emancipatory change is instigated by the oppressed and taken up by the collective in the interests of all. Feminist theory provides a vantage point from where an emancipatory approach can be realised in its foregrounding of the centrality of critical self-reflection. This is a way of understanding how we are constituted in power relations and in turn serve in constituting others pointing to a process of personal transformation. But, as Inglis (1997) points out, this must necessarily be also accompanied by the feminist demands for taking up, by the teacher/trainer/manager and indeed researcher, of the power struggle that the oppressed identify. Making the power relations that produce oppression visible to the oppressed, inclusive of the role

that the educator/researcher plays in that process, can serve for building a collective struggle for undermining power and thus undermining the kind of social polarisation that the literature suggests we are currently constituting. This final point in the conceptual framework for this study informs the second broad aim and ultimate goal of this study which is the question of whether an alternative trajectory to the current one is possible, and if so, what might this entail, and how this might be achieved.

1.11 Study Aims & Objectives

Based on my reading of the literature, my original question concerning the inclusion of parents in decision-making processes was turned around to become a far broader inquiry into the meaning of decision-making itself.

In summary then, the key aims and objectives of the study are:

a) to undertake an exploration of the meaning of the 'ideal' decision-maker as this is produced in the discourse and practices that make up school-parent relations.

This will be done by:

- undertaking an exploration into how the meaning of the 'ideal' type of decision-maker is informed, as evidenced in school-parent relations, and
- making visible how this relationship is held in place

b) to learn about the effects that the discourses and practices that constitute the 'ideal' subject/decision-maker have for those lower down on the social hierarchy,

c) to inquire into the implications of this for society more generally, and,

d) to explore whether an alternative to this current social trajectory is desirable and if so, what this might look like, and how this might be achieved.

1.12 Summary of Chapters

Chapter 2 sets out a theoretical and methodological framework for the study. It takes as a point of departure the argument that there is a crisis in democracy in the European Union that is being produced as the result of a split that is occurring between power and politics. Contrary to arguments that this is occurring due to the backgrounding of the state with the advancement of globalisation, the chapter argues instead that understanding this split requires examination of the sphere of politics and the constitutive function of same as this pertains to the meaning of the state

at one end, and political participation at the other. Undertaking this kind of exploration, it is then argued, requires a reflexive approach to inquiry, with a focus on understanding the changes to social institutions that make up the sphere of politics. From this approach to analysis it is suggested a more robust understanding of the democratic deficit can be ascertained. The chapter locates this exploration in around the time of the 2008 financial crash, exploring changes that occurred in the run up to this period, and since. It presents an argument for the increasing hollowing out of democracy, and accompanying profitability as this relates to the neoliberal Irish context. This is based on the literature outlining changes that foreground the 'expert' decision-maker, while backgrounding government in this regard, a downgrading of the popular vote, and simultaneous promotion of the 'participatory citizen', and accompanying de-politicisation of poverty. This is set against a corresponding consent to power as represented by business both Irish and multinational. Resistance to these changes is discussed but in terms of its generally unsustained form. The chapter then critically examines the effects of this kind neoliberal politics by exploring the themes of subjectivity, work and social relations. Neoliberal subjectivity is outlined, in terms of how this differs to its liberal predecessor, with particular reference to the collapsing into each other of previous distinctions between work and the worker. As neoliberal human capital, the literature suggests, we are now 'entrepreneurs of the self'. Rather than assuming that this also suggests we are 'all middle class', the literature on parenting and class is drawn from to demonstrate the differences that persist. The chapter sets out some of the policy changes to work and welfare that were ushered in under austerity, discussing their implications for the meaning of work, and effects on marginalised people, not only in terms of policy but also in terms of policy research. The final section examines the literature on the changes to the concepts of risk and respectability under neoliberalism. These are key concepts for examining the complex ways through which class and gender are reproduced, now considered in ways that they have changed under neoliberal financialisation. By way of closing, the chapter concludes that inequality has become an acceptable equilibrium; that is, a system of stratification that is both reproductive of inequality, while being simultaneously impossible to challenge, without being faced with the risk of downward mobility.

Chapter 3 provides a preliminary introduction to the field site, and contextualised in local area and national statistics, while **Chapter 4** sets out the research procedure undertaken. The ethical nature and conditions for undertaking the study are set out, from planning through to dissemination. A feminist ethnographic approach to inquiry is used in this study taken up because of its focus on knowledge production, its reflexive approach to inquiry, and attention to relations of power. The chapter sets out a theory of the research procedure framed in the feminist principles of reciprocity, care and empowerment. Methods utilised include participant observation, interviews (n=13) and a focus group (n=1). The chapter begins with autobiographical analysis of my early days in the field

in order to illustrate the link between knowledge, reflexivity and power, the core concerns of this approach. Analysis was an iterative process of movement between field and theory and writing informed by a combination of autobiographical and epistemic reflexivity, for gaining insight into the meaning of decision-making as constituted in the school-parents relationship. The key feminist principles of reciprocity, care and emancipation are set out.

Chapter 5 looks at the issue of decision-making power, as this is constituted in the school-parent relationship. Work processes in the school were found to be constitutive of an 'ideal' type of decision-making subject, that is, the subject of competition, investment and interest, while simultaneously producing unequal access to this position. This is shown to occur in a complex interplay of government action and inaction as this is interwoven between more recent austerity related policy reforms at the macro level, established policies informing the work undertaken in the school, and work with parents more specifically. In this complex field, the investment of time as work related value, and self-improvement as a key focus of work are promoted, thus argued to simultaneously go towards a changed meaning of productivity, and the exclusion of marginalised voices, respectively. An unquestioned social inequality is the wider backdrop to these recent and not so recent policy related changes, one where competition, based on a dominant idea of intelligence, is accepted as the organising principle of unequal social relations. The retention of this dynamic as it exists in the broader education field (and society more generally), it is argued, is beneficial for some, and exclusive of others. The chapter also points to how the work of policy researchers needs to be critically examined in these same ways, based on reflexive analysis of the effect of my own presence on the perceived parameters for speaking between parents. Left unchecked, this can mirror relations of subsumption, of the social and political domains of life under the economic, as represented by the 'professional' researcher. The chapter closes by pointing to some of the ways that the 'ideal' subject is resisted in the school. Key here is the point that parents are aware of power differentials in the school-parent relationship, but being involved in the school remains important because of their desire to support, not only their children, but the children in the school more generally.

Chapter 6 examines the arena of non-decision making power or the agenda-setting arena as it relates to the field of parent-school relations. A key finding in the chapter is that the relations in this sphere are depoliticising and depoliticised. This is found to be due to relations that are produced as individualising. This relates both to the school finding itself in the position of providing informal support to parents around psychological health and well-being in a context where these issues are not part of the formal work with parents in the school, and to the changing of in-house policies around school going costs. Viewed critically, these actions are argued to serve for

disconnecting the struggles of lived lives, from the political dimension of their production, all be this misrecognised. The fact that policy research can be similarly implicated is also explored. The chapter points to an ethics of care, underpinned by behaviour change, and manifest in an orientation in the school towards building 'positive' relations, as holding this reality in place. Explored in the context of a focus group with young mothers, the chapter illustrates that this complex dynamic is indeed evident across their views. The effects of this relational context is shown to be one of silencing where speaking out about money worries is something that all the mothers are unwilling to do. This is clearly so for reasons associated with respectability, where mothers are conscious of the risk to self, that is their status as a good mother, should they speak out about an inability to pay for school going costs. Notwithstanding this finding, the chapter closes by making visible that a spirit of defiance is found to remain where compliance is not yet total.

Chapter 7 is the final findings chapter. It presents a reading of the data from the perspective of a Rancièrian (May 2010) 'presupposition of equality', a framing for undertaking research by listening to what those who are excluded are speaking. Three mother's stories are presented, each containing accounts of their exclusion from decision-making, in relation to their children's additional educational needs in their various children's schools. The responses to each mothers exclusion follows where actions taken and the rational for that action is examined. Read collectively, their stories present collective knowledge and common features for a theory of decision-making that is inclusive. This sets out a process of decision-making that begins from the needs of people with the least power, taken up by people with more power. It is a collective process of critical inquiry into the various ways to respond to needs arising, as well as the kind of knowledge this would produce, and implications of that knowledge. Key also was the finding that mothers viewed themselves as being responsible for providing support to their own children, but in a context where they saw an equivalent role for the state, but responsibility for the provision of opportunities that are relevant to their needs, for supporting them in their roles as mothers. This was in contrast to the kind of state retrenchment and/or oppressive blocking out of the women's voices that they varyingly experienced. The chapter closes by suggesting that theirs was a collective call to reclaim the state.

Chapter 8 is the discussion. It begins by revisiting the complex ways that the 'ideal' subject, and inequality of access to that subject position are simultaneously produced, as learned from analysis of the work done with parents in the school. The role of the non-decision-making arena of parent-school relations for holding this inequality in place is reintroduced, relations that were found to be de-politicising, primarily due to their individualising nature, where personal problems become separated from their political contexts. Discussion about how these kinds of critiques must not be

limited to policy practice, but must also include policy research. The silencing of dissent is a key finding, which is then discussed and examined in the context of Parkin's (1979) concept of social closure. Here, some of the ways that exclusionary closure was found to occur in response to parent's resistance in the school are unpacked. Also discussed is social closure in its usurpationary form, showing how parents, although aware of the power imbalance in their relations with school, remain determined to be involved for the sake of their children, and as such attempt to renegotiate power relations on that basis. Examined in terms of future making, the discussion then argues that the findings are suggestive of a trajectory that is productive of increasing social polarisation, a future that will be made of up three economies, the private, off-shore and non-citizen economies (Cameron & Palan 2004). The private economy is the economy of competition subjects who are orientated towards self-interest, but in the context of state retrenchment and wage stagnation, the economy where more and more are finding themselves at risk of downward mobility. This was found not only in the 'choice' available for producing the self as 'good' worker, but also the precarious position that one mother found herself in where the only 'choice' available to her for supporting her son's additional education needs was private supports. This came with the worry for her of how to meet the long terms financial implications. At the top, an offshore economy, where citizens detached from nation can purchase citizenship rights across the globe in return for business investments, a reality already identified in the literature. At the other end, the non-economy (not non-economic), where accessing credit is citizens only way of avoiding exclusion, thus becoming increasingly indebted, but in a context where speaking out about poverty is increasingly difficult. This too was a finding in this study; mothers caught up in complexities of risk and respectability, unwilling to speak out. In conversation with this bleak forecast the chapter closes by discussing how read from the perspective of a presupposition of equality, policy research can become the work of actively listening to what excluded mothers are speaking. Using this methodological approach, mother's knowledge about ways of creating inclusive decision-making processes became visible. Read together, this knowledge outlined a process of decision-making that begins from the needs of people with the least power, taken up by people with more power. It is a collective process of critical inquiry into the various ways to respond to these needs, as well as the kind of knowledge this would produce, and implications of this knowledge. A willingness to assume individual responsibility for the provision of support to those in need was also found, but crucially in a context where the state is expected to be equally responsible for making opportunities available and accessible to the population based on need. The literature on multiple intelligences (Gardner 1999) is referenced as a way of operationalising this kind of work with parents in schools. This inclusive and bottom up process, it is argued, may well be the antidote to the divisiveness of neoliberalism.

Chapter 9 concludes the study. It briefly revisits the point of departure of the study, and the study aims and objectives. It then sets out the key conclusions. This is followed by discussion on why the study is important for researchers and practitioners, pointing firstly to the value of inquiring into the kind of knowledge that is being created in relations between the individual and state under neoliberalism, and the inequality, relationally produced that this makes visible. This kind of knowledge, it concludes, is more usually hidden in research focused on efficacy. Also discussed is the value of a reflexive approach to research and practice for understanding inequality in the context of its wider historical production, as this pertains to power as it occurs in local relations. The chapter then looks at the implications for policy, examining the findings in the context of the directive principles of social policy set out in Article 45 of the Irish Constitution. Drawing on the study findings it is suggested that we are veering away from the principles of justice and equality contained therein. The chapter closes with some recommendations for research in relation to epistemology, informational politics, and power, suggesting broad based recommendation for policy namely the introduction of a basic income and free schooling.

Chapter 2 Policy-Making, Democracy and Inequality

2.1 Introduction

This chapter presents a contextual framework for the study comprising a set of concepts, assumptions, expectations, beliefs and theories for hypothesising about the wider social context that informs the discourse and practices that make up the school-parent relations. The chapter begins by taking up Zygmunt Bauman's (2013) argument of a crisis in democracy that exists within the European Union that has occurred as a result of a split between power and politics. Contrary to arguments locating the cause of this split in the rise of globalisation, the chapter posits an argument that instead the state itself is a key player here, in its role in national level political and social change. As such, the chapter endeavours to examine the conditions of neoliberalism, the ideology of privatisation, de-regulation, and individualisation as these pertain to the Irish context. This framing is informed by the theoretical thinking of Michele Foucault, Judith Butler and Pierre Bourdieu, as is the methodology for undertaking the inquiry. Using the 2008 financial crash as a reference point, the chapter examines changes to the institutional landscape in Ireland since and immediately prior to this time that pertain to the national and European context, along with more specifically national examples that are suggestive of conditions in line with the hollowing out of democracy and reproduction of inequality.

In order to explore some of the effects of these macro structures as they relate to the meso and micro levels of society the chapter then examines the literature under the broad themes of subjectivity, work and social relations. Drawing from the work of Foucault, the notion of neoliberal subjectivity is explored, paying particular attention to the way that we are produced as entrepreneurs of the self. This is compared with the greater distinction between labour and the worker that existed under liberalism. In tandem with this Foucault's work points to an extension of a market logic under which the social and political dimensions of life are subsumed. While Foucault is more concerned with how subjects are produced in power, the ethnographic literature is drawn from to illustrate how in the making of subjects, classed subjectivities are among the kinds of subjectivities that are produced. The chapter then draws from literature that shows how a changed nature of work and welfare was ushered in under austerity. It pays particular attention to the implications of these changes for those lower down on the social hierarchy as this relates to official discourse about these domains. It is argued that in the context of these kinds of changes inequalities, and the processes through which they are produced, are increasingly difficult to identify. The implications of this literature for the need to undertake reflexive research is highlighted in order to prevent the inquiry from reproducing the conditions of that silencing. Two

key concepts, risk and respectability, are examined in order to explore the effects of neoliberalism on social relations. Theory about the changed nature of risk, as having expanded to become something originating within the individual is argued to have occurred in tandem with the rise of financialisation. In the context of what is argued to be a change in the matrix of social relations from exchange to credit, this new meaning of risk is argued to go towards a strengthening of the individualisation of thought and action.

Drawing from the ethnographic literature the chapter then explores how class relations might be understood within this wider context. The concept of respectability is found to be key here, for exploring the different ways that the working classes interact with the middle classes, in other words how they take up, resist, and/or reject dominant discourse and practices. The chapter closes by arguing that the overall effect of neoliberalism is the production of a landscape of stratified inequality in the form of an 'acceptable equilibrium'. Shaped by the fear and risk of downward mobility and access to credit as the means for preventing this potentiality, an acceptable equilibrium is a form of stratification whereby holding onto one position on that hierarchy can only be maintained through engaging in competition and consumption. In terms of a theory of class, an acceptable equilibrium is both reproductive of, and a blockage to challenging, the class inequality that it is dependent upon for its existence.

2.2 The State, Power and Politics

With reference to what is described as a crisis in democracy within the European Union, Zygmunt Bauman (2013), uses a comparative analysis between the stock exchange collapse of the late 1920's and the most recent economic crisis of 2008, in order to put forward his analysis of why this is occurring. Bauman (2013) argues that contrary to the range of arguments that are usually put forward to explain this, such as 'an inborn organic defect' in the institutional structures in the EU, or 'specific personalities' at that level, instead we need to look at the changed nature of the state, and its relationship to the split between power and politics. In the post-1920's context the state had a function comprising both power (to get things done) and politics (to make decisions) or the absolute and indivisible sovereignty, and in this sense was a *strong* state. More recently, the shift to the 'invisible hand of the market' Bauman (2013) argues, has resulted in the separation of power and politics. This earlier version of the state, which can broadly be understood as the Keynesian state, was equipped with absolute and indivisible sovereignty over its territory, regardless of the different models of Keynesianism taken up in nations as diverse as Russia, Germany and the US³¹. Bauman (2013) characterises the post-war Keynesian sovereign state as a 'social state' the role of

³¹ Bauman describes these differences as the Soviet state-managed, German state-regulated and US state-stimulated economics.

which, involved insuring its citizens against life's misfortunes including poverty, unemployment, homelessness, social exclusion, and a model of state orientated towards resolving the social problems that existed in Western societies.

This role for the state was challenged in the grinding halt to economic growth that occurred in the 1970's (Bauman 2013). This period ushered in a changed perception of the state, and a discursive move towards changing expectations of state solutions within society among citizens. This changing view of the state went from being identified as the protective arm of its subjects to being a hindrance to economic progress and an impediment to human enterprise. The uptake of this new ideological position by Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher in the 1980's saw the promotion of 'deregulation', 'privatisation', and 'subsidiarization'³² as a replacement for regulation, nationalisation and the communal, or in other words a shifting sideways of the post-war 'strong state' making way for the neoliberal 'free market' (Bauman 2013). These latter macro level policies are the key principles of neoliberalism. This is the ideology, as highlighted in Chapter 1, of deferring decisions to the logic of the market, of withdrawal of the State from its role in provision, and of placing increasing responsibility for success in the hands of the individual, all be this to different degrees in different jurisdictions.

This change seemed to be fruitful in the following thirty years, orientated now towards an intensifying draw on natural resources that is at the centre of today's climate debate, the central place of consumption, and the unregulated provision of credit in order to bolster that consumption. This, as we have more recently experienced, was followed by the most recent collapse of the global economy, increasingly widening gap in inequalities and a crisis in terms of how to move forward from this point (Bauman 2013, Harvey 2010). Bauman argues that the split between power and politics means that a return to the 'strong state', even if it was desired, is impossible as it no longer has power, it having been taken up by extraterritorial global forces now moving freely, transcending national boundaries, while politics, he argues, has remained, for the most part, within national boundaries. In practice, this means that finance, investment capital, labour markets and commodities move freely, separated from any disruption from national level political decisions, thus making politics powerless (i.e. the demands of citizens) where they involve any challenge to the domain of global economics.

³² Subsidiarisation as used by Bauman (2000) refers to the way that social problems have become individualised in late modernity, in the sense that we are positioned as individualised 'problem-solvers' within our own lifeworlds. Bauman sees the subsidiarisation of social problems as one part of the process of individualisation, the other key component being that we are positioned to choose our own identity, and in turn to accept responsibility for it.

Within the current European context, Bauman (2013) suggests this is particularly complex where there is a situation of a Union attempting to build cooperation and sharing among aggregate nation states, alongside the expectation of individual nations to carry the burden of the economic collapse due to unregulated global power, in the form of austerity³³. Indeed, Bauman (2013) sees any hope of introducing an alternative to the current trajectory of consistently widening inequality as lying in the reunification of power and politics, but how that might happen, or, at what level, national or global, is the challenge, particularly in the context of already unregulated power, in the form of global capital.

2.2.1 The Globalisation Myth

A problem, not with Bauman's argument above of a split between power and politics per se, but with the theory of an agentless state due to having being taken over by global forces, can be identified from the perspective of the literature on the myth of globalisation (Bourdieu 1998, Cameron & Palan 2004). A brief examination of this problem will help to develop an alternative theory of the cause and therefore potential solution to the split between power and politics and the consequent crisis in democracy that is a point of central concern in this study. When discussing the myth of globalisation critical theorists do so from a constructivist perspective, arguing that globalisation, like all topics or 'truths' that make up the social world, is in fact a discursive construct.

This epistemological framing is Foucauldian (1972) in nature, a philosophical perspective that argues that the meanings that make up the social world are discursively produced, that is, through language in use. All social practices, not just what is said, but also what is done, are understood by Foucault, to be discursive. Together, discursive statements go towards discursive formations about an idea, encapsulating a shared style, political leaning or pattern about a topic. These go towards producing broader ways of thinking and acting, which collectively serve in constituting the topic, or truth. Social reality according to this view is a process of demarcation where there is a contest of sorts for the identification of what is 'true', and discourse and power/knowledge are what function as the demarcating process. From this perspective then, what we call globalisation is essentially a concept that is being constituted in the debates that take place about what it is.

However, rather than being recognised as a construct, globalisation is instead more often treated as artefact, a truth to *"be reported on, adapted to, or coped with.."* (Cameron & Palan 2004, p.33). This is the result of a more recent discursive slippage in research away from inquiry into theories of

³³ Austerity refers to the series of budgetary measure implemented by the Irish Government between 2008 and 2014 in response to the economic crisis and to the bail out of financial institutions involving cumulative cuts to public spending, social welfare and raising of taxes of over €30 billion (Over 20% of Ireland's GDP).

globalisation, that is the meaning of globalisation that is being discursively constituted, and instead towards globalisation theories, or what works best in terms of that thing called globalisation. Use in this way, contemporary political and social reality becomes shaped by the discursive debates about this myth, debates (as discourse, constitutive of society) that both inform people about what globalisation is and how it will affect them. In this process, Cameron & Palan (2004) argue, the fact that these discourses have another function, “that of carrying and reproducing effective and affective stories about the facticity of globalisation, is simply ignored” (Cameron & Palan 2004, p. 33). Importantly, the myth of globalisation is held in place not only by proponents of the idea, but also in the critiques that contribute to a recognition of the existence of the idea. For my purposes here then, Bauman’s (2013) argument that the state is subsumed under globalisation leaving the way for a split between power and politics, now becomes part of “a mediating discourse which tells [people] what globalisation is, how it affects their lives, and most crucially, how it will affect them in the future” (Cameron & Palan 2004, p. 3). In short this becomes part of the discourse that constitutes globalisation as a fact. Arguably this is constituted through both pro and anti-globalisation debates, both going towards globalisations production as a truth, not least in the example of Yanis Varoufakis’ (2016) call, in response to the Greek debt crisis, for the elimination of banks at a nation level banks, replaced by banking at a collective European level. This was suggested as a way for Europe to be better able to withstand the inevitable dips that came with periods of growth that are characteristic of global capitalism, that is, to have the capacity to better compete as a European block in the global market. This recovery narrative is both productive of globalisation as an artefact, and suggestive of powerless nation states in the wake of this reality.

2.2.2 The Competition State

Contrary to this somewhat taken for granted idea of the neoliberal shrunken state in the context of globalisation, Cameron and Palan (2004) argue that a different spatial imaginary of the state is being written, in the discursive production of globalisation as a truth. This re-imagining of the state has been occurring in a shift away from the idea of the ‘imagined community’ (Anderson 1983) of the nation-state, and instead towards the ‘imagined economies of globalisation’. This new spatial imagining of the social world comprises three economies: the offshore (or deregulated economy), the private (or onshore economy) and the anti-economy (or social exclusion) (Cameron & Palan 2004). In this context the character of the state has changed from one of unity and insurance, or the Keynesian state, not to the shrunken state, but instead to the state of ‘privatism’, or self-interested competition. This is the state they argue, that is discursively constituted in line with the core value of economic globality, competitiveness.

2.2.3 A Changed Meaning of Inclusion and Exclusion

This kind of framing, Cameron & Palan (2004) argue, has implications for how inclusion and exclusion is conceived. Inclusion has come to be subsumed under its new meaning competitiveness (Lovering 1988, p. 35), and social exclusion is conceived as reluctance by the individual to take up competition, thus locating the self in the anti-economy. The sphere of social exclusion in this framing is a kind of holding site, exist from which will be overcome once the individual comes up to speed with the new world order. In other words, poverty and social exclusion are recast in the narratives of globalisation as the fault of the individual (Cameron & Palan 2004). Social exclusion the authors argue is no longer viewed in terms of material exclusion in this framing, but instead relates to one's effectiveness as 'human capital'³⁴ in the competition state. This is determined on the political right by the necessity for human capital wastage to occur for the smooth running of the economy, and on the Left in terms of poverty and unemployment being an unnecessary waste of human capital, the discursive demarcating process that together serve to support the overarching ideology of competitiveness as the natural order of life. Drawing on Levitas' (1996) paper entitled "The concept of social exclusion and the new Durkheimian hegemony" which problematises the use of the concept of social exclusion in policy discourse, Cameron and Palan point to this kind of change as having resulted in a shift in the quality of civil society. The authors explain this by stating that civil society is "no longer identified by a set of core values, rights and responsibilities, but by levels of access to and participation in, 'opportunities' in the mainstream economy" (Cameron & Palan 2004, p. 138).

2.2.4 Politics as the Site of Inquiry into the Democratic Deficit

Returning to Bauman's (2013) link between the democratic deficit in Europe and its link to the split between global power and national politics, the notion of the 'competition state' offers an alternative suggestion for how the reunification of power and politics that he calls for, in the name of democracy, might happen. For Bauman (2013), the challenge was in the question of at what level, national or global, reunification between power and politics should be worked towards. Within the European context, Bauman (2013) argued this is a complex challenge where there is a situation of a Union attempting to build cooperation and sharing among aggregate nation states, alongside the expectation of individual nations to carry the burden of economic collapse, resulting from Europe's adherence to unregulated global capital. Indeed, this avenue of inquiry has become even more complex in the context of Brexit, which has in its process pointed the finger at the institution of the European Union as being the fundamental problem (Celestino 2016).

³⁴ Human capital is a concept in labour economics referring to the stock of knowledge, habits, social and personality attributes embodied in the ability to perform labour so as to produce economic value.

Justification of this finger pointing is clearly visible in the then German finance minister Wolfgang Schäuble's statement, that 'new elections change nothing' (Legrain 2015) in response to the Greek Syriza government's decision in 2015 to put the question to the Greek people of whether they should take up the additional EU bailout and austerity linked conditions that were being imposed by Europe. This was validated in the refusal of Europe to recognise the Greek 61% Oxi/No vote to that question making little of newspaper headlines like, "Greek referendum no vote signals huge challenge to Eurozone leaders" (Traynor *et al.* 2015). This refusal of any challenge to the dominant economic model by Schäuble and the Eurozone was not limited to Greece, but imposed on other eurozone countries also. For example, Francois Hollande's 2012 win in France, on a pledge to end austerity, and the demands of Italy's reformist Prime Minister, Matteo Renzi in 2014 for changes to the Eurozone's fiscal rules were both rejected from within central Europe. The critical point in these refusals, pointed out by Legrain (2015), is the fact that changes to Eurozone rules were being continually made, and driven by the German (and French) government, in order to protect the German banks that lent excessively to national banks. Legrain (2015) argues that the response within Europe defied the 'no-bailout' rule contained in the Maastricht Treaty, which bans member governments from bailing out other member countries³⁵. Viewed from this framing, of orchestrated political change at the European level, the cause of the split between power and politics shifts away from 'globalisation' and instead towards the sphere of politics itself. In addition, re-imagined as an active process, rather than an entity subsumed under global forces, the competition state, or rather how the state is being constituted in the policy-making process is perhaps a better point of focus, for understanding how democracy is being undermined, and therefore how this process might be avoided. Based on the kind of global spatial imagining that the competition state is argued to produce, inquiry into its production can also provide insight into how inequality is being produced in this process.

2.3 A Reflexive Approach to Inquiry

The key question at this juncture is how inquiry into the process of state making in the Irish context might be undertaken. Cameron and Palan state that "perceptions and theories must be considered important causal factors in the changes that we witness" (2004, p.3). In other word, social theory

³⁵ This was preceded by other breaches of Treaty rules for example in relation to borrowing levels which placed Germany, and France beyond the 3 per cent debt to GDP boundary that was contained in Stability and Growth Pact, which Germany had forced their partners to sign (Speigel Online 2011). These kinds of breaches went towards the catastrophic problems for members countries that emerged in 2008 associated with the overlending to banks in Eurozone countries, from Germany, which occurred as a result of the surpluses they built up. While the sanctions that were to be imposed on Germany and France for breaching the pact were avoided in the context of various maneuvers including their securing of a majority on the EU Council of Economic and Finance Ministers and in turn the cancelling of the European Commission's sanction procedure (Speigel Online 2011), any attempts to change things by other eurozone countries were firmly blocked by Germany and Brussels, with the mantra that 'there is no alternative' (Legrain 2015).

is not just prescriptive or descriptive but **part** of the discursive production of the structures that shape the social. Bourdieu (1991) calls this the theory effect, where a discourse invested with power, brings into being what it claims is already there, along with the implications of that reality, as it is being created. Like the myth of globalisation, we are at risk of reproducing the myth of the state.

2.3.1 State Performativity

In order to avoid this trap, inquiry becomes orientated towards the meaning of the state as it is being produced in discourse and practice, easier to visualise in the context of Bourdieu's claim that the state is 'a legal fiction: it doesn't exist' (Champagne *et al.* 2014, p. 25). This vantage point is crucial in a context where all around us the notion of the state as an artefact is discursively reproduced, both by people who are empowered to act in its name, thus routinely performing and reinforcing the authority of the state, and also in the process of citizens following state orders. The notion of performing here is better understood in terms of Butler's (1993, p. 2) theory of 'performativity' or, "the reiterative and citational practice by which discourse produces the effect that it names". While Butler (1999) employs this theory with particular reference to gender, it is applicable to any discursive artefact. Central to the idea of performativity is repetition and ritual that is coercive in the sense that it is informed by societal norms. Performativity refers to the condition of the artefact, rather than to an act or behaviour. In other words, actions and behaviours carried out in the performance of the artefact, here 'the state', adhere to the conditions of state performativity. Performativity is future shaping, in the sense that, in line with Foucault, as discourse, it is constitutive of social reality. Similarly, the state, for Bourdieu (Champagne *et al.* 2014) is incorporated within us, by shaping both our mental structures and practices, and in turn, our enactment of these (re)produces the state. By this logic then inquiry that departs from an uncritical acceptance of what the construct is, for example 'the state', becomes research, that then merely serves for the constructs own discursive reproduction. In other words, the research acts as a mechanism of disconnection between the outcomes, and itself as part of the (re)production of the conditions (the state) of that outcome, in the very absence of any recognition of the role it plays in that process. It is for this reason that Bourdieu argues that a reflexive sociology is crucial, an approach to inquiry that is orientated towards understanding the meaning of the concepts 'performativity', that is understanding how the concept is being constituted through our repetitive referencing of acts and behaviours of which it is comprised. This logic is one that suggests if we know how we collectively are constituting the social, and in turn its effects, we can then consciously act and behave in ways that will produce a different social world, if that is so wished.

2.3.2 Inequality: Habitus, Field and Capital

Undertaking reflective inquiry into how we constitute state performativity can be difficult. This is because state performativity is reproduced in social relations that are simultaneously sites through which we accumulate and are in contestation over, different types of capital. These processes are central to Bourdieu's theory of inequality: economic, cultural, educational, religious, political, social inequality, and so on. For Bourdieu, inequality is (re)produced in the relations between the micro and macro levels of society. At the micro level is the person's 'habitus', meaning a set of durable dispositions or structure of practices that are particular to the person, and incline individuals to act and react in particular ways (Bourdieu 1991). Habitus is both a structured and structuring structure, but this is not a conscious reality, where the "dispositions generate practices, perceptions and attitudes which are 'regular' without being consciously coordinated or governed by any 'rule' (Bourdieu 1991, p. 12). A person's habitus is acquired from birth, essentially from family and then community, or Bourdieu uses the term 'doxa' meaning acquired through the invisible orthodoxies that inform dispositions and practices (Champagne *et al.* 2014). As a structured set of dispositions, habitus unavoidably reflects the social conditions within which they were acquired, and as such are relatively homogenous reflecting broad class distinctions (Bourdieu 1991).

At the macro level of social relations, is the 'field' or broad social domain like education, culture, politics and so on, and what Bourdieu (2014) calls 'nomos' or the logic that governs the accumulation of capital in the various fields. The logic of practices and perceptions then are not merely the product of the habitus, but should be understood as the product of the relation between the habitus and the specific social contexts or 'fields' of action within which individuals act (Bourdieu 1991). For Bourdieu (1991), fields are sites of struggle over different types of capital, or struggles over how capital is distributed within the field, for example economic (material wealth), cultural (knowledge, skills), social (networks, family) and symbolic capital (prestige, honour realised where capital accumulation is legitimated by others and converted to power). Struggle here can relate to efforts to alter or maintain the current distribution of capital in the field (Bourdieu 1991). This play to preserve the status quo, or alter it, occurs in everyday interrelations organised according to the logic underpinning 'habitus' and 'field' which for some people in any particular field are more aligned than others.

Bourdieu (Champagne *et al.* 2014) points to the state as the enabler of the operation of fields, and the accumulation of capital within fields, through an incorporation of itself (the state) within the cognitive structures and routine practices of players in the field. The state is implicit then, in all of the rules of engagement between actors, and simultaneously difficult to think, in the ebb and flow of everyday life. This occurs in the state's invisible shaping of the 'nomos' (the logic which

structures fields and underpins the accumulation of capital), and 'doxa' (the invisible orthodoxies underpinning 'habitus') that provides the 'outside' of subjective perception of one's place in the world, as the objective condition of one's life. In this framing, the state is performative, in the sense that, it generates the meaning of compliance around which everyday life is lived, according to how it is created.

2.3.3 Misrecognition

Bourdieu's theory of inequality highlights that reproduction is not a neutral process, but it is the unmasking of the role of the state in this process of distribution and perpetuation of privilege that is complex in the context of "we ourselves [being] inventions of the state, our minds are inventions of the state" (Champagne *et al.* 2014, p. 115). This raises the question of why, if we know as Bourdieu argues that each individual plays a part in the historical production of structured inequality, do we not act differently? Bourdieu's theory of 'misrecognition' is useful here for thinking about what might be occurring. Misrecognition for Bourdieu (2000, in James 2015, p. 100) is "an everyday and dynamic social process where [a process or action] is not recognised for what it is because it was not previously 'cognised' within the range of dispositions and propensities of the habitus of the person(s) confronting it". His theory of inequality suggests that as players engage in the game of capital accumulation occurring in any given field, the underpinning 'misrecognised' unequal logic continues to inform the functioning of fields within the scope of the state. If then, identifying the role we play in the reproduction of inequality is so easily missed by us, how do we inquire into the meaning of the state we are creating without merely reproducing the inequality of which it is made up?

2.3.4 A Focus on Institutions for understanding the State

Bourdieu (Champagne *et al.* 2014) advocates for what he calls a genetic or reflexive sociology as the means for uncovering this complex process of the perpetuating of historically rooted inequality, encapsulated in state performativity. This requires reflexive analysis into the historical production of institutions of the state and the relationship of these processes to the production of arbitrary inequalities, or in other words, changes at the level of institution from the perspective of capital accumulation and contestation. Importantly, for Bourdieu (1991, p. 8), institution has a broader meaning than an organisation, a family or place of work, meaning instead "a relatively durable set of relations which endows individuals with power, status and resources of various kinds". It is this set of relations, the institution, "that endows the speaker to carry out the act which his or her utterance claims to perform" (Bourdieu 1991, p. 8).

Returning to the aim of the inquiry, that of the relationship between the state as it is being constituted and the effects of this on democracy in Ireland, the next section will look at the sphere

of politics as the key site of the institution of the state, from the perspective of the set of relations that are being constituted in this process. This is being done with a view to understanding how these effect the meaning of democracy and equality as they are being produced in the Irish context. The conceptual frame developed here, will then be examined in terms of how it relates to the meaning of decision-making as it is being produced in the local school context, how this is informed, its effects on the parties involved, and the implications this suggests for society more generally.

2.4 'Politics' and The Hollowing out of Democracy

A key text on the changing nature of politics in Western societies is Peter Mair's (2006) book entitled *"Ruling the Void? The Hollowing out of Western Democracy"*. This text contains an inquiry into the variety of processes he identified occurring in the context of what he also identified as a mutual withdrawal from politics by both citizens and the political elite. Mair's (2006) work was instigated what he found to be a generalised popular indifference towards politics, evidenced in a slow but steady decline in voting numbers over recent decades. By way of exploring what might be contributing to this, Mair undertook inquiry into the broader field of political, policy and academic discourses. Mair (2006) identified anti-political sentiments in the literature, suggestions that government was becoming 'too political' resulting in decision-making that was being held ransom to the electoral cycle. He also noticed a shift in political discourse in the late 1990's, for example, in the rhetoric of Tony Blair's progressive politics in the UK that promoted a new school of governance, based more on self-governance and promoting the view that government intervention was often counterproductive. Politics in advanced organised societies, the message suggested, should be concerned with supporting citizens to 'come up with their own solutions', so they can 'make the best of themselves' (Blair 2001, in Mair 2006, p. 25).

Another strand in the downgrading of democracy Mair (2006) identified was literature which was orientated towards a concept of democracy that could cope with the absence of citizen voters. This work involved a teasing out of the distinction between 'constitutional' and 'popular' democracy which together have long made up the meaning of democracy. The constitutional component referred to the need for checks and balances across institutions, or government *for the people*, and the popular component meaning the role of the ordinary citizen and mass participation in politics, or government *by the people*. What Mair (2006) found in the literature was a downgrading of the popular element and a foregrounding of the constitutional component based on a 'Western model' that has historically been more about systems of constitutional liberalism than democracy, and therefore 'best symbolised not by the mass plebiscite but the impartial judge' (Zakaria 1997, in Mair 2006, p. 30).

Also identified, were views that promoted the delegation of decision-making powers to non-elected, non-majoritarian institutions, in order for longer term interests to be considered and decided upon. This, it was argued, would provide for decision-making processes that were unhindered by elected representatives who, by design are accountable to voters, and so subject to shorter-term electoral cycle led decision-making. Indeed, non-elected 'experts' were promoted as being better able to deal with the complexities of the law than politicians. Collectively, these ideas were argued by Mair (2006) as going towards the devaluing, or hollowing out of democracy.

For Mair (2006), the indifference he identified among the demos was attributed to a failing of political parties, evidenced both in trends that suggested a lack of encouragement by political parties to engage citizens in party politics, a pattern of this trend he found across advanced OECD countries (Mair 2006). Indeed, while references to voter apathy are often expressed in official political discourse, what Mair found instead was that a more generalised process of de-politicisation was occurring where, in practice there exists a clear tendency for political elites to match citizen disengagement with a withdrawal of their own. He states,

Just as voters retreat to their own particularized spheres of interest, so too have political and party leaders withdrawn into the closed world of the governing institutions. Both sides are cutting loose.³⁶ (Mair 2006, p.45).

2.4.1 The 'Expert' Decision-Maker

The setting up of the Fiscal Advisory Council in Ireland is a particularly relevant example in the Irish context of the retreat of politics from the realm of economic decision-making, increasingly handed over to non-elected technocrats (Kennedy 2015). Established in 2011 after the election that saw the Fine Gael/Labour government in power post the economic collapse, the council was set up, tasked as being "an independent statutory body established as part of a wider agenda of reform to Ireland's budgetary architecture"³⁷. The Fiscal Council has a remit of independent economic analysis, assessing the fiscal stance, and monitoring compliance with legislated fiscal rules. Allen (2015, p. 69) calls this move 'a highly ideological strategy', in that it is suggestive of economics being an objective science, carried out by a neutral role that can step apart from society. Contrary to this,

³⁶ Britain's Brexit vote is a particularly clear example of Mair's' analysis in practice. Among the reasons found for the vote to leave the European Union were a combination of long held establishment euro-scepticism, influencing public opinion (Curtice 2017), and a disenfranchised class of the 'left behind' in the wake of neoliberalism, locating the fears and uncertainties of everyday life in an anti-immigration vote (Goodwin *et al.* 2016). Indeed the inability of the UK parliament to move forward on Brexit has made clearly visible how disconnected the political class are from the population where Brexit has turned into a political battle ground within the Tory party itself.

³⁷ www.fiscalcouncil.ie

economics he argues cannot be an objective science, because the creation and distribution of wealth is the principal object of study. How this actually occurs is through struggles between the different classes, and preventing this from occurring, that is the politics of economy, is tantamount to class bias which he argues function under the guise of academic neutrality (Allen 2015). This is particularly concerning in the context of fiscal controls having come to dominate public policy in Ireland in the wake of the 2008 crash (Murphy 2016). This retreat by politicians and politics can be understood as eliminating the space for any potential challenge to the mainstream economic view. A further propping up of the ‘experts’ over politics in the sphere of economics was evident in 2013 where the Fiscal Council was assigned the additional role of being the independent body that would endorse the macroeconomic forecasts produced by the Department of Finance on which budgets and stability programmes are based. In line with Mair’s (2006) work, the handing over of economic decision making to so-called experts has meant not only that “[o]ne of the main outcomes of the crisis, [], has been a bureaucratic and authoritarian imposition of ‘economic expertise’ on [Irish] society (Allen 2015, p. 68), but that any potential role politics might have in what the ‘economy’ might mean has been eroded with the consent of the sphere of politics itself.

2.4.2 Downgrading of the Popular Vote

Attitudes favouring the downgrading of the popular vote are also identifiable in the Irish context. In a 2008 Oireachtas³⁸ transcript of a discussion entitled “The Impact of the Lisbon Treaty Result”, the Sub-committee on Ireland’s Future in the European Union (2008) examined reasons for the initial Treaty rejection. The Lisbon Treaty in 2008 was one of two recent referendums, the other being the Nice Treaty 2001, consulting the voters about the nature of Ireland’s further integration into the EU. Both were initially voted down by the Irish people, and each treaty rejection was followed by the request from government for the people to vote again taking a more considered view. This resulted in their ratification of both the year following the initial vote. Reasons identified in the Oireachtas transcript included the Irish having little knowledge of European institutions, an overly national-orientation among the population, and a lack of knowledge of political processes at European level into the process of ratifying these ‘complex treaties’. The discussion also included the suggestion that if not requiring changes to the constitution, perhaps referendums on these treaties might be sidestepped.³⁹ This suggestion of the removal of decision-making from democratic pressures and shifting them up to an intra-state level for reasons of complexity is at odds with the simultaneous call in government policy for greater citizen involvement in decision-making.

³⁸ The Oireachtas is the legislature of Ireland.

³⁹<http://oireachtasdebates.oireachtas.ie/Debates%20Authoring/DebatesWebPack.nsf/committeetakes/EUF2008103000003?opendocument>.

More recently, Kennedy (2015) highlighted how the European treaty, the Fiscal Compact Treaty, inserted neoliberal economic policy, or austerity, into law. The Treaty requires member states to meet harsh structural deficit targets, and to reduce their debt to GDP ratio to 60 per cent. According to Article 5 of the Treaty member states that fail to reach their targets must initiate a 'budgetary and economic partnership programme including a detailed description of the structural reforms which must be put in place and implemented to ensure an effective and durable correction of their excessive deficits'⁴⁰ In other words, the basis of these agreements are the placing of limits on the capacity of Eurozone members to run fiscal deficits, that is the stipulation of policy contexts that prevent revenue intake from falling below expenditure, a breach of which is attached to monetary sanctions. When finally agreed in 2011, The Treaty rules were announced by the pro-austerity German chancellor, Angela Merkel in a Guardian article, to be "binding and valid forever", adding that "never will you be able to change them through a parliamentary majority" (Traynor 2012, in Kennedy 2015). Use of the law here clearly functions for blocking any kind of democratic, or more particularly, popular control over the economic realm.

2.4.3 'Participatory Citizenship'

In a similar vein to rhetoric in 1990's UK calling for the devolvement of solution sourcing from central government to citizens, post-crisis rhetoric in Ireland has seen not an introduction of this idea, but a concerted drive to foreground it. For example, in the Programme for Government 2011 – 2016 drawn up by the newly elected Fine Gael/Labour coalition, under the heading of "We will overhaul the way Politics and Government work", it states that, "Government is too centralised and unaccountable. We believe that there must also be a real shift in power from the State to the citizen" (Department of An Taoiseach 2011). Similarly, in the Draft Open Government Partnership Action Plan (OGP/NAP), an international initiative driven by the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform (DPER) the aim set out is to make the "state ever more transparent, ever more accountable and ever more inclusive in how it reaches decisions" (DPER 2014, p. 3). Citizen participation is identified as one of three main areas of the plan stating that, "[c]itizen participation is at the heart of democracy and [...] actions will deepen participation further enabling valuable contributions to be made to decision-making, policy formulation, and improving public service delivery". Citizen participation in politics was also linked to the government aim of 're-building trust in our institutions and in our government', and 'fixi[ng] the distrust that has grown between citizens and institutions as a result of the collapse of 2008' (DPER 2014, p. 5). As a key concept that is now

⁴⁰ See Treaty on Stability, Coordination and Governance in the Economic and Monetary Union (2012) Article 5. http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_DOC-12-2_en.htm

interwoven through all levels of government policy,⁴¹ citizen participation is identified as a mechanism to support a reduction in inequalities in all dimensions of life through the greater ownership by citizens of the policy decisions being made that effect their everyday lives (Department of Health 2013).

2.4.4 Depoliticisation of Poverty

While discursively foregrounding citizen participation a simultaneous de-politicisation of poverty can be seen to occur, particularly encapsulated in the decision by government in 2009, to subsume the Combat Poverty Agency under the Department of Social and Family Affairs. As a statutory state agency, Combat Poverty played a key lobbying role around issues of poverty and exclusion. Driven by a community development approach to bottom up participation (Combat Poverty 2000b) and foregrounding the mechanism of poverty proofing (Combat Poverty 2000a), their redistributive approach held a significantly strong lobbying position in the Irish context until the agency was merged with the Office for Inclusion into a new division within the Department of Social and Family Affairs (Murphy 2016). Significantly, this move can be understood as serving to contribute to a de-politicisation of poverty in particular, where the Combat Poverty Agency was a vocal contributor to, and defender of, the successive National Anti-Poverty Strategies that had been a feature of the Irish political landscape since 1997.

Framed in the context of the financial crash, national debt, and the inevitability of austerity, the subsumption of the Combat Poverty Agency was rationalised by government as dealing with expenditure related wastefulness. For example, the now Taoiseach, and the then Fine Gael Enterprise spokesman Leo Varadkar was reported in the print media as having embraced the cuts to this and other similar agencies by saying “41 down, 400 to go” of what he called “useless and expensive quangos” (Byrne 2008). Unsurprisingly, in recession Ireland, this narrative was most likely appealing to a citizenry who were entering into a period of greater uncertainty, already feeling the impact of austerity related cuts. O’Brien (2008) described this move as undemocratic where the agencies’ work in research and policy had been a vehicle through which the issues of those at the lower end of the social hierarchy found voice, and therefore turning this process of subsumption into an attack on society’s weakest.

⁴¹ Participatory citizenship is identified as one of the key mechanisms of Ireland’s national health framework, Healthy Ireland, A Framework for Improved Health and Well-being 2013 – 2025, as part of a shift towards a more inclusive approach to governance of health, moving beyond the health service, across national and local authorities, involving all sectors of society and the people themselves” (Department of Health 2013, pg 8).

Indeed, the literature would suggest that a move towards the de-politicisation of the community sector was underway well before the 2008 crash. For example, Harvey (2014) in a report entitled *Are We Paying for That?*, undertook an exploration of the funding relationship between the state, and voluntary and community organisations engaged in public policy advocacy in Ireland. His research points to a 'strategic turn' that had occurred as far back as 2002. This involved the introduction of a 'services only' paradigm and 'no advocacy' clause in section 2.8 of the Health Services Executive service level agreement which effectively narrowed the advocacy and political role of the community sector and produced it as an extension of the state as service provider. This new underpinning legally denied the sector any capacity to challenge or oppose the state, conditionality that was linked to funding accessibility. This signalled what Bissett called "a sharp authoritarian turn in the state's position vis-a-vis the community sector" (2015, p. 174). This move, still in place, seems to jar with the language in the national health strategy, Healthy Ireland, inviting "the private and voluntary sector to participate through well supported and mutually beneficial partnerships", in addressing health inequalities (DoH 2013, p. 8).

2.5 A Corresponding Political Consent to Power

While moves towards the hollowing out of democracy are clearly evident at the European and national levels, the literature also points to a corresponding political consent to power, something the literature would suggest is not new to Ireland, but is also an evolving process.

2.5.1 Ireland's "Indigenous Middlemen"

For example, Conor McCabe (2015) would perhaps suggest that this kind of joining of forces between de-politicisation on one hand and profitability on the other, has been a feature of the Irish politics and landscape for a long time, but heretofore in a somewhat different way in Irish context. This is in the form of a business class that he describes as indigenous middlemen, that has positioned itself between foreign capital and the forces of the state. The Irish state, he argues, is dominated by and shaped toward the interests of this class. For McCabe (2015), the shift to financialisation in Ireland did not mean an introduction of this class, but instead a shift from it comprising individuals in "the cattle industry and banking, construction, real estate and the sale of natural resources, to now middlemen in stock broking, accountancy, law and commercial property speculation " (McCabe 2015, p. 48). Using the political decisions taken in response to the 2008 crash to illustrate his point, McCabe argues that the nature of activities that have influence over national economic policy is no longer related to production. Instead, this relates to speculation and administration, specifically in relation to financialisation, evident in the fact that the degree of influence that this group has is out of proportion with the size of the sector in the broader Irish context. For McCabe, it is this kind of influence that shaped the decision-making that occurred leading up to, during, and since the 2008 crash. He points to the delayed recognition by Europe

and Ireland of the housing bubble, where calls for its recognition and implications for a potential crash were dismissed, and explained away in neoclassical terms by political elites, as evidence of this consent by politics to power.

2.5.2 Winners and Losers in the Recession and 'Recovery'

McCabe is not alone in this view. Critics have argued that many of the decisions made in response to the 2008 financial crash can be understood also from this perspective (e.g. Coulter 2015, Allen 2015). For example, the decision in September 2008 to issue a bank guarantee for Irish banks in order to keep them afloat on the basis that the banking crisis was only a national one. The guarantee was worth over twice the value of the Irish economy, eventually costing the Irish state over €60 billion as the government was forced to repeatedly respond to the bad debts and deposit flights that were reoccurring. The implications of this was repeated sets of cuts to the public finances. The effects for individuals were devastating evident in the jump in unemployment in the official Central Statistics Office statistics from just over 4 per cent in 2006 (90,300) to a figure of 14.2 percent of the labour force (439,600) in 2012 (in Kennedy 2015). In 2012 in the region of 46,500 Irish people emigrated, a sharp rise from the approximately 19,200 Irish people in 2009 (Social Justice Ireland 2013 pp. 58-9). What was occurring was described as a socialisation of the debts of private financial institutions with the State put up as collateral (Coulter 2015, Kennedy 2015), supporting the business class over the Irish taxpayer who was now taking on this debt (Coulter 2015).

The government decision to set up the National Assets Management Agency (NAMA) for managing the highest debts arising out of the boom, the riskiest of which were commercial properties, was argued by Coulter (2015) to have become creditors to these same developers. NAMA was argued to be a holding site for some developers until such time as they were able to buy back their properties again, and at knock down prices, saving to the tune of 700 million⁴² (McCabe 2015). Some were even given high salaried jobs as advisors, helping NAMA to manage its property portfolio. Notably, this was all occurring in the context of an absence of any similar kind of help being provided for individual property owners (McCabe 2015). Just one indication of the scale of the impact for individuals and families is capture here where at the end of Q1 in 2014, there were 35,314 mortgage accounts with arrears of greater than 720 days (Central Bank 2014). Also highlighted was the rejection by the state of any suggestion that wealthy Irish people domiciled abroad for tax purposes might be asked to make a revenue contribution (Coulter 2015), or in the

⁴² The example given here by McCabe (2015) refers to the saving made by the O'Flynn group whose debt had been sold to Blackstone, a vulture fund, and back to O'Flynn at the reduced price of 700 million – the difference which he adds was being picked up by the taxpayer.

positioning of credit unions [community banking] as among the last in a line of bodies given repayment after the liquidation of IRBC, preferred shareholders being repaid firstly followed by debts owed to NAMA. These kinds of moves bring what Sheldon Wolin (2010), referring to what has been occurring in the United States, terms as inverted totalitarianism, which he takes to mean a joining of forces between the state and other forms of power. This is contrasted to the state's neutralising of other forces of power as would be understood by the notion of totalitarianism; the state in that frame being the central and dominant power. Inverted totalitarianism Wolin (2010, p. xiv) posits however, is "not a relationship of equals but instead representative of 'the coming of age of corporate power'".

In Ireland, these kinds of decisions seemed all the more one-sided in the context of the year after year introduction from 2009 – 2014 of austerity budgets requiring citizens to carry the debt burden in order to tackle Ireland's debt problem, with those at the lower end of the social hierarchy affected the most. For example, the poorest 10 per cent of the population suffered an income contraction of 22 per cent between 2008 and 2013, compared to a 13 per cent decrease across the population as a whole, and a drop of 14.4 per cent for those on middle incomes (Savage *et al.* 2015). In 2011, lone parents were the group most affected by budgetary measures losing 5% of their annual income (Spillane 2015). Looking at the cumulative impact of taxes and benefit changes between 2008 and 2014 welfare dependent lone parents experienced the largest decrease in household income at 11.3% of any group (Healy *et al.* 2016, p 154). These losses to income or earnings were accompanied by successive budgets cuts to public spending targeting public services in health, education, social welfare and the voluntary and community sector. The implications of these kinds of decisions for a citizenry whose avenues for challenging these processes are simultaneously being shut down give credence to what Wolin (2010, p. iv), identified in the United States context as the "political coming of age of corporate power and the political demobilisation of the citizenry".

The continued intensification of this relationship between the state and capital is clear in the opening of the way for the complete marketisation of housing (Hearne & Murphy 2018) and simultaneous crisis in homelessness, as the country moved into so-called recovery. This is a dynamic which has ballooned in Ireland since the financial crash of 2008, and according to Hearne (2017, p. 62) has seen inequalities within the Irish housing system expand beyond anything seen since the foundation of the state". The deepening of the financialisation of Irish housing involved two processes, a re-inflation of Irish property prices, and the attraction of multiple global equity funds to buy up the toxic loans and assets from NAMA and the banks (Hearne 2017). This was accompanied by favourable tax conditions such as the exemption of rental profit arising from real

estate investment trusts (REIT), and a favourable tax regime for private equity funds and vulture fund such as Section 110, resulting in the loss of billions of taxes to Ireland (Donnelly 2016). The governments' policy of housing marketisation where housing, not only the private rental sector but 'social' housing also, is being handed over to large equity funds and wealthy investors (nationally as well as internationally) alongside the governments retreat from the provision of social housing (Hearne 2017) has resulted in what can only be termed a housing and homelessness crisis. The involvement of large funds in the housing sector have been identified as purchasing land for use in ways that are contrary to local community interests, like the building of commercial property over residential property unless it is luxury housing and generally driving up rental and house prices making homes less affordable for renters and household buyers respectively (Byrne 2016). As Wolin (2010) argues, once Big Business, has a concentration of power in its hands it has the power to influence the market through setting and influencing prices, wages, the costs of materials and access to the market itself.

Indeed, the negative impact on housing circumstances, and indeed community life is evident at a national level. For example a quick survey over time of Ireland's housing circumstances since the economic crash showed that, in July 2018, according to the official figures 9891 people were accessing state provided emergency accommodation and 3867 of these were dependents (Department of Housing Planning & Local Government 2018). This was up from a figure of 4177 homeless adults in July 2016, with 2348 dependents. This is comparable to, but no less horrendous figure of 2858 homeless people in December 2014, with 880 of those being dependents⁴³. Rent increases between 2013 and 2018 showed an 86 per cent increase in Louth, 80 per cent in Meath and an approximate 74 per cent increase in the Dublin area. This according to the Daft.ie *Rental Price Report* is in the context of a 0.7 per cent inflation rate over the same period (Taft 2018). A report by Simon Community (2018) entitled *Locked out of the Market X* inquiring into the gaps between the rent supplements/Housing Assistant Payments (HAP) limits provided by the state and market rents showed that only 7 per cent of properties available to rent were available within government Rent Supplement/Housing Assistant Payment levels.

In the context of the state's consent to the financialisation of housing, housing systems have played a key role in the growing wealth of the '1 per cent' and the re-emergence of 'rentier capital' – or income drawn from owning financial assets, rather than working or from owning productive assets (McCabe 2011, Picketty 2013). As such, this is a particularly clear example of the unbalanced

⁴³ See Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government for homeless data at <https://www.housing.gov.ie/housing/homelessness/other/homelessness-data>

relationship between capital and labour, where increasing profits for investors extracted from the housing system, causing the increasing costs of housing for citizens, rental or ownership, resulting in low and middle income households losing access to affordable housing. This is a clear example of what David Harvey (2005) describes as ‘accumulation through dispossession’ where wealth is transferred from the majority of the citizens to small groups of the wealthy. Add to this the fact that the government is reported to have spent €47 million housing homeless families in Dublin hotels in 2017 (Hennessy 2018). The marketisation of housing in Ireland would seem to align with what Wolin (2008) refers to as the legitimisation of exploitation and opportunism ultimately serving a neoliberal capitalist ideology that is centrally organised around the pursuit of wealth, and changes in the power relations outlined clear the way for an uncontested upward flow of capital.

This dynamic made visible to this point, of a retreat of politics from the sphere of decision-making, and downgrading of avenues for doing so, alongside a political consent to wealth and global power, would suggest that political change in Ireland is indeed in line with the concept of the ‘competition state’ argued by Cameron and Palan (2004). This combination of the consent to corporate power and the simultaneous political demobilisation of the citizenry is characteristic of what Wolin (2008) calls a ‘managed democracy’.

2.6 The Question of Resistance

There was little resistance to the changes that were occurring across the political landscape. That which did emerge was either small in scale, short lived (Murphy 2016, Arqueros-Fernández 2015, Coulter 2015) or in the case of the, to date, successful anti- water charges campaign, issue specific. Kinsella (2017) suggests that social unrest may have been suppressed because the redistributive arm of Ireland’s fiscal policies helped to manage the extent of inequality and therefore effects of austerity. When compared to other Troika programme countries that saw considerable social unrest, like Portugal and Greece, Ireland had a far higher rate of expenditure as a percentage of GDP and lower changes in terms of inequality. In terms of quelling social unrest then Kinsella (2017) suggests that the redistributive arm appears to have done its job. Murphy (2016) links some of the lack of resistance to the largely neo-liberal frame retained by the media in their reporting over the crisis.

2.6.1 Co-option of the Political Left

The “extraordinary co-option of oppositional elements within southern Irish society” (Allen 2003, p. 69), during the era of Social Partnership has been identified as setting the scene for the absence of any form of organised resistance to institutional change. Social Partnership, which had begun in 1987, was a programme of governance comprising representative pillars from government, business, agriculture, the trade unions and the community and voluntary sector. It began during

the second wave of Foreign Direct Investment in Ireland, the first having occurred in the 1950s, and was communicated by Europe, and the political elite in Ireland, as being emblematic of a European social model and as such different from the neo-liberal agenda that was being taken up in the USA. Social partnership was framed in a discourse of 'social solidarity, partnership and consensus'; a process said to be 'owned' by all of the pillars at the partnership table. The wider context of the latter half of the social partnership era (which ran until 2009) was one of the Celtic Tiger boom years that saw an Ireland with near full employment, median incomes rising, and even growing social transfers and public consumption (Taft 2015). During this time, the left saw that core issues of concern for them were being addressed by Foreign Direct Investment: capital was being directed into production, wages and employment were increasing, and accessible and cheap credit in the private banking sector made any argument for state run banking seem unnecessary (Taft 2015). For the most part, the left coalesced around demands for better redistributive processes in light of the wealth that was being generated. In other words, any demands made by the left were from a base that was located *within* the dominant framework, rather than being any challenge *to* that framework. Taft (2015) makes the additional point that the Celtic Tiger era property boom further weakened the left as the then government had in this process addressed most social and class interests, resulting in the fact that any critique from the left, which did exist, did so only on the margins. This resulting co-option of the unions meant that when the 2008 crisis hit, it did so in the context of a severely weakened left at one end, and the dominant political parties of Fianna Fail, Fine Gael and (a resigned to private capital) Labour at the other, championing the policies of fiscal contraction that underpin the dominant politics of neoliberal austerity (Allen 2015). Lynch *et al.* (2017) make the point that the legitimisation of austerity in Ireland can also be attributed to an ingrained promotion and practice of responding to inequality through charity over any response involving calls for institutional reform. This tradition was appealed to by government through the use of a language of 'generosity' for framing the debate about social expenditure in Ireland, foregrounding the 2008 crisis as a fiscal crisis, while simultaneously serving as a justification for the retrenchment of expenditure (Dukelow & Considine 2014, in Lynch *et al.* 2017), and a distraction from resistance to austerity measures.

2.6.2 Citizen Mobilisation and Identity Politics

O'Rian (2017) names the capacity for limiting protest as among the few of Ireland's strengths during austerity. The governments' use of a welfare fraud campaign can be understood as one such 'strength'; a divisive strategy used to separate out the welfare-dependent section of the population from the taxpaying population (NESC 2011), producing a climate of distrust in welfare recipients, and serving as a distraction from any collective organising against wider austerity, and the demands of capital. Attempts made by the public to resist the introduction of indirect taxation, for example

the property tax were bypassed by the government's introduction of its collection through the PAYE (Pay as You Earn) system.

A more successful example of the people's resistance to austerity could be seen in the anti-water charges protests (Ogle 2017). This involved large-scale demonstrations⁴⁴ in the capital city and nationwide protesting against the introduction of water charges, the potential privatisation of the newly established water utility, and a general protest against the now years of austerity that had been imposed on the Irish people. Ogle (2017) argues that the success of the water movement in terms of mass mobilisation lay in the ability of its initiator, the radical left, to get five trade unions on board, thus making it a national campaign. The protests occurred simultaneously at local community level where residents blocked the installation of water meters, and smaller scale local level protests sprung up in response to visiting politicians to the area. Despite a range of attempts by government to undermine the protests (including various uses of the judicial system), and individual protestors⁴⁵, resistance continued, resulting in an eventual suspension of the water charges. Notwithstanding the precarious success of the current suspension⁴⁶, even a successful eradication of water charges as a single issue that strikes at a politics of economy rather than identity (as in the case of the marriage referendum), would not be sufficient to challenge the dominance of the contemporary neoliberal agenda. From the perspective of capital accumulation, the outcome of the suspension is more one of a zero sum game. Ogle (2017) argued that the water charges has been the basis for wider momentum and mobilisation. While resistance to the introduction of water charges occurred prior to the campaign for marriage equality and the campaign to Repeal the Eight Amendment, and may indeed have generated high levels of interest in politics and political processes among the citizenry, this would seem to be orientated towards a politics of identity, rather than a politics of economy. This is particularly evident in the, to date, largely lack of citizen engagement in the politics of housing particularly in the context of the scale

⁴⁴ Street protests of up to 100,000 people in Dublin and 250,000 nationwide (Ogle 2017).

⁴⁵ For example, court injunctions banning protestors from standing twenty yards from water meter installation, high levels of police presence in communities during meter installations, arrests and jailing of activists, the use of language that described water protestors as sinister, violent, law-breakers, and even terrorists. Responses also included dawn raids on the homes and arrests of water protestors by police in the working class community of Jobstown, Co Dublin, in response to accusations of 'false imprisonment' in her car, by the then Labour Minister for Jobs, Joan Burton when met by protestors during a visit to the local community for a graduation ceremony. The hashtag #JobstownNotGuilty was used by supporters of the accused protestors to garner publicity during the period of arrests and court hearings. The campaign attracted the attention of public figures like Ken Loach, Yanis Varoufakis, and Naomi Chomsky. Chomsky responded with the suggestion that should convictions result from the court case against the Jobstown activists it "would have the effect of criminalising protest and sending a chilling message to all those who would seek to protest in the coming years" (Eagleton 2017).

⁴⁶ Clearly precarious in the context of the resurfacing of the issue of water in public debate when water related problems arise, and in the context of references to the introduction of excess water charges coming down the line like "Irish Water to introduce excess water charges next January [2019]" (McMahon 2018).

of the negative effects of housing being left to the market to resolve. What is occurring in this sphere is very clearly suggestive of a policy-making environment orientated toward the reproduction rather than transformation of inequality.

2.7 Effects of Neoliberalism

The second half of this review sets out to explore themes of subjectivity, work, and social relations, in terms of how these are transformed by neoliberal governance, how these relate to inequality, and the implications of same for undertaking research.

2.8 Subjectivities

2.8.1 Neoliberal Subjectivity

Harvey's (2010) book entitled *The Enigma of Capital, And the Crises of Capitalism* opens by stating that his book is about capital flow, how that occurs, and how wealth is created. At the core of that process, he argues, is the relationship between capital and labour, a relationship that fundamentally changed with the introduction of neoliberalism. While neoliberal ideology has introduced a shift to competition as the primary organising principle, this similarly had implications for the kind of subjectivity that is constituted (Read 2009). This is because in order for competition to be sustained within the state, a reality that is recognised under neoliberalism as not being natural but necessary in order to prevent monopolies from forming which would disrupt the workings of the so-called 'free'-market, continual 'engineering' of the competition subject is required so that people think and act in line with the competition principle (Read 2009). As Foucault (2008, p. 12) argued, "[c]ompetition necessitates a constant intervention on the part of the state, not on the market, but on the conditions of the market" and the 'competition subject', shaped in social policy is key in this process.

2.8.2 Human Capital through Investment in the Self

For Foucault, the neoliberal context for 'economic man' or the competitive subject has changed in two fundamental ways. The expansion of economics across the whole of society, that is, encompassing the social and political has meant that everything that humans set out to achieve can now be understood 'economically' according to a particular calculation of cost for benefit underpinned by the basic relationship in mainstream economics between supply and demand. In other words, the frame for thinking about human endeavour is re-orientated around buying and selling, to the exclusion of questions around different access to finances for different individuals and groups. In line with this, a change to the distinction (that exists under liberalism) between 'labour' and 'the worker' has occurred in the sense that the subject him or herself has now become human capital. Wages and salaries have become payment for the individual's investment in themselves, in their increased capacity in terms of skills and abilities. 'Productivity' here becomes

associated with the building of self-capacity. Under neoliberalism Foucault (2008, in Read 2009, p. 28) argued, 'economic man' "is an entrepreneur, an entrepreneur of himself".

Foucault (in Read 2009) saw that while neoliberalism views the limitations that people experience due to for example, race, class, genetics and gender, biology or intelligence as natural this ideology also sees the opportunities made available through technological innovation as the means through which one can build upon what one has as their initial investment. John Prescott's proclamation in 1997, that 'we're all middle class now', encapsulates this idea; that social mobility is now available to all, and therefore that the idea of social class is dead.

2.8.3 Classed Subjectivities and Parenting

Considered in the context of parenting, the literature would suggest that the notion that class is dead is a fallacy. Annett Lareau's (2003) ethnographic work entitled *Unequal Childhoods. Class, Race and Family Life* is particularly useful here. Lareau uses Pierre Bourdieu's theory of inequality to analyse relationally the family life of middle class, working class, and poor families in the US. Lareau (2003) draws a distinction between child rearing that adheres to what she calls a 'concerted cultivation approach' in comparison to an upbringing that is called the 'accomplishment of natural growth'. Concerted cultivation, Lareau (2003) learns, is based on a set of broadly agreeable guidelines among professionals that focuses on a set of practices concerning how parents should raise their children. As such, these professional views "form a dominant set of cultural repertoires and broad principles for child rearing that permeates society" (Lareau 2003, p. 4). Lareau (2003) makes the point that these dominant 'standards' of child rearing are arbitrary rather than natural. Although framed as 'the right way to bring up children', they are in fact just particular to any historical moment in time, differing in other words, to prior 'correct' child rearing standards⁴⁷. Much of the concerted cultivation approach involves the timetabling and management of children's lives in relation to and beyond their education across the range of activities that make up their daily routines. It includes parental involvement in the cultivation of particular characteristics in their children, for getting on in the world, like learning to negotiate with and/or speak with professionals. Contrary to this approach, Lareau (2003) found that working class parents used what she calls a 'natural accomplishment of growth' approach largely involving the provision of comfort, food and shelter, but stopping short of the cultivation of children and their leisure activities. Working class parents in Lareau's (2003) work, as in other ethnographies that explore working class parenting (e.g. Evans 2006) are aware of these

⁴⁷ Examples of these changes include changes over time from promoting the merits of bottle feeding, being stern with children or use of physical punishment to more recent ideas promoting breast feeding, displays of emotional warmth and promotion of negotiation and reasoning with children as mechanism of parental control (Lareau 2003).

differences, but more often reject the taking up of middle class values. Notwithstanding this, Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital suggests that any attempt on parent's part to alter their parenting practices in ways that align with middle class parenting practices would merely be met with change in approaches to middle class parenting. Distinction, for Bourdieu (1979), is the way in which cultural capital accrued, is also retained. Lareau's work suggests that taking the notion that class is dead for granted would have implications in terms of a very limited understanding of the meaning of subjectivity. This study takes up this more complex idea of subjectivities for informing inquiring in this study.

2.9 Work

2.9.1 Rise in Non-Standard Work

Despite the current return to near full employment, one of the indicators used to report Ireland's recovery, the 2008 financial crash and accompanying response of austerity has had an effect on the landscape of work, and thus nature of that 'recovery'. Eurostat figures show that unemployment rates dropped consistently since 2012 where after some fluctuations between 2001 and 2012, began to decrease steadily from October 2012 (15.3 per cent) to 14.4 per cent in January 2013, 12.9 per cent in January 2014 to a figure of 6.1 per cent in March 2018 (Eurostat 2018). Notwithstanding these headline statistics, a changing nature of work has been evident in the form of a rise in the nature and extent of non-standard work (Bobek *et al.* 2018). Three broad types of non-standard working arrangements have been identified in the Irish context: part time work with variable hours, or 'if and when contracts', temporary work, and solo self-employment (O'Sullivan *et al.* 2015, Loftus 2012, Nugent 2017, Bobek *et al.* 2018).

In their analysis of the Quarterly National Household (QNHS) database,⁴⁸ Bobek *et al.* (2018) found that the recession saw a rise in the number of part-time workers⁴⁹. From what had been a fairly consistent rate of around 17 per cent from 1998 to 2007, to a peak of 24 per cent of the total working population in 2013. The first quarter of 2017 saw this figure drop to 21.5 per cent. Temporary workers also increased during the recession to almost 10 per cent of all workers in 2012, reducing to seven per cent in 2017. Self-employment as a whole category remained fairly static over the time prior to and during the recession (19 per cent in 1998 to 15 per cent in first Q of

⁴⁸ The QNHS is a large-scale nationwide survey of households in Ireland (26,000 households every quarter), designed to produce quarterly labour force estimates that included the official measure of employment and unemployment in the state (International Labour Organisation classification). The QNHS is compiled by the Central Statistics Office (CSO).

⁴⁹ The QNHS allows for the analysis of temporary work, solo self-employment, and part-time work - but not allowing for a differentiation between regular part-time and 'if and when contracts' and so it is only possible to report on part-time work as a whole.

2017), but as a sub-category of this group, those who were solo self-employed (self-employed without employees) rose from 67 per cent of self-employed workers in 2010 to 70 per cent in the first quarter of 2017 (Bobek *et al.* 2018). Bobek *et al.* (2018) make the point that conditions of work precarity have been found across a wide range of sectors including health, education, construction, accommodation, wholesale and retail among others, including sectors like third level education that are more usually associated with the middle classes.

2.9.2 Measuring Work – Life Balance and Reproduction

While the literature illustrates that changes to work patterns are being found among people across the social divide, the dominant ways of measuring the effects of precarious working are particularly problematic for those at the lower end of the social hierarchy. The work of sociologist Tracy Warren (2015) is useful here. Warren argues that the use of time as a measure of work-life balance in the official UK context simultaneously serves to reproduce a middle class experience of work, to the exclusion of working class experiences. Warren undertook research in this area due to what she felt was a relative absence of the working class experience of work from work-life debates in mainstream UK research and policy. She hypothesised that the focus on time meant that other possible factors that impact on work-life balance were not being measured. In order to explore this theory, Warren undertook secondary analysis of the post-recession British Household Survey⁵⁰ (for the years 2010-11) and expanded this analysis to include the variable of ‘financial insecurity’ alongside more usual measures examined relating to ‘too much work hours’. What Warren (2015) found was that economic precarity, and not time, was the major factor associated with lower levels of life satisfaction for members of the working class. However, in the context of time as the topic in official framing on ‘work-life balance’, space for speaking out about economic issues is absent. Time as the measure of work-life is also used in the official Irish context. Two broad categories for measuring work-life in the Quarterly National Household Survey (QNHS) are ‘Length and Pattern of Working times’ and ‘Work organisation and Working time’ (QNHS). While working part-time, or on a temporary basis is not necessarily always problematic, and may be preferable for some workers for a range of different reasons (e.g. child-rearing, caring or students among others), the literature would suggest its dominance of the measure of work-life has work-life balance implications for the working classes.

The Irish literature on the effects of work precarity would indeed suggest that economics is an issue for many. This relates to meeting living costs, difficulties accessing welfare benefits, and the need to take out loans (Loftus 2012), having loans denied (O’Sullivan *et al.* 2015), paying for the cost of

⁵⁰ The British National Household Survey is a survey of each adult in a nationally representative sample of over 5000 households, with approximately 10,000 interviewees.

attending a GP where income is too low for private health insurance and too high for a medical card (Loftus 2012), or meeting housing costs (Bobek *et al.* 2018). These accounts give qualitative insight into the kinds of issues being experienced on the ground, and shed some light on what might be occurring among the working poor in Ireland, figures for which were discussed in Chapter 1 (Nugent 2017). In the context of this study, this highlights the need for inquiring, not only into the dominant framing that is being produced through the use of particular measures in official discourse but also, if and what, in that process, is being simultaneously blocked from view.

2.9.3 Welfare to Workfare

Changes to welfare were also part of post-crisis activation policies in Ireland. In 2008, the Department of Social Protection established an Activation Unit with the remit of supporting people of working age to access employment. While not a new policy in Ireland in 2008, work activation is reported as being a policy that had not been previously implemented with the same degree of conviction (McGauran 2013). The terms set out in the Memorandum of Understanding (Ireland 2010) with the Troika, required a more targeted set of work activation measures. In 2012, the Government introduced legislation, set up new structures, and published an activation service model, *Pathways to Work* (Government of Ireland (GOI) 2012) which set out the government statement on labour market activation. The key objective of the service model was to prevent the “drift into, and reduce, long term employment” (Government of Ireland 2012 (GOI), p. 10). The strategy identified key areas of focus summarised in the document as,

more regular and ongoing engagement with the unemployed; greater targeting of activation places and opportunities; incentivising the take up of opportunities; incentivising employers to provide more jobs for people who are unemployed; and reforming institutions to deliver better services to the unemployed (GOI 2012, p. 8).

Murphy (2016) offers a critical view of these kinds of changes, discussed by her as a development of the new public management (NPM) approach in Ireland, which features more technologically driven controls of the client-welfare engagement process. NPM, Murphy (2016) argues, has facilitated the engineering of a changing frame from welfare as a right (exchange), to workfare as credit. Mechanisms like contracts between the state and the welfare recipient have been introduced setting out the terms of agreement attached to the receipt of benefits which can include the requirement that welfare recipient’s take-up training and employment seeking opportunities. After an initial period of benefits receipt, people on unemployment benefits are directed towards newly established for profit training and employment services, for example programmes like

JobPath,⁵¹ targeting the long term unemployed (12 months) or JobNet⁵², which provides work activation programs for third level graduates. A key change in this new approach is the pay-by-results model that drives the work of the private employment services. This is a departure from the use of NGO not-for-profit services that began with the previous recession in Ireland in the 1980's through the Local Employment Services. Sanctions have been introduced as punishment for welfare recipients that do not take up these opportunities. These include imposing cuts to welfare income based on the non-take up of activities like offers of training, the decline of an intervention, non-attendance at Intreo scheduled meetings, or indeed, dropping out of the activation process altogether (Murphy 2016)⁵³. Friedli & Stearn (2015) referring to the workfare in the UK context, discusses how workfare under neoliberalism is concerned with promoting work on the self in order to achieve characteristics said to increase employability. As a mechanism of governance the authors highlight that "the aim is not a job, but the generic skill, attribute or disposition of employability" (Friedli & Stearn 2015, p. 41).

2.9.4 Researching Gender, Class and Work-Life and Reproduction.

The shift from welfare to workfare has particular implications for researching class and gender. A return to Warren's work on work-life balance is useful for thinking through this in her research that examines this issue in relation to working class women's lives. In a 2004 paper entitled "*Working Part Time; achieving a successful 'work-life' balance?*" Warren's point of departure was the argument that the mainstream research literature on women and work-life balance is limited to what she calls the 'two-roles' frame of a work-family dynamic. Warren hypothesised that this was problematic due to the limitations that it sets for gaining a more balanced understanding of working class women's work-life experience which should, she felt, be more properly examined within a Quality of Life framework (QoL). QoL frameworks provide inclusive frames for exploration that list domains like financial resources, leisure, neighbourhood, friendships, social participation and health (Cummins 1996, Camporese *et al.* 1998, Hsieh 2003, Massam 2002, in Warren 2004) among others. The 'two-roles' frame, she theorised, blocked any view to the place that the other dimensions might have in working class women's work-life balance.

In order to examine this question Warren (2004) undertook secondary analysis of British National Household Survey data. She added the domains of leisure and financial resources to those of work

⁵¹ <https://www.welfare.ie/en/Pages/JobPath.aspx>

⁵² <http://www.jobcare.ie/learning/jobnet/>

⁵³ The number of sanctions issued have risen significantly since the height of the recession, from 359 in 2011 to 6,500 in 2014 (Murphy, 2016). Figures for 2017 show a jump to 16,500 jobseekers being penalised, with an estimation of 20,000 this year if the current rate of 3,800 for the first eight weeks of 2018 is maintained (Bray, 2018).

and family⁵⁴. Warren found that for women, working part time at the lower end of the scale, finance, or the lack of it, greatly impacted upon their capacity to balance their lives in terms of leisure and finance; the financial aspect being particularly affected (Warren 2004). Based on her findings, Warren argued that the ‘two-roles’ framing as the parameters of inquiry meant that these aspects of women’s lives were blocked from view, and therefore are absent from any official discussion on working class women’s experiences of work. Warren contrasted this to middle class women’s experiences, whose work-life balance is also subject to this official limitation, but for whom family duties was a reflection of their main challenges, in the sense that the economic dimension of their lives was not problematic in the same way that it is for working class women.

2.9.5 The Example of Lone Parents

This problem of foregrounding of family and backgrounding of the financial aspects of life for working class women provides a useful vantage point for critically thinking about the more recent introduction of policy changes aimed at lone parents (predominantly women in Ireland) in Ireland. This relates to the changes to welfare eligibility for lone parents that were introduced in July 2015 as part of the government’s work activation strategy. The change concerned the reduction to the age of 7 years as the youngest child age limit for eligibility for the One Parent Family Benefit (OPFB). The OPFB is a welfare benefit payable to lone parents who have weekly earnings under 425 euro. This change was part of a gradual reduction in youngest child age eligibility from age 14 in 2011. The change means that those with an income level below this amount are transferred to a Jobseekers Transitional Payment (JST) once the 7 years threshold is reached and until their youngest child reaches the age of 13. Being in receipt of JST means one is deemed available for employment activation measures in the form of work, training or education programmes.

The policy change received considerable amounts of criticism from across the sector that works with children, parents, and families. Much of the critique of the 7 years old threshold was orientated towards the fact that state funded childcare would be required if the activation of lone parents was to be possible, a service which was critiqued by SPARK⁵⁵ and others, such as the ERSI⁵⁶

⁵⁴ Warren stated that she focused on these two domains as they facilitate the twin aim of moving beyond the way that jobs only fit with work in the home for women and of highlighting the longer term ramifications for women of taking up different work-life balancing strategies – i.e. how finances impact the other QoL domains.

⁵⁵ SPARK. Irish single Parents Fight back is a voluntary group of single parents that came together in 2011 to oppose the austerity cuts to one parent families. It continues to campaign today.

⁵⁶ The ESRI is “a not-for-profit independent source of evidence for policy” informed primarily by economics and sociology. Its statement on Independence states that its “work is free of any expressed ideology or political position”. Its funding is made up of approximately 22% grant-in-aid from the Department of Finance, and the remainder comes from research programme agreements with government departments, state agencies and international bodies like the European Commission, membership subscriptions and sale of publications.

(Russell *et al.* 2018), as being severely lacking in the Irish context⁵⁷. It was argued by SPARK and the ‘7 is too young’ campaign⁵⁸ that both trying to manage with reduced incomes, and juggling work and parenting in the absence of appropriate state childcare, would only result in lone parents falling further into poverty⁵⁹ (SPARK 2018⁶⁰, Barnardos 2012). In terms of Warren’s work discussed above, the emphasis on the need for childcare, can be understood as discursively reproductive of the two-roles framing for women’s lives, and deflects from the fact that women are being oriented towards a labour market that is already one of low wages, work precarity and a working poor. The state provision of childcare may be seen as having ‘provided the solution’ for ‘empowering’ women to enter the workforce. However, this may simultaneously serve for shutting down any space for women to speak out about the accessibility and conditions of that work (in terms of wages, contracts, and the implications of responding to children’s needs where they clash with work hours), where this has been excluded from the dominant framing that defines all women’s work-life balance according to work-family. In the context of this study, this highlights how a reflexive approach to the research is crucial in order to ensure that it is not propping up middle class perspectives to the exclusion of perspectives of participants from beyond that dominant framing.

2.10 Social Relations

2.10.1 Risk and Financialisation

The work of Maurizio Lazzarato, the Italian sociologist and philosopher provides valuable insight into the effect of neoliberalism on the nature of social relations. A key concept through which this his work can be understood is what he argues is the concept of risk. Lazzarato (2009) argues that one of the key changes that has occurred in the context of us being required to producing ourselves as human capital under neoliberalism, is that the technique of security (risk) has also expanded. Using the example of workfare, this expansion, Lazzarato (2009) argues, is manifest in the extension of the definition of risk from something that has been associated with, for example, accidents, illnesses or old age, to include the risk of ‘employability’. As a result he argues, ‘risks today are more endogenous’ (Lazzarato 2009, p. 127), that is, risks are originating from within the self where they are attached to, or arise as a result of our conduct, how we think and act, rather than only

⁵⁷ Ironically, Spillane (2015) pointed out that the lack of childcare provision could be traced back to axing of the CE Schemes which were a key mechanism for the provision of childcare services, and employment for women.

⁵⁸ A campaign made up of OPEN, Barnardos and the National Women’s Council of Ireland.

⁵⁹ In 2011 lone parents were the group most affected by austerity budgetary measures losing 5% of their annual income (Spillane, 2015). Looking at the cumulative impact of taxes and benefit changes between 2008 and 2014 welfare dependent lone parents experienced the largest decrease in household income at 11.3% of any group (Healy *et al.*, Social Justice Ireland 2016, p. 154).

⁶⁰ https://www.facebook.com/SPARKsingleparents/?hc_ref=ARRd6RyBQyd9EFE-SLHwQTXzVXXdSMl6KGoQJ5fyYdB6uGjC73nrBcX8tIL0q-sgKKM&fref=nf

something out there in the world to be managed. Subjection in this frame, is a process of “making the individual in all aspects of life, responsible and culpable, or indeed criminalizable” (Lazzarato 2009, p. 127) in the event that their conduct does not undermine the risk materialising in the first instance.

Lazzarato (2009) argues that financialisation is key to understanding this change to the nature of risk, that is, financialisation in terms of the functioning of money for the ‘regime of accumulation’ that is particular to neoliberal capitalism. Lazzarato (2009) draws from Deleuze’s point that money should be thought about in two ways: money as exchange money, and money as credit money. Within this frame money can be understood as having three separate functions, (i) as a structure of financing, (ii) as a means of payment, and (iii) as the sum total of goods produced at a particular time. Deleuze and Guattari (1975 in Lazzarato 2009, p. 123) state that, “the asymmetry of power in capitalist societies is inscribed in the asymmetry of force/potentiality between money for credit and money for payment”. In this frame so-called ‘buying power’ is in fact a powerlessness, because money for payment is really only an act of exchange according to terms that are already determined by the conditions, or state of play, of credit at a given time. Credit determines the field of consumption as the outside of any potential for purchasing. This is what Lazzarato (2010) means when he says that the matrix of the social has changed from one of exchange, to one of credit.

The ‘regime of accumulation’ in neoliberal capitalism, rather than being one of exchange, where redistribution occurs, is described instead as a downward orientated class hatred, a hatred towards any kind of counter power (redistribution being one) that might disrupt the upward flow of capital. The co-extension of neoliberal economic logic to the paradigm of the social serves this purpose, through the production of individuals whose moral selves are produced according to neoliberal capitalist logic in all aspects of their lives. In the context of the example of workfare, as Friedli and Stearn (2015) point out in their paper on the UK workfare context, it is not securing employment that is most important, but instead ‘working’ on becoming employable. Non-compliance with *effort* is what is becoming sanctioned. In this way, population management through workfare can be understood as combining old disciplinary techniques that target the body in space, through for example the threat of sanctions, for non-attendance/compliance with opportunities provided, with adaptation to the technique of security, where sanctions are aimed at orientating morality and behaviour towards ‘work on the self’ and so individualising the risk of ‘employability’ (Lazzarato 2009).

2.10.2 Risk, Class and Gender

Khiara Bridges’ (2011) research entitled *Reproducing Race: An Ethnography of pregnancy as a site of Racialisation*, illustrates clearly how risk, financialisation and population management are

interrelated under neoliberalism, and as they pertain to class and gender. Her ethnographic work was undertaken in a state supported neonatal unit in a public hospital in New York City. She begins by arguing that government policy for the provision of state maternal services to a so-called 'at risk' population, simultaneously constitutes that population (in this case, poor black, medically uninsured women) as already lacking in something even prior to their attendance at the unit; a lack that is produced as requiring a government response. In other words, and in line with Lazzarato's (2009) arguments above, this lack is from the outset framed as being internal to the women; that who they are identifies them as being 'risky'⁶¹.

Bridges (2011) identified a link between the nature of the service provided to the women in the hospital and its shaping according to the stipulations of medical insurance policies (Medicaid), which dovetailed with the hospitals need for 'fiscal caution' (Bridges 2008). Avoidance of any jeopardising of receipt of funding for the provision of the public service was the essence of this connection. This funding dependent relationship also meant that the nature and extent of information demanded of the pregnant women attending the service was of a level that required them to disclose personal information that extended way beyond the level of information needed for the receipt of a neonatal service. In other words, the information provision requirements, or the risk potential that needed to be assessed for service provision moved beyond the sphere of pregnancy to encompass the social world of the individual and their family. In this sense, and in line with Lazzarato's point, the meaning of risk and finance are interlinked with population management in a way that extends to the whole 'life' of the individual. This is what Foucault's identified as bio-power, a new direction in the effects of power which had previously been concerned with the disciplining of the body in space, but now extends to include being concerned with the governance of conduct, or in other words, concerned with managing the 'life' of the population.

Bridges (2011) draws on this idea to explain this level of state surveillance that she found evident in her research on pregnancy. In this framing the service can be understood in terms of credit, and the provision of information by the women, payment for those services. This became clearer to Bridges where stepping outside of this frame, in the form of non-compliance with information requests by the hospital, was recast within the hospital as women having 'poor moral judgement' associated with poor decision-making not only on behalf of themselves, but also on behalf of their families.

⁶¹ Bridges points out that the very existence of the state programme blocks the view to the question of why this 'lack' exists in the first instance.

Bridges (2011) found that key to the population management process was the shift from education to training. This is a shift from education being concerned with providing learners with a range of different views of the world, to a process instead where training steers people in a particular direction, in response to particular agendas (Bridges 2011). One of the ironies here again of course is that undertaking these duties of monitoring and sanctioning of welfare recipients equates to doing a 'good' job, being a 'good' state employee. This is monitored and engineered through the participation in work performance reviews, more recently developed to include the 'self-evaluation', ensuring that we self-manage in pursuit of our goals in the production of self as human capital, self-management that is contained within the scope of 'opportunities' that are open to us. Of course while state officials are in this way reproducers of value, that is, reproducers of the capital relation there is also literature on how the labour of officials can be unproductive of value, or productive of struggle against and beyond capital (Harvey 2006).

2.10.3 Respectability

Of course our understanding of the ways that working class people respond to the kind of downward pressure that is imposed on them long precedes the time of more recent changes under neoliberalism that the review to this point is focused on exploring. Sennett and Cobb's (1972) ethnographic study of the working classes in the US entitled, *The Hidden Injuries of Class* is particularly important here. *Hidden Injuries* was part of a wider body of the author's work exploring the transformation of urban life under the impact of industrialism in the US. It is set in the context of the demise of the 'urban villager'; the way of life that acted as a mechanism for cohesion between white workers providing for what might be termed as a 'working class culture' in the sense that it was known in a European context.

What Sennett and Cobb (1972) learned was that the issue of dignity as it is experienced, navigated, and protected by the working classes provides a far more relevant lens, than the impact of measures of material wealth that are usually used in official statistics, for understanding the impact of social structures on class. The ethnographic literature more generally concurs (Bourgois 1995, Skeggs 1997, Evans 2006, Hanley 2016).

For Sennett and Cobb (1972) this became evident in the paradox of social mobility that they found among the participants in their study. The authors identified a pattern across interviewees, of ambivalent feelings of powerlessness, inadequacy, and a lack of dignity, low self-esteem on one hand, with views on social mobility as being a personal responsibility on the other. These mixed feelings fused to produce experiences of shame attached to always having a lesser status than elites, regardless of personal material success. What Sennett and Cobb (1972) found was that the

workers in their study employed a 'divided self' for navigating this dilemma, a self-made up of a 'performer' self and a 'real' self, mapped onto power/work and love/family respectively. This division was actively deployed through a process of 'alienation', which the authors defined as a wilful separation of these two dimensions of the self, or making these realms 'foreign to each other' (Sennett & Cobb 1977, p. 193) in discursive expressions. At the core of this disconnection was pride in belonging to the working classes (love/family); a pride that interviewees guarded from infiltration or loss, through various discursive techniques, which simultaneously allowed them to navigate social mobility in the world of work. For example, Sennett and Cobb (1977) found that interviewees discursively separated themselves in all sorts of ways from personally having done the work that resulted in them receiving work related recognition/bonuses (e.g. I received a promotion for *the work that was done* – rather than 'work *that I had* done'). The authors argued that this 'protective alienation' occurs for two reasons, firstly, to ward off social isolation, by distancing oneself from one's achievements and so communicating that one is not deserting one's community, and secondly, it wards off the threat of not being accepted by one's class fraternity, where boasting was taken to be a negative quality (ibid).

However, key to Sennett and Cobb's findings was that the protection of the realm of love/family from power/work was not necessarily a passive disconnection, but instead was also an active position taken. In this context, it involved a joining of love and power at the other side, in protection of one's working class status, one's self-respect, and a rejection of it being available for compromise by others. This was a similar finding in Wills' (1977) ethnographic work entitled *Learning to Labour: How Working Class Kids get Working Class Jobs*, where rejection of the education system was framed by the 'lads' in terms of self-respect, manifested in them not surrendering their independence to the school. Of course in Wills' (1977) ethnography, as in Sennett and Cobb's (1972), this ongoing process of protective alienation, this separating out of the 'softer' self of love/family from the world of power and work does not challenge the conditions that make the separation necessary in the first instance. In this sense, these acts can be understood as serving for holding dominant perspectives in place. In the context of this study, this highlights how it is necessary to also look at the role of those outside the dominant framing for insight into how that dominant framing gets held in place.

Importantly, the more recent literature in this area highlights how in inquiring into the concept of respectability, as researchers we need to be aware of its changing parameters. For example, in Hanley's (2016) more recent autobiographical work entitled, *Respectable: the experience of class*, where she reflexively explores her personal journey from being working class to middle class, she points out that she found the meaning of respectability to have changed. Respectability she point

out used to be about 'what you did' (she points to being racist, in her white working class community, or not hanging your washing on the line as being acts that demonstrated one's respectability) in the 1980's. Now, she noticed, it has expanded to become more of 'a property of your specific circumstances', 'a quality laid down in you' and 'the appearance and feeling of self-respect'. As a vantage point for inquiring into some of the complexities of how class relations are held in place, the literature here on respectability, in its expanded form will be used to explore the relations underpinning decision-making as they are produced in the school. From this vantage point, it becomes possible not only to better understand how class relations are held in place, but also to identify if and how they are taken up, resisted, or rejected.

2.11 Inequality as Acceptable Equilibrium

The overarching picture of social relations that emerges from the review of the literature is one of the separating out of individuals from each other, isolated and orientated towards their own 'progression' trajectory, framed by the 'opportunities' (credit) made available through government policy. Lazzarato describes this as a politics of individualisation (Lazzarato 2009, p. 126), and as such provides a very nuanced understanding of Bauman's similar claim (2000). What is produced in this process, according to Lazzarato (2009), is what he calls an 'acceptable equilibrium'. This term describes the stratified nature of inequality that is constituted, comprising of a managed balance between poverty, precarity and wealth that allows the state of inequality to be maintained. According to Lazzarato (2009, p. 119), "[t]he specific role for government, [is] to detect the 'differences' of status, incomes, education, social insurances etc., and to set these inequalities to act effectively one against the other". The individualisation of salaries and careers is used to ensure that none of the positions of inequality feel safe, and so the only mechanism for holding one's position in the equilibrium is continued participation in competition. While not all individuals experience the same level of insecurity, this differing with different levels and conditions of employment, the experience of fear (of being unable to repay debt in its various forms), is common for all. In a context where this individualising creditor-debtor framing for thought and action has expanded beyond credit (capital) as money to include credit (capital) as the 'opportunities' made available by government the individual is produced as indebted in all the dimensions of his [sic] life. Debt has come to represent an economic relationship inseparable from the debtor subject and his 'morality' (Lazzarato 2009, 2011). In terms of a theory of class, an acceptable equilibrium is both reproductive of, and a blockage to challenging, the class inequality that it is dependent upon for its existence.

From this perspective, the economy, or the 'debt economy' as Lazzarato (2011) names it, is a political technique. Debt among proponents of neoliberalism is not viewed as a problem, but is

instead the engine of the capitalist economy, where getting out of debt, although used as a common discursive strategy by governments, is not the real goal. In fact, Lazzarato (2011) would argue, that the real goal of neoliberal capital is producing all subjects as indebted, through encouraging consumption, where individuals, orientating their actions towards the goal of debt repayment ensure the conditions for capital accumulation (i.e. competition) will be sustained. It is in this sense that Lazzarato (2011) claims that under neoliberalism we are all indebted man.

2.12 Conclusion

The aim of this chapter was to examine the relationship between policy-making, democracy and Inequality in the Irish context with a particular focus on the kinds of changes that have been occurring immediately prior to and since the financial crash in 2008 and the introduction of austerity by government. This was in order to provide a conceptual framework for undertaking this study as it pertains to school-parent relations. The chapter presents the argument that austerity provided a context for the intensification of neoliberal ideology. This was evident in policy decisions that facilitated a further hollowing out of democracy and a corresponding political consent to power. For the most part, these changes were met with little sustained national level resistance, perhaps understood in the context of the co-option of social partnership, which ultimately collapsed following the crash. Within this framing that were also calls to citizens for more individualised participation in policy making, but occurring alongside a more concerted foregrounding of identity politics in the political and civil society arenas.

The chapter then examines the literature under the broad themes of subjectivity, work and social relations in order to explore the effects of change in the wider context. Drawing from the work of Foucault, the notion of subjectivity is explored, with particular attention to his argument that neoliberalism represents a particular change in ideology, visible when compared to its predecessor, liberalism. Particularly, his idea relating to how we produce ourselves as entrepreneurs is examined, along with his views on the extension of a market logic under which the social and political dimensions of life are subsumed. While Foucault is more concerned with how subjects are produced in power, the literature is drawn from to illustrate how in the making of subjects, classed subjectivities are among the nature of subjectivities that are produced. The chapter looks at the changed nature of work and welfare, and the implications of these changes for those lower down on the social hierarchy in the wider context of official discourse about these domains. It is argued that in the context of these complex interrelations, the processes through which inequalities are produced are more difficult to unpack. The implications of this literature for the need to undertake reflexive research is highlighted in order to prevent the inquiry from reproducing the conditions of that silencing. Two key concepts, risk and respectability, are examined in order to explore the

effects of neoliberalism on social relations and class relations. Theory about the changed nature of risk, as having expanded to become something originating within the individual is discussed as having occurred in tandem with the rise to power of financialisation. Drawing from the ethnographic literature the chapter then examines how this both shapes the work of the state employee, and how this effects those at the lower end of the hierarchy. The concept of respectability is examined with a view to highlighting the nuanced responses to the downward pressure that these systems imply, and as such provide a vantage point for inquiry into the ways that the oppressed take up, resist, and/or reject this pressure. The chapter closes by arguing that the overall effect of neoliberalism is the production of a landscape of stratified inequality in the form of an 'acceptable equilibrium'. Shaped by the fear and risk of downward mobility and access to credit as the means for preventing this potentiality, an acceptable equilibrium is a form of stratification whereby holding onto one position on that hierarchy can only be maintained through engaging in competition and consumption. In terms of a theory of class, an acceptable equilibrium is both reproductive of, and a blockage to challenging, the class inequality that it is dependent upon for its existence. This study sets out to explore whether an alternative to this Gordian knot can be identified.

On a final note, negative implications for social cohesion, resulting from the kind of trajectory identified in this chapter, one of the subsumption of the social and political sphere by the economic sphere is one forewarned by Wolfe (1989). Civil society relies on a combination of sameness and difference underpinned by values of family, community informal networks, and so on, made up of not only of expressions of sympathy and benevolence, but also disgust and hate; the glue of civil society, providing a 'grounding' for people, or a sense of 'being-together'; belonging. Yet, the requirement of neoliberal economy remains, for social and political integration of the nature that does not disrupt the principle of competition held in place by class relations. Racism, according to Lazzarato (2009) has been identified as the mechanism that meets this requirement for the neoliberal project. "Racism (internal, against immigrants, and external, directed against other civilisations) is one of the most powerful phenomena operating through disgust and animosity that contribute to the constitution and fixing of territories and 'identities' and which 'capital' lacks" (Lazzarato 2009, p. 130). A togetherness is created in distinction from, or disgust towards, 'the other'. In light of the potential for this being an avenue travelled down in the Irish context, this study, drawing from what Ruth Levitas (2012) calls a utopian re-reading of the social, aims to not be limited to an inquiry of if, and how, inequality is being reproduced. It will also endeavour to explore what we could do, or should do, by way of devising an alternative to that kind of reality.

Chapter 3 Setting the Scene

3.1 The School

A central location for this ethnography was a Junior Primary School, which I have named anonymously as Maryville National School. The school is located in an urban working class community. I undertook fieldwork for the study during the 2013/14 school year over a nine month period. The school where ran classes from Junior infants through to Second class. The school was part of a larger primary school, with its senior counterpart, which housed 3rd to 6th class pupils, and which had its own school principal. Other than spending time in the school with parents in the parents' room which was accessible to parents from both the junior and senior school, I had no particular dealings with the staff or school principal from the senior-junior school although they knew of my presence in the junior school.

Maryville was an English speaking state run school. It had approximately 180 pupils divided among three classes each of junior infants, senior infants and first class, and two second classes. The junior school was a single story building, one of three on the campus where it was located.

3.2 Staff

All (n=26) but three staff members were women. Staff roles ranged across classroom teachers (x 11), two learning support teachers, a behavioural support role and a Home School Community Liaison Officer both of whom were also qualified teachers. The roles of school principal and one classroom teacher were held by male staff members, as was the caretaker role. During the year that I undertook fieldwork in the school (2013/14), there was a Special Needs Assistant (SNA) allocation of 3.83 staff members which comprised three female SNA's. The schools also had a secretary and another female staff member who ran the kitchen/common/staff room along with providing support with administrative duties, and two cleaners. Two women from the local community ran the school library on a voluntary basis, which opened for a few hours in the morning times.

3.3 Board of Management

Primary schools in Ireland operate under the Education Act 1998, other relevant legislation circulars of the Department of Education and Skills and the Rules of National Schools currently applicable. As a Catholic Primary school, Maryville is under the patronage of the Catholic Church. The patron appoints a Board of Management who, according to section 15.1 of the Education Act 1998,

manage the school on behalf of the patron and for the benefit of the students and their parents and to provide or cause to be provided an appropriate education for each student at the school for which that board has responsibility (Government of Ireland 1988).

The Board is tasked with a range of functions in accordance with the Education Act, 1998 (Government of Ireland 1998). These include: adhering to policies determined by the Minister (15.2.a); having regard to the principles and requirements of a democratic society (15.2.e); having regard to efficient use of resources, the public interest in the affairs of the school and accountability to students, their parents, the patron, staff and the community served by the school (15.2.f). A Board is tasked with being made up of two nominees of the Patron, two parents of children in the school (a mother and a father), the School Principal and another serving teacher, two extra members from the community with a commitment to the ethos of the school.

3.4 Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS)

Maryville National School is a DEIS school. DEIS is the acronym for Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools. The DEIS Action Plan for Education was launched originally in 2005. It is the Department of Education instrument for addressing educational disadvantage. The plan focuses on the educational needs of children from pre-school to second level education; 3 to 18 years of age. DEIS aims to provide for a standardised system of identifying educational disadvantage and an integrated school support programme. In the school year 2013/14, 658 primary schools and 190 second level schools came in under the DEIS programme (education.ie⁶²). Maryville is categorised as participating in the Urban Band 1 strand of the DEIS programme which is divided into bands 1 and 2. Urban band 1 is the category where levels of disadvantage are assessed as being the greatest. Of the 658 primary schools under the DEIS programme in 2013/14, 195 were Urban band 1 schools. Schools in this category have smaller class sizes, a school principal for 116 pupils, a financial grant, access to Home School Community Liaison Services, a School Meals Programme, School Completion Programme related supports, access to literacy and numeracy specific supports, planning supports, professional development supports and additional funding under a book rental scheme. Receipt of DEIS support comes with the expectation of schools to undertake systematic planning and monitoring at individual school level in order to feed into the targets contained in the DEIS Action Plan. Parental involvement is one of the list of target areas that needs to be undertaken and monitored in order to meet the conditions of DEIS funding.

⁶² <https://www.education.ie/en/Schools-Colleges/Services/DEIS-Delivering-Equality-of-Opportunity-in-Schools-/Breakdown-of-DEIS-Schools-2006-to-date.pdf>

3.4.1 Parental Involvement

Parent and community partnership is one area identified as being key to informing the work of the school under the action plan. The other five areas prioritised are attendance, retention, educational progression, literacy and numeracy, and finally, partnership between schools and links with the community. DEIS schools are expected to develop action plans based around the latter and set targets for self-monitoring that are SMART: Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Realistic and Time-bound” (Department of Education & Skills 2015).

3.4.2 Home School Community Liaison Scheme

In the context of the DEIS Action Plan (DAP), a Home School Community Liaison (HSCL) Scheme, which had its beginnings in 1990, makes provision for a Home School Community Liaison Officer (HSCLO) at school level. Operational responsibility for the HSCL Scheme is now with the Education Welfare Services (EWS) of the newly established Child and Family Agency (TUSLA), established in 2014, having been transferred from the now dissolved National Education and Welfare Board (NEWB). The Home-School Liaison Scheme “operates in the spirit of developing partnership and collaboration” (Department of Education & Skills, Department of Children & Youth Affairs, and TUSLA 2019, p. 6) between parents, teachers and the community. The scheme is identified as being preventative in nature with a focus on implementing evidence-based initiatives that impact on parents and children with the aim of improving educational outcomes. The scheme’s focus is on “salient adults (parents and teachers), whose attitudes and behaviours impinge on the attendance, participation and retention of children in education”, with a view to being solution focused through building parent/guardian capacity and empowerment (ibid).

According to HSCL Scheme booklet (DES, DCYA, TUSLA 2016) DEIS schools are expected to place a renewed emphasis on parental involvement. As far back as the 2005 DAP parental involvement in policy formation is identified as having a history in schools and supported by the work of the HSCL Scheme. Part of the HSCLO role is facilitating “partnership with teachers, parents, pupils and community agencies in formulating school policies” (DES, DCYA, & TUSLA 2016, p. 11) along with other key areas of work including: conducting home visits, transfer programmes, cluster meetings, integration, parents supporting parents, courses for parents, staff development, local education committee, literacy numeracy, science. This also includes supporting individual parents to build capacity around supporting their children’s learning.

The HSCL Coordinator is required to “produce plans incorporating targets, to meet the key priorities of the HSCL Scheme, in accordance with the strategic direction of the Educational Welfare Services in the Child and Family Agency” (DES, DCYA, & TUSLA 2016, p.9).

The Five Goals of the HSCL Scheme are⁶³:

- supporting marginalised groups
- promoting cooperation between home school and community
- empowering parents
- retaining young people in the education system
- disseminating best practice

The Twelve Principles governing the operating of the HSCL Scheme are:

- Partnership and collaboration of the complementary skills of parents and teachers
- The scheme is unified and integrated at both the primary and the post-primary level
- The thrust of the scheme is preventive rather than curative
- The focus of the scheme is on the adults whose attitudes and behaviour impinge on the lives of children, namely parents and teachers
- The basis of activities in the scheme is the identification of needs and having those needs met
- The scheme develops teacher and staff attitudes in the areas of partnership and the whole-school approach
- The scheme promotes the fostering of self-help and independence
 - Parents as a resource for children at home, in classrooms, and in the community
 - Parents as community leaders and as educational home visitors
 - Parents and teachers working together on policy formation
- Home visitation is a crucial element in establishing bonds of trust with families
- Networking with and promoting the co-ordination of the work of voluntary and statutory agencies increases effectiveness, eliminates duplication, and leads to an integrated delivery of service to marginalised children and their families
- Home, School, Community Liaison is a full-time undertaking
- The liaison coordinator is an agent of change
- Community “ownership” of the scheme is promoted through the development of the Local Education Committee.

3.5 Local Parish, Wider Garda District, and National Context

The host school is located in an urban parish. Small area statistics are available through the Central Statistics Office (CSO) based on census data. These are accessible at various levels and in order to

⁶³ http://www.tusla.ie/uploads/content/HSCL_Description_and_Vision.pdf.

provide a brief profile of the area within which the host school is located I have drawn on these at parish level, at Garda District Level, and national level. The latest data available for all three levels is from census 2016, but as much of the fieldwork was undertaken in the school year 2013/14, census data from 2011 is drawn from for a more time appropriate contextualisation.

Population

The parish in question had a population of approximately 9,000 according to census 2011, 52 per cent of whom were female. It was predominantly resided in by people identifying as being of Irish nationality (87.4 per cent), followed then by Polish nationals (3 per cent) and UK nationals (1.3 per cent). Just over eighty-two percent were 'White Irish', and (.9 per cent, n=86) reported being 'White Irish Traveller'. Black/Black Irish and Asian/Asian Irish made up 7.68 percent of the population. The area is predominantly Catholic also where 84.75 percent reported being so. This parish level population percentage profile was very similar to the wider Garda district profile, the area within which the parish is located.

Profile

The parish has a high percentage of 'lone parents with children' making up 50 percent of family units (N=1996) in the parish. Lone mother headed families made up 46 per cent of those family units. Lone parent families in the parish outnumber couple with children families. This is significantly higher than the wider Garda district rates of 30 percent of 'lone parent with children' family units, or a third of all family units in the district, and is also far higher than the 12 percent of lone parent households reported in the census at a national level. The parish has a large young family population where the majority of families 35.5 per cent are families where the youngest child is between the ages of 0-4.

Housing

Houses, as opposed to flats/apartments, are the main housing type in the parish (72 per cent), and the majority of housing was being rented (63 per cent) from the local authority (43 per cent) or a voluntary body (7 per cent) or private rental market (12 percent). This is comparable to the wider Garda district where owner occupied housing is in the majority (68 percent) followed then by private rented accommodation (15.3 per cent).

Education

Early school leaving data inclusive of those that had left school up to and including the age of 16 were high at 38 per cent, 54 per cent of those being women. This is comparable, but significantly

higher than the also high figures of 24 per cent in the wider Garda district, and 18 percent at national level. Seven and a half per cent of the parish population had education to degree level (over half of these (60 per cent being women), comparable again to the wider Garda district at 17 per cent and what seems like a low figure of 13.6 per cent at a national level.

Work (Paid and Unpaid)

Unemployment in the parish was approximately twice as high (23 per cent)⁶⁴ as what were high rates of unemployment in the wider Garda district (13 percent) and the nationally at 12 per cent. One third of working age residents (30 per cent) fell into 'social class by occupation' status of semi-skilled, unskilled or employed but unknown. Unpaid caring work was found to be carried out by 4 per cent (n=325) of the total population at parish level and 69 per cent of this work carried out by women. Thirty-seven and a half percent of carers were found to provide 29 or more unpaid hours per week. Of those, 28 per cent (n=91) provide 43+ unpaid hours. A similar percentage (3.69 per cent) of unpaid caring work was found as being provided at district level, and by women (62.4 per cent) but the figure for provision of 29 unpaid hours or more per week drops nearly 10 percent to 28 percent, and when further narrowed to 43+ unpaid caring hours the figure is 20 percent demonstrating the very high proportion of this kind of work being carried out in the parish. Interestingly, at a national level 4 percent of the population also provide unpaid caring hours, 30 percent carrying out 29 or more unpaid hours per week, and 21 percent carrying out 43+ hours of unpaid work.

3.6 Keeping Focused in a Vibrant School Community

Before moving onto the next chapter, which moves into the domain of the school for discussing and setting out the research procedure in practice, it is important to reiterate the point that the aim in this work was never to comment on the teaching skills of individual staff at the school, or the teaching profession more generally. I have no knowledge of the education profession. Similarly, the findings do not attempt to make any judgement about parenting. The analysis that follows in the next chapters attempts to never lose sight of this fact. Instead the analysis looks at the topic of decision-making in particular as it is produced to mean in the everyday relations between the school and parents, how this is informed, and the effects of this in the local context, and as a lens for identifying implications at the broader societal level. In the sense the focus is on the relations of

⁶⁴ Figure made up of categories 'unemployed' (21%) and 'looking for first regular job'. All unemployed figures comprise of these two measures.

power, how these are shaped in policy-making and implementation, and the implications of this for politics and political voice.

Being immersed in school life in the way that I was while undertaking fieldwork often made it difficult to separate this core focus from the broader and invaluable learning experience that attending Maryville made possible for me. I was continually inspired by the work that went on in the school, the collaborative projects, the information sharing, the in-depth knowledge about, and interest in the children that both the teaching and non-teaching staff clearly had. Teaching staff were constantly working together on new ideas, and fine tuning old ones, for continual improvement of the teaching experience for the children. I often heard the teachers discussing this child or that, who had been in their class last year, and sharing tips with their new teacher on ways of working with them that they had found successful. Non-teaching staff were always on the ready if a child fell or became upset and needed help of any sort. For me the overall atmosphere of the school was one of a happy place to be.

I learned of the hours of work that the teachers put into planning ensuring that the day at school was kept moving at a pace that worked for the group, and the individual children. Access to language support, resource teaching and behavioural support for the children intersected with the classroom timetable meaning that children came and went from the classroom throughout the day as they attended special classes. Teachers worked around these disruptions with skill and professionalism, normalising the movement for the children as 'just part of the school day' and skilfully reincorporating them back into the lessons once they returned to their classroom after their learning support session, thus making this as seamless as possible for the individual child.

The extent of the teachers' skills when working with the children became all too obvious to me during the times I struggled to keep small groups of children focused on tasks, for example, on their reading when helping out with a literacy programme that was run every morning in the school, or supervising the children's enthusiasm during a Halloween pumpkin carving session. In contrast the often seemingly effortless way that this was managed by teachers holding the children's interest, keeping learning momentum going, and peace between the group of eager children made very clear to me the degree of focus required of teachers minute to minute as they worked with the children through the day.

The school ran a range of programmes for supporting children's learning, using methods to support the learning experiences and needs of children. One such programme was Reading Recovery⁶⁵, a targeted one-on-one intervention that used techniques that were different to current mainstream classroom techniques acknowledging that not all children learn in the same ways. From the teachers I learned, anecdotally, that the results the school were seeing with this were very positive. Another example was the provision of technological aids for children with visual impairments that made school books available to children in large print opening up the world of reading that had previously been so much more difficult for them. In addition, the school had adopted restorative practices into its work with the children, and at the classroom level, this gave children the time to air grievances, work through issues, and develop solutions. These processes were built into the school week.

I also learned of the extra-curricular time and effort that many of the teachers gave to the school. Often this involved running a range of different after-school activities for the children providing access to French classes, dancing, music and sport among others. Others worked over the summer running summer camps in the school. I saw how the hours of work that were put into preparation for the Christmas play paid off and each class had their turn at performing for the packed hall of proud parents and siblings, aunts and uncles, grandmothers and grandfathers.

I witnessed and took part in some of the extensive work that is undertaken with parents involved in the school, which allowed me to see first-hand the dedication and time that parents gave to the various activities and tasks that they took up. It was clear that they added to the sense of community that that made up the school day not only in their contributions to the work carried out but their knowledge of and interest in working with the children from their community, and the sense of fun that they brought to the day. The work that the staff put into engaging and working with parents both formally and informally was continuous and the good relationships that were forged in this process were clear to see.

Importantly, the data generated from parents for this study was not solely from parents with children in the school that hosted me during my fieldwork. Therefore, the experiences that parents shared of being involved in their child's school, or indeed experiences of their child's schooling more generally, regardless of this being a good experience or not, does not necessarily relate to Maryville. The parents that participated in this study had children in a range of different schools in the parish, and some in the wider Garda district. Including parents whose children attended a range of schools

⁶⁵ <http://www.pdst.ie/ReadingRecovery> for more details.

in the area, each of which was similarly a DEIS Band 1 school, helps to ensure that the study is not read as an evaluation of one school, and how it undertakes its work. The inclusion of parents whose children attend a range of unspecified DEIS band 1 schools in the wider area serves for the purpose of orientating interpretation away from a singular school, and instead towards the policy-making process itself, its effects and implications. The following chapters attempt to do just that, and so the findings should be read less as a story of a school, its staff and parents, and more as a story that provides a glimpse into the trajectory that we are taking as a society more generally, through the lens of the power relations that shape decision-making as it is occurring in the local school context. In other words, this is really an attempt at a story about us all.

Chapter 4 The Research Procedure

4.1 Introduction

This chapter presents the research procedure framing inquiry. Feminist activist ethnography is the methodological approach chosen to frame the research. The chapter sets out a theory of the research method as it relates to this study, in terms of the central concerns of feminist activist ethnography: power, knowledge, and social justice. Taking up the central instrument of analysis, reflexivity, the chapter sets out a theoretical underpinning for how it is used in this study drawing on Judith Okely's (1992) idea of 'autobiographical reflexivity' and Bourdieu and Wacquant's (1992) notion of 'epistemic reflexivity'. Together these incorporate both feminist sensibilities for learning where power imbalances exist, accessible through reflexive examination of emotions experienced and expressed, alongside a kind of reflexivity that pays particular attention to the specific rationale for those power imbalances as these relate to social structures. These ideas are then applied to my early days of fieldwork in the school. This illustrates both how they function as an introduction to the field of study, provides insight into the processes of reflexive engagement that I used, and the kind of knowledge that this process can produce. In this chapter, this relates to a broadening of my knowledge about the hierarchical structures in the school, the embodied nature of class, and the meaning of respect as this pertained to my early days of fieldwork. The chapter then discusses the methods used, the processes of making contact, and detail pertaining to the study participants. This is followed by a section outlining the ethical approval and ethical codes of practice as Faculty of Health Sciences. The processes of data analysis, write up and dissemination are then discussed. These are framed within the feminist principles of reciprocity, care, empowerment and emancipation. By way of beginning the chapter, the aims and objectives of the study are reiterated, followed by a short section outlining inequality in education in Ireland for bringing the parent-school relationship back into the picture.

4.2 Bringing the parent-school relationship into the frame

In order to undertake this study I decided to centre the inquiry on the nature of relations that make up the parent-school dynamic in a primary school, in an urban working class community context. Three interconnecting factors make the school a particularly suitable site for this study.

4.2.1 Formal Education and Reproduction

Formal education is long recognised both internationally and nationally as a site of inequality of educational and life outcomes (Freire & Ramos 1970; Willis 1993; Bourdieu 1977; Lynch 2001,

Evans 2006, among many others). In her article entitled *Equality in Education*, Lynch (2001) points to the four core equality contexts of economic, political, socio-cultural and affective inequality, that exist not only in the context of education, but across society more generally. This overlapping between formal education and society makes the school a suitable site for the exploration of macro relations in a micro context as they pertain to these equality contexts.

Decision-making as a practice is more specifically associated with political injustice, in that power shapes systems of inclusion and exclusion. Drawing from Baker (1998), Lynch (2001, p. 396) highlights that political injustice can take the form of “political exclusion, political marginalisation, political trivialisation or political misrepresentation” all of which can occur at any level of society from the family, through to the school, community organisations, church, the state and so on. This study is concerned also with the other kinds of injustices also, in terms of how they play a role in understanding the objectives of this study. For example, economic injustice is concerned with the issue of unequal distribution of material resources along with inequality in their ownership and control. Lynch (2001) points out that economic injustice also relates to inequality in people’s opportunities to improve their economic position, especially through education. Socio-cultural injustice ultimately relates to respect. This is located in “patterns in representation, interpretation and communication, manifesting in various kinds of cultural domination, symbolic misrepresentation or non-recognition” (Lynch 2001, p. 396) of individuals or groups. The fourth domain, affective inequalities, relates to a deprivation of emotional nurturance needed to ‘develop or maintain intimate/trusting and solidarity based human relations’ (Lynch 2001, p. 360). Care work is a central issue in affective injustice in the sense that marginalisation of the knowledge that underpins this vital dimension of humanity equates to the marginalisation and trivialisation of caring work, and the activity of caring itself (Lynch 2001). Affective injustice denies the reality of humans as being dependent and interdependent, limiting us to being discursively produced as purely rational actors.

4.2.2 School as Right and Left Hand of the State

The second key factor relates to the role of the school. Bourdieu (1999) uses the idea of the left hand and the right hand of the state to differentiate between minor and senior ministries. The right hand of the state is the sphere “entrusted with the economic and legal order” and the left hand contains, what he terms, ‘the agents of the spending ministries’ (Bourdieu 1999, in Wacquant 2004, p. 6) for example community development workers, family counsellors, teachers and so on. This dual function of state agents facilitates withdrawal of the right hand of the state from being the guardian of the public interest (Sapiro 2010) means that the left hand is

increasingly in the position of managing the front line of the state (Bourdieu 1992, in Sapiro 2010). This can be a particularly difficult role to occupy as the left hand is caught in the contradictions of being state providers and simultaneously working with the local community in a local community context. It has long been acknowledged that schools in Ireland, acting as the initial site for socialising a future labour force also act as a site where social stratification begins to coalesce (Whelan & Hannan 1999, Clancy 2007). The states' understanding of this process of stratification and cumulative exclusion and its responses mirror Bourdieu's 'left-hand/right-hand' analysis.

Study Aims and Objectives

Based on this role for the school, of navigating across and between the various fields of relations between the state and parents, an exploration of the discourse and practices that make up the school-parent relationship can provide insight into the dominant discourses that shape that relationship, how these are taken up, rejected, and/or resisted by the school and parents. With this as the focus of inquiry then, a reminder of the aims and objectives of the study follows. The first aim of the study is:

a) to undertake an exploration of the meaning of the 'ideal' decision-maker as this is produced in the discourse and practices that make up school-parent relations,

This will be done by:

- undertaking an exploration into how the meaning of the 'ideal' type of decision-maker is informed, as evidenced in school-parent relations, and
- making visible how this relationship is held in place

b) to learn about the effects that the discourse and practices that constitute the 'ideal' subject/decision-maker have for those lower down on the social hierarchy,

c) to inquire into the implications of this for society more generally, and,

d) to explore whether an alternative to this current social trajectory is desirable and if so, what this might look like, and how this might be achieved.

4.3 Feminist Activist Ethnography: Framework for a Theory of the Method

A feminist activist ethnographic approach was chosen for framing inquiry. In recognition of the complexity, not just within fields of practice but also between them, that need to be considered for understanding the meaning of decision-making as it is being produced in the relations between parents and their children's schools, and how this is informed by neoliberal policies and ideology. Skeggs (1995, p. 77) argues that feminist research is different from non-feminist research because it "begins from the premise that the nature of reality in western societies is unequal and hierarchical".

In addition to meeting this requirement I needed a methodological approach that could both provide the means for understanding how these inequalities are being produced under neoliberalism as well as the means for deciphering ways that this might be challenged in ways that align with broader (rather than neoliberal) ideas of social justice. In a recent edited volume *Feminist Activist Ethnography: Counterpoints to Neoliberalism in North America*, Craven and Davis (2013) define feminist ethnography as "a project committed to documenting lived experience as it is impacted by gender, race, class, sexuality, and other aspects of participants' lives" (2013, p. 1). They assert "that among the many strands of feminism, there is support for linking feminist ethnography to a commitment to engaging in research that is socially and politically relevant to those we study" (2013, p. 9). Notwithstanding this aspiration, the authors take-up and thus foreground the various problems that exist in the feminist ethnographic research endeavour. Among these are critiques of the potential for ethnographic work to mitigate the power differentials and exploitation that exist in the researcher-researched dynamic (Stacey 1988) or the reproduction of divisions along lines of class and race between women where universalising conclusions based on an un-interrogated concepts of 'woman' are used in feminist inquiry (Abu-Lughod 1990, Lorde 1984). Critique of feminist inquiry also includes the problem of the production of 'rescue narratives' about women in third world countries that ultimately serve to reproduce the white western woman as superior (Mohanty 1991), and oppressed groups or colonised countries as Other (Said 1978, Minh-ha 2000). Particularly relevant for this study also is the problem of inquiry rooted in development thinking based on western notions of targets and successes to the exclusion of aspirations and desires of third world women (Ong 2001). Importantly, Craven and Davis (2013) point out that despite feminist ethnographic work that is orientated towards understanding power imbalances, with a view to challenging structural inequalities, these systems of power persist, and recognition of this has firmly placed the project

of feminist knowledge production alongside praxis, as a way of working consistently for the identification of and challenge to inequalities.

Feminist Activist Ethnography and Neoliberalism

This persistent interrogation of power disparities is particularly relevant in terms of the increasing depoliticisation that is occurring under neoliberalism, as discussed in Chapter 2. While not a new problem, neoliberalism's professed apolitical underpinning is argued to be backgrounding the political, requiring an approach to inquiry that counters this reality. In addition, feminist ethnography, with its focus on lived experience at the individual level, could be accused of aligning with the neoliberal tendency towards reductive individualism, but differs in that it explores those experiences in the context of proximal and distal relations. In doing so, Davis and Craven (2013, p. 9) argue, feminist ethnographic work emphasises the link between the individual *and* community, moving beyond the simplistic dualism of the individual *versus* community. As a methodological approach, feminist ethnography is well placed for interrogating the neoliberal escalation of overdependence on objectivity, discussed in Chapter 2, in the context of the use of New Public Management for shaping and measuring effort and success. The centrality of reflexivity for inquiry and analysis, undermines the latter overdependence in the very process of its undertaking. The next section of this chapter teases out this point in its application of my use of reflexivity for analysis of my early days of undertaking fieldwork in the school.

Prior to this however, the question of how feminist ethnography is an activist project remains. Mullins (2011, p. 236 in Davis 2013, p. 26) provides a broad definition of activist ethnography including "everyday personal support, public education, social critique, collaborative research advocacy, and activism". Davis (2013) adds to this by drawing on Susser's (2010) definition which sees activist ethnography as work that is centered on social justice, in the sense that ethnography must include an intervention. However, Davis suggests broadening this to include Clarke's (2010, S301) view that activist anthropologists serve "as social critic, unravelling issues of power and positionality". Of particular relevance to this project is the point made by Craven and Davis (2013, p. 2) that activism in the tradition of feminist ethnography aims to connect their research to broader social justice efforts, thus "directly challenging the neoliberalist tendency to make the market the arbiter of social and economic justice".

While ethnography can sometimes be thought of as a method for undertaking research, I would argue in line with Skeggs (1995, p. 192) that in fact, ethnography "is a combination of different

methods; hence it is a theory of the research process – an idea about how we should do research”. The remainder of this chapter sets out the theoretical framework that for undertaking this study, based on the core ideas identified in the conceptual framework.

4.4 Reflexive and Recursive Inquiry

Reflexivity is at the core of the research strategy employed in this study. In this study, I draw from two different but related meanings of reflexivity. The first is informed from the discipline of anthropology and relates to a particular meaning of autobiography as put forward by Okely (1992), encapsulated in the concern for knowledge production as understood through self-reflection. The second definition is based on the reflexive sociology informed by the work of Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992), and Bourdieu *et al.* (1999) which relates to ‘epistemic reflexivity’, or awareness of the presence of dominant social structures as ‘knowledge’ in social interaction in order to disrupt these in that same process. As will be shown below, these strategies are used together in undertaking this study.

4.4.1 Autobiographical Reflexive Anthropology

Participant observation is the long associated method for undertaking ethnographic research reaching back to the American cultural anthropology associated with Bronislaw Malinowski and British social anthropology undertaken by Radcliffe-Brown in the early twentieth century. However, what participant observation means needs to be understood in terms of the theoretical underpinning of the particular project. In this study, Okely’s (1992) autobiographical strategy for undertaking ethnographic research is one key component of the meaning of participant observation used in this study.

4.4.2 Emotion as Knowledge

Okely (1992) argues for a different meaning of the autobiographical than that associated with the popular put down of autobiography as being a narcissistic endeavour or a kind of navel gazing done by the author in their exertion of full control over the text. As a strategy for undertaking research, Okely (1992) sees its meaning as different from self-awareness and instead critical scrutiny of the self. The shift away from the tradition of positivism in anthropology as a paradigm for framing inquiry that came with the ‘literary turn’, continued to be constrained by the desire from within the discipline to remain being seen as ‘scientifically objective’. While taking up the literary idea of multi-vocality (Bakhtin 1981) as a critique of the notion that there can be an authorial voice over the text within the discipline of anthropology, the focus remained on the text, but, Okely (1992) argues, to the exclusion of the fieldwork process. In other words, while taking up the post-structural critique of knowledge, there remained an Enlightenment separation

out of reason, as embodied in the text, from emotion, as attached to the more messy and emotional aspect of fieldwork. This equated to a separation out of the writing of anthropology from the doing of fieldwork.

4.4.3 Researcher as Research Tool

Okely (1992) argues that attempting to be 'scientifically objective' sidelines the ethnographer's self and in doing so loses the depth and breadth of knowledge production that is linked to the experience of doing fieldwork. Fieldwork, she points out, is always concerned with relationships. The process of being in the field is all encompassing, demanding all of the anthropologist's resources: intellectual, physical, emotional, political and intuitive (Okely 1992, p. 8). Because this experience involves so much of the self, Okely (1992) points out, it is impossible to reflect upon it fully if taking the self out of the process.

What Okely (1992) means here is that reflection on the self as category is about how one is confronted, received, and confided in, in the process of undertaking fieldwork. In this sense the ethnographer becomes her own vehicle for learning. For Okely (1992), this is not simply the 'I' of "I was there", observing others and documenting that process, but a recognition of being related to and by others as both individual and cultural category.

The autobiographical insertion is different from the stamp of author's authority: not simply 'I was there' but the self and category whom others confronted received and confided in (Okely 1992, p. 24).

Like all social relations, those forged in the process of fieldwork are always evolving over time. In ethnographic research, this factor is key to the learning process. As relations change in the field, different levels of understanding can be reached and new avenues explored. This does not mean to suggest that one can assume a linear progression from introduction to good relations in the field will occur. In fact relations in the field between the fieldworker and the individuals encountered can improve and/or dis-improve at any point over the course of the time spent doing participant observation as social relations evolve. The fieldworker's presence, particularly at the outset, often involves rule breaking in the sense that their presence clashes with the taken-for-granted 'rules of the game' within the particular group, environment, or community, usually the result of not knowing them. This can result in varying degrees of take-up, rejection and/or acceptance between different actors across the range of positions that make up the fieldwork environment. Taking a reflexive examination of the fieldworker's presence in the field as a catalyst (Rabinow 1977) in the changing nature of relationships can provide insight into the specifics that

are informing those occurrences and provide avenues for thinking about the more general circumstances that may be potentially shaping these.

4.4.4 Writing is Analysis

What this highlights is that analysis is not a distinct phase in the ethnographic process. It begins at the pre-fieldwork stage informed by the methodological framework, and continues through to the various kinds of write-up and dissemination of learning that occurs during and after time in the field (Hammersley and Atkinson 1995). It is iterative in nature, involving a recursive process of engagement, note taking, analyses in consultation with theory, the devising of new questions, exploration of new avenues, and a reinterpretation of older ones. Knowledge here is emergent, evolving as participant observation progresses, and is a distinct feature of an ethnographic approach (Marcus 2012). Writing is central to this process, as analysis evolves over a process of editing and rewriting, reverting to the data, and back to the writing process.

4.5 Accessing the Field

My process of accessing the field provides a clear example of this. Faculty ethical guidelines stipulate that making initial contact with potential research participants must be done in a manner that does not disempower the host. I made initial contact with the school principal by letter asking for return contact if he was interested in hearing more about the study. Upon receiving confirmation of interest, I followed up by meeting with the School Principal in person, where we discussed the project in more detail. While interested in the study himself, he informed me that prior to any agreement at a school level he would speak with the rest of the staff members to see if they would agree to me presenting an outline of the study for their consideration. This went ahead, and prior to the school breaking up for the summer holidays at the end of the 2012/2013 school year, I visited the school and introduced my study. It was agreed that I would start attending the school in September of the 2013/14 school year. While this could be taken to signal that I had received access to the school, I quickly learned upon starting fieldwork that 'access' was in reality something that needed to be developed in a process of negotiation that was not reduced to the initial consent received. Instead, I learned that consent was something that needed to be acquired throughout my time in the field.

For example, two weeks into my time in the field, the Principal approached me to say that the teaching staff had approached him to inquire again, into what it was that I was doing in the school. He said that some were feeling a bit uneasy about my presence and were unsure of what I was doing. Although I had thought that I had explained the project and its method, and had received

agreement from staff for me to be there, it was clear that this was not so straightforward. I was worried that at this early stage the staff might decide that they did not want me to be in the school doing fieldwork, and of course, this was something that I would have to accept should this be the case. I suggested to the Principal that I would speak with the staff again, answer any questions or queries that they had, and we could re-evaluate the situation at that point. He agreed, and suggested that I take a lead from the teaching staff in terms of how this might be undertaken in a way conducive to their work schedule. Upon doing so, the teachers suggested that I could talk with them about the study during last five minutes of each of the two morning breaks on the following day.

4.5.1 Respect and Teacher Autonomy

During these talks, the teachers asked questions about the overarching aim of the study, what I was observing, and the kind of things I was interested. I talked through this, locating my inquiry in the problem I saw in the description of parents as ‘unwilling’ or ‘uninterested’ participants in policy programmes, without any examination of what participation in decision-making meant. Interestingly, for some staff members the concern was whether what I was doing was more along the lines of investigative journalism. This of course was a reasonable question. In Ireland at the time, this kind of work was exposing horrendous abuses in the context of both residential care settings for older people, and people with intellectual disabilities, and poor practices in crèches that were placing children in danger. Whistleblowers were doing most of this work, some using concealed cameras that went towards televised reporting on national television and print media. The teachers suggested this somewhat in jest, but it was clear that even though it had never occurred to me, staff in the school had different perceptions of what I might be doing than I had thought. I assured the staff that I was not collecting information for the purposes of an exposé, and that my work had no undeclared covert dimension to it. At the end of the two five minute talks I felt that a lot of the tension that had obviously been building up, had dissipated. This does not mean to suggest a wholesale embracing of my presence occurred, but after the talks, some staff obviously felt more comfortable, offering to work with me on a closer level. Some teachers invited me to observe in their classrooms, or agreed to do one-to-one interviews with me, while others did not express any desire to do so. Overall, I did feel a shift in relations between the teaching staff myself and had occurred from these short roundtables.

Upon reflection, I began to think about the disconnection between the school principal’s regular referral to the fact that teachers had a degree of autonomy in the school, and my early days in the school where the Principal facilitated my time there by asking teachers if I could sit in on events

or classes or the like. In other words, my presence was perhaps disrupting the parameters of the space of teachers' autonomy, within the school/wider education system. From this perspective, the roundtables also functioned as a way of teachers re-establishing this autonomy, communicating this to me, and thus establishing (or not) a relationship with me on that basis. In short, what teachers perhaps felt was dis-respectful, was beginning to be replaced by relations of respect, and thus facilitative of me continuing to attend the school in a context where participants made informed decisions about the nature and extent of interaction with me that was preferable to them. Upon reflection, this highlighted for me, in line with the ethnographic literature (Bourgois 1995), the vital role that learning one's place plays in the researcher-participant relationship, in terms of its necessity as the basis from where knowledge can be produced. In addition, reflection carried out in this way while accessing the field offers an opportunity to learn about the nature of hierarchies in the organisation itself.

4.6 Embodied Knowledge

As Okely (1992, p.3) states, fieldwork "is totalising, and draws on the whole being". Turner & Bruner (1986) highlighted how the reflexive knowledge gained from participant observation is not only from examining external categories, but also from inner experience. An autobiographical strategy acknowledges that learning occurs through all the senses, including the body (Okely 1992) or felt experience. Bourdieu (1977, p. 94) saw how the body could be treated as a memory (1977, p. 94), something that could not always be consciously controlled. Okely (1992) makes the point that the power of memory of the senses and the body can often relegate the fieldnotes gathered in the field to being merely memory triggers of field experiences. This is because knowledge learned from reflecting upon the senses often occurs after the fact, where it is only afterwards upon reflection that the memory resurfaces, and with it questions posed and connections teased out.

4.6.1 Working to a Different Rhythm than the School

For example, one of the intense embodied memories that I have of my early days of fieldwork in the school was to do with the difficulty that I experienced just being there in the field without a recognisable role. The fact that the school functioned according to a fine tuned timetable made this particularly tangible. For example, often there were times I would find myself sitting in the common room, chatting with this person or that and then the bell would ring. Everyone would get into motion moving towards classrooms, or the assembly hall, or the yard, as I sat there, yet again in an empty room, or in the company of non-teaching staff who were busy carrying out their various duties. Other times after helping out with classroom reading initiatives, or some

photocopying, or the few times I helped with library duties I would wander back towards the common room, 'role-less', sometimes by 9.30am.

I spent a lot of my time in the common room, where so much of school life passed through each day. There were times during the early days that I found the experience of not having a role in this environment very difficult, where everybody had specific duties and everything ran according to a tight timetable. At times, I desperately needed to find a way to 'disappear' because just 'being there' was the most difficult thing for me to do. I felt that I stood out in a way that I was not used to, or comfortable with. My response to this feeling of discomfort was always interlinked with a compulsion to do anything in order to feel less conspicuous. Now and again, I would find a quiet place to be just to be out of view. Other times I would go for a walk around the school, or the local community, and I would be relieved when asked to help out with some task or other in the school. In the context of the tightly structured school organisation, doing anything meant being less visible, if not in others' eyes, certainly in my own, and this made me feel more comfortable. My experience has echoes of Hanley's (2016, p. 100) view of the middle class person where she says that "the middle class idea of the person is that you are a project; you are nothing without external input, matched with personal effort". For me, this seemed to be a context specific reality, in the sense that although I was working on my research project, within the context of the school day I was detached from that relational dynamic due to working to a different rhythm. I was struck by the physical effect that not having a role in the school had on me, particularly in the early days.

4.6.2 Learning to Communicate

One of the more useful applied learnings that I gained from reflecting on this experience was how my middle class cultural capital affords me the kind of mobility necessary to move through society in ways that mean this kind of discomfort is rarely felt. In other words, I do not move through the world in a way where I am marked by my class in the sense referred to by Beverly Skeggs (2004) because my life to a large degree has always taken part in some way or other in alignment with these structures. I reflected upon this in order to examine how it might relate to my work. In doing so, I began to think about the potential of the effect of my presence for parents coming into the school. As a person with middle class cultural capital, I became more aware of the potential that I might be experienced, by parents, as representative of the dominant structures in the same way. In the context of my own experience of wanting to retreat from what was the tangibility of the dominant structures, I became more conscious of the potential for my presence to become reproductive of the social inequality that I was attempting to learn how to undermine. In this sense, a reflexive approach to relationship building was once again helpful.

For example, during my earlier days in the school I met with one of the women from the local community who was regularly in the school. I have named her Sally here. We usually chatted when we met, and I noticed that in those early days she would often frame our conversations in humorous banter directed at my class privilege. Sally's joviality regularly targeted my role as researcher and the fact that the academic institution to which I was attached in undertaking the PhD work is associated with being an elite institution in Ireland. Sally was a very quick-witted woman and a skilful story teller.

Very often she would tell me stories of 'blow-ins', who lived near her mother, middle class people that had moved into what was traditionally a working class area of Dublin, in other words in the process of being gentrified. Sally communicated her feelings about this through her use of a posh Dublin accent. She was very good at mimicking the well recognised 'Dublin 4' accent⁶⁶, and while regularly starting the story with "You'll never guess what [the neighbour] did...", where she would switch into her posh accent to communicate whatever it was that the neighbour had said or done. Sally usually used a tone that suggested she felt the neighbour had an overbearing sense of self-importance. While Sally told these stories she typically 'brought the neighbour down to size' through this use of accent as ridicule. Inevitably, Sally's stories were always very funny, but I felt they carried a meta-message.

4.6.3 Learning About the Professional Role

Drawing on my learning from the work of Martha Balshem (1993), I heard these stories as part entertainment, and part communication to me of her intolerance of any sense of self-importance that I might potentially possess because of my class, institutional affiliation or role as researcher. Balshem (1993) tells a story in her ethnography about a turning point in her thinking when having tea after a formal session she facilitated in her role as a health promotion professional offering advice on health and well-being in a working class community, where no one engaged with her offers of an open floor discussion, but did so, and very frankly, afterward in the more informal setting of tea and biscuits, by challenging the health promotion narrative that framed her earlier talk. Among the things that struck Balshem was her very presence in her professional role, delivering advice in a formal capacity, had a silencing effect on the local community members. It was only when she stepped outside of the formal role that a space for communication was created. I felt that Sally was naming this problem of professional authority and its effects in her

⁶⁶ Dublin 4 accent meaning an accent associated with a more affluent part of Dublin.

stories, while simultaneously communicating that it would not be tolerated by her. I agree with her, and while this was the very thing that I was trying to overcome, how that might happen in practice, was something I was trying to work out.

Sally and I continued chatting as the days and weeks went by. Her talk about the research project along with playful teasing about it and me dwindled over time. We moved on towards chatting about our respective lives, the goings on in the school and local area. We developed a better rapport over time, one that was less defined by Sally's initial perceptions of me, and perhaps my unawareness of the ways that my class privilege might be experienced by her. Sally was aware that I was interested in talking to parents from the local area in one-to-one interviews over my time in the field, but I knew from our conversations and interactions that she did not want to take part in one. At the same time, I was also aware that she was interested in talking with me, as she often did, about a whole range of different things. Over time, I felt that a trust had developed between us, in a way that also recognised that the divide between us, and as such lent itself to a kind of mutuality.

4.6.4 Learning Different Meanings of Respect

While, as mentioned above, the middle class person is a project, of external input and personal effort for constant improvement, Hanley (2016, p. 100) contrasts this with the working class idea of the person which is that "you are good enough, lovable, and worthy of esteem, just as you are". Hanley (2016, p. 100) doesn't try to diminish the fact that one's unconscious may well have "internalised a social hierarchy which deems [the person] to be morally and intellectually deficient". However, she does point out that in order to stay true to themselves, working class people "must challenge those people and institutions who insist on continuous self-improvement as a means of being accepted into society" (ibid, p.100).

Okely (1992, p. 24) states that, "[i]n its fullest sense, reflexivity forces us to think through the consequences of our relations with others, whether it be reciprocity, asymmetry or exploitation", precisely because this has implications for the knowledge that is produced. Upon reflection, I learned an awful lot from Sally. I feel that Sally would never have taken part in an interview with me, nearly as a matter of self-respect, but I am also sure from my time in the field that she wanted to talk with me, but in a context that would not have the potential to eclipse her own set of values. This highlights how the research interview can become an instrument of silencing. In a case where the interview is the only avenue for taking part in research, it can simultaneously act as a tool of exclusion from the research process. Participant observation, still subject to the rigors of

reflexivity, can offer the potential to find common ground for the production of knowledge. Of course this itself cannot be taken for granted, in the sense that what Sally had to teach me about relationship building and respect could go one way or another depending, I suggest, on my capacity to hear what she was saying.

4.7 Interviews and Focus Group

Reflexivity here draws on the work of Bourdieu *et al.* (1999) and Bourdieu & Wacquant (1992) and their notion of 'epistemic reflexivity' (1992, p .44). This refers to a process of challenging the academic knowledge base that informs the interviewer's own perceptions and thoughts as method *in the act* of undertaking interviews [my emphasis], or in other words a kind of active engagement. Active engagement in this sense lies somewhere in between the non-directive interview situation at one end and the closed structured questionnaire at the other. This is in line with the semi-structured interview (Bernard 2006) which offers a balance between exploration of a framework of ideas and the open-endedness that allows for the introduction of new ideas in the interview by the interviewee (Bernard 2006), but engaged with in a reflexive way.

In *The Weight of the World* Bourdieu *et al.* (1999) explain that a reflexive sociology is the craft of perceiving the effects of social structures as they are occurring in whatever social interaction it is that makes up the process of inquiry. This centrally involves gaining insight into one's own presuppositions by using the findings and theory from social science to control (rather than any assumption of eliminating) the effects of social structures as they emerge in the interaction itself.

This involves taking up active and methodical listening that becomes part of the process of constructing the discourse produced so that it yields the elements necessary for its own explanation. In other words, knowledge construction occurs through reflexive navigation of dominant discourses and structures that emerge in the process of communication by asking about experiences of them as they arise. Bourdieu *et al.* (1999) argue that the social researcher's knowledge should be such that it meets the aim for a reflexive approach whereby the researcher can "mentally put themselves in the [interviewees] place" (1999, p. 612) without pretending to cancel the social distance that exists between interviewer and interviewee. This meets the function of understanding interviewees as,

necessarily where they are; by questioning them from that point on; to some degree to take their part; based on a theoretical or practical grasp of the social conditions of which they (interviewee) are the product;

and a grasp of the conditions, inseparably psychological and social, associated with a given position and trajectory in social space (ibid, 1999, p.613).

It is for this reason that Bourdieu (1999) describes sociology as a craft learned over time, where theoretical knowledge and knowledge of social structures inform interpretation and interaction at the point of conversation with the other, in order to disrupt the effects of these structures on the possibilities that might otherwise be blocked. Bourdieu (1999) argues that undertaking research in this way collapses the gap between understanding and explaining, making them one, and as such bridging the gap between interaction and the written representation.

4.8.1 Topic Guide: Parents

The topic guide for parents (Appendix V) was devised in order to get insight into parents' perceptions of their relationship with their children's schools, what informed these perceptions, and if, how, and why this relationship was accepted, challenged and/or rejected by parents. The guide explored these relations by orientating questions towards two broad, different, but sometimes inter-related levels of parent-school relations. These were formal parental involvement, or involvement of parents in the school, for example, being on the parents association or taking up the activities/courses offered to parents through the school, and, the more general parent-school relations that occur as part of sending a child to school.

After beginning with general introductory questions about their children attending primary school and their broad views on schooling today in comparison with their own experiences of schooling, the questions were then orientated towards their own relationship with the school. This usually began with questions about the nature and extent of their relationship at the formal involvement level, and then broadened out to the more generalised level. The interviews designed in this manner purposefully made space for parents to participate in the study and bring what they themselves wanted to talk about into the conversation, in whatever format they themselves chose.

4.8.2 Topic Guide: School Staff

The topic guide for staff was somewhat more structured (Appendix VI). This guide began by gathering information on the staff members' current role, and their history of working in formal education. It inquired into the specifics of the role, changes to the role over time, and if and how changes shaped perceptions of teaching and learning. Staff members were asked about the curriculum and additional supports in the school, changes that had occurred over time, and the

implications of those for their role, the children, and the school more generally. Interviews also included questions about school-parent relations, along with changes to these relations over time, how these changes were informed, and staff views of any changes. I added questions emerging from my being in the school, eliciting elaborations or rationale for one practice or another.

4.8.3 Topic Guide: School Principal

I also devised a topic guide for undertaking an interview with the school principal (Appendix IX). This included general questions about the running of the school, and any challenges to same, looking at change over time as this related to running the school, and more specifically, the effects of austerity in the school. The guide included questions about the topic of parental involvement, its function in the school, changes over time, and aspirations for the future. I also included topics informed from my time in the field. An example of this was my ascertaining of perceptions on the rights of parents to involvement in decision-making in schools based on my attendance at a national conference where this was a central theme.

4.8.4 Topic Guide: Home School Liaison Officer

A broad set of questions was developed for the Home School Liaison Officer also (Appendix VIII). This explored the Home School Liaison Role more generally, and the topic of parental involvement in the school, with a view to garnering perceptions of these as they related to the school. It looked at changes to the role over time, and challenges that arose in this process. The topic guide also included questions that were asked from spending time in the school, like inquiries into the Parents Association as it operated locally, how it was perceived in the school and how it was run.

4.8 Making Contact with Parents/School Staff for Interview

As the weeks of fieldwork went on, I began to feel like I should begin to do some interviews with parents. In consultation with the school principal, it was agreed that I might try to send home 'invitation to interview' packs with children in their homework folders. University ethical guidelines stipulated that I had to follow certain procedures for making contact with parents/guardians for interview. One of these was that invitations to interview could not be given directly by me, but had to go through a third party by way of acknowledging power disparities that might exist and to prevent parents from feeling pressured into taking part.

The school used the children's homework folders as a mechanism for communication between parents and the school. The principal was happy for me to use this channel. I decided to send packs home with thirty first class pupils. The invitation letter pointed out that parents interested

in taking part in interviews were invited to make contact with me first, and only then would I return contact to discuss the process in detail. In order to ensure that parents had the relevant information about the project and what their participation would involve, I put packs⁶⁷ together that I gave to the teachers who handed them out to the children in their class.

The teachers mentioned to me that often parents communicate back into the school through the homework folder and perhaps a system for facilitating that might be useful. Drawing on an idea used in a previous study that I had worked on, and in keeping with the ethical parameters of contact, I left a small sealed cardboard box in the classrooms where pupils could post return envelopes should their parents prefer to send them back in with their children via the homework folder.

4.9 Criteria for Inclusion in Interviews

Parents

Parents/Guardians that have children in primary school; are male or female; are parents/guardians over 18; parents/guardians who speak English, and are willing to have the interviews recorded.

Staff

Staff in the host school.

Two Notes on the Inclusion Criteria

The Question of Fathers

While the study criteria were designed to be inclusive of both mothers and fathers, the parents that took part in the study, either in interviews or those whom I had contact with through my fieldwork in the school were mothers. This is not to say that I did not encounter fathers who were involved during my time in the school but in terms of formal parental involvement, I found this to be a space taken up more by mothers. My attempts at making contact with parents were inclusive of fathers in the sense that the packs that I sent home to families were invitations to *parents*, but

⁶⁷ Packs included: an introduction letter explaining the study; an outline of the process for arranging and undertaking the interview, and that it would be audio-recorded; a list of possible topics for discussion and the fact that parents could add any themselves; notification of the confidential and voluntary nature of participation; a copy of the consent form that would be used; and a stamped addressed envelope and 'expression of interest' slips so that parents could communicate their interest by return post to me.

as is discussed in Section 4.9.2 below I did not make contact with either fathers or mothers through this avenue.

What was apparent during my time in the field was that relations between fathers and the school were not as strong, or regular, as relations between mothers and the school were. The literature provides some insights into why this might be so. For example, it is long identified in the feminist literature (Graham 1983, p. 18) that “[c]aring is ‘given’ to women: it becomes the defining characteristic of their self-identity and their lifework. At the same time, caring is taken away from men: not caring becomes a defining characteristic of manhood”. In this sense, the central role for mothers is suggested to be a gendered role, and one that is produced in social relations. In addition to this, Lareau (1989) points out that often more rigid gender roles are adopted by working class parents and in this framing involvement in the child’s school is taken to be the mother’s role. An additional issue for consideration is the suggestion Sevenhuijsen (1998) that this kind of gender divide can reproduced by educational institutions themselves where there is a lack of active outreach directed at father’s inclusion, and instead a concerted effort to include mothers. Walkerdine’s (1990) work aligns with this view where she examines how the work of producing the ‘rational’ child, particularly in the working class school context, is found to be interwoven with work that simultaneously suppresses the ‘irrational’ mother. In this context the absence of fathers is perhaps justified, but this remains a limitation that needs to be addressed in future research.

The literature provides insight into why weaker links between fathers and the school might exist. However, including parents with weaker links in the study was not its aim. Instead, it required access to stronger links in order to gain insight into how inequality in decision-making was being produced in the relations that exist, why this was so, and insight into who it is that benefits and who loses, along with insight into what a more democratic politics might look like. The stronger relations were with mothers. In addition, the study never claims to represent all parents, nor, importantly all mothers, but instead aims to make visible to policy practitioners, policy researchers, and parents some of the ways that parents inequality is reproduced, and the effects of this on them, and in turn all of us. This is with a view to contributing to the creation of conditions from where we can all begin to work together towards a real democratic politics.

English Speakers

The criteria of English speakers for inclusion was pragmatic and made due to the cost implications of communication and translation in a research context that involved an extended period of time in the field. However, in line with the points made above by fathers, the study never claims or aspires to find the 'breadth', 'outside', or the 'most excluded'. A danger in aspiring to this is that a boundary is redrawn where claims of this nature, even unbeknownst to the researcher, inevitably produce those outside of that boundary as the excluded. This is the central problem of identity politics. Instead, and in line with the previous point, the methodology required access to strong/regular relationships in order to be able to gain critical insight into how they were being comprised, with a view to making processes and their effects visible. As a model for thinking and working with in the aspiration for more democratic decision-making, the aim would be that this would help for drawing more parents inwards to school contexts where they know they will be heard. In the context of beginning from an equality of condition, addressing the issues of accessibility like language differences, race, gender and so on would at this point be necessary as they pertain to, and indeed change, at the local level.

4.9.1 Initial Response Rate: Zero

I did not receive any return expressions of interest in the in-class post boxes or via the post. I reverted to the literature again, thinking back through the lessons in Martha Balschem's (1993) work about the relationship between professional authority and 'othering' and wondered about how the invitation pack might have been perceived by parents. The non-response rate may have been a resistance to a sense of being positioned by the letter, or in other words by me as the 'professional'.

During my first few weeks, I undertook various tasks in the school assisting the principal and staff where I could. This included tasks like answering the phone, managing the door, some photocopying, tidying shelves, or helping out with the delivery of leaflets in different classrooms. I was concerned in these early stages, that my undertaking of these tasks might mean that I would be perceived as a staff member by parents. Indeed, parents that I met on my way to the local shop or between schools sometimes commented on the fact that they knew I was doing research. In this sense, my being in the school, and helping out in the way that I initially was may well have served to communicate that I was doing research on behalf of the school, rather than independently, regardless of it having been stated otherwise in the invitation to interview letter.

Agency or Just Disinterest?

This raised lots of questions for me and I wondered if this occurred due to resistance or agency. I wondered if it was too soon to try to set up interviews. Was I pushing forward too quickly in response to my need to be 'doing' something? Was the notion of asking to speak to parents about parent-school relationships from within the school disrespectful in the context of what I knew about inequality in education? I wondered if I had inadvertently silenced parents, or if the non-response was a resistance against the perceived potential that I might do so anyway should they take part in the study?

Of course, there was also the possibility that parents did not see the project as interesting or something they saw as relevant. For example, there were times when I was sitting in the common room, chatting with some of the non-teaching staff and I would be asked, "Karin, are you bored sitting around?" or others would be informed, "She must be bored to tears". Sometimes, in the context of pointing out that relations between parents and the school were actually very good, suggestions were made about where I might be more useful. "Do you know where you'd be great Karin... Down in Limerick working on the City of Culture stuff"⁶⁸. None of this was said to me with any malice. It was more within the context of concern that I might be better off 'doing' something. These kinds of comments also alerted me to the fact that my interests may not be the interests of parents themselves. Maybe the zero response rate was really indifference. I needed to rethink the process again in a way that would eliminate potential discursive and structural barriers in order to see if parents were interested in taking part.

4.10 Revisiting the Methods

One-to-One Parent Interviews (N=5)

Interviews with parents did occur, but after thinking through the above possible reasons for the initial zero response, I waited for a time before trying different approaches. Maintaining the 'third party' distance stipulated in the Faculty of Health Sciences TCD ethical guidelines, I made contact with some parents through teachers, who offered to pass packs directly to parents/guardians, identities of whom I was unaware. I asked the teacher to make it clear to the parent/guardian, that they themselves [the teacher] would not be aware as to whether the parent took up the invitation or not. Where this occurred, one parent posted back her letter of interest, another

⁶⁸ At the time Limerick was working towards rolling out its City of Culture programme, and one of the staff members knew that I was from Limerick.

stopped me in the corridor one day when she was in the school and said she would like to take part.

Parent participation in one-to-one interviews also occurred from conversations that I had with parents that I met during my time in the field. In this context, parents often asked me what I was doing my research on, and in the context of our conversations some offered to take part. In terms of the University Faculty ethical requirements this was concerning to me, but was also an unavoidable outcome of getting to know people. This is not easily reconcilable when undertaking ethnographic work where relations with potential participants are established prior to interview recruitment. Notwithstanding this, and as I point out later, I always adhered to the Faculty stipulation for a seven day reflection period prior to undertaking interviews.

Parent Focus Group (N=1, 5 parents)

In addition to this, I made contact with a group of young parents from outside the school. Adhering to the conditionality on third party distance, I made a link with community development workers in the local community firstly by phone, and then face-to-face meeting. They agreed to pass invitation packs to parents who fitted the study criteria. Through this avenue, I made contact with a group of five young mothers who decided that they would like to take part, but stated that their preference for doing so was in focus group format. Their request was respected, and arrangements for undertaking the focus group were organised initially through the 'third party' and then in person with myself. The focus group took place in the community-based organisation and was attended by the five mothers and myself.

One-to-One School Staff Interviews (N=5)

School staff were interviewed on a one-to-one basis for the study. Ethical approval was granted for initial contact to be made with staff by post. However, this did not occur due to the fact that as time was spent in the field, and working relations were developing with staff members arrangements for undertaking interviews with staff evolved out of various conversations with individuals and groups as the topic of my research was discussed. This is an unavoidable reality of undertaking participant observation as being in the school meant interacting with staff on a daily basis. As a follow on from these conversations, a certain number of staff members volunteered to take part in the interviews. Any staff members that agreed were provided with an information sheet and consent form in adherence with the seven day consideration period prior

to interview. Interviews took place at a time and place convenient to the staff member. All staff interviews took part in the school.

One-to-One Interviews with Non-teaching Staff/Local Community Residents (N=3)

Interviews also took place with three non-teaching staff members of the local community, one of whom was a grandparent of a child in the school. Two staff members chose to do a joint interview and the third was a one-to-one interview.

4.10.1 Total Interviews and Focus Group

In total, 18 individuals took part in interviews or a focus group. The table below sets out detail of the nature of participation in this component of the data collection. All of the parents that took part in the study were female. Of the total number of interviewees, two were male.

Table 4.1: Overview of Interviews and Focus Groups

Interviews/Focus Group	Number of Participants
Interviews with Parents	5
Focus Group with Parents (N=1)	5
Interviews with non-teaching Staff/Local Residents/Grandparents	3
Interviews with School Staff	5
Total Interviewees	18

Interviews lasted between 30 and 60 minutes and all sessions were audio-recorded, and transcribed verbatim. Recordings were downloaded to a password protected computer and interviews were then cleared from the recording device.

4.11 Ethical Approval

4.11.1 Ethical Approval: University

Ethical approval for this study was received from the Faculty of Health Sciences at Trinity College Dublin in October 2012.

4.11.2 Ethical Protocol: School

There was no ethics committee at the school. Access was initially organised through the School Principal. The Principal and I discussed the ethical implications of my being in the school

particularly in terms of child protection. While my study was not focused on the children in the school, I was obviously going to be in their company. We agreed as protocol that if I had any concerns I would talk with him, and that should I be dissatisfied with that process, I would be obliged to follow my own course of action in response to the issue arising. During my time in the school there was just one time that I felt I need to contact the Principal in relation to concerns I had about a child. After our telephone conversation, I did not feel the need to take the issue any further.

4.11.3 Garda Clearance

It was required by the University and the school that I have Garda Clearance in order to carry out the research in the school. I received clearance in Ireland, the United Kingdom, Germany, and Canada as I had previously lived in these countries.

4.12 Ethical Principals

Feminist ethnographers recognise that representation is not value free (Schrock 2013), and simultaneously can play a central role in shifting the limits of our understandings (Skeggs 1995, p. 203). How we conduct our research and make representations is critically important. The principles of reciprocity, care and empowerment are central underpinnings of feminist research (Skeggs 1995). The following section examines researcher responsibility in the context of this frame.

4.12.1 Reciprocity

I aspired, in my interaction with the people I encountered in the field, to engage in line with a moral code of reciprocity. The examples that I set out above (Section 4.7) attempt to illustrate this point by highlighting how social interaction needed to be self-consciously analysed in wider processes all the time (Okely 1992). At the heart of a reciprocal feminist inquiry is the need for researchers to be alert to the ethical implications of their knowledge making (Domosh 2003), by analysing how that knowledge is produced in the context of the broader processes to which it is connected. Importantly though, this principle cannot be reserved as a lens for inquiry about knowledge-making in relation to the researcher only but must also be taken up as a frame for analysing the experiences that research subjects share in the research process. Experience in this framing takes on an alternative definition to a mainstream understanding of experience as a truth in and of itself, separate from the broader context. Drawing from Scott (1992),

Experience in this definition then becomes not the origin of our explanation, not the authoritative (because seen or felt) evidence that grounds what is known, but rather that which we seek to explain, that about which knowledge is produced (p.26).

What this quote highlights is that to reduce our research participant's contributions to experiences as truths in and of themselves, separated out from the political and social systems in which those experiences are constructed is to deny them the same subjectivity that we attribute to ourselves. As Domosh argues (2003) our job as researchers is to understand how and in what ways those experiences, particularly the experiences of marginalised individuals, as expressed to us through the methods employed have been socially constructed, and in so doing subject these accounts to the same rigorous deconstructions that we afford ourselves. This is not to suggest that what is being spoken by the marginalised is not a truth, it is to argue that our work should begin from validating that truth, but analysing it from the perspective of asking questions about how societal power relationships have come to be experienced as subjective truths (Domosh 2003). We need to scrutinize the personal knowledges of our subjects just as we do our own, by asking the same kinds questions, like under what conditions are these truths constructed. For what reasons? Who benefits and how can these kinds of inquiries help create a more just world? In analysing participant's contributions in this way, we can get a more robust understanding of the ideological system in which experiences are produced. As such interrogating the foundational status of experience involves us in a connection to our interviewees that is more complex and ethically fraught, but ultimately more responsible. By affording our interviewees the same subjectivity that we allow ourselves, we create a more reciprocal research relationship (Domosh 2003). Reciprocity according to this meaning similarly goes towards the creation of an alternative definition of participation, as is expanded again in the next section on care.

4.12.2 Care

The neoliberal attempt at reducing our understanding of differences between subjects to degrees of willingness to take up so called 'equal access opportunities', highlights the need for an approach to inquiry that can counter that dominant narrative. An ethics of care within the feminist paradigm of knowledge can offer this kind of counter-balance. The ethics of caring, as pointed out by Balshem (1993) differs according to different paradigms of knowledge. For example, "the ethics of caring in health education is about changing peoples' behaviour" (Balshem 1993, p. 129). This top down approach to caring was exactly what I was attempting to undermine in the process of, and as an outcome of, undertaking this research. Feminist ethnography informed by the complexities of power imbalances is an approach to inquiry that strives to be open the differences

in lived experiences (Craven & Davis 2013). An ethics of care within feminism is encapsulated in the recognition of our different lived experiences as these are shaped in our relations with others. In respect of difference then, an ethics of care in feminist research means recognising the importance of participants having a voice, in whatever form they choose to express it, and their voice being listened to carefully, and heard. As an approach to inquiry, this underpinning ethic itself offers a definition of participation for inquiry where participation is on the terms of the individual participant. While I strove to incorporate this ethic of care into all of my informal interactions in the field, I also left open space for parents to speak in the interviews that I undertook with them, with a view to actively hearing what they wish to speak. In this way, the study set out to operate under an alternative definition of participation to that prescribed for individuals within the dominant ideology, and so simultaneously disrupt that framing.

4.12.3 What to Leave In/Out?

But in our eagerness to show these differences in ethnographic work we need to remember that marginalised people are often the targets of critique and structural violence informed by their own 'truth telling'. Foucault (1978), in Bridges (2011), refers to this as the problem of the confessional story. The confessional story has become a normative way of communicating; confessions that we either offer ourselves, or that are dragged from us by violence or threat (Bridges 2011). The desire to confess is becoming increasingly associated with 'truthful' interaction under neoliberalism. This is occurring where the body's role in birth, mortality, health status, life expectancy and so on make it a vehicle for regulation of the individual done through a series of interventions and regulatory controls which Foucault (1978, p. 139) calls "a biopolitics of the population" already referred to in Chapter 2. Bridges (2011) points to the use of the needs assessment as a tool for the drawing out of the confessional story as service conditionality as one such instrument of regulation increasingly used in neoliberal governmentality. In the process of becoming commonplace for the receipt of state services, this, what Bridges (2011) calls state surveillance and regulation, is framed in a salvation narrative with the promise of freedom resulting from the purging of mind and body of its ills. In Bridges (2011) ethnography, this meant opening up to the service provider, telling them the truth of one's circumstances thus contributing to the production of confessing as normative. For people in the margins this confessing can be used against them in the form of punishment, such as welfare sanctions, referrals to social services and so on, acts that can be carried out without reflection on the structural causes of the circumstances in the first instance.

This has specific implications for researcher responsibility in terms of what, and how, data are collected and used. This is not to suggest that what the participant says might be false but instead that speaking can make participants vulnerable if used without consideration for its consequences for the teller. The idea of 'do no harm' becomes even more complicated as does the notion of 'trust'. For example, Craven & Davis (2013) ask, is the participant trusting you to tell their story, even if the researcher feels negative consequences might follow.

Skeggs (1995) draws attention to the not unproblematic fact that ultimately, the decision about what goes in and what gets left out of ethnographic work is the researcher's decision. However, as Craven and Davis (2013, p. 10) point out the fact that some people have more power and/or time than others to take part in research means we have to "weigh up what collaboration means in the context of principles of inclusivity and equity". In other words, do those with more power or time to speak become more present in the data generated? Ignoring these kinds of questions would compromise the underpinning value of care in feminism and feminist activist ethnography. This study attempts to navigate these balances.

4.12.4 Language Use: Class Vs. 'Disadvantage'

In line with Skeggs (1995), one of the more difficult issues that I had to address in this work was how to describe the parents in this study. While I use the term working class, it is not a description that I feel comfortable using all the time. Unlike Skeggs (1997) who reports that the women in her study did not want to be defined as working class, the parents and local community member in this study used this term interchangeably. For example, sometimes the term would be rejected by parents if the term was being used as a contrast with the notion of middle class. However, at other times, when speaking more directly between their own politico-historical experiences and the state, some would talk about the effect of social change on them as a working-class community. This might be in terms of work or the lack thereof, or community life, or the havoc that the lack of state intervention in an ever escalating problem of drug use has meant for their and other working class communities or housing and homelessness issues that affected themselves or people that they knew. In summary, the people I met chose when and if to use the term. This raises question of whether it is problematic for the researcher to use this term beyond the context of its use by participants.

Skeggs (1995, p. 200) asks, if the researched do not speak concepts does it mean that the researcher cannot use them? She responds with another question, "If the theorist cannot theorise, why bother doing research?" Here class is not being employed as a classificatory term,

but instead as a term that can be used to think about the differences between social groups, that are being produced in social relations. Class thought of in this way does not refer merely to the fact that there are differences in terms of the ownership and control of assets, but more importantly that the effect of inequality in assets has consequences for people. Also important is the idea that class itself does not produce subjectivity, but instead subjectivities are shaped through interaction with social and institutional processes (Wright 2008). It is this interactional dynamic, and the effects of that interaction that make class a more useful term for this study than one such as 'social disadvantage', where people's disadvantage is made to sound as though it 'lies in their exclusion rather than in excluding structures' (Labonte 2004).

Again, I follow Skeggs (1995) where she says,

It may be more useful to think about knowledge being produced through different discursive sites in which the researcher and the researched have different access to discursive resources (p.201).

4.12.5 Listening and Supporting

I used the paradigm to think through my response to any issues that participants told to me while in the field. There were times that people confided in me about issues that were troubling them in their lives, or in other instances became upset about something that had happened to them. It seemed apparent to me that in some instances the fact that 'telling' could result in vulnerability was a central concern for some of the people themselves. For example, there were times that some women told me very personal stories, and a friend or colleague might move uncomfortably in their seat, concerned that the story could become, as Skeggs (1995) describes, a weapon that could be used against them. This suggested to me that the experience of being exploited as a result of 'truth telling' was not something unknown about. Inevitably, I would always ensure parents that these kinds of individual stories would never be used in the research.

I would also always ask if I could help in any way. Sometimes, my help was more in the form of covering their tasks for a few hours so that they could go and sort out whatever it was needed doing. Other times I would source information for people, and offer to help or seek help on their behalf if they so wished. In addition, if a situation arose where a person became visibly upset I always sat and listened, and talked through the issue with them, but led by them. More often it was not the case that people wanted me to try solve a problem, but instead just to listen as they voiced it and their concerns. In this era of what often feels to me like one of relentless unsolicited advice, not least in relation to how to be an 'effective' parent, and in my own experience of how

to be an 'effective' carer, I often responded with what I myself would usually prefer, a listening ear. This did not replace my commitment to being ready to address an issue of concern should it arise.

4.12.6 Faculty Ethical Stipulations

Seven Day Reflection Period Prior to Interview

Faculty ethical guidelines also stipulated that a seven day reflection period be given to parents before contacting them again so that they could have time to consider their participation. This was adhered to in all instances, where I followed up by phone or in person answering any questions parents or school staff had, and if still interested, organised to carry out interviews with them. Parent interviews took place in places of work, training, and in individual parent's homes. Staff interviews took place in the school in classrooms or offices.

Written Consent

Written consent was received from all interviewees and focus group attendees. This kind of close procedural work was intended for use at a closer individual level. Immediately prior to interview the details on the consent form was either read out to, or read by the interviewee, and then the form was signed. The freedom to ask questions at any stage prior to or during the interview was made clear, as was the freedom to stop the interview at any time. The voluntary nature of participation was highlighted, as were assurances of confidentiality and anonymity. Interviewees were assured that in addition the name of the school and local community would be anonymised.

4.12.7 Protecting Participant Identities

The notion of care cut across the various dimensions of the research study. I undertook a number of measures to ensure that any data I gathered was kept safely and securely.

Interviews

All participants who took part in interviews were provided with pseudonyms/codes from the outset. These were used in all stages of the research process. Personal details of interviewees were kept on a password protected database and access to these were encrypted. The researcher and supervisors were the only persons who could access this file. All audio files were kept separately from transcriptions and from participant personal details to ensure that no connections between these could be made. Any references to individuals by name in the transcriptions were omitted and replaced with kinship titles [e.g. son/ daughter 1,2,3] or working relation title [e.g. pupil/gender/descriptor, or teacher coded according to classroom year] to further ensure confidentiality.

Fieldnotes

Fieldnotes did not contain any identifiable information at an individual level. I wrote up fieldnotes immediately after leaving the field. Bourgois (1991) makes the point that experienced fieldworkers usually advise novice ethnographers not to take notes in public while undertaking fieldwork. He follows by asking, is that a false presentation of the self? This is an important question that I have not resolved. In the early days of my fieldwork I took out my notebook once or twice and when the Principal came to me to say that the teaching staff were uneasy about my presence one of the things he mentioned was that they had noticed my notebook and wondered what I was writing in it. In the context of the roundtable interactions that I had with them, I talked about the kind of notes that I was taking and assured them that it was not about individuals but the practices and procedures that made up schooling, my experiences of being in the field, and questions arising. Even so, I did not produce my notebook very often after this. I did discuss it with different individuals now and again, where they would ask me about note taking as part of research practice.

After leaving the school I wrote up my notes in a systematic fashion. I firstly jotted down key points in order to gather an outline of the day. Then I went back over these and fleshed them out in greater detail. Notes included description of physical spaces, things that had happened, topics of conversations held, changing relations that I perceived and reflexive notes about my own experience of the day, and relational thoughts for thinking these through. All notes were stored in a password protected 'fieldwork notes' folder, on word documents and headed with the date. I developed a set of codes for the key individuals, used only in order to be able to remember the events better rather than for use as identification for findings. These were used in lieu of individual names. Over time, the nature of the notes taken changed as the rhythm of the day became very familiar, and my note taking became repetitive. More nuanced notes building on ideas emerging over time were taken. This coincided with new rounds of note taking where for example I joined a group or took part in an activity new to me as the fieldwork process evolved.

Data Storage

Interviews and Fieldnotes

All recorded interviews were uploaded to a password protected file on computer. Once transcribed, transcriptions were stored on computer separately from audio files. Only the researcher and study supervisors had ethical approval to access any of the data. All fieldnotes taken during the fieldwork phase were typed out in word files. The documents and files were also stored on the computer and were password protected. Only the researcher has had access to the

data stored on the computer. Only the supervisors and the researcher had ethical approval to view any of the data.

Hardcopy records

Signed consent forms and hard copies of transcripts of interviews were stored in a locked fireproof cabinet in the School of Nursing & Midwifery at Trinity College Dublin. The researcher is the only person who had access to the cabinet. No records belonging to participants were collected in this study.

4.13 Analysis & Dissemination

The final dimension of researcher responsibility concerns the notion of empowerment as it relates to the analysis and dissemination of the research knowledge.

4.13.1 Analysis: Theoretical Storytelling as Guide

As discussed in section 4.5.4 above, analysis involved a process of moving between data and theory, field and desk inquiry. Following Sanjek (2014) decisions that followed the early stage of data collection were informed by the process of recursively moving between reflexive exploration of the data and new theoretical ideas of significance that were used to explain what was felt to be emerging in the process of inquiry. “These latter theories – hunches, hypotheses, ideas about connections and relationships - emerge as listening and observation proceed” (Sanjek 2014, p. 64). This process takes precedence over the power or time that the different participants have to take part. Oscillating between field and theory as the process evolves orientates the researcher towards the people, events, ideas, and activities of focus and towards the objects of relevance for exploring the central problematic. As a feminist and activist approach to analysis this is also in line with the need for making strategic and sometimes challenging choices about whose voices to foreground in a neoliberal context where marginalised voices are more usually suppressed. This ties back to the point made above in Section 4.11.1 on Reciprocity, and Section 4.11.2 on Care that argue for analysis of marginalised voices to be undertaken within the wider political/social context, and thus not reduced to subjective experience, in the practice of making space for marginalised individuals and groups to speak. Analysis in this feminist framing then itself becomes a political act.

4.13.2 Validity, Reliability, Generalisability, or, What is Objective Knowledge?

The method for knowledge production set out here raises an important question. How does this framework fit with the notion of scientific objective knowledge? The scientific community has long argued for the knowledge produced in research to be objective, that is un-biased and value-

free, yet these 'certainties' have been dislodged in the framework set out. Harrison (2013) highlights that critique is often levelled at activist research based on questions of whether it can produce evidence that is methodologically valid and reliable given its admittedly partisan perspective. However, rather than making any attempt to defend itself on the grounds of validity, it is argued instead, that the notion of validity itself comes from a partisan positivist perspective on research. In other words, arguments about validity and reliability are based on the pretence that research within a positivist paradigm, or in other words from within the frame of the dominant discourse, is a value-free science. This opens up the questions of the meaning of 'valid' and 'reliable' according to what 'truth' and according to whose reality? Feminists have long argued that being value-free is impossible because we all carry experiences and values that shape our vision and interpretation (Woulfe 2005) regardless of whether this is in agreement or contestation with the dominant discourse. Instead, and in line with the theoretical thinking of Foucault (1982), we can really only ever view knowledge as being partial, or in other words, the product of that which is excluded from it. In this frame, validity and reliability are relative terms.

4.13.3 Situated Knowledges and Feminist Objectivity

What then does this mean for the notion of objectivity? In order to think about this question, and how this relates to the specificities that underpin the methodological framework of this study the work of Donna Haraway (1988) and her theory of 'situated knowledges' as objective knowledge is taken up.

Rather than something that is separate and beyond the effects of individual values and ideas, objectivity for Haraway (1988) is instead embodied and based on locatable, partial perspectives. This definition of objectivity results from her critique of the notion that there is such a thing as 'scientific objectivity'. Contrary to what is usually claimed, that scientific objectivity is not unbiased, Haraway argues that in fact science is always performed and authored by biased people. Science tries to popularise the belief that it can 'see' from nowhere or in other words from all perspectives and therefore is objective. This view from nowhere claims the power to be able to see and not be seen, to be able to represent the world, and not be represented. In other words it suggests a standing outside of culture. However, the scientist actually sets out to find out something, to answer a question; they want to know something and the question is informed from within the frame of knowledge as it is already constructed.

Therefore, rather than having a transcendent and disembodied view from nowhere, in reality inquiry is actually predicated on the splitting of the 'knowing subject' and passive object from a

place within the social matrix. Haraway (1988) associates this with the Male/White gaze as scientific objectivity and thus power. She refers to the historical honing of the idea, located in militarism, capitalism, colonialism and male supremacy, of “distanc[ing of] the knowing subject from everybody and everything in the interests of unfettered power (1988, p. 581). According to Haraway, those in the ‘hard’ sciences are very aware of this reality, of the ‘game’ of science, but that it is in the realm of the non-scientists that the concept of objectivity as unbiased persists. Any notion of scientific objectivity is actually toppled by the very simple idea that with objectivity hierarchy could not exist (Haraway 1988). However, the power of saying something is objective while acting in ways that are the opposite is so forceful that seeing beyond the words can be impossible. This is what Haraway calls the ‘god-trick’ (1988, p. 586) communicating the myth of being able to see everywhere from nowhere. Feminist objectivity means quite simply *situated knowledges* (Haraway, 1988, p. 581) which reflect our locationality (historical, national, generational) and positionality (race, gender, class, nationality, sexuality etc.,) acknowledging how the dynamics of where we are always affects our viewpoint and the production of knowledge without privileging one particular position over another is not possible.

4.13.4 Partiality not Relativism

Haraway’s idea of objectivity is not the opposite of the overarching vision of scientific objectivity which would be difference for difference’s sake. In other words, she does not mean merely a shift from modernism to a postmodernism. This kind of shift would only result in a state of relativism, individualism and the impossibility of knowing anything as a society. Objectivism is instead about connection between the partial perspectives that are particular and embodied in the forms of partial, locatable, critical knowledges. This kind of objectivity allows us to account for knowledge as it is being produced and as we come to know it in the local context. Haraway (1988) reclaims the notion of vision by arguing that only partial perspectives promise objective vision. This is contrary to grand narratives as objectivity, which are merely allegories of the dominant ideologies governing the relations of mind and body, subject and object.

4.13.5 Universality not Generalisability

Objectivity then is embodied in the form of a ‘map of tensions and resonances between the fixed ends of a charged dichotomy’ (Haraway 1988, p. 588) and it is in this kind of knowledge that “politics and epistemologies of embodied, therefore accountable, objectivity”, lie. Analysis of knowledge based on this understanding shifts the focus away from working towards arriving at another new point of view informed by yet another biased ‘terms of vision’. For Haraway, the task we must take on is the building of “webs of connections, complete with tensions and

resonances that are a consequence of the productive structurings that force unequal translations and exchanges – material and semiotic – within the webs of knowledge and power” (Haraway 1988, p. 588). It is communicating across, and connecting and building upon these situated knowledges that is the aim. Situated knowledges are then decoded, subject to criticism, reworked, and in ongoing dialogue, generative of a collective vision (Harrison 2013, p xii). This of course also redefines the notion of generalisability arguing instead for a universality of knowledge made up of differences. In this sense, the knowledge being produced in this study needs to be thought of as partial in the wider web of connections that make up its historical present, and thus future knowledges.

4.13.6 Dissemination: Empowerment and Emancipation

While feminist ethnography is itself not new, it has a history of been relegated to the domain of ‘soft’ research in opposition to what was deemed the more theoretical ‘scientific’ approach of male ethnographers and anthropologists in the academy (Dumont 1978, Schrock 2013). The increasing neo-liberalisation of the university and its implications for the changing nature of academic work and the academic has particular implications for upholding this ‘ethical’ commitment (Gill 2010). The very process of becoming the ‘good’ academic has implications for the production and dissemination of feminist knowledge. This is because the master discourse of neoliberalism that shapes the notion of ‘work’ and ‘the worker’ in the university is more akin to the masculine and ‘scientific’ self, contrary to the feminine identity, “marked by more flexible, permeable ego boundaries” (Chodrow 1978, in Okely 1992). In other words, the narrative of ‘self’ informing this study is concerned with representing experience as interpersonal in contrast to the narrative of the ‘masculine’ self as one of individualism and distance (Smith 1987, p. 12-13). In locating myself within the study, my goal is to actively deconstruct those distances, and in turn, use the learnings from analysis of my role and its effects in the study in the dissemination process itself. This will be done with a view to challenging the more normative ‘masculine’ approach, where research and researched are separate and unequal, taken in the dissemination process, with a view to undermining the reproduction of inequality that this would perpetuate.

An issue for consideration in the context of this claim relates to what could be argued as an absence of collaboration between researcher and researched in the knowledge making process. Two points are worthy of consideration here. Firstly, I would argue that because the study is problematising the very concept of participation itself, the notion that I would try to engage others in that process, without firstly learning how I myself might be implicated in its reproduction as an unequal process, could merely result in that reproduction occurring. This direction in thinking, as

I have argued in the introduction, distracts from the wider question of what participatory decision-making is being produced to mean in discourse and practice, how is this informed, what are its effects for subordinated groups, and implications of this trajectory for us all. Indeed, this study is not one that is only inquiring into how this meaning of decision-making is being taken up, resisted, and/or rejected by parents, but in line with Laura Nader's (1972) call to 'study up', is inclusive of an exploration of how the neoliberalisation of decision-making is similarly being engaged with by school staff, as well as myself. Therefore, rather than undertaking a study that would risk further silencing the voices of those with less power by driving an agenda of 'bringing the excluded in', my aim was to make visible the discourses and practices that go towards exclusion firstly. In doing so we can learn about the thoughts and actions that go towards these processes, and in turn inform how we can create a space underpinned by an equality of condition. In that framing we all, researchers, practitioners and parents, might embark on the question of participatory decision-making from within a more politicised and equal field of relations.

I would argue that it is in the carrying through to dissemination the learning from my own the that the study remains in adherence to the feminist claim to interpersonal knowledge making where the utilisation of learning from reflexive practice, including my own for knowledge production, a method of analysis that has interpersonal relations at its core. Crucially, as a project concerned with the production of an equal field for debate, making visible my own reflexive learning; how I as the 'professional' researcher am equally implicated and effected in the reproduction of the status quo, places me among the field of actors in the study, necessary to the field of debate. The findings in chapters five, six and seven, along with the examples set out above in Section 4.5 above, illustrate how reflexive examination of my own role in the field, has implications for the kind of knowledge that is being produced, which in bringing into the dissemination process can act as an equalising force. 'Dissemination' in this framing becomes a process undertaken *with* the other study participants; part of the discussion about where we might collectively go from here rather than a presenter of the study findings *to* the 'others' in the field. Foregrounding my reflexive learning in the dissemination process is a way of redrawing the dissemination frame in this more interpersonal and equalising way, by recasting it as a space of equality of condition.

In line with this, I also recognise that bringing the learning into the academy, along with the wider public policy domain is a crucial part of the process if this study is to adhere to its feminist activist function of connecting the research to broader social justice efforts in society. In terms of this

study, this will be achieved by making visible to both policy researchers and practitioners that despite our good intentions, our work can be a contributor to the inequality that we argue we are trying to undermine. Once again, placing myself in the frame, by making visible the ways that this can occur from analysis of my own work, my aim is to reject any use of blame, and instead promote the use of critical and reflexive inquiry as a way of ensuring that we avoid reproduction in our work as we go forward. In line with the underpinning principle of empowerment I aspire to continue to work toward forging out a space of respect through exchange, where the knowledge constructed in this study and the more dominant 'scientific' knowledge in the academy can find common ground in a way that can contribute to the potential for real inclusion for all.

4.14 Conclusion

This chapter has set out and simultaneously illustrated the research procedure used in this study. It draws from a combination of two specific meanings of reflexivity, the first associated with autobiographical reflexivity in line with the work of Okely (1992) and the second 'epistemic reflexivity' as set out in the work of Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992). It shows how the procedures employed in this study dovetailed with the core principles underpinning feminist ethnography of reciprocity, care and empowerment. The chapter pays particular attention to the complex challenges of undertaking such in-depth work as they related to this study and the ways through which an adherence to its ethical underpinning were foregrounded and problematised at all times. The chapter closes by discussing the ethical imperative to bring the knowledge produced in this study into the public domain, and highlights some of the complexities concerning this in the context of the increasing neoliberalisation of the university and the public realm.

Chapter 5 Decision-Making Power

5.1 Introduction

This chapter focuses in on the issue of decision-making power in the school. It does this by exploring how decision-making as a process is viewed in the school, how this is informed, and how this is held in place in school-parent relations. An unquestioned inequality of access to decision-making in the school is the point of departure for the chapter. This long existing reality is discussed in relations to the culture of education in Ireland, as held in place through counter resistance. The rationale for the inequality of access to decision-making for parents is found to derive from ideas linked to a particular kind of intelligence that is required to participate in what is a competitive arena of decision-making, requiring a 'competition subject'.

The chapter then inquires into the additional characteristics of the competition subject through analysis of key aspects of the work of parental involvement as it occurs in the school. By way of capturing recent developments in this work, the chapter explores policy reforms introduced in the wake of the post 2008 financial crisis in order to explore their effects in practice. What becomes clear is how both government action and inaction play a role in shaping the meaning of work with parents, and in line with the neoliberal production of human capital, thus the meaning in turn of the good person. This relates firstly to the foregrounding of the notion of *time invested* as work related value or productivity, over and above material productivity, as introduced through a 'productivity measure' across the public sector, taken up in the school to describe good parental involvement. Secondly is the identification in dominant policy discourse for rebuilding citizen trust government through citizens 'having a say' in shaping the institution of the state, thus appealing to participatory citizenship. Notwithstanding this, attempts to realise this, by naming trust building, as a requirement of work with parents was absent. Instead, an emphasis on building trust in the education worker was evident. Understood in the wider context of parent attendance and retention being measures of the 'good' worker, and assessed through self-evaluation, this is argued to be unsurprising, thus making visible how the 'good' worker (or decision-maker/person) is produced, to have the 'quality' of self-interest. In the local context, this slippage away from parents (citizens) 'having a say' and towards building trust in the worker suggests that this is, for the worker, a risk adverse approach.

By way of illustrating that the subject of competition, investment and interest is not one limited to practitioners, here discussed in the context of educational professionals, I present reflexive analysis from my own presence in a parents group within the school, showing that researchers are also

representative of the dominant neoliberal subject. Of particular relevance here is the effect of my presence in the group in terms of narrowing the parameters for speaking for parents, particularly in the context of them having worries or concerns. This raises the question for research of what it really means to be a good/ethical researcher, a question that is explored throughout the study.

The final section of the chapter explores some of the ways that parents take up, reject, and resist both their inclusion as a subject of competition, investment and self-interest, and their exclusion from this positionality. While aware of the power relations that shape their relationship with the school, in the last instance, their wish to make education more accessible for their children is their driver for being involved.

5.2 Decision-Making: A Competitive Practice

By way of teasing out a central problematic of framing this study, that of the simplistic notion of ‘inside’ of social inclusion, produced in contrast to the outside of exclusion, a useful point of departure for this chapter is from an illustration of that framing in the context of the topic of this study. The particular example that I draw from here comes from an interview that I undertook with one of the staff members who works with parents in the school as a key part of her role. The point here is less to place a spotlight on any particular staff member but more, in line with the argument outlined in the introduction of an unquestioned unequal sphere of inclusion, the findings evidence this critique here in practice. Also important in the following quotes is the idea that this is not immediately visible but a fact that emerges in the process of a more probing inquiry. For example, in the first quote here, where I had asked the participant about parental involvement in policy-making in the school the initial idea communicated was that parents are involved in decision-making in the school.

“...any time we get parents involved in policy or development or something, they will always come up with something that you didn’t think of. So that’s always been my experience... I’ve noticed that over the years, .. that if you involve parents, they will just give you a gem, over and over, well you might get like however many gems you might get, you can be guaranteed to get something that you wouldn’t have thought of yourself”. (School Staff)

By gem, the staff member is referring here to ideas and solutions to issues arising, that parents continually bring to the policy making process in the school. The following quote contributes to the perception that parental involvement in policy-making is an unproblematic process. This is evident in comparison provided between parents current ‘involvement’ in policy processes in comparison to views held within education in years gone by.

".... years ago it would be a bit like, 'Why would you have a parent on a policy development group like? That's for schools to do themselves'....". (School Staff)

Used in this way, and in line with the thinking of Foucault (1972) we can see how discourse in its naming what inclusion means, has the power to block the view from what gets left out of that framing.

5.2.1 Decision-Making: An Unequal Practice

This becomes a little clearer when considered in the context of the next quote, which was part of our continued discussion about the topic. Here the staff member begins to qualify what she means.

"Parents will be on the policy development group if the policy was relevant to parents... if you know what I mean... If it's internal, it's not so necessary. It's not necessary really, but am, say things like we developed an exceptional circumstances policy, say for example, what to do if it's a snow day". (School Staff)

What becomes clearer above is that parents actually have limited access to decision-making in the school, evidenced by the view here that it is not necessary for parents to be involved in 'internal' decisions. More generally, this alludes to the idea that unequal decision-making practices, where parents are concerned, is a somewhat taken for granted reality in the school. In order to better understand how this might be demarcated I inquired further.

5.2.2 Protecting Parents from Unequal Competition

The answer became clearer in an interview that I undertook with a senior member of staff. As part of that interview, I was sharing with the staff member some of what I had recently learned at a conference run by The National Parents Council (Primary)⁶⁹ (NPCP) on the topic of parental involvement in decision making in schools. The policy position taken by the NPCP was strongly in favour of parents being involved in decision-making,⁷⁰ and much of the discussions in the

⁶⁹ The National Parents Council (Primary) is a charitable company limited by guarantee – without share capital. The principal source of funding received by the Council is from funding grants from the Department of Education and Skills and the Health Services Executive.

⁷⁰ According to the National Parents Council (Primary) "It is the right and responsibility for all parents to be included in school decisions and developing parent leadership and representation in all schools (2016). Drawing on the Education Act 1988, the NPC add that "Principals and Boards of Management must consult and give due consideration to parents on all matters that effect children in the school". On the other hand, in the most up to date Circular 24_91 (2006) from the Department of Education and Skills on the issue of *Parents as Partners in Education*, the language is softer where it states, "partnership for parents in education is a stated policy aim of Government". The Circular refers primarily to parental *involvement* in

conference were concerned with if and how this might happen in the schools. The senior staff member's response to this was one delivered in a tone of slight agitation. The main reason for this was that he felt this would be an unfair direction for the state to take in the context of the capacity of local parents to compete in the wider arena of decision-making with their more middle class counterparts.

"In a lot of ways it [the NPCP position on parent's participation in decision-making] might not be helpful. We have tried to involve parents in making decisions in schools and in a lot of cases... in a disadvantaged area, in the area that we are in our.. [...] parents don't have a lot of expertise; they don't have a lot of knowledge... A school in Foxrock⁷¹ will be at a much greater advantage.. just on levels of skills and expertise.. If you have a school where parents are doctors, or lawyers or accountants, parents who are professional people who know legislation and can write letters.. am, talk publicly or whatever they are at a huge advantage.. [compared] to a school where parents are unemployed, or haven't got a good record of employment, or mightn't be on the best terms with the law, am.. or have lots of other problems.. It's a completely different situation". (Senior Staff Member)

There is a clear sense in the above quote that there is a genuine concern for parents in the school, in that subjecting them to an imbalanced arena of decision-making would be unfair. This language of protection is unsurprising in the sense that the staff member spoke regularly about his interest in developing good relations between the school and parents, along with the success that had been achieved in this regard, in recent years. However, the quote can also be understood as going towards a reinforcing of the taken for granted inequality in access to decision-making, in the fact that it, like the earlier quotes, goes unquestioned, not only questioning that inequality exists, but questions about how its comes to be. On the other hand, the quote veers towards the idea that parents participation in decision-making might be disrupting, that 'it might not be helpful', due to the disadvantage that local parents are at in terms of capacity for participating in the context of the wider education sphere, or decision-making table. It is perhaps important to note here, that this also is suggestive of the idea that middle class parents have unlimited access to decision-making in education which may in and of itself be a questionable assumption. In this sense, the quote contains a very complex range of perspectives on the issue of parental involvement in decision-making. In order to inquire into how these perceptions might be informed, I explored both the study data, and the literature for greater understanding.

the child's education, and only uses the phrase 'decision making' when suggesting that parents associations should affiliate themselves with the NPC (Primary) to have a voice in decision making at a national level.

⁷¹ An affluent middle class area of Dublin.

5.3 Inequality in Education as a Cultural Norm

I began to get some insight into my question when analysing one of the more pressing issues at the forefront of day-to-day school management, finances. In my fieldnotes finances featured regularly, more accurately represented by the theme of ‘the lack of finances’. This was in my notes in lots of different ways for example, in accounts of times about it being very cold inside the school, of staff wearing their outdoor coats indoors and complaining loudly about the very cold temperature in the building, wishing the principal would turn on the heat. It was in accounts of the principal often being seen ensuring that lights, even in common rooms that were in use, were turned off, despite visibility with the daylight alone, mid-winter, being on the underlit side. Another example was an account of one of my first days in the school, and at the beginning of the school year. I was helping one of the staff members with the task of delivering stationary to teachers in their classrooms that they had ordered ahead of the start of school year. I had imagined boxes of items being delivered to individual classrooms, amounts of stationary that would be needed for whole classrooms, and at least covering a school term’s need. Instead, I was delivering part packets of poly pockets here and there, a packet of highlighters divided between classrooms, part packets of coloured paper or folders. I wrote about how teachers were delighted to receive their orders, many commenting on the fact that they were even more delighted to have received everything they had requested. In addition, my notes contained accounts of photocopying being monitored and restricted due to it being so costly. These and the many other examples were suggestive of a school being very vigilant in terms of its spending. My initial interpretation of this context was one of being unsurprised, in the sense that, having gone to a convent school myself, frugality was not a surprising feature of the school going experience. The nuns knew how to eke out finances or at least express that as an admirable quality. On top of this, we were in the midst of a recession in Ireland and austerity and the education sector did not escape the extensive cuts that were being imposed on Irish society over successive budgets since 2008⁷².

However, in the context of a formal interview that I undertook with the school principal, I began to get a different sense of the reality of financial worries in the school that made me reevaluate my initial perceptions. As a precursor to discussing school finances with me in the interview, the principal spoke about the professional and capable staff members that worked in the school, of their energetic and creative approach to their work and the collaborative way in which they addressed any problems or issues that might arise from time to time. Notwithstanding this, he was

⁷² The capitation grant for primary schools cut by about 15% since 2010 (Healy *et al.* 2016).

clear about the fact that financial worries were a real and constant worry on a day-to-day basis. For example, the following quotes highlight this.

“We are worried about paying our electricity bills and worried about getting work done in the school. Like the school hall, it needs a ceiling on it – so the last few years I’ve been hoping to get a ceiling but I haven’t been able to get the money for it”. (Principal)

5.3.1 Working at Keeping Up with Middle Class Schools

The school principal’s account is suggestive of a grants environment that is changing in terms of grant accessibility, but a greater emphasis seemed to be placed by him on the litany of ongoing works that are a longstanding feature of keeping the school in running order and open for business.

“You can apply for summer works and they grant a certain number of them each year; emergency things they seemed to grant last year... We have had some work done in the school but it was done under emergency works but that has to be something that the school would have to close over if you didn’t do [the work]. So we got work done in the car park. The lamps were falling over. We got a grant for that during the year. Our latest thing is the hedging. We are doing work on that.. fencing up around the side of the school..” (Principal)

The financial worries for the school principal were not limited to issues concerning the physical environment but were also spoken about as having a direct effect on the teaching and learning environment.

“..so funding things is a big worry, am, all the equipment in the school, say, our IT equipment, that’s all very dated. And we’d be wondering how we will replace it or keep it up to date or can we keep up with other schools. Am.. most other schools would have interactive boards in classrooms. They have a white board with a projector and the teacher can touch the screen and make different things happen. It’s an aid to learning”. (Principal)

The Principal’s account is suggestive of a school that was not newly, as a consequence of austerity, resorted to playing catch up with other schools, but instead more usually so. He was clearly aware of the changes that occur in the non-DEIS school environment where he adds,

“That’s where learning is going nowadays, so what we have tried to do.., we have whiteboards, but we bought these devices that clip onto the side of the board. It connects to the laptop and there is a pen and then it is switched on and beams. It can be used like an interactive board, a cheaper

solution, so we've managed to get all the boards [equipped with] something like that but we are playing catch up all the time, with other schools." (Principal)

Financial struggles mean that trying to source workarounds in order to keep up with advances in learning technologies would appear to be a significant part of the DEIS schools work. In addition, making do with cheaper solutions, while not necessarily problematic per se, requires research in terms of ensuring that the children's learning needs are being met in ways that align with their middle-class counterparts.

The capital funding received by the school through the DEIS scheme is supposed to fund these kinds of needs, however the principal pointed out that this was not nearly doing so. Capital grants for primary schools had been cut in successive austerity budgets from 2010 onwards (Healy *et al.* 2016), and currently stands at €170 per child, estimated to cover approximately 52% of the cost of running a school⁷³. According to the Catholic Primary Schools Managers Association (2018), parents and communities contribute 46 million to help fund what is supposed to be free primary education through fundraising and voluntary contributions. Unlike non-DEIS schools, parents in DEIS schools are not obliged to make a 'voluntary contribution' each year. The funding provided through the DEIS programme is meant to compensate for this⁷⁴ where they receive extra funding in recognition of the limited potential for DEIS schools to fundraise locally (Department of Education & Science 2005). However, the principal stated that this was falling very short of meeting the ongoing financial needs of the school. According to the Principal, the amount of funding needed for the kinds of works and technological updating required in the school are in the tens of thousands. In this context, the school pushed along in any way they could in order to try to keep up.

A key idea that I felt this account contained was that the inequality in education that clearly shaped the work and worries of the DEIS school, while intensified under austerity, is more clearly a longstanding status quo that frames daily life in the school. In this wider framing, where inequality in education is not questioned, the taken for granted inequality in decision-making as this pertains

⁷³ The Catholic Primary Schools Managers Association are currently (2018) running a campaign to have the capitation amount returned to pre-crisis levels of €200 per pupil.

⁷⁴ The so-called 'voluntary contribution' is on average between €80 per senior infant child and €150 for a child in secondary school. DEIS receive extra funding per child due to its disadvantaged status, meaning that parents are not required to give the 'voluntary contribution'. However, the degree to which DEIS funding is sufficient to bridge the gap in resources between disadvantaged and non-disadvantaged settings is questionable (Society of St. Vincent de Paul 2014) particularly in the context of the additional €46 million in contributions made by parents to primary schools in 2017 (Catholic Primary Schools Managers Association 2018).

to parents can be found to make more sense. The 'problem' that was ruled in was 'keeping up' with other schools, effectively ruling out inequality as the problem to be problematised.

5.3.2 Education Mediators and Counter Resistance

Drawing then from the critical education literature, a more complex layering of how this taken for granted inequality might be interlinked with concerns about the status quo being disrupted, as expressed earlier, becomes apparent in the idea of counter-resistance as discussed in a paper by Lynch (1990) entitled "Reproduction: The Role of Cultural Factors and Educational Mediators" .

A key point relevant to the analysis here was that to understand the processes of reproduction in education it is important not only to account for resistance as it relates to subordinated groups, but also to the counter-resistances to these efforts (Lynch 1990). Understanding this relationship, Lynch (1990) argues, requires an understanding of counter-resistance as it is contributed to by cultural, historical and political forces that are unique to its development. Two key factors are identified as being vital for understanding this in the Irish context (Lynch 1990) for a more nuanced interpretation that is not reduced solely to the relationship between social classes and the State. The first is the country's post-colonial status, and its effect on the importance of cultural capital (and education capital particularly) over other kinds of capital for status and power accumulation in Ireland. Lynch (1990) argues that education plays a central role in creating and distributing privilege in Ireland's very centralised system of control. Secondly, Lynch (1990) posits are education mediators whose status and power interests are bound up with the unequal educational status quo.

Key education mediators in the unique historical and cultural context of Irish education include the Roman Catholic Church, teacher unions, vocational education committees and parent bodies (Lynch 1990). Each in different ways, but with similar effect, is identified as part of the collective force of counter-resistance in education, in that their actions ensure that those who are already very successful consumers of education continue to be so. In other words, the conditions for capital accumulation are sustained in the process of counter-resistance to resistance from below. For example, teachers' unions who have historically had a considerably powerful position in developing policy in Ireland have, as an occupational group, specific class interests to meet. What is taken to be valuable knowledge is key in terms of ensuring these interests are met. Supporting resistance (from below) to how valuable knowledge is defined is to threaten the terms upon which the educational professional's class position is maintained, and therefore contrary to the union's objectives. From this perspective, views about local parents' participation in decision-making as 'not being helpful' or as being disrupting, for reason associated with 'knowledge' can begin to look like counter-resistance to what could otherwise be a challenge to the kind of cultural capital that holds the class system in place, from below. In the context of similar aspirations among the range

of mediators of educational services referred to above, and the conflicts that occurs between the mediator groups within this wider field, Lynch (1990, p. 15) argues that this web of inter-relations “itself acts as a stabilising force within the education system”. Bourdieu (1997) similarly argues that competition in the field of education between stake groups can paradoxically strengthen the institution.

For our purposes here, this analysis helps to broaden the context for interpreting the work of keeping things going in the school from one underpinned by relations that are unidirectional in the form of state-professional-parent to an interpretation that is based on a far more complex and contingent set of relations. These of course are not particular to Maryville, but relate more generally to the field of education, from primary right through to third level and beyond⁷⁵. This framing served to open up my interpretation of what is being ‘protected’, from parents in contexts of unfair competition, to include now the protection of competition itself as a mechanism necessary for retaining the education status quo. This analysis would align with the idea in the literature that the decision-making subject under neoliberalism is the competition subject (Read 2009, Lazzarato 2011).

5.4 Investment of Time as Work Value

The dominant idea of the competition subject is further supported in the analysis that follows from this point where we see the work of the school with parents orientated towards, not only bringing them in, but inwards in ways that are in line with the production of the parent as a subject of investment and interests, or away, that is, from the subject of rights and laws.

For example, as part of an interview with the school principal he spoke about the funds brought in from parents’ fundraising activities as certainly softening the edges of the school’s money worries, but added that this would not address the scale of the school’s financial needs. One example provided was that funds raised from a recent fundraising event amounted to €1000 which he highlighted was on the higher end of the amounts usually raised through fundraising efforts. The principal commented on the fact that the school is always appreciative of this income, and paid recognition to the effort that parents invest in fundraising activities, however, in the context of the reality of the school’s financial needs, he pointed out that this only goes so far. In the main, it seemed that the funds brought in from fundraising activities help to keep the school’s ‘head above water’.

⁷⁵ And of course not limited to the field of education in Irish society but an analytical approach applicable to all sectors.

However, what did strike me was that in the context of the principal recognising that fundraising activities were not be expected to address the school's financial worries, the real value of the work carried out by parents was described more particularly in terms of time invested in the task, over and above the amount of money raised. For example, he says,

"When they [parents] do fundraising, really the value of it is that it involves parents, it gives them a voice, it makes them feel that they are contributing and those kind of things are where the value is with the parent's association" (Principal).

Read's (2009) point, in his discussion of Foucault's work on neoliberal subjectivity, that under neoliberalism we are being produced as subjects of investment helps to make sense of the link here between describing the *value* of parental involvement in the school in those terms. Upon thinking about this finding in the broader policy context as it was unfolding under austerity, I began to question whether this link between time invested and work-related value was being promoted. What began to emerge was that not only was this the case, but that what also seemed to be occurring was that the concept of 'productivity' was being discursively attached to the latter relationship. This could be seen in the introduction of a mandatory 'productivity measure' across the public service, which includes education. This is discussed in the following section.

5.4.1 Policy Reform: The 'Productivity Measure'

In 2010, two years into the recession that had begun in 2008, a new Public Service Agreement (2010 – 2014) was drawn up between the government, public service trade unions and other agencies⁷⁶, colloquially known as the 'Croke Park' agreement⁷⁷. A key component of the agreement for primary schools was the introduction of a productivity measure in the form of an additional thirty-six hours per school year, which became operative in February 2011. The rationale given for this was about achieving efficiencies in service provision standards, in an environment of staff reductions and reduced costs⁷⁸. Specific detail about how this extra time could be used was prescribed not only in terms of the content (for example, the time had to be used for school planning, policy development, staff meetings), but also that time had to be used in a specific way (e.g. hour long blocks rather than making up the extra hour by adding minutes to each working day, or using the time together in larger blocks). The issue of the additional Croke Park Hours was raised and reviewed in the next

⁷⁶ These included the Public Services Committee of the Irish Congress of Trade Unions, the Garda, and Defence Force Associations.

⁷⁷

<https://www.gov.ie/pdf/?file=https://assets.gov.ie/6622/243d1eeba2634e08845131ffc96df7f0.pdf#page=1>

⁷⁸ <http://www.per.gov.ie/en/croke-park-agreement/>

rounds of talks and a revised stipulation that the additional time should be continued to be used⁷⁹ was included in the Haddington Road Agreement 2013 – 2016.

These additional hours were given renewed in emphasis in Maryville in the run up to the school year that I undertook my fieldwork. Considering this, it seemed that there were many times where the staff were trying to come up with ideas for ways to use their extra hour, not because they were avoiding the duties specified on the list of tasks in the Croke Park Agreement, but because these tasks were already completed. However, regardless of this the extra hour per week had to be given by teachers to the school and different ideas relating to, for example, improving the physical environment of the school were undertaken in order to comply with the directive. There were mild grumblings among some staff about the need to do the 'Croke Park Hours', but in general this requirement was accepted. This is encapsulated in the response to a question about her opinion of the mandated Croke Park Hours that was asked of one of the more recently employed teachers in the school,

"Like I don't think they are the worst... but that's because when I started I had to do them, so I know no different. Whereas teachers who have been working longer in the school didn't have to do them – so that all came in when everything was going bust, so I'd say they were raging. But I've always had to do it, just as part of the contract, you know...am, I like... some of them are quite useful...".
(Teacher 3.1)

Views on this among educational professionals across the education field more generally were not so amicable. Debates about the value of this additional time among teaching staff and unions ensued, encapsulated in media headlines like, "Uncertainty still surrounds Croke park as Teachers split on the deal" (Murray & Rogers 2010), or "Croke Park hours forces teachers to cut back extra-curricular activities" (O'Sullivan 2015) or, "Croke Park hours a detention for Teachers, says ASTI" (O'Brien *et al.* 2016). While initially taken up in schools across the education sector, some teachers were reported in the media as having felt that mandating the hours undermined the goodwill, already given prior to Croke Park, in the form of voluntary time supporting pupils and the school. What teachers felt to be the usual lack of recognition of this goodwill was now cemented through the additional hours mandate. Teachers also argued the set additional time was the least productive use of time within the school (Murray 2016). The issue remained one of contention across the teaching profession, becoming a key issue around which a ballot was introduced in 2016 by members of the Association of Secondary School Teachers (ASTI) where the hours were voted

⁷⁹https://www.asti.ie/uploads/media/0043-2014_HRA_Review_of_Usage_of_Croke_Park_Hours.pdf

down. This was despite warnings from government encapsulated in other media headlines such as in the Republic of Ireland's national public broadcaster online news, "Teachers warned over Croke Park hours at conference"⁸⁰. Currently, the service level agreement with the requirement of fulfilling these hours remains in place.

5.4.2 Towards a Changing Meaning of Productivity

For the purposes of my inquiry here, this broader changing policy context, I argue, can be understood as discursively conducive to the intensification of a changing meaning of productivity, towards 'time invested' by the worker/as work and away from material gain as a core value. Viewed within this broader policy context, the school principal's association between time invested and parental involvement makes sense. This clearly aligns with dominantly discursive ideas of doing 'good' work in education and being a 'good' involved parent. Arguably, what this also does is ensure that attention remains deflected away from the taken for granted inequality that exists. That is, in the process of carrying out 'good' work, in shaping the 'good' and involved parent, the fact of the inequality that exists is being more securely backgrounded in the context of working in accordance with this increasingly changing meaning of production as investment of time.

One could argue that the introduction of the reduced rate of pay for new entrants across the public sector in 2010 also served to ensure the issue of social inequality remained off the workers agenda. As the country eventually moved out of recession, the context was set for public servant resistance to austerity to be orientated towards challenging the inequality that had been created *within* the professional classes. In 2018, the Teachers Union of Ireland (TUI) put forward certain demands that related to the restoration of pay equality among teachers. Government rejection of any discussions on the restoration of pay equality for teachers was based on the argument that the public service level agreement could not be breached, and that specific groups of the public sector could not be treated differently than any others. Based on the aforementioned point that competition within education between powerful interest groups can paradoxically strengthen that institution (Bourdieu & Passeron 1977), the scene was set for a return to the usual business of conflict for the reproduction of social inequality. However, this can be understood now on broader terms, where each of the different public sectors become pitted against each other, in their fight for pay equality within their own sectors. Under the cover of this complexity, the investment of time, as work-related value, has had space to gain greater position as a core value. In 2018 approximately 75% of the cuts imposed on new entrants in 2010 had been reversed, and while still conducive to an environment of pay inequality within the public sector also arguably occurring in a timeframe long enough to be conducive to wider cultural change of core work related values. Indeed, the response

⁸⁰ <https://www.rte.ie/news/2016/0428/784910-education/>

from the teacher above, new to the school since the financial crash and happy to take up the extra hours was, due to ‘not knowing any different’, can perhaps be understood in these terms. Austerity in this framing, ushering in a more concerted neoliberalism, as argued in Chapter 2, can be seen to be actualised in the changing meaning of the ‘good’ worker, educational professional or otherwise, as the worker/work who invests time in what they are doing, over and above any question of material outcome.

5.5 Trust Building through ‘Having a Say’

One of the questions that emerges out of the findings to this point is that of how the work of promoting the investment of time as value occurs in the policy work of inclusion, or bringing-in. With this in mind, I returned to my data on the work carried out with parents in the school.

5.5.1 Trust Building and the Work Role

A concept found to centrally underpin the work carried out by the school with parents was trust. The following quote illustrates this, where trust building is described as being central to the work with parents,

“...as people got to know me in home school liaison which is extending the bonds of trust with school – or extending the bonds of trust that exist between home and school like is my job, is the bottom line of my job..”. (HSCLO)

Building trust with parents was described as going towards the production of a working environment where the notion that the educational professional has the parents and their children’s best interests at heart.

“...and as people get to know me and trust me and realise that I don’t really have an agenda other than them and their well-being and their child ...”. (HSCLO)

During my time doing fieldwork there was a small group of parents that were regularly involved in the school, and the nature of trust building that informed the school staff member’s work is encapsulated in the quote below.

“I’d be confident enough with the core group [of parents] – the core group has gone quite big now. You need a core group where you can kind of...[] ... they’d be very generous with their time and say years ago I’d never have gone, “I want to try this new thing. Will you do it for two weeks and you can tell me if it is not happening or if it is happening for you”. And they’d be very honest with me that way. They’d be, ‘Yes, no problem’ and ‘Yes. We’ll tell you exactly what we think’”. (HSCLO)

The central idea expressed in the quote above suggests that parents feel comfortable giving feedback to the staff member on the ideas she introduced in her work on parental involvement in the school. However, when thinking about the meaning of trust building that was being communicated above, that is, trust in the educational professional and their work (or the worker/work), I noticed that this appeared to be different to how the concept of trust building was being used in wider government and policy discourse during the period of 'recovery' from financial crisis.

For example, the then Fine Gael/Labour Government regularly identified citizen trust in politics and the institutions of the state as having been undermined by the failures that led to the financial crash in 2008 under the governance of the Fianna Fáil/Green party coalition. In response to this the work of the Fine Gael/Labour government was be aimed at working towards 'regaining' this trust among the citizenry. What this was taken to mean is encapsulated in a speech given by the then Tánaiste and Minister for Social Protection Joan Burton T.D., at the McGill Summer School⁸¹ in 2014, entitled, Restoring Trust in and Credibility to our Institutions⁸². In this speech, Burton locates the route to 'regaining' trust in "credible reform and sustained commitment to best practice that is both visible and persuasive". Burton identifies faith as necessary for regained trust between citizens and the state, not a leap of faith, but its building in an evidenced way. Burton identifies participation as the key lever here, linking this to people's belief in democracy because they *have a say* in it [my emphasis]. Having a say in shaping the institutions of the state, she argues, will mean that the people will once again have faith in them, and in this way, trust will be fostered between government and people. This, she sums up, is the recipe for regaining trust, and the government, she claims, is fully committed to this endeavour.

The divergence concerning the purpose of trust building discursively communicated by government versus what was expressed as occurring within the school, in terms of the work of parental involvement, seemed to suggest a slippage in meaning/ function was occurring. While for the educational professional this meant building parents trust in the worker, wider government discourse suggested trust building occurs through citizens having a say in the shape of the institutions of the state. In the school context of the work of parental involvement, parents seemed

⁸¹ The McGill Summer School is a fora in Ireland for the analysis of topics of national and international interests. It brings together government ministers, members of the opposition parties, heads of business, heads of business, academics, church leaders, members of the judiciary and public representative from Northern Ireland.

⁸² Accessible at: <https://www.welfare.ie/en/pressoffice/Pages/sp210714.aspx>

to be diverted from this process, by being encouraged to respond to what the educational professional had to say/offer. What interested me here was the question of how or why this kind of slippage might be occurring, as to understand this might help to understand further why inequality in decision making is taken for granted in the school parent relationship, and thus left unquestioned.

5.5.2 Work: Between Discourse and The Law

Arguably, the emphasis on building trust in the educational professional is not particularly unsurprising when understood in the context of the remit of the work of parental involvement. Among the central goals of work in the schools with parents, as set out in Chapter 4, are attendance and retention. As key measures of the work being undertaken with parents (and key measures of the work with children), and in the context of the requirement that the worker undergoes self-evaluation, working in a way that ensures one evidences oneself as doing a good job by meeting the aims and objectives of the job description clearly become central. In this context, building trusting relations between staff and volunteer participants (parents) can be understood in a context of serving that wider goal.

This raises the question, in line with a Foucauldian notion of neoliberal subjectivity (Read 2009), where the worker and work are being produced to be one and the same, of whether the work remit is shaping the workers perceptions of parents' capacity to have a say in education, as an institution of the state, is being compromised. For example, in a discussion with the Home School Liaison Officer about the parent's association⁸³ in the school, it was described by her as fitting, somewhat awkwardly, under the HSCLO remit. Referring to the topic of the parents association the staff member said,

"Ya.. [conflicted tone] technically it's not [under the HSCLO remit]". (HSCLO)

The HSCLO carried on telling me that she did work a lot with the parents association, and explained this and her earlier reservation about this through comparing what a parents association is taken to be in theory versus practice in the context of a DEIS school.

⁸³ Not all schools have a parents association (Department of Education and Skills 2006) but Maryville did. The Education Act 1988 gives a legislative basis for the existence, recognition and purpose of a Parent Association (PA). Drawing from that Act, the National Parents Council assert that: (1) A parents association is the structure through with the parents in a school can work together for the best possible education for their children; and, (2) the parent association works with the Principal, Staff and Board of Management to build effective partnership between home and the school (NPC 2010).

"[Theoretically] It's [a parents association] a pressure group set up by parents in other schools... There may be a Principal or a teacher sitting on the parents association but that's it like, it's not.... But it's different in DEIS schools, it's just different. You would need parents to be supported in having a parents association and who is going to do that only me, so I don't think it's any harm". (HSCLO)

The HSCLO carried on to describe the kind of support she offers the parents association. This related to a variety of things, for example, driving parents who needed to do errand runs, assisting parents to make links with people within the school that might be in a position to help out with the planning of an event, helping with identifying the links that parents already have in the community that could contribute to deciding whether or not an idea that parents were developing had potential or not. Indeed, this also meant support around making decisions in relation to what the group might do or how they might proceed with a plan.

The response given by the HSCLO outlines a relationship that is perceived as complex, and arguably caring, but a reality, in the last instance that is in line with the taken for granted unequal status quo. This is confounded by the absence of any critique concerning why, what is suggestive of an inequality of capacity exists in the first instance. But that this is occurring is in fact unsurprising when understood in the wider context of government inaction in terms of the Education Act 1998 (Government of Ireland 1998). In the Act, only national parent organisations are recognised as full social partners, local parent bodies are not, and in the context of an absence of action to change the law, a divergence between the dominant discourse on citizens having a say in the institutions of the state as a trust building exercise, and practice, is clearly produced.

5.5.3 Making Class: From Rights to Interests

It was clear throughout my conversation with the HSCLO and in the many conversations that we had during my time in the school, that she was aware of the contradiction in terms that was sometimes the reality of her work with parents. For example, here she states,

"...the more I do for them the less it's a parents association", and added, "Ethically, I'm not sure how I feel about it, but I don't mind going with it". (HSCLO)

This might be better understood in the context of Lazzarato's (2009) argument concerning the changed nature of risk under neoliberalism (discussed in Chapter 2). To recap, Lazzarato argues that the matrix of the social has changed from exchange to credit under neoliberal financialisation, where relations of creditor-debtor have become the dominant rationale underpinning all social relations. In this framing, interest is becoming transformed from a concept relating to capital accumulation, to one more associated with interest in maintaining one's position in 'the game'.

Being able to repay debt is the mechanism for maintaining position, and in turn accessing additional credit. In this framing, the meaning of risk is being extended from something that can happen to us, to now also being something that is endogenous to the self (Lazzaratto 2009). In this framing, what we do, in a context where work and worker are the same, becomes synonymous with maintaining our position in the social hierarchy, that is, our ability to access credit and repay debt. Falling down the social hierarchy in this framing, becomes attached to our work effort, or indeed lack thereof. In this framing it becomes easier to see how parents' right to have a say in the institution of education can become backgrounded in the workers interest of being risk adverse, that is, meeting the criteria of attendance and retention, as evidence of being a 'good' worker. In turn, this might explain why, although recognised as an ethical dilemma by the educational professional, evaluation of her dominant role in the parents association is ultimately resolved in a way that leaves the unequal status quo within the school, unquestioned and unchallenged.

Notwithstanding the above analysis, I take up Lynch's (1990) point that teachers are unlikely to be granted enough autonomy by school administrators to bring about resistance to the educational status quo a point that must be considered in the presentation of findings here. But similarly, as Lynch (1990) adds, it has to be recognised that teachers as an occupational group also have class interests and are unlikely to disrupt a system that privileges them over the working classes. Lynch (1990) argues that teaching staff are part of the middle classes and therefore among those "whose power and influence is contingent on maintaining traditional hierarchical distinctions between mental and manual labour" (Lynch 1990, p. 11). However, I would add that this fact and its implications for the reproduction of class is not one preserved for education professionals, but the middle classes more generally. Therefore, the analysis here should be read in the spirit of that generalisation, rather than the particular context used here for teasing out how some of the ways through which this occurs. Indeed, in the quote immediately above, the HSCLO presents us with a question that we must necessarily all ask of ourselves, that of whether we, in the process of constituting ourselves as a 'good' worker, can equate this version of ourselves with what we also understand to be an ethical worker.

5.6 Policy Research/Researcher

Undertaking the analysis in this chapter was a difficult process of writing and re-writing, fraught with concerns about how to present these findings in a way that would not offend the staff and parents in the school, people whom I had come to know and like over my time in the field. In the same way that school staff often spoke about having parents' and their children's best interests at heart, my intention was not to undermine that reality. Indeed, as the left hand of the state, the school often resisted, or interjected upon the downward pressure imposed on school life from the

state/Department of Education with and/or on parents' behalf. For example, in the rewriting of a parent survey issued by the Department so that it was in Plain English and more accessible to parents, or in collective acts of protest where staff and parents went on strike together in opposition to government proposals, in 2012, to increase class sizes⁸⁴. My main concerns were, upon reflection, linked to fears that I would breach an unspoken sense of trust that had developed between us, or that I would be perceived to have been disingenuous in terms of the work/time that I was doing/spent in the field. However, upon further reflection, I saw that these concerns are the very same issues that I was identifying as the dominant values that were being communicated by staff and being promoted in the work of parental involvement. Thought about more generally this made visible to me how I too, in the role of researcher, reluctant to name these circumstances, could so easily be contributing to their reproduction through that inaction. This orientated me towards undertaking analysis of my own work in the field with parents through the same critical lens. By bringing myself into the frame for analysis I began to see how I also was perceived as embodying these same dominant values by parents through analysis of the effect of my presence on their space within which to speak. The findings pertaining to this follow in the next section below. The key point that emerged here for me was that the kind of neoliberal subjectivity that I was identifying in the views and work of school staff, is not the preserve of policy practitioners, but equally visible in the work of policy researcher and as such also requires unpacking. Opening up the space of analysis to include myself in the field of relations provided me with a way to write about what might otherwise have been taken to be analysis informed by the very kind of power relations that I set out to undermine.

5.7 Take-up, Rejection, or Resistance of Neoliberal Subjectivity

Read collectively the findings to this point are suggestive of the kind of subjectivity that Foucault sets out (Read 2009). This is encapsulated in Foucault's argument that neoliberal governmentality; that "manner, or mentality in which people are governed and govern themselves", has re-shaped the way that power operates, "no longer in terms of rights and laws, but interest, investment and competition" (Read 2009, p. 29). One question that emerged from the analysis to this point was whether this dominant form of subjectivity was being taken up by parents who were involved in the school, and if so, the kind of effect that this was having to the nature of that involvement. By way of exploring this question I am drawing on fieldnotes generated from my own time spent taking

⁸⁴ <http://www.thejournal.ie/teachers-protest-dublin-valuing-education-648420-Oct2012/>. The parents group had made a banner for use in the collective strike effort in response to this threat, alongside the issue of teachers' unequal pay.

part in a craft class with a group of parents (all of whom were women) that regularly attended involvement related activities in the host school.

5.7.1 Take-Up

The craft course ran over a period of eight weeks, for one morning a week. The group was made up of just parents/grandparents/guardians and me and did not include any school staff members. In total there were usually between eight and ten of us attending each week. The women led by the craft making activities themselves; the idea having been introduced by one of the women who shared her knowledge with the rest of us. Each week, the craft we were each making, rag dolls, emerged in varying stages of completion as some parents missed the odd week, or worked along at a slower pace, while others completed each stage of the task quickly. What occurred to me as the weeks rolled on was that interest in the craft making itself waned for a few the women attending. This did not result in a reduction in the overall numbers of women attending, but the focus of the course, the doll making, seemed to garner less and less energy, and some of the women would be delighted if another person would do the stitching on aspects of their project. While the overall level of enthusiasm for the specific act of craft making waned among some, the sense of camaraderie among the group certainly did not. Each week that I attended was very enjoyable as the hour was full of fun and local banter. The women shared stories about their day, their families, things that had happened, or news they heard on their way between here and there. Also regularly shared between the group were tips for how to do this, or avoid that, intercepted with rounds of tea making, accompanied by tucking into various delicious home baked goods (often provided by the HSCLO), or other treats that were provided by one or other of the women on the day. I very much enjoyed being part of the group and felt like a certain rapport was being developed between myself and the women, not all to the same degree, but nonetheless we were all becoming more used to each other's company.

Notwithstanding this, it was also clear to me that when the women had more serious worries or concerns, they often broke into smaller groups to discuss, or continue discussions between them that were ongoing outside of the craft making context. I very often did not know what the women's concerns related to and was always conscious of trying to ensure that I did not encroach on their space to talk to each other, sometimes feeling like my presence was interfering in the group space and time that was probably used by them to talk more openly among each other. Upon reflection after the fact, I began to think about the kind of support that the women were providing to each other, something that was interwoven in around the more official naming of the time as craft making. Thinking back to the key objectives of parental involvement within the school, these acts of support certainly align with the objective of facilitating parents to support each other (DES, DCYA, & TUSLA 2016, 2019).

But what also struck me, was that my presence in the group, regardless of the developing relationship between myself and the women, was in the last instance representative of someone who was not really an insider in the group, and thus seen more in terms equivalent to those that I have discussed above in terms of the educational professional, but here in the guise of the research 'professional'. Recognised in those terms, what was particularly interesting to me was the effect of my presence on the narrowing of the space for support provision among the women attending the group. In other words, it was clear that the women felt that as a result of my presence, it was necessary to discuss certain issues in more concealed ways, or that the parameters for speaking with each other had been narrowed, from what would have been the case, 'the craft group' was not present. In this sense, the issues that were of concern, and obviously important to the women were being subsumed within the dominant or official framing of the kind of subjectivity that was being produced as being the good and involved parent, as represented by my presence. In that framing it seemed, the women clearly felt the freedom to openly speak about their personal issues was constrained.

This finding can be understood as illustrative of the way that co-extension of the economic or neoliberal market logic, that subsumes the social and political dimensions of society, can be seen to occur in the local relational context. Thought about in this way, as encapsulated in the act of 'professional' work (parental involvement) and 'professional' subjectivity (myself as researcher), the bringing-in of marginalised groups through policy initiatives or research can be seen here again as productive of the 'idea,' subject and simultaneously exclusive of the parts of the individual that is not aligned with this idea. Thought about differently, conforming to the limitations on speaking out that are produced in policy work, can simultaneously be understood as the taking up or acceptance of the dominant notion of neoliberal subjectivity; the subject of competition, investment and interest, due simply to the contribution to these dominant ideas contained in the absence of speaking out. Of course this must be understood in terms pointed out by Read (2009, p. 29) in his discussion on the work of Foucault, in that neoliberal governmentality is a process whereby "[t]he state channels flows of interest and desire by making desirable activities inexpensive and undesirable activities costly, counting on the fact that subjects calculate their interests". Challenging the status quo comes with risks, and with the added dimension of the changed nature of risk under neoliberalism (Lazzarato 2009) now extending to have become something endogenous to the self, understanding the meaning of risk for parents is an important question that is explored in the next chapter.

5.7.2 Rejection

Of course, parent's interaction with the school was not only that of the take up of dominant ideas serving for their production as neoliberal subjects. From my time in the field it was apparent that in some cases, parents rejected these ideas evident in the fact that they cut ties with the school in terms of their role as a member of the regular group of mothers involved with the school. This occurred sometimes where direct clashes between parents and one or other member of staff occurred, for example, where the lines of what was felt to be the distinction between staff and parents were perceived by staff to be crossed by parents. In some instances, these grievances could result in what were close working links to be dissolved.

5.7.3 Resistance

There were also examples of parent's resistance within the school, to clashes that occurred between parents and staff that generated push back from parents, not only at an individual level, but also collectively. This might be with a view to retaining and/or extending the meaning of their role as involved parents in the school, where the lines of distinction between parents and staff were being redrawn by the school. Examples of this included the collective demands of the mothers for the retention of group members in situations where an individual was feeling 'squeezed out'. This sometimes involved a process of mediation where the parents as a group would stand with the offended party, and call for talks between the group and staff in order to try and work grievances out.

'It's for the Kids'

In this sense parents were very clearly aware of the power relations that existed between themselves and the staff members in the school. Despite this, many parents persisted in their efforts to maintain their position as involved parent. I wondered sometimes what it was in particular that motivated them to do so, and I think the answer is located in the complexity encapsulated in the final short example present here. The context for this example was a one-to-one interview that I conducted with one of the mothers, who I have named as Patricia here. During the interview, Patricia began to talk about how the nature of her work as a parent volunteering with the school had changed in the last while. She said that fundraising was now taking up a lot of parents' time, here contextualised as necessary due to the cuts to education under austerity.

"A lot of the grants are gone for the schools so that's why there is so much fundraising now being done. Like we fundraise nearly all year round now." (Patricia)

Patricia continued on to tell me that the parents association had recently agreed to give a portion of the fundraising money raised, which usually would go towards the Parents Association kitty to

fund their work, towards an outstanding utility bill in her daughter's school instead (this was not Maryville). She contextualised this in the challenges that schools face in meeting the costs of running a school on a day-to-day basis, where utility bills were a very big worry for them.

Having told me this and as though worried that it sounded too much like undertaking fundraising for the school staff and their worries, Patricia quickly followed with the following statement as though to ensure that I would not interpret this simply as a form of parental consent to power,

"It's not for [the principal(s)], it's for the kids, you know". (Patricia)

This statement clearly foregrounds the complexities of parent's participation in the school, in the sense that while an unequal reality for them, staying involved, for the kids, would it seem far outweigh the problems that might be encountered in the process of navigating the relations of power that shape their involvement.

5.8 Conclusion

Using what Levitas (2012) calls the archaeological strand of critical inquiry, this chapter examines the data with a view to gaining an understanding of the 'good' person, or dominant idea of decision maker, as it is being produced in neoliberal policy making and practice. The chapter begins from the point of a taken for granted inequality in decision making that exists in the school, as this relates to parents in the school, with a view to examining how this reality is informed and held in place. The findings show that a key concept shaping views that legitimise parents' unequal access to decision-making is the notion of competition, and more specifically, the notion that taking part in competition requires a particular kind of competition subject, with particular knowledge and capacities. That these kinds of knowledge and skills are taken to be dominant is further propped up by the view that parents without these capacities require protection due to the disadvantage that they would be at if left to fend for themselves in the field of education competition. The work of parental involvement itself, is then examined with a view to gaining greater insight into the dominant values and ideas that make up the 'good' person, or 'good' decision-maker, in other words the kind of person that is promoted through that work. Two key learnings emerged that are suggestive of the production of a subject of investment and of interest. This was found in the foregrounding of intangible value (time invested), and the production of the self (interest) as good worker, to the exclusion of tangible economic value on one hand, and marginalised groups having a say in shaping the institutions of the state on the other. This kind of subjectivity was argued to be (re)produced in the work of parental involvement as shaped by the Department of Education

and Skills, and also intensified in policy reform as it occurred during the most recent recession in Ireland.

The chapter then examined if and how the subject of competition, investment and interest effects the reproduction of inequality as this relates to parent's involvement in the school. Drawing on reflexive examination of my own participation in a parents group course the chapter illustrates that the dominant kind of neoliberal subjectivity is not the preserve of school staff but equally embodied within the researcher. This was evidenced in my awareness of the effect of my presence on the narrowing of the space of involvement for parents, where discussions among parents about issues of concern, worry or importance for them more often took place within the group but discussed outside of my earshot. While illustrative of parents supporting parents, which is aligned with one of the principles of the parental involvement, that of 'fostering self-help and independence' (DES, DCYA, & TUSLA 2016), viewed from a critical perspective this was argued to make visible the way in which the work/worker (parental involvement course/myself as professional present) had the effect of subsuming the social issues of concern for parents, thus (re)producing the space of parental involvement as a depoliticised space. In this way, the work of parental involvement as work that subsumes the social and political, itself becomes the mechanism that reproduces, rather than transforms, the unequal status quo.

While the findings are suggestive of parents taking up these dominant ideas, the chapter finishes by pointing out that parents also rejected and/or resisted the downward pressure experienced by the unequal power relations that make up this reality. Notwithstanding this, the chapter concludes by suggesting that ultimately parents remain involved, despite experiencing a complex combination of good relations with the school and oppression, because of their desire to provide support to the children.

Chapter 6 Non Decision-making Power: The Agenda Setting Arena

6.1 Introduction

This chapter undertakes an exploration of the arena of non decision-making power. Its aim is to explore the wider field of school-parent relations, as this is constituted in everyday social interactions, with a view to making visible if and how it inter-relates with the inequality in decision-making that the previous chapter argues exists. The key findings set out in the chapter are that firstly school-parent relations, as they are produced in the agenda-setting arena, are de-politicised relations, as evidenced in a foregrounding of individualisation, and backgrounding the topic of economics. Secondly, the findings suggest that 'positive' relationship building practices, as they are produced within education, serve for holding this de-politicised field of relations in place. De-politicisation in this combination of processes, it is suggested, ensures that what are taken to be legitimate topics for debate in relation to parental involvement, and thus inequality in decision-making, goes undisrupted.

The chapter takes up this theory of the agenda setting arena and examines it in the context of a focus group that I undertook about parent-school relations with a group of five young mothers. Here, it is shown, that the similar themes of individualisation (foregrounded) and economics (backgrounded), held in place by a particular definition of positive also exists. Drawing from the example of school book rental schemes that the mothers themselves raised, most parents legitimised their take up of the 'opportunity' of payment plans for book rentals made available to them through the school as 'positive' in terms of helping them to resolve worries at the individual level around meeting school costs. In doing so, it is shown, this serves to keep the topic of economics outside of the agenda-setting arena in terms of what is deemed to be among the legitimate topics for debate in the parent's relationship with their children's schools. The effect of this take up of the dominant framing by parents, becomes clearer to see in the softening of one parents' open protest, who prior to that point, was speaking out about the challenges of meeting school costs regardless of payment plans. Despite this parent having appeared to be a lone protester, the findings show that in the case of not being able to meet the school going costs of their children, all the mothers defer to high interest loans, something the majority were reluctant to admit. The findings are suggestive of processes reproductive of class and gender inequality, but increasingly difficult to discern in a context where remaining on the inside of society is possible through accessing loans, but a reality that is silenced in a combination of the dominant framing for everyday social relations and accompanying stigma associated with poverty. Notwithstanding this gordian knot, a spirit of defiance was found to remain among the parents, suggesting that the

closing down of spaces for speaking are not complete, and so a route out of this bind may still be a possibility.

6.2 Individualisation of Social Problems

During my time in the field in the host school, I spent numerous hours chatting with people from the local community, parents and grandparents, who were in and out of the school, or worked in the school or involved in it in various ways. Indeed, a vast amount of my time spent in the school involved tea drinking in the staff common room, the hub of the school one could say, with many of these people. One of the things that struck me was that the topics of day-to-day conversations were very often about very difficult struggles that people in their families, or the local community were living through in their day-to-day lives. These ranged across topics including drug use or addiction, alcohol problems, suicidal ideation, poverty, homelessness, domestic violence, mental health issues and murder among others. I do not mean to suggest that there was a mood of doom and gloom underpinning school life and these conversations, in fact, on the contrary, they were usually frank accounts of different people's realities, friends or neighbours, or community members whom they knew through someone else. Most of these conversations occurred at times, and in contexts in and around the ebb and flow of the structured and timetabled school day, a space in the life of the school that I occupied for an extensive amount of fieldwork time. This might have been in the school staff room in between its use by the teaching staff for morning or lunch breaks or outside the school where parents/grandparents gathered. It may have been during brief conversations that started up in one or other of the offices in the school or the main hall when it was quiet and in transition between being set up with chairs for assembly and emptied again of those chairs for Physical Education. Sometimes this would entail an account of historical struggle in the local community, for example, an account about how local residents had tried and failed to win the support of establishment politicians for their efforts at preventing drug use from taking root in their community in the early days of the existence of the neighbourhood. This account was told to me in the context of a community now needing to cope with the devastating effects of drugs on the lives of families and friends on a day-to-day basis.

Stories closer to home were told also, sometimes in hushed small group chats where, usually a mother spoke, upset and concerned for a child; concerns about them struggling with friendships, or struggling to keep engaged in school, or courses in which older child dependents were enrolled. Accounts were also of children lacking in self-esteem, struggling with being unemployed, or very worried accounts of children threatening, or attempting, to harm themselves. It was clear that the issues talked about in these in between spaces by parents and guardians, made them worried and anxious about their children, and sometimes even frightened them.

6.2.1 Unsicherheit

In *"In Search of Politics"*, Zygmunt Bauman (1999) names anxiety as one of the illnesses of our neoliberal times. This anxiety he argues stems from the postmodern condition of *unsicherheit*, the opposite to *sicherheit*, a German term made up of three different concepts: (in)security, (un)certainly and (un)safe(ty). Bauman (1999, p. 18) stresses that these three terms have important differences: *security* referring to a reliable and steady world where achievements acquired cannot be taken away; their value not diminishable; *certainly*, clarity of mind, knowledge of the decision to take, trusting it to be right and not worried about regrets; and *safety*, correct behaviour ensures one will only come up against dangers or life challenges they can manage, dangers to oneself, one's family, home and community. *Unsicherheit* is the absence, or the opposite, to these conditions, now framed, he argues, as the contemporary 'gift' in late modern societies of 'flexibility', of not being tied down by security, a 'freedom' defined as unconstrained choice among the opportunities made available by the market. But, as Bauman argues, this new type of freedom instead undoes the self-reliance and self-confidence that comes with having a sense of security. The consequent and gradual loss of faith in one's ability, of trust in others, of being able to decipher other's intentions, of non-rational fault finding, of mounting aggression, encapsulated in a general state of anxiety have resulted, he argues, in the contemporary shift to a social order underpinned by *unsicherheit* (Bauman 1999).

6.2.2 Unsicherheit and the Work of Parental Involvement

Bauman's (1999) concept of *unsicherheit* seemed to encapsulate in one word that sense that often present in the school day in the spaces in between the formal structures shaping the school day. I began to think about this in relation to the work of formal parental involvement, and my learning discussed in the previous chapter (Chapter 5) in terms of the effect of my presence, experienced by parents, as professional researcher, representative of the competition subject, on the closing down of the space in which they could speak out. The activities that made up formal parental involvement as I was learning through my fieldwork comprised of a range of courses like cookery courses, or craft making, or joining in on the national 'Operation Transformation' get fit walking programme. It also involved fundraising as mentioned in Chapter 5, and the range of events that this involved. Parent and Toddler Groups were set up, organised by the school, and talks were provided, about various topics such as dental issues. There was an educational component, where parents were invited into the classrooms to take part in maths and reading initiatives, which the children loved, and parents helped with other educational events held in the school or those held at a broader community level.

But the kind of disconnection that I felt existed here was not to do with any sense that the formal content of parental involvement was not useful or valuable. Nor am I suggesting that being involved

was not enjoyed by parents or seen as beneficial by them form themselves and/or their children, but what did seem apparent was that the anxieties that seemed so pressing for parents in relation to their children were not found to have a legitimate place in the official agenda of parental involvement. This I felt was particularly important in the context of Bauman's (2005) point that in today's consumer society a 'new poor' has been produced, where poverty is not limited to material deprivation, but more a social and psychological condition of exclusion. This kind of poverty results in the exclusion of individuals from participation in what is taken to be 'normal life' in consumer society (Bauman 2005). The result of being unable to take up the choices that are on offer results in the individual being viewed by him or herself, and others as what Bauman (2005) calls a 'flawed consumer', that is, the marginalised become blamed for the exclusion that has been imposed upon them.

6.2.3 Kindness and/or Subsidiarisation?

Identifying this absence of addressing the range of anxieties evident among parents from the formal work of parental involvement was not something that struck me initially while doing fieldwork in the school. This was perhaps more difficult to identify in a context where it was very clear to me that the staff in the school were both aware of the fact that parents were struggling in all sorts of ways, and very supportive of them. Staff often spent time providing informal support to parents through small group and one-to-one chats, offering advice and regularly providing a confidential and listening ear for parents throughout the school day. But upon reflection, these acts, although certainly witnessed as acts of kindness, began to appear more like discursive acts that aligned with the kind of subsidiarisation that Bauman (1999) talks about when viewed from a critical lens. In order to think about how this might be informed I examined my data with this question in mind. What emerged for me was that the framing for work with parents as dictated by government once again played a role in shaping school-parent relations in a way that made sense of the disconnection of the social and psychological from the formal work of parental involvement.

For example, during an interview with the Home School Community Liaison Officer (HSCLO) we began talking about the function of the parents group. The HSCLO talked of how the longer she has been in her role, the more aware she has become that in terms of the courses component of parental involvement which is driven by official remit of her role, it is the social aspect that is most valued by the parents themselves. She stated,

"..years ago it would have been a lot to do with parent education. Like, let's say educational betterment of oneself, you know, but I've noticed that the courses that are popular are the group, the chat, the company, and it's very important because [for example] isolation is always to be avoided as much as possible..." (HSCLO)

In getting to know the HSCLO during my time in the field, it was clear she had a lot of knowledge about life in the local community from her years of working in her role and being in constant contact with families. She commented on the fact that 'tight family networks' were a feature of life for many people, but that at the same time there were plenty of people who experience isolation locally for a range of different reasons and at different times in their lives. She pointed to her awareness of the link between isolation and depression, not only with reference to the local community context, but in society more generally. She contextualised the importance that she attributed to the social aspect of parental involvement in relation to this reality.

"...I would have a big suspicion about depression at local level as well.... I mean everywhere. I think because parents are expected to kind of pull it together and it can get very stressful, but if they are at home staying quiet about it then nobody knows and am, you know, if they are on their own [i.e. lone parents] am they cannot ever leave the house..". (HSCLO)

Both the social and psychological dimensions of taking part in the groups are what the HSCLO feels parents really appreciate.

"Ya. And it's a mix of age groups that seems to work as well. You know if girls have somebody to lean on or who have more life experience than them, you know they seem to enjoy that and the network is really important.. ". (HSCLO)

But while this is acknowledged a distinction was also made between the official and un-official function of parental involvement with regard to the above kinds of issues. For example, when I asked about how the aims and objectives of the parent courses would be described, in terms of the parents group the HSCLO said,

"..so, ya am, so officially the role would be to support parents education". (HSCLO)

or, in using the example of a rag doll making course, attendance was again identified as the key official measure,

"...if I was going to talk about the aims and objectives of that I probably would make it as simple as possible, like that everybody will attend and that everyone will make a rag doll and present with a rag doll at the end, and am.."

But this was differentiated from the unofficially recognised benefit of being an involved parent,

“...but I, you know yourself... you notice relationships, ...and the banter and all that and you have to observe it and see how successful it is as opposed to observe the final result”. (HSCLO)

Recognising the benefits of the group setting in terms of parents definition of success, the HSCLO concluded,

“It’s the groups here that are not trying to teach anything that seem to be more successful”.

What this seemed to suggest to me was that the culture within the school, as constituted in the work remit, was one which relegated the social and psychological dimension of parents lives to the margins, beyond the space of the ‘real’ work of parental involvement. Within this framing, the kindness of staff, available as a supportive and listening ear, along with the promotion of parents supporting parents as one principle of the official function of parental involvement, together now seemed like practices that are part of a wider societal level narrative promoting subsidisation, or individualised private problem-solving. As such, they become illustrative of the kind of social and psychological exclusion Bauman (2005) discusses in his concept of the ‘new poor’. In this framing, these kinds of narrative acts can be understood to contribute to the de-politicisation of mental ill health as recognised in Bauman’s (1999) concept of *unsicherheit*. Considered in the context of recently published findings from the *Growing up in Ireland* data which identifies links between the effects of economic recession and family stress on the adjustment of 3-year olds in Ireland (Nixon 2019), this context would seem to be counter-productive to many of the principles underpinning the work of parental involvement, key among which is the promotion of parents as a resource for children at home, in classrooms and in the community.

6.3 Backgrounding: The Topic of Economics

A second key topic that emerged as one that was excluded from the agenda setting forum of formal parental involvement was economics. This became particularly clear in a conversation held between myself and a mother as part of an interview that I undertook with her on her understanding of the subject of parental involvement and her experiences of same in her children’s school. Sarah, who was the mother of four children, two in primary school, and two pre-schoolers, spoke firstly in the interview about how her children were getting on well in school. She spoke about how some minor education related issues that she was concerned about in relation to her son recently identified within his school and resolved. She said she was very happy about that. She also told me about her daughter, who was doing well in school, and recently had her good ability

at drawing noticed by the teachers, an ability that was being encouraged by the school since. In general, Sarah was expressing a positive account of her children's experience of school.

When it came to talking about her role as an involved parent in her children's school, Sarah seemed a little less comfortable with this topic. She stated that she was, and intended in the future, to be involved more and in various ways, broadly framing her perception of her level of involvement with guilt. She added that she felt her current level of involvement was not viewed as being 'involved enough' by the school, but she was not readily taking up this criticism. Being a working mother with an additional two children not yet at school meant that having the time to *invest* in the school was limited for her.

"It's kind of quite hard because I've often had the school liaison officer saying "would you not come in and do...." But I've to got to work like [slight tone expressing a feeling of being hemmed in by the expectation she perceives]. I mean the days I'm off I have two babies at home as well so it's kind of hard and sometimes you kind of feel like, "Oh I should be doing something and..". There's a bit of pressure put on .. well pressure is what I felt.. I don't know but you can't do... you know... that kind of way ...". (Sarah)

Remembering back to when her son was in Senior Infants, she recalled that the message from the school was,

"You need to give something..". (Sarah)

Clearly, this 'something' is time, something that Sarah is short of, particularly in the context of needing to make a living,

"But I can't!", I said, "If I can't go to work I can't pay for them to go to school, I can't buy them stuff – so what do you want me to do like?". (Sarah)

Referring to communicating her situation, she added, *"..sometimes you physically can't do it.. [] ... so... it's a little bit hard trying to explain that to them as well.. (Sarah)*

Sarah's reference here to the challenges of talking about economics in a context where the investment of time is foregrounded is in line with the arguments set out by Tracey Warren's (2015) in Chapter 2. Warren (2015) made the point that in the work-life balance literature time is named as the primary issue that needs to be managed for success in this balancing act. To briefly recap,

Warren undertook secondary analysis of official statistics with a lens on the classed experience of work-life balance. She showed that in fact for many people it was economics that was the primary work-life issue, but that the foregrounding of time as 'the problem to be managed' was the issue more associated with a middle-class experience of work-life balance. This in effect results in backgrounding the potential for speaking out about economics as the work-life balance issue, something that Warren argued has particular implications for the working classes. For the purposes of the argument being developed in this chapter, this would suggest that in the very act of promoting parental involvement as time invested, the space for speaking out about the topic of economics gets blocked out.

This finding, concerning the backgrounding of economics was, like that of the finding concerning the foregrounding of subsidiarisation above, was difficult to identify at first. Similarly, this felt silencing of economics as a topic expressed by Sarah, was occurring in the context of a school environment where staff were clearly very aware of the economic struggles parents experienced with its impact on children's lives. The school adapted many of its policies in order to lessen the burden of school costs for parents, specifically in the context of the austerity related cuts and indirect tax hikes that were introduced by government during the time of the fieldwork. For example, there were reductions in the amount of 'voluntary' contributions per request; the usual request for two euro per child was reduced to two euro per household, so that families with more than one child in the school would not be put under extra pressure. The school also managed the uniform sale, choosing the uniform (a tracksuit with school crest) with a view to ensuring costs were kept at a minimum. Uniform sales were offered on a payment plan, as was the book rental scheme, both devised in order to lessen the need for larger outlays at a single time, replaced by incremental payments. Many staff members offered after school activities like French classes, music or sports, the cost of which again was kept at a minimum. Talking about this one day, a teacher told me in passing that sometimes payments for afterschool activities are not received at all, and that while not paying is not promoted, children are not excluded as a result. Examples like these were evident all the time and recorded throughout my fieldnotes. As representative of the level of awareness of economic struggles among parents within the school, the data also meant that seeing beyond it to a simultaneous silencing of parents about the issue of economics was difficult for me to see.

6.3.1 Misrecognition and the work of Research

Drawing on the ethnographic work of Martha Balshem (1993) (as discussed in Chapter 4) helped me to re-examine the issue of the silencing of the topic of economics as raised above by Sarah. By way of brief re-cap, in her ethnography *Cancer in the Community Class and Medical Authority*, Balshem (1993) teased out how the lens that the professional researcher takes up for understanding a policy or programme impacts on the interpretation that follows. Bourdieu's

concept of misrecognition is similarly useful here where as the social practice of individual or collective misattribution (in James 2015), relating to the ways that “underlying processes and generating structures of fields are not consciously acknowledged in terms of the differentiation they perpetuate, often in the name of democracy and equality” (Grenfell & James 1998, p. 22). In light of Balshem and Bourdieu’s work, I began to rethink the in-house financial policies, understood by me initially as ‘good’ as policies that made up the field of mainstream schooling relations; that same field within which Sarah felt she could not speak out about money issues. Based on this rethinking, I approached my data instead with a view to an understanding of why Sarah might feel this way.

6.3.2 A Culture of Silence around Poverty?

What I found in the process of rereading the study data relating to some direct questions about the effects of austerity on families in general and children more specifically, were varied answers, mostly tempered with a reluctance to talk about poverty or the effects of it on parents and children. In the context of the demographic profile for the local parish, contained in Chapter 4, this stood out to me as unusual. For example, this teacher responded to a question on whether the effects of austerity were noticeable among the children by saying,

“A little bit but ... [pause] generally they’re ok .. Sometimes with breakfast in the morning you’d have [one or two] children who might be coming in a little bit hungrier.. You might have a couple of children who would come in a bit grubbier.. ya, ya.. and shoes as well. The quality of the footwear isn’t great. Ya,.. and books like – you know eventually they all pay for them – or the book loan scheme is good where they can rent the reader and all that and pay less than going out and buying them. We were waiting a good while this year, I found, to get the money in”. (Teacher 2)

Or this Teacher who commented,

“You’d hear a few comments like say the sponsorship cards. People saying, “My Mam hasn’t got paid yet”. You know things like that, but not really. Like I know my Mom and Dad weren’t particularly disadvantaged but if I had of gone home looking for more money, they’d be like ‘Ah come on!’. So I think that’s the general thing...”. (Teacher 3)

I began to see these kinds of comments in the context of a reluctance to speak about poverty, when read alongside data from another interview where the focus of conversation was not on poverty. Instead, on the topic of home visits and in the process of explaining that some families might need more support than others with home visits, this staff member said,

"They (parents) may not have, like for one reason or another, there could be an issue at home am... you know.. surrounding possibly....[she gestured quietly here to me to inquire if it is ok to say these following things with the recorder on]

Unsure of what this might mean, I responded by nodding "O... ya?" to which she continued by saying,

".... poverty, there could be history of addiction or something like that....". (Teacher 4)

It struck me here, that speaking out about the issue of poverty was difficult for this staff member. One reading of this is that she was concerned that speaking about this might be disrespectful to parents or families; a reluctance perhaps not to reinforce stereotypes or stigmatise the local community. An additional reading might be that this was felt to not be an appropriate topic to raise in the context of the research interview. Interestingly, once the topic was recognised as a legitimate topic for discussion in our interview, the same interviewee carried on to provide a very frank view of the impact of austerity in the wider local community.

"Ya big time. A lot, I really have [noticed this]. Am, people are really poor, more than they ever were. Ya. Like a lot of people are not driving any more, [they] can't afford to tax and insure the car. I think money is a huge issue and every Christmas it gets worse like you know, there is less and less available and more and more pulling out of the Vincent de Paul for just [necessities..]. But like, I think it's disposable income .. disposable income is not there for people. (Teacher 4)

The response here provided by the teacher is illustrative of an acute awareness of the experience of poverty in the community and society more generally. However, the broader view among staff was generally one of poverty not being particularly problematic, or at least not *the* problem when it comes to school costs. In this context, I wondered if Sarah's experience of not being able to talk about finances in her relations with her children's schools might be related to a broader cultural perception that money is not the problem. If indeed this was the case, I began to inquire as to whether I could identify how this dynamic of individualisation on one hand and backgrounding of economics on the other, might be held in place within the school.

6.4 Problematising an Ethics of Care as Behavioural Change

A point that stood out to me in this regard was the dominant place held in school policies and practices of an ethics of care that was concerned with behavioural change. Balshem's (1993) work on problematising the professional role in health education highlights how an ethics of care differs

within different knowledge paradigms. For example, “the ethics of caring in health education is about changing peoples’ behaviour” (Balshem 1993, p. 129), whereas as referred to in Chapter 4, an ethics of caring from a feminist perspective relates to making space for people to speak. Many of the policies in the school were informed by a programme called The Incredible Years⁸⁵, which is “a series of interlocking, evidence-based programmes for parents, children and teachers”. Its goal is to prevent and treat young children’s behavioural problems and promote their social, emotional, and academic competence”. The central driver of The Incredible Years[®] is to “decrease conduct issues and promote positive behaviour among children”.⁸⁶ This framing was taken up and underpinned all of the host schools’ policies and could be seen to be woven through all of the teacher-pupil interactions that made up the day.

For example, pointing out what positive behaviour looks like is a technique used to communicate the rules to children all day long. One technique is ‘show five’ which when called out by the teacher lets the children know that they are to sit at their desks, sit up straight, feet on the floor, hands on the desk, and to remain quiet. Upon calling out ‘show five!’ the teacher might use one or other child as an example of this being done well. “Look at X, sitting beautifully quiet at her desk” or, “I like the way X is sitting up straight”. This technique is used all day long for example, to illustrate what standing quietly in the class line looks like, or to show that putting a hand up is the way you get to speak, or that ‘fingers on lips’ is how to move around the school in a line, etc.. Rewards in the form of stickers are regularly used for good behaviour, jellies the odd time, and the influence of these rewards for disciplining was mostly instant. The children were, for the most part, very keen to stick to the rules and responded with military type displays (for a minute at least) to show that they could be good at a moment’s notice.

6.4.1 The Question of ‘Positive’ Relations

What I found was that this use of the positive interaction informed the school’s interaction with parents also. For example, in an interview with one teacher, she told me how more recently all communications with the home are framed in positivity, and that this was felt to be particularly useful for forging relations with parents who had previous negative experiences of school. As the teacher stated, engaging in this way,

“.. makes it [the school] positive and it makes the teacher a friendly person as well...”. (Teacher 1)

⁸⁵ www.incredibleyears.com

⁸⁶ <http://www.atlanticphilanthropies.org/evaluations/the-incredible-years-ireland>. The Incredible Years comprises programmes targeted at parents, teachers and children. In Ireland and elsewhere it has been targeted at disadvantaged communities. Incredible Years was an Atlantic Philanthropies funded programme.

Indeed, teachers in different roles regularly spoke about the fact that they try to ensure that the reasons they are in contact with parents are framed in the positive. For example, in response to a question about the kinds of reasons that she would be in contact with parents this teacher said,

“Am.. I kind of.. for good reasons.. you’d make sure like.. If it’s a child who is having a bit of behavioural difficulty, I’d kind of ring the parents a good bit and let them know about how they are getting on, how they are coming on, you know... ring them with good news stories... I would send home a lot of good notes... I try not to send home any bad notes..”. (Teacher 3)

Framing things according to positive behaviour is one of the key changes to the teaching role identified by this teacher who has been in her role since the Celtic Tiger years. Interestingly, learning to interact in this way was associated by her with the large amounts of training in behavioural change that was made available to teachers during the years of the Celtic Tiger, when funding for training was in far more plentiful supply.

Ya, I can see a huge difference [in the teaching role]. Like even in terms of dealing with behaviour and that... like it’s completely changed since I started.. .. it is a lot more positive – since the introduction of [initiatives] like Healthy Schools and am different positive behaviour [programmes] like Dinosaur School [part of The Incredible Years] and all the training that we had. The training, during the times when there was loads of training available for teachers like we all had fantastic courses delivered to us and it [improved my skills] a lot like in my way of dealing with kids, in behaviour management as well like – you know we are all a lot more positive, you know like how we deal with difficult children. It’s changed a lot compared to when I started”. (Teacher 2)

The effects of this change to the way of working were noted also by the Principal who often commented that relations between parents and the school had greatly improved over recent years. He felt that when parents came up to the school the nature of interaction was more constructive as engagement was underpinned by a focus on the positive, and that this helped to undermine what may have been a more historical ‘us and them’ underpinned interactions which could be more conflictual in nature. As a point of inquiry in relation to the finding in this chapter more generally however, I was interested to inquire as to if and how this emphasis on the positive might serve for holding what seemed to be a de-politicisation of school-parent relations.

In order to test this relationship, I undertook analysis of a focus group session that I undertook with a group of young mothers. I made contact with this group through a local area service, one that these women linked in with on a weekly basis, so they already knew each other. Five women took

part in the focus group. One woman worked part time and was in receipt of a welfare top up while the other four were in receipt of the one parent allowance. All of the women were in their early twenties, and had children in different primary schools in the local area.

6.5 The Young Mothers

That the women already knew each other is relevant here as they had already established themselves as a group, with, they told me at the beginning of our session, rules that underpinned their group work processes. In addition, this meant that they had established certain group dynamic in their regular weekly sessions. There was one participant who was very outspoken, embellishing many of her comments and inputs to the focus group session with humour and lots of dramatic effect. I have named her Kate here. At times Kate would say things for shock or entertainment value, for the other mothers, perhaps for me, or herself. As different topics were raised for discussion by me or the mothers themselves, the other mothers in the group often disagreed or agreed with Kate's points, or laughed in a way suggesting they could not believe she had said X or Y out loud. Regardless of whether they agreed or disagreed with Kate, they would say so, usually providing a rationale for their point of view. Sometimes even Kate revisited her own statements in the process of the back and forth with the other mothers that would follow, from changing her initial statement to agreeing somewhat more with the other participants, to being even more adamant about holding her ground regardless of their opinions. This of course is one of the benefits of a focus group situation, as people hone their ideas in conversation with other participants.

6.5.1 Money Matters

The women brought up the topic of money themselves at the very start of the focus group discussion. I began by asking them if they felt there were any major differences between their time in school and now, sending their children to school. The first response I got related to money.

"Ya. The money for the trips and all. We used to pay two euro to here and there for the bus and all, and now they are looking for.. fourteen euro!". (Kate)

All the women joined in here commenting in different ways about the cost of sending their children to school.

“Ya.. books⁸⁷ is 75 euro. The uniform is 30 and I’ve to buy two of them. That’s another 60. Then by the time you get.. you know the way kids nowadays want gear from sports shops, and all like.. Well my little fella does. You can’t go to Dunnes⁸⁸ anymore. So you’re like “No I want them ... ones.. for football ..” Am.. by the time you get the bag and coats an’ shoes and then you have to get them not from Dunnes like, it does all add up”. (Shirley)

By way of agreeing and adding to this, Sandra, another participating mother said,

“You do have to be starting now for September [Referring here to managing costs of going to school months ahead] just to get yourself back up floating anyway”. (Sandra)

I followed this up by asking the group if their children’s schools [not all of the mothers had children in the host school] ran any schemes to help with managing costs. Kate, who said that her child’s school ran the book rental scheme followed on with this,

“Our school is gas right.. It’s [children’s] allowance⁸⁹ day once every month.. and we all get a [text] message [from the school] sayin’ am, “We will take 20 euro of youse today”, because they know you are getting paid like, the school do, and they text your phone sayin’ ah.. “We’ll get 20 euros off you....”.

[As though verbally responding to an imaginary phone in her hand Kate follows with] “See you later I’ll pay when I have it...” [laughs].... Like you’ve been [unclear] told what to do with your money! ... And you’ve other things to do with it..”. (Kate)

This comment evidences a kind of resistance by Kate to what she interprets as the authoritative attempt of the school to manage her money. The nature of Kate’s resistance can be understood in the context of Warren’s (2004) work (Chapter 2) which highlighted how women’s lives are reduced to the ‘two-roles’ of work and family in the mainstream policy research literature. To briefly recap, Warren (2004) argued that this narrow framing for understanding women’s lived experiences

⁸⁷ This refers here to the cost of the School Book Rental Scheme. This is a scheme available in some schools and involves the loan to children of text books for a rental fee. The books are returned at the end of the year. <https://www schooldays.ie/articles/School-Books-Rental-Scheme-for-Primary>

⁸⁸ Dunnes Stores is an Irish department store with a long history of selling mass produced, non-branded, lower priced clothing, shoes and accessories. More recently however, it is trying to carve out a niche in the market somewhere between low cost and expensive clothing adding a small number of designer ranges that are produced on a large scale. Based on Shirley’s comment here, its attempt to change its reputation has not won her over as of yet.

⁸⁹ Child benefit, formerly known as children’s allowance, is a universal state benefit, payable to parents of children under 16 years of age, and up to 18 years for those in full time education.

serves to block out the reality of the impact of economics on women's QoL, a reality that upon secondary analysis of official data that she undertook, was a key component of QoL identified by working class women. She makes the point that while economics is similarly a key aspect of middle-class women's lives, the fact of having greater financial resources than their working-class counterparts merely means that the narrow 'two-roles' framing does not mean they are constrained by it to the same degree. The 'two-roles' impact is clear to see in Kate's statement, captured in her demand for recognition as having a life, as a woman and mother that involves a life beyond any reduction to work-family as framed by the school's communication with her.

6.5.2 Money and Shame

Based on what Kate had been saying, and in the context of the other mothers in the group who talked about the challenges of managing the costs of school, I asked the group if they would talk to the school about this, and tell them the kinds of impacts that keeping up with school costs this was having on them. This was responded to firstly with silence, and then followed by a consensus across the room that they would not speak to the school. I asked why not, and in the context of some shrugs and non-responses, Kate then said,

"No. 'cause I'd be mortified if they [school] were saying I wouldn't pay for the kids ..". (Kate)

The kind of risk that Kate expresses here is in line with the changed nature of risk under neoliberalism discussed in Chapter 2 (Lazzarato 2009) where risk is no longer something out there that can happen to you and out of your control, but instead endogenous to the self. The risk for Kate of speaking out about financial struggles, equates to the risk of losing respectability, or face, as a mother. This quality of respectability is in line with the definition proposed by Lyndsey Hanley (2016) where she suggests that it has become a quality of the self. As a mechanism of silencing, this is clearly both powerful and complex, not only in terms of class but here more specifically class and gender, where respectability is interwoven into a complex context of 'getting on' in the world but only in a way that does not jeopardising ones belonging to community (Sennett & Cobb 1972). For Kate, and indeed the other mothers, this is clearly not just about navigating the class divide, but also about the gender divide having to navigate the reductive discursive production of working-class women's lives, according to middle class values.

6.5.3 Opting for High Interest Loans

I was curious to know, in the context of them being unable to speak out about financial struggles in their relationships with the school, what kind of implications this had for them. Therefore, I continued by asking them just this,

Karin (Researcher): *“Well what then do you do? How do you get around this [problem of not being able to say it] if you don’t have the money?”*

Kate: *You’d have to like borrow off Provident or something like* [laughs] [they all laugh].

Karin (Researcher): *Borrow off what?* (I hadn’t heard of Provident)

Kate: *Get a lend. You just have to get on with it and get it. Provident. Ah, it’s a loan, a loan person like you’d have to borrow to get the .. What are you laughin at!?!? [shouts across with a playful tone to another woman in the group].*

Kate speaking out here in the context of the focus group, saying that they would need to get a loan to keep things going, seemed to embarrass the other mothers, evident in the way that they laughed somewhat uncomfortably when Kate spoke about using a loan company to meet school costs. Indeed, Kate herself laughed initially, suggesting that she too feels stigma attached to the need to source loans. But ultimately as she said again, *‘you just have to get on with it’*.

The women’s response here is illustrative of the change to the matrix of the social that was posited by Maurizio Lazzarato (2011) in his work entitled *The Making of Indebted Man*, from exchange to credit. Remaining ‘in the game’ or avoiding the risk of exclusion is achieved here by accessing credit, altering as Lazzarato (2011) argued, the notion of value under neoliberal capitalism into something that is accessible through the credit-debtor relationship. In this sense the young mothers make visible the equivalence of the meaning of inclusion and indebtedness, where debt under neoliberalism is not seen as a problem, but instead an essential component of the success of neoliberal capitalism as it creates the inseparability of social relations underpinned by the creditor-debtor logic from the production of the debtor subject and his or her morality. In other words, respectability as it has come to mean in the neoliberal context, is only retainable for Kate and the other mothers by sourcing credit and entering into the credit-debtor relationship. It is the means of preventing any exposure of the reality of their financial circumstances, and therefore also the mechanism that relegates that reality to silence. The findings show in other words that becoming human capital, being an ‘entrepreneur of the self’, requires the individual to absorb the costs along with the risks of a flexible financialised society (Lazzarato 2011). This he argues is not only the costs and risks associated with innovation, but also those associated with welfare cuts, precariousness, service cuts, unemployment, a compromised health system, housing shortages and so on. While indebtedness is not preserved for the poor, but instead is the condition of all members of a financialised society, in the form of mortgages, credit card usage and so forth, the implications of

this reality for the poor and working classes are clear. Being accepted as eligible for credit and taking on the risk of their own losses as personal failure going towards the production of the anxiously guilt-ridden morality of the debtor (Lazzarato 2011) effectively serves in shutting down any potential for class struggle. In this sense, the findings are in line with Lazzarato's (2011) argument that debt is not just an economic mechanism, but a technology of government shaping our very subjectivity, as he argues, 'finance is a power relation' (ibid, p. 24).

6.5.4 Debt and the 'Life' of the Mother

While Kate was very critical about what she interpreted as being implied by the strategies used by her child's school for requesting payment for school costs, this was not the view of all the mothers in the focus group. Some challenged Kate's view by saying that they found this kind of system of payment useful and that it helped them to budget over time and manage their money. Notwithstanding this, keeping abreast of school costs was spoken about as having become an ongoing project for the mothers. This is represented by the following quote,

"You do have to be starting now for September [Referring here to managing school costs months ahead] just to get yourself back up floating anyway". (Sandra)

Foucault's (date) concept of bio-power, meaning a kind of governance that has extended from being a form of disciplining of the body, to the whole life of the individual, becomes visible in this context. Here where taking up payment plans, and successfully meeting their terms orientates the mother's efforts over extended periods in ways that satisfy processes of subjectification desired by capital, in the form of the debtor, 'affected by guilt, bad conscience, and responsibility (Lazzarato 2011, p. 52) engendered in the commitment to pay off debts owing. This of course has very particular implications for the meaning of class and the process of its reproduction, here found to be swallowed up in the very processes through which autonomy is realised.

6.5.5 A Spirit of Defiance

The findings in this Chapter present a bleak picture, and while this may be the case, perhaps all is not lost. As we were coming towards the end of our discussion about the nature of the relationship between parents and their children's school, and in recognition of the trajectory of our conversation, and the metaphorical theme emerging of a general sense of having 'nowhere left to go', Kate interjected by saying,

"Like, no one pays the full 75 euro". [book rental money]

Kate's comment expressing a degree of resistance to the all-encompassing experience of the credit-debtor relationship suggests that the silence imposed upon her, and the subjectification that it makes way for is not something that she blindly accepts, suggested in the disruption that this expresses, that she may also have a vision for an alternative to the current trajectory. The next chapter will present the findings from analysis of the data undertaken from the viewpoint of this possibility.

6.6 Conclusion

This chapter examines the arena of non-decision-making power in the school, with a view to exploring if, and how, the inequality in decision-making identified in Chapter 5 is held in place in the wider agenda-setting arena as this is constituted in school-parent relations. The overarching finding is one that is suggestive of relations that are de-politicised. This is found to be occurring in a school culture where the foregrounding of individualisation, as this related to the issue of psychological health and well-being and backgrounding of the topic of economics, is reproduced as normative. The chapter then inquire into the question of how this de-politicised arena of non-decision-making power might be held in place and identifies an ethics of care as defined by behavioural change as a possible lever in this context. In examining this set of inter-relations, a focus group with young mothers is examined to see if this hypothesis makes sense. The findings make visible a context where money worries in relation to school costs exists but speaking out about these to the school is rejected for reasons associated with respectability, and the stigma associated with not being 'able to pay for the kids'. The power of the stigma attached to this for the mothers was evident in their willingness to opt for high interest loans rather than speak about money worries. As a result, for many in the group, the payment plans offered by their children's schools are spoken about in the 'positive', as ways in which they can budget and meet the demands of school going costs. In this framing, the themes of individualisation, the backgrounding of economics, and the notion of the positive can be seen to serve as a combination that are silencing, and as such are suggestive of the key factors that produce a de-politicised field of school-parent relations. Notwithstanding this finding, the chapter closes by making visible that their spirit of defiance is found to remain where their compliance is not yet total.

Chapter 7 Towards an Inclusive Process of Decision-Making

7.1 Introduction

This chapter inquires into whether an alternative process of decision-making in schools can be identified, one that is unconstrained by the structurally imposed limits made visible in the last two chapters, and instead a process inclusive of all voices. Using Rancière's (May 2010) system of thought as a methodological frame, this chapter presents analysis of data examined through the lens of a 'presupposition of equality'. This orientates analytical focus on language use from the perspective of a wish to hear what the mothers wished to say based on an equality of intelligence between all people.

The chapter follows a pattern of presenting three participant mothers' accounts of the exclusion from the decision-making process in their children's schools that they experience firstly, and their responses to same thus making visible the varying effects of class and gender inequality. The women's accounts are also interwoven with various ideas about the process of decision-making that challenge the decision-making status quo that has featured heretofore and would go towards mitigating the exclusion from these processes that they/their children are experiencing. Presenting the women's narratives in this way makes visible what Rancière identifies as the two logics of the social side by side, the unequal logic of the social bond, shown here (and in the previous chapters) to produce parents exclusion from decision-making, and the egalitarian logic of an equality of intelligence that can be found in language due to its capacity for traversing the boundaries imposed by social structures (Heron 1992). The chapter shows how read together the individual women's ideas about decision-making constitute an alternative conceptual framework to that which is currently producing their exclusion. This is a framework broadened out to include the domain of affective relations; involving a process of collective critical reflection and knowledge making for decision making; driven from the bottom up; involving partnership between the mother's and the state; and the work of seeking political openings for engendering change along the lines of justice and equality.

The chapter begins with Margaret's story, chosen as the first story to present here because of how it dovetails with, and indeed verifies the findings in, the previous chapter. Using the work of Valerie Walkerdine (1990) we get a close-up sense of the very tangible experience of the processes and effects of a gendered and classed experience of exclusion from the decision-making process in Margaret's narration of herself as having been eclipsed in that context. The silencing effects of the dominant structures become even more vivid when understood in contrast to Margaret's narration

of herself as an active and shared decision-maker once her story takes us beyond the field of education and into the fields of community and family. From here, in the domain of affective relations, Margaret provides us with insight into some of the fundamentals of an alternative process of shared decision-making.

7.2 Margaret

I met Margaret, who was in her early thirties, while I was undertaking participant observation in the school. Having invited her to take part in an interview via one of the teaching staff members, Margaret invited me to call up to her house the following week to talk with her. We did the interview in her kitchen, sipping tea, and sitting at the kitchen table. Up on the wall were school photos of her three school-going children beaming out at us. We started talking initially about the idea of parental involvement in the school, something which Margaret said, wasn't really 'her thing'. She prefers to 'keep herself to herself', she said, and commenting that the bickering that can occur sometimes between parents is something from which she would prefer to steer clear. This was the main reason she provided for why she chose not to join the parents' association committee. However, Margaret did take part in some things, and so, for example, around the time of our interview the school was hosting the Operation Transformation walks for parents, and she happily took part in some of those. Margaret made sure to add that she is always available to give the school a hand whenever they need it, adding that she welcomed the bonus it offered her of 'getting out of the house'.

Margaret had four children, three boys and a girl, with three in primary school at the time of my fieldwork; two in Junior Primary and one in Senior Primary, and a toddler at home. Margaret worked in the home. Unlike her daughter who she described as being *'very good in school, does all her work and is well behaved'*, her two boys are, as she describes it, *'struggling with school a bit'*. Her older son is in trouble a lot *"..for his behaviour.. am his cheek, things like that.. Not doing his work.. Maybe messin.. things like that."* Referring to her younger son, in Junior Infants at the time of fieldwork, she said, *"The little lad now – he gets into trouble in school for rough playing in yard"*. She adds, *"..with him now, I think it's learning behaviour with him, trying to copy off the eldest lad, and they play a lot together at home as well...."* (Margaret)

Margaret does not talk about herself as having a major role in the context of any of her children's schooling whether they are doing well, as she reported of her daughter, or if they are 'in trouble' and 'not interested' in school, as was her account in terms of her sons. Margaret spoke about herself as helping out with homework when her children would ask her questions, even though all the questions often 'drove her mad', suggesting that helping with homework was something child

led, rather than driven by herself. Evans (2006), in her ethnography on education and class in Britain, discusses this as being a characteristic of working-class parenting found in her study, whereby the child's interest in school is his or her own affair, and help with schoolwork is provided in response to this degree of interest. Indeed, some of the other mothers I spoke to over the course of this study also spoke about helping with homework in this way, often complaining that the length of time it took to get the homework done was always way longer than the school suggested, making for a 'torturous' time.

Margaret also commented on the fact that she struggled herself in school and that this made it more difficult to provide homework help. She said that she had suggested that a homework club be set up in the school, not so much for the children, but for the parents, so they could better help their children at home. I missed this point during our interview, in the sense that I did not probe further, by perhaps asking if her idea was taken-up in the school, due to me initially assuming that she had meant a homework club for the children. Upon analysis of her transcription later, I realised that she meant a club for parents who struggle with education themselves so that they could learn what the children were learning in class in order to help them more at home. Upon reflection, it seemed to signify a wish on her part to be able to engage more effectively with what sounded like a conveyor belt of challenges, general 'getting into trouble', and ongoing sanctions, in relation to her boys in particular. The fact that I missed this is problematic, as being in Margaret's home under the guise of a so-called professional researcher who invited her to be included in the study, not picking up on her point here may have served to suggest to her that it was perhaps not important, or relevant, or perhaps possible, all of which of course are untrue. In missing this point, I undermined Margaret's voicing of her desire to build up capacity to help her children, an action I am critical of in relation to others in the role of the professional throughout the research.

Margaret mainly talked about her sons, perhaps because they were constantly in trouble in school. She talked about the various tactics and strategies that the school were employing to try and keep her sons' behaviour in line: behaviour monitoring reports on a day by day basis, links with behaviour programmes such as *The Incredible Years*⁹⁰, suspensions, loss of privileges, like going swimming with the class, loss of yard privileges, and so on. But what was very curious here was that while speaking about her sons' behaviour issues in the context of the school, Margaret spoke about herself in a sense that was suggestive of her being absent from the school-child relationship, as though it was something between the school and her son, about which she just got feedback and about which

⁹⁰ The Incredible Years® programme is designed to prevent and treat emotional and behavioural difficulties in children aged 3 to 10 years. <https://www.archways.ie/our-programmes/incredible-years/>

she could have only negligible direct involvement even though she tried to do so informally. For example, having spoken about the range of sanctions and programmes the school uses to discipline and target her sons' troublesome behaviour, she followed on by saying that, in terms of her older son,

"I'd go up to the school every second or third day if I don't hear from them. I'd go to them, just to see how he was and what have you...". (Margaret)

A central concern in feminism is the challenge that women experience 'finding a voice' in patriarchal society. However, this concern is critiqued as being rooted in the overly simplistic perception that silence is equated to repression while the act of speaking is equated to having the place and power to do so (Walkerdine 1990). For Walkerdine (1990, p. 31), the important point is not one of whether a person is allowed to speak or not, but rather "what can be spoken, how and in what circumstances". In paying attention to this Walkerdine (1990, p. 31) says, not only do we learn what is being left out, but also, we can learn "how particular forms of language, supporting particular notions of truth, come to be produced". Taking up this focus for analysis, this next section attempts to make sense of how or why Margaret might background herself in the context of her narration of her son's schooling, and therefore from the decisions being made in relation to her son.

7.2.1 The 'Rational' Mother

Margaret's deference to the school in the behaviour management of her son makes more sense when considered in the context of Walkerdine's (1990) account of how the mother's role in normalised accounts of child-rearing is produced as maternal nurturer in society; the primary school being a key site where this occurs. What is to be nurtured in her children, Walkerdine (1990) argues, is the modern conception of the rational which is contained in discourse and language and which in order to be known requires its binary opposite, the irrational. As was communicated by Margaret in the various strategies used by the school to manage her son's behaviour, and in line with Walkerdine's thinking, the production of rational children occurs through the regulation of speaking and conflict. This requires the mother to be responsible for containing not only her children's irrationality but also her own. Walkerdine (1990) draws from Foucault here and the discursive production of self-regulation to make sense of how this occurs in everyday social relations. She makes the point that the practices involved in the production of the subject, both mother and child, are class and gender (and race) neutral, but underpinned with the assumption that these categories "assume a built-in deviance, a problem to be dealt with and corrected" (Walkerdine 1990, p.32). Emerging conflict is regulated by rational argument, guided in this way by the school who instructs the mother to produce the 'natural' or normal child. Simultaneously this process serves to identify

the absence of normal, the abnormal, which through the force of patriarchal state agencies and policies, channelled through the school, in a range of interventions that target the mother as much as the son, the son comes to be pathologised, and in need of correction through the range of educational, medical, and/or welfare agencies. Margaret's account seems to resonate with what Walkerdine discusses where she says,

"See the eldest lad has ADHD. And he has am.. he's dyslexic so he struggles a lot with his [school] work. He's being tested for Asperger's now as well – you know. He would have a lot [of issues]".
(Margaret)

When talking about her son's behaviour in the context of school, Margaret takes up this kind of pathologising language as an explanation for why he is always in trouble at school. In addition, her account of her son's school-based behaviour is further rationalised, through the 'truthful' monitoring of her son's behaviour by a computer programme administered by the school. This was being carried out with the use of a screening tool where she says information about him is input into a computer on a daily basis by the school staff. Each day the child gets a score out of 100. These form a daily report from the school on her son's progress.

"It tells you how they were all day.. so that's how I know everyday how he's been in school. It's all done on computer and then you can print it off before they leave school, so there's no cheating on it. It comes up exactly where he was at, what he got..". (Margaret)

The distance expressed here, between Margaret and her son, encapsulated in how she describes his school life is clear here; a relationship separated out by the computer programmes, tests and labels that make up his 'school self', while her passive self remains in the background of this account, being reported to by the 'truth' of the monitoring processes administered by the school.

Margaret also spoke of herself as retreating from the role of overt disciplinarian in school-related behavioural conflicts to the extent that she often recruits other ways of propping up the school's efforts of behavioural management in the wider community setting. Here she talks about a collaborative approach to disciplining her son, that she has organised with the local football club coach, mirroring the strategy that Walkerdine (1990) highlights, of self-containment in her efforts at producing a good child. What is clear in the following quote, and the previous ones, is Margaret's sense that she is communicating to me that she is 'doing the right thing' by taking a step back.

"...and when he gets a suspension from school, his football manager suspends him from a match.. so it's not down to us [herself and her partner]... and for the simple reason is that the football manager that they have, their son is in my son's class, so if he saw my son getting suspended and still going on a Sunday to play a game, he might think that's ok for him. So we just came up with this ourselves....". (Margaret)

Walkerdine (1990) makes the point that the containment of the mother's power to speak, as part of the process of producing the maternal nurturer, is done in order to avoid any form of overt regulation of the (male) child. Overt regulation, or authoritative parenting, taken to involve excessive sanctions, threats, or compliance is to be avoided as these are said to produce feelings of humiliation and powerlessness in the child. The overarching aim in capitalist societies, according to Walkerdine (1990), is to produce the autonomous child, the child that feels like he (sic) is in control, as the author of his (sic) intentions, of freewill and independence. Dominant ideas of parenting argue that overt regulation will disrupt this project of autonomy production in children, really taken to mean, in the male child. Margaret's take up of the football manager's involvement in her son's behaviour management, suggests her adherence to this perspective, albeit explained here as a way of avoiding her children's retort back at her.

"Ya, because if he thinks it's me [disciplining him] all the time then he gives out to me, "O your terrible, and your this and that". Or, "you know like.. you know like when a child is upset and they are roaring and shouting at you, "I hate you Mammy, this and that", and then you find the four year old comes down the stairs saying the same thing you know.. you do..." (Margaret)

"..but when he knows it's the manager that's actually stopping him from going, then he actually calms down then... So he can blame them.. you know.. but am.. that's I suppose, that how we would deal with things". (Margaret)

Margaret's taking up the 'good maternal nurturer' role quenches the fiery exchanges that would otherwise materialise in situations of conflict with her son, something that she is perhaps happy to avoid. This, according to Walkerdine (1990), is crucial in the production of the autonomous subject under capitalism, the subject within whom an excess of passion or conflict is not valorised. She adds, "[s]uch an agent is a citizen who, as in the humanist dream, sees all relations as personal relations, in which, power, struggle, conflict and desire are displaced and dissipated" (ibid, 1990, p. 32). The 'rational' mother in a classed and gendered society is the mother who does not disrupt this agenda.

7.2.2 Resisting the 'Rational'

While Margaret's story to this point clearly communicates a passive self, this was not the only dimension to her sense of self that she shared. Resistance was evident in her story, introduced mainly in the context her critique of the schools' notion of the 'good' child in comparison to her own beliefs. The following excerpts demonstrate how her views depart from what the school views as problems.

For example, in descriptions of her younger son, who was in Junior Infants, also getting into trouble in school, but not being monitored in ways that her older son was, she rationalised his behaviour differently,

"Boys like to wrestle – you know, and he would be a little rough, you know.... And he plays with the older lads, because his sister is on the yard, and he'd play with [kids in his sisters class] the older boys because he's rough and ready for playing with his eleven year old brother you know – so that's what he'd be in trouble for in school". (Margaret)

Indeed, this expression of her own beliefs was not reserved for her younger son only. In the following account she shows how she dismisses the schools' coming down hard on her older son at times for what she says are silly things.

"Now there has been things that I have been called up to the school over that I absolutely laughed.. You know like, just something silly...". (Margaret)

Here she told me about a time where her son and another boy got up to mischief in the school which revolved around them mimicking a scene from a well-known children's film. Margaret was laughing while she was telling me the ins and outs of the story, adding that the school's response to this resulted in her being called to the school once again, something which she felt was excessive, and suggestive of her view that disciplining in the school goes too far sometimes where it tries to rein in her spirited boys.

Similarly, Margaret in recognition of the fact that the school was constantly coming down hard on her son, suggested that she is trying to navigate between the school's view and her own:

"You see when a child has a lot of problems as well you do tend to kinda feel sorry and be a little bit more easy going because you know..

...but at the same time with him being the eldest we do have to be a bit hard on him because the others are watching..". (Margaret)

These expressions of resistance were few in Margaret's account of her role as mother in the context of the education field, but where they did emerge, they were like ruptures to the mainly passive self that was being more generally communicated in that sphere. Drawing from the work of Annette Lareau (2003) these divergences from the strictures in the school are suggestive of an underlying allegiance to an alternative approach to child-rearing from the dominant idea held in the school. As discussed in Chapter 2 the distinction that Lareau (2003) set out was between a working-class approach to child-rearing, which she called 'the accomplishment of natural growth' and a middle-class approach that she labelled 'concerted cultivation', an approach that mainly involves a structured life of in-school and after school activities. This difference was teased out within a wider discussion about how working-class respectability is found in a rejection of middle-class values, which is also an expression of alignment with ones working class values and community (Sennett & Cobb 1972, Hanley 2016).

Indeed, Margaret's making light of what she frames as an overly serious response by the school to some of her son's antics might be understood as an expression of self-respect, in the process of distancing herself from the approach taken by the school. It also suggests a departure from the kind of silencing that was, to this point in her story, expressed in her account of her relations with the school. But the complexity for working class women moves well beyond this level of analysis. For example, on one hand, the impact of lower levels of education are recognised as having negative implications on parents ability to meet the expectations of being a 'good' parent, what is less recognised is that the position of the 'good' and 'rational' mother encouraging autonomy, and fostering a sense of control and free will in her child, is a position that is not so accessible to working class mothers in the process rearing children outside of the school gates in the local working class community context. However notably here, rather than this being interpreted as a problem, it is instead being re-framed as one lens through which learning about how a more democratic kind of parental involvement might be done that is inclusive of the voices of women like Margaret who are currently excluded from that position in the complex and layered ways illustrated here.

7.2.3 From School to Home

In Margaret's narrative, her presentation of herself began to change when she then started to talk about her role as a mother beyond the boundaries of the school. This occurred as Margaret introduced two key issues of concern she had about her son, his wish for greater independence, and worry around the balance of knowledge that she felt her son needed to know about the reality

of drug addiction and drug use, an issue which was present in her son's life at a community neighbourhood level.

In terms of his wish for greater independence, the issue of how to equip her eldest son for navigating the busy roads between school and home was a key concern for Margaret. This was something that she was anxious about, but her son, in fifth class, was striving to achieve some independence and making his own way to and from school was something that he wanted to do. Margaret talked a little bit about how her relationship with her son had been changing over recent years, and that while he was still up for a hug and cuddle from his mother at home, by third class this was another thing when it came to public affection. As she said,

"If I said to him "Give us a kiss or a hug, I'd be laughed at.. He'd just look at me and walk away from me. But it's different at home..". (Margaret)

At home he was still his 'Mam's boy'. Now wanting to walk himself to school was another level of independence he sought, and it worried her as she said that her son does not stop to think, he just bolts forward out onto the roads, enthusiastically. Although not comfortable with his desire to walk independently, and not resigned in terms of when that might occur, Margaret spoke about how she currently gives him some space by letting him walk ahead while monitoring him from a distance.

"It's just to let him walk up that bloody road [exasperated tone] whereas I don't get him [understand him] because I'm going to be there collecting the other kids. It's not like I'll be going out of me way.. He just wants..... So I'm letting him.. walking on up the road and I'm crawling up along the road behind him. It's just mad! My big fear is the road there at the [Names pub]. There's only a lollipop lady there in the morning. She's never there after school when the kids are crossing the road. I go down to collect them and she doesn't be there.. Now like he'd be good enough [with the roads] at the school. If only for that lollipop woman, don't know how many kids would be knocked down – she's absolutely brilliant". (Margaret)

Margaret's active voice is present here where she positions herself in the role of protector of her son. Having listened to him, she takes up his wishes for greater independence, by participating in the process of working towards meeting his needs. While worried about his safety, she nevertheless carried on to tell me about a plan she was developing for how to move forward with this process.

“Now me Ma lives in [area] beside the school [....] so she had said to me – say half way through sixth class next year we were going to give him his own little independence by allowing him to walk – [stumbles over this bit] allowing him to go home for lunch to trust him – he could go to me Mam’s house for lunch because there is no roads crossing, there’s nothing, just a straight journey there and back and if we can trust him. And then at home time then, he wants to start walking home but it will be to me Mam’s, and then I’ll have to collect him then at me Mam’s...”. (Margaret)

Trusting her son is a key idea that Margaret mentions twice here, trusting him in the face of treacherous roads even though they cause such anxiety for her. Interestingly, what is at play here is change to the dynamic of the family, a change that her son is having a say in shaping, and trust-building is the central issue of concern. Her son wants her to trust him, and in turn she wants to be able to trust him. This two-way street, sounds a lot like the kind of trust building described in social inclusion policy discourse, but which as was shown in chapter 4, gets disrupted in the simultaneous promulgation of the neoliberal ‘entrepreneur of the self’.

7.2.4 Love Labour and Decision-Making

Margaret’s gradual switch to the use of her active self as her story moved closer to family and home led me to examine the literature for a way of conceptualising what might be occurring, and how it might help think about this in terms of an alternative kind of decision-making process. The recent work of Cantillon & Lynch (2017) stood out to me and in particular their use of the concept of ‘love labour’, which was at the centre of their paper entitled, *Affective Equality: Love Matters*. Their work makes the case that “affective relations are not social derivatives, subordinate to economic, political, or cultural relations in the fight for social justice (Cantillon & Lynch 2017, p. 169). For the authors, affective relations “are productive, materialist human relations that constitute people mentally, emotionally, physically and socially” (Cantillon & Lynch 2017, p. 169). In this way they are as politically important to the cause for social justice. Of the three types of nurturing relations: love, care and solidarity, that Cantillon & Lynch (2017) identify as primary, secondary and tertiary kinds of affective relations respectively, love relations are the kind that they argue are distinct. This is “because the labor involved in producing love, love labor, is both inalienable and non-commodifiable” (Cantillon & Lynch 2017, p. 170). For the authors then, *love matters* because as they say, drawing from Matheis (2014, p. 12), “love is the primary element of our “human co-affective relations” through which we make and re-make one another” (in Cantillon & Lynch 2017, p. 170). Indeed, Frazer (2010, in Cantillon & Lynch 2017) argues that the conditions for achieving ‘parity of participation’ must include affective relations if we wish participatory processes to be just, that securing equality in the nurturing of one another is of equal political importance along with securing equality in terms of redistribution, respect, and recognition.

For our purposes here, the inclusion of affective relations in the frame for analysis provides a vantage point from where Margaret's voice can be heard providing some insight into her political philosophy, or subjectification as Rancière (May 2010) would call it, taking up the Foucauldian concept. Subjectification in Foucauldian terms is the process of how we relate to ourselves as selves of a certain kind (Rabinow & Rose 2003). Here, this becomes more than the expression of an idea, but becomes the material act of speaking one's own name through a declassifying of existing norms. From the vantage point of love labour however, participation in her son's education does not appear to be through absence or silence, but instead through engagement, communication, listening, negotiation, planning and a shared goal. This was also evident in the second issue Margaret highlighted.

7.2.5 From Home to Neighbourhood

Margaret's other key worry in terms of her children was the proximity of drug use to her children's lives, something which she told me is not only present in the community, but in her local neighbourhood. As a result of this, Margaret says that she is very open with her children, her eldest son especially, since there are dangers that can be encountered even when playing outside in the estate with his friends. Margaret was alerted to this from her neighbour,

"There was a boarded up house on the end of me road there and that's where they were all going.. and the next door neighbour came up to me and said, "Will you tell [son] to stay out of that garden", you know. He says, "There's all sorts in it". So I did, told him to stay out of it..". (Margaret)

What Margaret was referring to here was discarded injecting drug paraphernalia; mainly used needles. She added that the boarded house had since been occupied and the danger averted but Margaret learned from this that she needed to make sure that her son was equipped with knowledge so that he could navigate these dangers.

"..when they are out in the street these days you have to teach them to know what a needle looks like. My biggest fear would be that they would pick them up". (Margaret)

The issue that Margaret highlighted here was not so much whether she should teach her son about drug related issues, but how she would strike a balance between what he needed to know as a child, and what he did not need to know.

"Well like it is an awful thing that you have to teach children – you don't want them to know too much, but they have to know enough..". (Margaret)

Knowing what a needle looks like is very specific information that once acquired by her son can be seen to go towards his security, equipping him to navigate one of his life's challenges at this very young age. His security means her security in the sense of being able to meet Margaret's, and indeed any mothers, life challenges of ensuring their child is equipped with the knowledge to stay safe in the world. Bauman (1999) named security as another dimension of 'sicherheit' that is absent in our contemporary relationship with social institutions and indeed highlighted as so in the previous chapter in this study. This is something which Margaret here gives an account of addressing herself in the context of her family's life. Equipping her son to make an informed decision about his own security is a way, in turn, of addressing Margaret's own anxieties.

7.2.6 Affective Relations as Knowledge

Looked at through a different lens, the site of affective relations from where Margaret talks about the process of collaborating with her son in order to 'hear' what he is saying and develop a way of moving forward is suggestive of two key issues. Firstly, Margaret's story is suggestive of the fact that when the sphere of affective relations is recognised as a legitimate place from where women speak, particularly women excluded from the other spheres of social life, we see very quickly that they quite quickly speak their equality. In this analysis of Margaret's account this relates to her equality of capacity for decision-making. Not only this, but it is also an equality of capacity for decision-making that is akin to the kind of process set out by Paulo Freire, a process that Brian McKenna (2013) argues is more often taken up and misused in places as powerful as the world bank. A central foundation of Freire's critical pedagogy is the notion of the 'gynological cycle', that is, where the learner produces his or her own knowledge in a cycle of perceiving and coming to understand this knowledge "in a never ending spiral of action and reflection" (McKenna 2013, p. 450), or in other words, action and theory building. Freire, according to McKenna (2013) separates out schooling and education from each other. McKenna (2013) adds that schooling for Freire privileges socialisation and conformity to the status quo. Education on the other hand is about de-socialisation and comprises two separate moments. The first is a struggle for meaning. The crucial second moment is the struggle of power relations. For Freire, "in order for learning to be convincing for the learner, knowledge, whether dangerous or not, must be enacted in some manner – thereby enjoining those who seek to repress the dialectical and creative urge to understand" (McKenna 2013, p. 449).

In terms of Margaret's voiced reluctance to allow her son to walk to school independently, or to have to teach her son what a used needle looks like, ultimately, his desire for independence pushes her to take-up these issues, engaging both Margaret and her son in a struggle about the meaning of her role as a mother; a struggle that is, in the last instance, concerned with the changing relations of power between them. But key here is that in this process, Margaret's autonomy, unlike in the

earlier analysis of her interaction with the school, was not being suppressed but rather actively produced, as was her sons. Both theory building and action, or praxis, are therefore necessary for being able to experience beyond the repressive dominant discursive production of the social and cultural taken-for-granted; a process of individual and collective continual problem posing or agitating of the comfortable (McKenna 2013) here shown to create knowledge for informed decision-making. Contrary to the findings in this study that show processes of marginalisation and exclusion from decision-making, analysis of Margaret's story here shows not only an equal capacity for decision-making, but a process that is more expansive than that which occurs in practice among those already included.

The difference here, McKenna (2013) argues is that Freire would mentor parents to make trouble, to learn to see their lives in its widest context, and to challenge the production of the story of their selves, in order for them to shape their own narrative. In other words, Freire's approach is more about clarity (through learning), than charity (through receipt of knowledge from others), an approach that is increasingly at the heart of the definition of 'caring' being produced in service provision, through effecting behaviour change (Balshem 1993). The limitations of this become clearer again in the account given by the next mother, Jane, who we will see feels there is little connection between where she understands the parameters of parental involvement in education and her need to step into the role of supporting her daughter's additional education needs.

7.3 Jane

Jane, in her early 30s, a mother of two girls in primary school had very strong opinions for why she was not particularly interested in the more formal dimension of parental involvement in her child's school. For Jane being involved, as it was being produced in the schools, did not provide her with an avenue for addressing her key concern, which was what she identified as one of her two daughter's additional educational needs.

"The interaction there is good [parent-school interaction] but I don't find too much of a benefit to what that is doing like... with the kids..". (Jane)

Jane did not really see the point of the roll out of courses for parents that were not focused on the children, and even had reservations about some child education specific activities like those around maths and reading, that did involve parents, but she felt were not always targeted at the right ages. Indeed, in terms of policy making in the school, Jane felt that ultimately parents did not have any power, not so much because of the school, but due to it being in the context of the wider education system as it is currently constituted. Therefore, fundraising was seen by her as the main activity

that parents could be usefully involved in. As she worked, she had very little time available for involvement in fundraising, a fact that she was frank about also.

Jane's pretty frank view of parental involvement makes sense when contextualised in, what for her, is the most pressing school related issue. She told me that her younger daughter, then in Junior Infants, was struggling with her school work. Jane's older daughter had been doing much better at school when at the same age as her younger daughter is now, a reluctant point of comparison which she outlines here,

"Ya,.well you don't want one struggling and one flying.. Well it's not that one's struggling and one's flying... you don't want to be comparing them and going 'she's brilliant' you know, 'top marks for her' and then you're kind of going well 'your [second child] needs to work harder'. You know that way and they [children who are struggling] are working harder but they get fed up because the understanding's not there..". (Jane)

7.3.1 Needs Driven / Collective Provision

Jane's reluctance to differentiate between her daughters dovetails with a wider view of the world that she held. For example, early on in our interview, when Jane was telling me about how well her older daughter did at school, she digressed to recount the fact that her daughter had been included in a programme evaluation of a literacy programme, an in-school initiative that placed emphasis on developing literacy skills in an after-school setting. While Jane said she was delighted for any extra educational attention directed towards her older daughter, she was in two minds about her involvement in this programme in the context of its fairness where other children had the need for literacy support. Jane said her older daughter, who was in the programme, had no literacy difficulties.

"It was a lucky dip ... it wasn't kids that necessarily needed it. I was delighted that she got it 'cause it was extra help for me child. [But] to me it should have been something that would have been am.... [As though paraphrasing] "Your child actually needs this, she should get the extra attention". I know there was other children that were struggling in that class that didn't get picked, you know, it could of benefited them but that is the way they were working it to see if the programme worked in general". (Jane)

For my purposes here the issue of the methodology used for that evaluation, which Jane seemed to disagree with is not the issue at hand. However, what is of relevance in Jane's account above is her view that firstly extra supports should be provided to children within the school, and secondly that they should be provided on a priority of needs basis.

Jane's definition of fairness, based on priority of need, is contrary to the notion of fairness identified in Chapter 5, which was based on protecting parents from the weight of competition due to unequal levels of skills and knowledge. While fairness based on capacity was seen in that chapter (Chapter 5) to block people out, fairness based on priority of need would mean the opposite: inclusion of those with the most need first. Jane's definition of fairness suggests alignment with a social justice perspective.

Interestingly, while Jane holds this view, she expresses a kind of uncertainty about how this might occur, particularly in the context of the level of need that she feels exists, and decisions around what priority needs might be in that light. For example, she says,

"It's very hard as a mother to go in [to the school] and say, "I think my child needs this", because everybody thinks their child deserves, you know, some sort of extra help in some way". (Jane)

7.3.2 Risk Society - Risk Self

Importantly, analysis of Jane's story of parent-school relations does not suggest that her perspective is limited to one of state/school provision for meeting needs but is also one that communicates individual responsibility. This more individualised viewpoint began to emerge in Jane's account of why she was particularly concerned about her daughters struggles with reading; loss of respectability. In Jane's account, respectability was framed as something her daughter was at risk of losing, if unable to keep up with her peers in school. For example, referring to the reading and writing difficulties that her younger daughter was experiencing Jane commented,

".. she's not embarrassed by it. She is too young. But when she starts going into the next year or two and other children are starting to cop on to what she doesn't know but what they know, you get picked on. Now I know that hasn't happened and it's farfetched for me to say that but you know what way the schools and the kids work". (Jane)

Jane's comment here points to the kind of social matrix theorised under neoliberal capitalism in Chapter 2 as becoming one of credit (Lazzarato 2011) rather than exchange. Unlike Bourdieu's (1977) theory of capital accumulation describing how access to capital accumulation can be blocked, what is described here by Jane instead is suggestive of the fear of capital (respectability) loss that could be the outcome for her daughter where her additional education needs are not met. In line with Bauman's (1999, pg. 17) point, that late modernity has become a context where none of us are immune to the risk that what we have, can be just as easily lost, Jane's expressed fear is suggestive of this kind of uncertainty.

Loss of respectability for Jane would appear to be linked here to reduced life chances, where falling behind in school can mean,

"..they [children] try to back out of things then.. they don't get involved". (Jane)

Jane's interpretation of the effects of the loss of respectability echo Hanley's (2016) analysis of the changed meaning of respectability under neoliberalism (Chapters 2 and 4), where she says it has changed from meaning something you would or would not do, to now being a property of the person's specific circumstances, a quality laid down in you. For Hanley (2016), respectability in its current guise is a slippery slope, that is, in order to stay respectable, you must stay within the bounds of community, social or geographical, in which your version of respectability counts. Indeed, this echoes the sentiments communicated by the young mothers in the previous chapter who would not risk speaking out about the reality of their inability to take up whatever 'opportunities' the school made available – from payment plans to involvement related activities – due to the potential of 'loosing face', loosing self-respect.

Like the analysis in the previous chapter, here prevention against 'falling out' of one's place in the social system can be seen to engender an individualised response, or the taking up of problem-solving at the individual level. In this context the individualised response taken up by Jane is on behalf of her daughter. This suggests that the notion of acts being taken up in order to prevent producing oneself as being at risk of, in this example losing face, is here extended by becoming an act undertaken by Jane in order to mitigate against her child being at risk in this way.

"I'm trying to prevent it.... I'm going around with my CD player in the car with jolly phonics.. If I have to sing "The snake is in the grass" one more time I'll crack up – [laughs]. But I'm doing this ... I'm trying to work off the tablets and the technology, that the kids are working on, at home in order to get her into school [i.e. interested in education]". (Jane)

7.3.3 Risk Society and/or The Welfare State?

This finding made me question whether there was in fact a change in attitude among mothers. For example, I wondered if mothers might believe meeting their children's additional educational support needs is their personal responsibility. In other words, might mothers be happy to take up the neoliberal project that is concerned with changing attitudes and behaviour, making problem solving an individual matter? In line with these questions, I wondered also if mothers might agree with a reduced role for the state in this regard? These were the kind of questions posed in work carried out by Taylor-Gooby (2011), a professor of Social Policy at the University of Kent. His work

examines attitudes to solidarities, in the context of the transition away from modern industrial society, asking the question of whether risk society erodes welfare solidarity (Taylor-Gooby 2011), in citizens' attitudes. In his secondary analysis of two sweeps of the International Social Survey⁹¹ (1985 and 2006), Taylor-Gooby (2011) examines attitudes to state spending and social risks in order to identify if an erosion of solidarity can be predicted. What he concluded was "a slow and diffuse" shift in this direction, but one that could either lead towards "recreat[ing] solidarities as well as dismant[ling] them" (Taylor-Gooby 2011, p. 159).

7.3.4 Seeking Solidarity in the Face of State Withdrawal

Returning to Jane's account it became clear that her take up of responsibility for supporting her daughters learning was not merely a matter of unquestioned acceptance of her role as individualised problem-solver. Jane spoke of having attempted to get help with the provision of support for her daughter from her daughter's school. This was in relation to her wish for her daughter to be tested for dyslexia, but Jane was being met with resistance by the school on this point. She spoke about being in constant contact with the school in order to try and find ways of working around her daughter's academic difficulties, but this was something that she felt often went unheard. This is evidenced in the following quote in her metaphoric use of being met by a wall, in response to a question inquiring about her view on the approachability of her child's school, for raising the issue of her daughter's reading challenges.

"Well everybody is approachable .. You just don't know how much it is going in and what they are going to do about it. It's very like.. there is no format for them to say well this is where we are going to bring you. It's normally a wall is put in front of you and saying "Well. We don't assess and the policies are we don't do it until a certain age". (Jane)

While Jane experienced this official block, at the same time she did feel that she had been heard by individual staff members in the school. She talked about how her daughter's class teacher expressed relief when they had a conversation about her daughter's difficulties during a parent-teacher meeting. However, this did not translate into action within the school as, according to Jane, the school did not see any available support avenues that were open to her.

Jane said that the cuts that had occurred at her daughter's school as a consequence of the 2008 crisis had meant that her daughter was in a class of 21 children⁹² that did not have a Special Needs

⁹¹ The International Social Survey Programme is a self-funded cross-national collaboration programme conducting annual surveys on diverse topics relevant to social sciences. www.issp.org

⁹² Jane's daughter was not in Maryville.

Assistant⁹³ (SNA) allocation. For SNA allocation, an assessment of need is required, which is based on provision of a medical or other relevant professional report, setting out that a pupil has significant care needs arising from a medical need or impairment of physical or sensory function as deemed significant to warrant SNA support (Department of Education & Skills 2014). Waiting lists for assessments of children with disabilities grew exponentially between 2008 and 2014⁹⁴. Delays getting assessments of needs carried out would have a knock-on effect in terms of a schools' leverage for applying for additional SNA support.

Jane recognised the negative impacts of austerity related cuts on the work of individual teachers.

"The teachers are overpowered by so many children....they can only do so much... and only get so much time.. you have to look on the teacher's behalf as well...". (Jane)

Notwithstanding this, a slight sense of exasperation surfaced in Jane's account suggesting that there was tension between herself and a teacher in the context of her difficulty in knowing where to locate the fault of the lack of support.

"I'm struggling with the school at the moment and the teacher... The teacher.... she has 21 children. She doesn't have any help. Three days a week she gets one teacher in to do English with ten of the kids and she takes eleven or whatever way they work it, for 30 minutes. There is no one-on-one basis for any of those children". (Jane)

This tension between anger and understanding may well be the result of Jane's knowledge of the impact of austerity cuts from her own role as a worker in the community sector, tempering her frustration, if not her expectation of state provided support. She says,

"[Working in my role] doesn't mean that it helps you with a school. If anything, it could probably put you into a problem because you know a little bit more than what..., you know, how long it takes, you know what the processes are you know that way, what needs to be done". (Jane)

⁹³ Special needs Assistant is a supportive role to the class teacher, by providing support to students with special educational needs and/or who have significant care needs. They are allocated to the school and work under the direction of the principal/teachers.

⁹⁴ For example, of the 24,183 applications for assessment submitted to the Department of Health between 2008 and 2014, 15,752 assessments were carried out and 9,598 service statements were completed. This does not of course provide any insight into the level of service provision actually provided (Russell 2017).

Notwithstanding her knowledge of the nature and extent of service cuts under austerity, the way that Jane talks about this, is not in terms of acceptance of this reality, but more generally frustration at having no avenue to go down to access support from the state.

The combination of a willing acceptance of individual responsibility and expectation of state support evident in Jane's story is in line with findings in another inquiry carried out by Taylor-Gooby (2010), the 2008 European Social Survey (ESS)⁹⁵. This inquiry also posed a question about whether individual focus on risk prevention, or in other words individualised responsibility, replaces notions of collective state provision, or whether these are not opposed (Taylor-Gooby 2010). In this second study, trust in government was the dependent variable in that it was taken, by Gooby (2010), to represent general acceptance of the existing political ideology.

Taylor-Gooby's (2010) findings were interesting. He found that the opportunity-centred approaches found in contemporary social policy were associated with trust and solidarity to the same level as the discourse of security/equality that was previously more central to European level policy. However, a key factor that was contingent in this existing similarity was citizens' expectations of state responsibility for ensuring improved access to opportunities. In other words, in the policy shift to a greater emphasis on responsabilisation, citizens took this to mean responsabilisation not only at the individual level, but also at the level of the state. Where both levels are viewed as existing, a sense of solidarity was also felt to exist and greater trust in government. "Public attitudes endorse this approach: the proactivity of ordinary citizens requires a corresponding proactivity of government" (Taylor-Gooby 2010, p. 466).

Jane would seem to be trying to hold on to this combination view. But in the last instance, and in a context where support is not forthcoming, she states,

"I know the lines I have to go down [to prevent her daughter from falling behind] so I am doing a bit better and she [younger daughter] is coming on". (Jane)

Left to 'go it alone', and without any avenue for 'having her say' Jane's account is suggestive again of a split between the promotion for trust building discourse as social inclusion policy, and the severing of participation in decision-making, identified by government as the means through which citizen trust building occurs. In line with Taylor-Gooby's (2012) discussion of the UK post-economic crash reform context, this is conducive to the production of a context of reform that, reduces

⁹⁵ Looking broadly across the different political orientations within Europe: social democratic Sweden, corporatist Germany and liberal-leaning UK.

current spending, and stifles pressures from citizens for future spending. Taylor-Gooby (2012) argues that essentially what is occurring is a shift in the meaning of citizens' rights, where the lines of entitlement are being redrawn producing a relationship with the state wherein the line of state responsibility is also being redrawn.

However, in the context of the dual purpose of this chapter, that is, to examine close up the effects of exclusion while simultaneously attempting to identify an alternative way forward, Jane's story is one that builds on a model of inclusive decision-making, already contributed to by Margaret, clearly also pointing to a preference for a bottom up approach, alongside a combination of collective responsibility, or proactivity of ordinary citizens, matched by proactivity of government.

7.4 Geraldine

Evidence of this shifting line of responsibility between the state and citizen, was also evident in Geraldine's narrative. I met Geraldine in a different setting, that of the National Parents Council (Primary) conference that I attended in Dublin, in June 2014. The issue of parental involvement in decision-making in schools was the central theme of the conference that year. During the lunch break I chatted with Geraldine who had travelled to Dublin from her home town in the midlands. Geraldine's story was like Jane's in terms of the challenges she experienced accessing support through her son's primary school for his additional education needs. She told me that her son had dyslexia, but she felt that his school was not doing anything to proactively address his support needs.

7.4.1 Steered Towards Private Supports

Because of the blockages she faced at his school and her sense that a window of opportunity for getting on top of this problem was slipping by for her son, Geraldine had since gone down the road of paying for private supports for him. She pointed out that the costs of this, not only in terms of paying for initial assessments but also the potentially prohibitive longer-term cost of private supports for him, was of concern for her. She said that once a parent is in this kind of arena of private supports 'it's all about money'. Geraldine added that she had heard of an upcoming conference on the topic of dyslexia in Dublin that she also wanted to attend, but that the 75 euro for attendance, along with travel, and accommodation, that would be needed in order to attend the full day event, meant that the conference was becoming out of her reach financially.

After my short chat with Geraldine and on my way back to the conference hall I stopped to have a look through the range of stands that were set up in the foyer for the conference. What struck me was that most of the stands were for education related products for sale by private businesses orientated towards not only meeting children's needs but also the needs of parents. These were

for programmes and supports around reading, writing and maths, stands selling toys and books and other child learning aids, and stands advertising private counselling and other therapeutic supports for parent, all of course at a cost. In this framing, Geraldine's story began to strike me that bit more, her concerns relating to being able meeting the costs of her son's very likely long-term support needs. It seemed to me that the meta-message that was being communicated that day in the foyer was that supports for children and parents were available, but many at a cost to the parent, thus perhaps also contributing to the normalisation of the shifting of responsibility for additional needs support from the state to the citizen. The implications of this for parents, and their children, that do not have the kind of capital that Geraldine clearly currently had (cultural and economic) were clear. But I also thought, learning from the short interaction that I had with Geraldine, that it seemed that those further up the social hierarchy were now also at risk of downward mobility, a reality that was accompanying the retreat of state provision.

7.4.2 Seeking A Way In

Geraldine said the reason for attending the National Parents Council conference that day was because she was interested in hearing about parental participation in decision-making in schools. She wanted to see if the conference could shed light on ways that this might be taken up in schools, with a view to identifying if there might be a seat at the decision-making table where she could effect change within her son's school so that his needs might be met within the education system, rather than outside of it. I did not meet Geraldine again that day, so I am none the wiser as to whether she saw that kind of potential in the rest of the conference sessions and afterwards. However, the very fact of her intention to try to find a space within the education system where in the Rancièrian sense, her wish to speak might be met with a wish to hear her speak (Rancière 1992), is in line with the similar aspiration expressed by both Jane and Margaret for greater proactivity by the state. Margaret, Jane and Geraldine's stories, in line with the work of Hilary Wainwright (2009), are suggestive of a collective call to reclaim the state, away from its role as the competition state, facilitative of the desire of capital for uninterrupted accumulation of profit, and instead towards a role that works with citizens rather than against them. As has been discussed in Chapter 2, lessons from retrenchment exercises in other countries show that to carry along the lines of an intensification of state retrenchment and private provision has had considerable negative impact on poverty and inequality (Taylor-Gooby 2010), not only for those lower down on the social hierarchy, but for all of society (Wacquant 2004, Wilkinson & Pickett 2009, Marmot *et al.* 2010, Picketty 2013).

7.5 Conclusion

This chapter presented the findings from data analysis undertaken with three mothers experiencing exclusion from decision-making concerning their children, in their children's schools. It was

undertaken with a view to inquiring into how those experiences were being constituted, what the effect of this was for each of the mother's, and the strategies employed by the mothers as a result. The findings serve for validating, in a more in-depth way, the learning from the earlier chapters (Chapters 5 and 6) which show how parents decision-making subjectivities can be truncated in policy research and practice, while building on this by making visible how the effects of this are different for different mothers lived lives. In addition, the chapter sought to build on this understanding by listening to the mothers stories with a view to drawing on their knowledge for the purpose of informing how decision-making processes could occur in a really inclusive way.

The chapter used Rancière's theory of a 'presupposition of equality' (May 2010) as conceptual lens. This is a theory of equality that takes as given an equality of intelligence among all humans at birth, but an equality which is altered to become an inequality within societies as they are shape by social structures. While the logic of inequality is inherent in the social bond, for Rancière, an egalitarian logic is implied in the act of speaking. Put simply, if we want to learn about ways of creating a more equal society, we must listen to what people are saying, specifically, Rancière argues, listen to those who are excluded. This approach aligns with a research methodology underpinned by a feminist ethics of care, an approach that strives to hear the voices of people that are marginalised.

The chapter suggests that an inequality of access to decision-making in schools is experienced differently at the individual level. Examples of this were varied in this chapter, but importantly, these are not meant to be suggestive of all parents experiences. Three different experiences were evident in the chapter. These included, the experience of the mother being separated out from her child as the school took up the role of decision-maker on behalf of both the child and mother; the experience of the mother being excluded from the agenda setting, or non-decision making power, arena, thus producing the mother as additional needs support provider for her child; and the experience of the mother being excluded from the schools agenda-setting arena thus turning to sourcing privatised supports for her child.

In terms of the role of the state, the picture emerging was one suggestive of a very active state on one hand, a state that is heavily involved in managing the behaviour of Margaret's son, while simultaneously being an inactive state, in the sense that the kind of supports that Jane and Geraldine were seeking for their children were inaccessible. This double-role of the state, highlighted in Chapters 5 and 6, as being productive of exclusion, is similarly found to be evident in this chapter, not only in terms of the exclusion of individuals with less power but also those with more. This was particularly evident in Jane and Geraldine's account, two women who had actively resisted their exclusion from having a say in ways that the school might help to meet their child's

needs but nevertheless, found themselves on the outside. The effect of this form of state performativity across all three stories was one of silencing. This was manifest in Margaret's removal of herself as a key player in her account of her relations with her child's school, the resorting to taking up the role of support provider herself as evident in Jane's story, and the financing of support provision herself, as evident in Geraldine's account.

Notwithstanding this, the mother's stories also demonstrate that listening to what those who are excluded say, knowledge about how inclusive processes of decision-making can be learned. In Margaret's account, which brings the affective domain of social relations into the frame for learning, we learn about processes of decision-making that are instigated by her son, heard by herself, and after being critically evaluated in terms of safety, are then worked on collectively between her son, herself, and her mother, so that a way forward is developed taking all parties into account. Jane spoke about the importance of decision-making occurring for her on a priority of needs basis. She highlighted her willingness to take up responsibility for supporting her own child, but this was something she felt should receive support from the state and as such, communicated her critique of the individualisation of her that was occurring in the context of her child's additional education support needs. Geraldine, similarly resisting the individualisation of her role as mother, a problem-solving role involving financing private supports for her son, feared she would not be able to meet the long-term costs that this likely implied for her. As a result, Geraldine, was seeking ways to re-enter the agenda setting arena, via the national level, and thus wanted to try to alter the shape of decision-making practices in ways that would be inclusive of her voice.

In short, the stories together can be interpreted as a collective call to reclaim the state from its role as being productive of exclusion, to instead being a state orientated towards creating conditions that foreground citizen rights over a market logic. Collectively, the women in the chapter provide a roadmap for a more inclusive decision-making process, that begin by those included, listening to the excluded in order to work collectively towards a more equal sphere of inclusion.

Chapter 8 Discussion

8.1 Introduction

This chapter undertakes a re-reading of the findings with a view to addressing the overarching aims and objectives of this study. The chapter begins by briefly revisiting the point of the taken for granted inequality in decision-making found in the school. It does so through outlining the key characteristics of the dominant view of the appropriate decision-making subject that exist in discourse and practice, gleaned from an exploration of the work of parental involvement within the school and the rationale for same.

In order to respond to the question of how this meaning of decision-making is informed, the discussion makes visible the links and divergences between neoliberal politics at the macro level and work with parents as it occurs on the ground. Using the example of policy reform that occurred during austerity, and government action and inaction in terms of its implementation or not in the school, the chapter makes visible a context, that goes towards both the production of the 'ideal' decision-making subject, and restricted access to that subjectivity for parents.

The chapter then looks at the findings in terms of how these processes, productive of the unequal decision-making subject are held in place by examining the space of non decision-making power, or in other words, the agenda-setting arena. A key finding that emerged here was depoliticisation as this was found to be constituted in the processes underpinning everyday relations between the school and parents. This was identified in relations where the foregrounding of individualisation, and backgrounding of the topic of economics were occurring. Together these are argued to serve for shaping what are held to be legitimate topics for inclusion and exclusion from the agenda setting arena in the school-parent relationship. The space of school-parent relations is argued to act as a point of disconnection between the life challenges experienced by individuals at the lower end of the social hierarchy, and the structural causes of same. Identifying this reality is discussed as being made extremely complex where this derives from intentions of generosity, care and support as is found among school staff, and further legitimised by being promoted as falling within the parameters of 'positive' relations.

The effects of these findings for those lower down on the social hierarchy are then discussed. The silencing of dissent is a key finding in this regard. This was found in the context of parents being unwilling to speak to the school about challenges related meeting school costs, despite the indebtedness that this can create for them. Respectability was a key reason given for this

illustrating how this further serves for holding the depoliticised sphere of relations in place. An example of this kind of silencing in discursive terms is also discussed as found in the absence of the self in an account of school-parent relations as told by another mother. The findings discuss how this kind of effect is not something resulting from policy practitioners only but also must be seen in the context of policy research as illustrated from discussion of reflexive analysis of the effects of my presence on parents in the field. Much of the resistance to the silencing of dissent found in the study suggests that it occur outside of the bounds of the school. This is discussed in terms of the concept of social closure (Parkin 1979) in its exclusionary form, but also in its usurpationary form that demonstrates how resistance to their exclusion by parents within the school is nevertheless evident. Drawing from the literature on resisting neoliberalism in education, I link this to an example of resistance occurring successfully in other jurisdictions.

The chapter then takes up the second key aim, the question of the implications of the current trajectory for the future of the social order more generally. Here, it is argued that the findings point to the production of a changing social field that is apparent upon a reflexive examination for our place in the global context. The conditions conducive to the production of the private self/citizen are key here, intensified under austerity and so further legitimising 'choices' made by the 'good' worker, despite the class power entailed. Drawing from the literature the discussion shows how the sphere of the private citizen is productive of conditions conducive to profitability, already evident in the space of the off-shore citizen. This is the space of the transient citizen, unattached to any nation, with decision-making rights purchasable as added value in countries where business investments are made. Returning to the findings, the discussion makes visible how at the opposite end of the scale, and a consequence of these other spaces, rather than being separate from them, a space of non-citizens (not non-economic, but voiceless) is being produced. Ultimately, the findings are suggestive of a trajectory towards an increasing polarisation of the social, one that the 'good' citizen/worker is part of producing in the take up of neoliberal politics in the making of self. The negative implications of this kind of trajectory are clearly to be felt the most for those at the lower end of the social hierarchy, but as the findings suggest, and as the changes in the broader society make clear, this way forward will bring with it a continued downward mobility of the middle classes.

While a bleak forecast, the discussion closes with a final re-reading of the findings that offers hope. Using the Rancièrian lens of a presupposition of equality, this re-reading is taken from use of a methodological approach that actively attempted to hear parents speak their accounts of ways in which they set out to resist the exclusion that they were experiencing in their children's schools. Taking this active approach to hearing what parents were speaking was done with a view to

exploring if an alternative space to those being created under neoliberalism could be identified. Indeed, in line with what Harvey (2010) calls 'spaces of hope', an alternative space made up of practices in line with Rancièrian democratic politics was identified within and across the mother's stories. By way of thinking about how this might be operationalised in practice, I finish up the discussion with a brief look at the work of Howard Gardner (1999) on multiple intelligences. The discussion closes by arguing that a Rancièrian democratic politics is arguably, the vital antidote to neoliberal financialised government.

8.2 The 'Good' (Decision-Making) Subject

The study findings suggest that the key characteristics that make up the dominant idea of the decision-making subject are in line with Foucault's analysis (Read 2009) of neoliberal subjectivity; the subject of competition, investment and interest. This was learned about firstly through analysis of the rationale provided by school staff for what was found to be a truncated decision-making role for parents in the school. A key factor identified as being associated with full access to decision-making in the school was intelligence, or more specifically a reference to particular knowledge and skills that are necessary for taking part in, what was also taken for granted, the competitive decision-making arena. This suggests in line with Foucault's analysis (Read 2009), that a full participant in decision-making is the subject of competition. Analysis of the rationale of the work of parental involvement undertaken in the school provides insight into the additional characteristics of the decision-making subject. In Chapter 5 the emphasis placed on the *investment* of time in being an involved parent as equating to valuable effort by parents is suggestive of the subject of investment holding an elevated position. This of course is in line with the changing definition of productivity discussed in Chapter 1, where value under financialisation is becoming increasingly intangible as material labour productivity has stagnated. Also found was that the 'good' decision-making subject, was a subject produced to be a subject of (self) *interest*. This was evidence in the way that the work of the educational professional with parents is required to be done, for example according to criteria, such as (parent) attendance and retention, while also and increasingly assessed using the new public management tool of self-evaluation. In this context, how work is undertaken becomes shaped according to measures that one will have to apply to oneself, resulting in work being shaped as in the interest of the self. Once again in line with Foucault (Read 2009), this is suggestive of neoliberal conditions productive of human capital as an 'entrepreneur of the self', or in other words conditions for erasing what was previously more of a distinction between work and the worker under liberalism.

8.2.1 Inequality, Policy-Making, Government Action / Inaction: Informing the meaning of the 'Good' Decision-Making Subject

That the decision-making was an unequal practice in the school was not felt to be problematic in that domain. Instead, it was found that the school saw itself in the role of protector of parents, as a matter of fairness, in the sense that unprotected from the competitive sphere of decision-making, parents would find themselves at a considerable disadvantage. It is within this broader framing of protection that the work of parental involvement appears to take place, a framing that provides a rationale for the unquestioned take up of neoliberal policy reforms which go towards the reproduction of the 'good' decision-maker, and therefore in turn its more limited or unequal parent counterpart.

Using the example of policy reforms introduced under austerity, the analysis sought to show, not that the inequality in decision-making between the school and parents was a new reality under neoliberalism, but instead that in the context of the financial crash of 2008, and the policy reforms introduced in response, an intensification of the conditions of inequality could be discerned. Chapter 5 makes visible how policy change and its relationship to government action and inaction, as this was found in the local school context, could collectively be seen to inform the reproduction of the 'good' decision-making subject on one hand, and inequality of access to this position on the other. This was evident in the example of the introduction of a 'productivity measure' by government for all public service staff that mandated more working time from public servants in exchange for the agreement that further pay cuts and redundancies would not be imposed on workers. This was argued to contribute to the discursive elevation of the notion of *investment* of time/effort as a work-related value, thus associating productivity with the notion of investment, over and above labour related outcomes. The elevation of time as work-related value here also ties back to Warren's (2015a) point that for the middle classes, time is the key work-life balance issue, thus propping up its value in this regard. While this was seen to have immediate effect in the school context with the introduction of the additional working hours, another change promulgated in government discourse, and written into various government speeches and documents was the subject of government inaction in the local context. This related to the call by government for trust building between the citizen and government, lost during the economic crash, to be re-established through citizens having a say in how the institutions of the state should be shaped into the future. Despite the re-emphasis of 'participatory citizenship' as a key principle of post crisis policy, changes to the 1998 Education Act (Government of Ireland 1988) were not enacted, within which only national parent organisations are recognised as full social partners; local parent bodies are not. In this context and dovetailing with the aforementioned goals of parent attendance and retention as contained in the DEIS Action Plan, and requirement for self-evaluation, trust remains as a

relationship that is developed between the educational professional and parent, rather than a quality achieved from parents having a say in the institution of education. What this makes clear is how inequality of access to decision-making for parents is reproduced in the very same acts that go towards the reproduction of the 'good' decision-making subject of interest. The findings show that there is an awareness among staff of the complexity and sometimes problematic nature of power relations, but in the last instance, these are sidelined, summed up in various guises of the expression, 'that's just the way things are'. In this inter-play the work of educational professionals, as the left hand of the state (Bourdieu 1999), that is "those charged with carrying out [the state's] 'social functions'" (ibid, p. 183) who although recognise power imbalances that exist, are caught up in the contradictions that are produced by the more powerful right hand of the state, circumstances that become more difficult to extrapolate from as systems of work continue to become more aligned with a market logic. While this study takes the school parent relationship as the lens for exploration it is pertinent here to add the point that in terms of democratic governance, children are even more excluded under the 1998 Education Act (Government of Ireland 1998) as schools are recommended but not required to set up children's councils in schools. That, and how, these combinations of processes have implications of this for children's exclusion, particularly children in underserved areas is an issue that requires interrogation.

8.2.2 Depoliticisation: Holding the 'Good' (Decision-Making) Subject in Place

The kind of government action and inaction outlined above, as this pertained to the relationship between policy and practice in the study context is in line with the insight offered by Mair (2006) as discussed in Chapter 2. In his work, this tied back into his wider argument that a hollowing out of democratic politics is occurring, in the wake of this and other kinds of so-called change. In this study processes productive of a de-politicised school-parent relationship were also found, which when considered in the context of the complex and unequal conditions found to constitute the dominant notion of the decision-making subject, can be understood to function for holding that reality in place.

The findings in Chapter 6 suggest that school-parent relations are a de-politicised field of relations. This is shown to be a field of relations where one where individualisation/subsidiarisation (Bauman 2000), particularly as related to psychological health and well-being, is foregrounded, and the topic of economics is backgrounded. The foregrounding of individualisation/subsidiarisation was argued to have been found in the context of support provided to parents around personal and familial worries, and absence of any focus on psychological health and well-being in the formal work of parental involvement as it is constituted to occur in the work done by the school. In the context of late modernity and the increasing phenomenon of 'unsicherheit' (Bauman 1999) (that state of anxiety made up of a combination of insecurity, unsafety, and uncertainty, produced in the social

context of a dominant discourse of increased flexibility and choice, but constrained by the dictates of the market), individualisation is argued to produce a disconnection between parents lived experiences of anxieties and worries, in relation to themselves and their children, from the structural causes of those problems.

The backgrounding of the topic of economics was identified in parents accounts, firstly discussed in Chapter 6, in the example of Sarah's reluctance to speak out about the need to work and earn a wage as a reason why she could not give more time to being involved in her daughter's school. For Sarah this was described as "a little bit hard trying to explain [to the school]". This together with the findings that were suggestive of a reluctance to speak about austerity related local parent's money struggles, were taken to be suggestive of a wider school and cultural environment within which 'money talk' was something uncomfortable. Indeed, this was found to relate to perceptions about whether 'money talk' was appropriate in the research interview context as well. Once legitimised as a topic for conversation in the research context, the findings show that an account was expressed that was more in line with the Census 2011 statistics (Chapter 3) for the local parish.

Together, the foregrounding of individualisation and backgrounding of the topic of economics, are argued to be de-politicising in nature, de-politicising the issue of psychological health and well-being, by discursively suggesting that it is a personal and private issue, and economics by its exclusion as a legitimate topic for debate. This combination of issues is particularly concerning in light of recent work by Nixon *et al.* (2019) in the Growing Up in Ireland (Infant cohort) series entitled, *The Effects of Economic Recession and Family Stress on the Lives of 3-year olds in Ireland*, the exclusion of these two issues from formal parental involvement is concerning. The report aims to understand how the economic recession in Ireland affected stress within families⁹⁶ (n=9,793) (increasing negative outcomes such as depressive symptoms and marital dissatisfaction), and in turn how this is associated with the behavioural and emotional adjustment of three-year-olds⁹⁷. The analysis is framed by the Family Stress Model, which proposes that economic events, such as those that occur during times of recession, indirectly influence children through their impact on the lives of parents. The findings demonstrated that sixty-five per cent of families indicated household income had been reduced as a result of the recession. Men in the lowest income quintile at Wave 1 were 8.5 times more likely to have been made redundant than men in the highest quintile in Wave

⁹⁶ Defined as the psychological experience of stress resulting from economic circumstances e.g. redundancy, income changes, indebtedness and mothers perceptions of economic strain.

⁹⁷ The *Growing up in Ireland* data provides for comparison where families in the infant cohort were interviewed first at Wave 1 when their children were nine months of age, and again at Wave 2 when their children were three years of age. The timing of Wave 2 coincided with the onset of the recent economic recession in Ireland.

2. Fourteen per cent of families were in arrears for utility bills, and nine percent in rent/mortgage arrears. Based on mothers' reports only, the proportion of families experiencing economic strain, reported as "difficulty in making ends meet", increased from forty-four per cent in Wave 1 to sixty-one per cent in Wave 2. Overall, forty per cent of families were experiencing more economic strain at Wave 2 than at Wave 1. The experience of economic strain was more common among one-parent families, in families with mothers of lower levels of education, where one parent was made redundant, or where working hours or social welfare were reduced. The study found a direct association between economic strain and depressive symptoms (as opposed to clinical depression) among mothers, based on a depressive symptoms screening measure used by the researchers in Wave 2. Being in arrears on the rent or mortgage was a key reason found, as opposed, that is, to mothers' demographic characteristics.

While a direct relationship between mothers' and fathers' marital satisfaction, economic strain (as reported by mothers) and being in arrears on mortgage/utility bills was weak, a stronger relationship between mothers' and fathers' depressive symptoms and marital satisfaction existed. Of interest in this study in terms of children's outcomes, was that mothers' depressive symptoms were related to higher levels of emotional (internalising) and behavioural (externalising) difficulties among children, and mothers' marital difficulties were associated with higher internalising difficulties⁹⁸. The overall findings were found to have a negative but diverse effect on individuals and families, where recession related economic problems had important consequences for the mental health of both parents and the quality of partners' relationships, reducing the quality of life for the families affected, with knock on effects for the quality of parenting and children's outcomes. Based on the stated goal of parental involvement being encouraged in the interests of children's education opening up that space as one where parents can speak out about issues concerning psychological well-being and economics, and their inter-relatedness as this is produced in the broader social/political context, may well contribute to better achieving that goal.

In a school cultural context consisting of these relations of foregrounding (individualisation/subsidiarisation) and backgrounding (economics), the findings suggest that a particular emphasis on forging and maintaining 'positive' relations serves for holding this culture in place. This underpinning for relationship building within the school was found to be promoted in a tranche of teacher training that was provided during the Celtic Tiger era; training that might be said

⁹⁸ Of note was the finding that once mothers' depressive symptoms and marital satisfaction and parenting were accounted for, fathers' depressive symptoms, marital satisfaction and warmth became non-significant, and only father's, what the authors term, 'hostility' remained a predictor of children's externalising but not internalising difficulties.

to be supportive of what is often referred to as the psychologisation of society (Madsen 2018). This is simply since the parameters of what is meant by 'positive' already exist in the latter relations, and therefore reproducing these, is therefore to simultaneously reproduce the de-politicisation of the agenda setting arena. Together these interweaving processes are argued to serve for holding the dominant decision-making subject in place.

8.3 Effects of these processes on those lower down on the social hierarchy

8.3.1 The Silencing of Dissent

A key effect found to result from these processes that are productive of the dominant decision-making subjectivity is the silencing of dissent. This was clearly evident in the context of the focus group session with the young mothers (Chapter 6), evident most clearly in Kate's open critique of the costs associated with sending her child to school but her equally open admission that she would not speak out about this issue with the school due to the sense of 'mortification' that she says she would feel if perceived by the school as not being able to 'pay for the kids'. While her counterparts in the focus group were less critical of the mechanisms put in place by the school, like book scheme payment plans, stating that they felt this helped them to manage school going costs, in the last instance they also agreed that if it came to it, speaking out about their inability to meet payments would not be an option they would take up, for the similar reason, shame. This kind of silencing was clear in Margaret's account (chapter 7) in the very exclusion of herself from her account of decisions being taken about her son and his educational needs in his school. In Margaret's narrative a clear contrast was evident between her account of the dominant role of the school in the management of her son's behaviour and his educational needs, and the absence of herself in this framework. While Margaret does bring in a 'gesture' of resistance to the current state of play, by suggesting that she feels the sanctions imposed on her son by the school can be a bit 'over the top', ultimately her account of her place in the home-school relationship is one suggestive of a space within which she cannot speak out. The effect of Margaret being silenced is even more vivid when contrasted with her storytelling as it moves beyond the school gates. Here we see Margaret narrate herself back in to the centre of her own story.

An important point to revisit in this discussion is that the effects of the processes that go towards the (re)production of the neoliberal decision-maker are not the preserve of policy practitioners as represented in this study by the educational professional but must also be considered in terms of the effect of the policy researcher as well. In Chapter 5 of this study, the findings highlight the effect of my own presence on the narrowing of the space for mothers to speak in the context of the craft making group where some of the mothers spoke to each other in smaller groups when addressing issues that were of a personal nature for them, engendered I felt because of my

presence. In this framing despite my intention not to be representative of any particular ideology in the field, for the mothers, my presence in the formal parental involvement context, was representative of the key characteristics that make up the dominant market logic/neoliberal subjectivity. In other words, the personal issues being worked through by the mothers could be understood to have been subsumed by my presence taken to represent the dominant market logic. As such, the need for reflexive examination of the effects of ourselves as researchers on the space of knowledge production, and in turn the kind of knowledge produced, is crucial for seeking ways to overcome this reality.

The silencing of dissent that was found to occur in the study illustrates how a knock-on effect of this is that for a large part resistance to the exclusion from decision-making that was occurring meant mothers moved out of the school to take up this position. For example, once beyond the school gates, Margaret's account (Chapter 7) was one of being at the centre of decision-making practices, along with her son and mother, as they explored ways to negotiate her son's desire for greater independence. Similarly, Jane's account of making the decision to go it alone is illustrative of a mother that is clearly unafraid to make decisions having weighed up her options. Geraldine (Chapter 7), who also found herself being unheard in her son's school had clearly made the decision to source an alternative avenue to the school in order to find a sustainable way of meeting what she felt were going to be her son's long terms educational support needs.

8.3.2 Social Closure

Exclusionary Social Closure

The fact that resistance to being excluded from the decision-making process in the school is more often found in moves taken outside of the bounds of the school points to existence of social closure in the school. Social closure according to Parkin (1979, p. 44), is "the process by which social collectives seek to maximize rewards by restricting access to resources and opportunities to a limited circle of eligibles". Parkin (1979) identifies two main types of social closure, exclusionary and solidaristic or usurpationary. In terms of the exclusionary form, that is, "the attempt by one group to secure for itself a privileged position at the expense of another group through processes of subordination" (Parkin 1979, p. 45), the findings towards the end of Chapter 5 are illustrative of this occurring. There it is pointed out that on occasion parents leave the core group of mothers that are involved in the school as a result of disputes between themselves and school staff. This example highlights how open challenges to power in the school by parents can lead to conflict, a response which can be understood in counter-resistance terms where those with power rarely concede that power. This dynamic of social closure is also detectable in the earlier sections of Chapter 5, where although the schools rationale for protecting parents from the decision-making

arena is spoken about in the context of protection from being in competition with their middle class counterparts, or middle class parents, understood in the context of the critical literature (Lynch 1990) this is perhaps more a matter of 'protection' from the challenge that parents might pose to the stabilising tension that exists within the field of education mediators more generally, but a stabilising tension that ensures that the benefits of that class position remains undisrupted.

Usurpatory Social Closure

But the findings show that usurpatory closure is also present. Usurpatory closure is the use of power upwards by subordinate groups that are created by exclusionary closure, aimed at winning a greater share of resources, by 'biting into' the resources and opportunities and privileges of legally defined superiors (Parkin 1979, p. 74). For example, towards the end of Chapter 5, the findings are suggestive of the fact that despite experiencing the downward pressure of power in the school, which has resulted in some mother's leaving the core group of parents in the school altogether, those that still attended were found to work in solidarity together in an attempt to retain and or secure greater conditions in terms of their roles as involved parents. This, the findings suggest, was because in the last instance, their involvement in the school was not for the staff, or indeed for themselves, but ultimately it was 'for the kids'. This is suggestive of the mothers wanting to have a greater say in the decisions that were being taken about their children from within the school. In addition, while she was found to have moved out of the school to find sites at which her resistance could be targeted and supports for her son might be found, Geraldine's efforts (Chapter 7), in exploring if the National Parents Council Primary conference might provide an avenue for being heard, can similarly be understood as suggestive of building blocks towards this kind of usurpatory social closure.

These findings provide examples that could be the building blocks towards the kind of solidaristic resistance among parents to neoliberal practices in schools in the literature. For example, in a book chapter by David Hursh *et al.* (2019) entitled *Resisting the Neoliberal: parent activism in New York State against the corporate reform agenda in schooling*, the authors provide an account of the way that parents were resisting the increasing privatisation of their children's schooling. This was occurring, for example, through the imposition of new testing practices that parents felt were narrowing the scope of their children's education and which was feared to carry negative future implications for the children, or through the threatened introduction of a data infrastructure in the state that would see philanthropy shape the nature of teaching and learning. Their resistance took both horizontal and vertical forms, resisting being constituted merely as consumers of their children's schooling in terms of the former, for example by withdrawing their children from the testing regimes, and pressuring state level lawmakers for change in terms of the latter. Building a grassroots collective social media and internet based social movement parents in the state

reconstituted themselves as active citizens who wanted a say in their children's public education. Their collective efforts were very fruitful in that they have reduced testing time and the test scores which were being used to evaluate teachers no longer applies. They defeated the introduction of philanthropy shaped teaching and learning, fought for a whole-child philosophy, and opposed the move towards computer-based instruction. Together with the other member groups (educators and community members) of the New York State Allies for Public Education⁹⁹, an opt-in toolkit of demands was developed. This is a set of demands that need to be met before parents will opt into the testing of their children. These included limiting the scope and effect of the tests to serving educative purposes (rather than evaluative), use of the tests to assist teachers in their teaching, to inform policy-making and to frame more equitable school funding. In addition, they support the concept of 'opportunity to learn standards', that is the right to demand and expect that policy-makers and legislators provide the necessary resources so that schools can achieve the goals set for them.

8.4 Future Making: The 'Good' Society - A Global Classed Reality

The discussion to this point addresses the key questions in this study concerning the meaning of 'participatory citizenship' that is being produced in the Irish policy-making process, how this is informed and held together, and the effect of same on those lower down on the social hierarchy. Taking up the reflexive sociology again (Bourdieu & Wacquant 1992) that is used throughout this study, the next section inquires into the question of the implications for society of the kind of trajectory we are on. Returning to the work of Bourdieu (Champagne *et al.* 2014), in his work entitled *On the State*, it is useful to reiterate his point that the logic underpinning social relations is simultaneously the logic of the state, encapsulated in the idea that 'we are the state'. On that basis, the social relations that we engage in are simultaneously constitutive of the state within which we live, of in other words the society that we are creating. Based on a re-reading of the findings in this study I argue that what is apparent, is a set of relations that are ultimately productive of a changing of the spaces of citizenship, one that needs to be understood in global rather than national terms.

8.4.1 The Private Economy

The study findings point to the intensification of the space of the private citizen in the primary school context produced in the context of policy reform, and accompanying government action and inaction as this relates to the local school context. Key to the findings here is the way that change of this nature shapes the 'choices' made by the educational professional in the interests of producing the self as a subject of competition, investment and interest or the 'ideal' type of person as is promulgated under neoliberalism. For example, firstly the findings in Chapter 5 show

⁹⁹ See <https://www.nysape.org/> for more information.

neoliberal subjectivity to be dominant in the rationale underpinning the nature of work with parents in the school, work with parents that is informed by government. In Chapter 5, the findings highlight a divergence between the government rhetoric around the notion of trust, and the employment of the concept in work in the local school context. While 'rebuilding' citizen trust in government is said to occur through citizens having a say in shaping the institutions of the state, action in terms of the legal position of parents in local school bodies went unchanged in the Education Act, 1998 (Government of Ireland 1998) thus being out of line with the dominant rhetoric. In this framing, the findings show trust building to remain as being something developed between the educational professional and parent, not through parents having a say in the institution of education, for the purposes of the educational professional doing a 'good' job. In that context measures of attendance and retention hold priority of position, measures against which the educational professional self-evaluates in order to demonstrate that they are a 'good' worker. Arguably, 'choice' in this framing becomes a mechanism of class reproduction whereby decisions arrived at by the educational professional are orientated towards realising self-interest papering over the class power that this entails. For example, in the last instance, when unpacking the issue of provision of support to the Parents Association, which is ordinarily an autonomous entity in other schools, the educational professional is aware of the ethical problems that this might entail, but nevertheless 'doesn't' mind going with it'. In this very subtle example, class power, in the form of the papering over of parent autonomy, in the context of meeting the requirements of doing a 'good' job, becomes visible. Considering the broader context of social closure, as the means for suppressing open challenges to power, this finding can be understood to go towards the subsumption of parents' right to speak by the right of the professional worker to self-making, or, doing a 'good' job. Arguably, the findings suggest that this kind of class power is increasingly difficult to separate out in the advancing psychologisation of society, that foregrounds subsidisation, backgrounds the topic of economics, informing a particular meaning of 'the positive' in terms of relationship-building between the school and parents.

Importantly, the findings in Chapter 6 show that the argument being developed here that the space of the private citizen or citizen of self-interest must not be viewed as being limited to the policy practitioner but must be considered also in terms of the policy researcher. For example, while Sarah (Chapter 6) highlighted the problem of speaking out about the topic of money, the more generalised view among the school staff was that of an issue that hadn't changed much or wasn't particularly problematic. As a collective representation of what is important or not to marginalised individual and groups, this view, when considered in the context of statistics on poverty both local and national, can be understood as being informed by the wider acceptance of inequality as a taken for granted social reality, a point made visible in Chapter 5, and as such informed by the dominant

neoliberal market logic of 'equality of opportunity', despite the inequality of access to speaking out identified above. In this framing, the conducting of research for the purpose of meeting the goals of policy only, becomes research that itself is a mechanism of class power, aligning with the dominant market logic, and similarly blocking from speaking. Doing 'good' research in this framing, and, in line with the theory of human capital as work/worker, the 'good' researcher is the researcher that serves self-interest by simultaneously wielding class power in the form of action and inaction that together silences the marginalised from speaking. The choice to include the voices of the young mothers in the research (Chapter 6), who wanted to speak about money matters can itself be understood as an act of resistance to the dominant logic.

Arguably, the changes to new entrants pay that were introduced for teachers taken on after 2011, now hired on a lower pay scale (Department of Education & Skills 2011), can be understood as a policy that functions for legitimising the professional's participation in class reproduction. New entrants taken on after 2011 were hired on a lower pay scale and combined with the more general cuts to allowances this left them at a significant disadvantage to their colleagues. In the post-recession environment in Ireland, the issue of pay inequality within the teaching profession has come onto the table, all be this in a sluggish fashion, but most recently (October 2019), teachers have voted to take up action, including strike action in order to restore pay equality (Donnelly 2019). While as a demand this is framed as an issue of equality, viewed in the wider societal context, this meaning of equality is exclusive of the reality of social inequality *per se*. In this framing the space of the private citizen as the space of 'equality' becomes normalised, a space in which no room exists for the fact of wider social inequality. Re-read in this context, the findings from this study are clearly suggestive of conditions that increasingly legitimise private or self-interest at the expense of social or collective interests.

8.4.2 The Off-shore Economy

In our globalised world the changing nature of citizenship needs to be understood in this wider context. For example, in a book chapter entitled "The Geographies of Capital in the Twenty-First Century: Inequality, Political Economy, and Space", Gareth Jones (2017, p. 294) describes how at the upper end of the wealth distribution, elites have become hypermobile, decoupled from the nation and therefore changing and challenging what, drawing from Ong call the "deep commitments required by classic citizenship". Citizenship at this upper end comprises a group that now have more in common with each other regardless of where they are across the globe, than they do with their countrymen and women (Jones 2017). In this new framing, citizenship for elites becomes something that can be purchased, now for sale in countries around the world as an incentive to encourage the rich to purchase property and invest nationally in return. With the purchase of citizenship, comes the power of decision-making, carrying with this the implications of

decisions made according to the interests of global business, with the frightening implications this holds for any potential access to the decision-making table for those still attached to nation, region, city or neighbourhood. Sheldon Wolin's (2010, p. iv) warning of the "political coming of age of corporate power and political demobilisation of the citizenry" that is produced in the context of joining forces between traditional government and private governance begins to paint an even more daunting forecast within the typology of global citizenship as set out here. Indeed, the scene is being set for Thomas Picketty's (2013) predictions of a 'heristocracy', with a continued widening gap in inequality that this implies for society, and the negative outcomes that this predicts for us all (Wilkinson & Pickett 2009, Marmot *et al.* 2010, Marmot 2017).

8.4.3 The Non-Economy (not non-economic)

In order to think about the implications of this for those lower down on the social hierarchy, the findings are suggestive of conditions that are constitutive of a space of non-citizens, but not non-economic citizens. For example, in Chapter 6 from analysis of the young mother's focus group, a key finding here was the refusal of the mothers to speak out to the school about financial difficulties they can experience in meeting school costs. This was because of the stigma attached to an inability to pay, or in other words, the stigma attached to poverty. In this context, the option referred to as being available to the mothers was the taking out of high interest loans, a fact that most of the mothers were equally reluctant to admit, as a matter of self-respect. The notion of respectability, as it is found here aligns with its changed quality as highlighted by Lynsey Hanley (2016) (Chapter 2), where respectability is no longer only associated with something that one does, and instead has become a quality of the self. Based on this finding, it becomes clear that the taking out of high interest loans, becoming indebted, functions for avoiding the risk of undermining one's own dignity, which it was felt would be jeopardised upon speaking out about money issues. The findings suggest that the conditions found here are conducive to the reproduction of class and gender inequality, but in a way, it would seem that makes this reality invisible. In line with the work of Lazzarato (2009) who points to the fact that credit rather than exchange is the matrix of the social, indebtedness is clearly the mechanism functioning to produce class in this way. Margaret's account in Chapter 7 would seem to confirm these findings, in the sense that her generalised absence of her *self*, from her account of the school's top down management of her son similarly suggests that a group of people are being produced in society without any voice at all. Yet, in line with the work of Cameron & Palan (2004) this group would not be described a class of non-economic citizens, as access to credit serves for keeping them 'included', but instead as a group of non-citizens in terms of being produced without having any voice in the game. The scale of this issue in this Irish context is more tangible when considered in the context of the 2018 SILC data where, as reported by Social Justice Ireland (2018) 760,000 people were found to be living in poverty. While down from the previous year, this figure remains at 120,000 people higher than that figure ten years prior (Social

Justice Ireland 2018). Based on Wacquant's (2008) comparative ethnographic work where he found that countries in Europe were travelling along a similar trajectory to that which has resulted in conditions of 'advanced marginality' for poor communities in the US, but at earlier stages, the finding in this study are suggestive of a similar road being taken.

But the findings suggest that this reality should not be thought as a reality limited to those lower down on the social hierarchy only. For example, the findings in Chapter 7 also point to the fact that both Jane and Geraldine were experiencing exclusion in the sense that despite attempting to speak to their children's school about their children's educational support needs neither were being heard. In both cases, these mothers were being met with the response that resources were strained and 'opportunities' for accessing support for their children were not available through their schools. The result of neither mother being heard meant that they drew on their own resources, which for Jane was found to be time, while for Geraldine this was money. Aware that her son's needs would more than likely be long term, the findings highlighted how Geraldine was working on finding a way of being heard by attending a national conference hosted by the National Parents Council (Primary), as financially sustaining her sons support needs was an issue that concerned Geraldine greatly. In this sense, the findings show that exclusion as it is being produced under neoliberalism, with what seems apparent in Geraldine's story, the move towards the privatisation of additional educational supports, is no longer an issue for those lower down on the social hierarchy, but one that looks to increasingly effect families and children further up the social scale. The more recent issue of school exclusions highlighted in a report entitled *Invisible Children. Survey on School Absence & Withdrawal in Ireland's Autism Community* (AsIAM 2019), reports that for 17 per cent of families their child attends school on a reduced timetable, and 13 per cent reported that their children were absent from school for as long as three years. Another finding in the report was that 34 per cent of respondents stated that (despite the mainstreaming of education for children with autism) a lack of appropriate supports in the schools was a reason why their children were excluded. The implications for families trying to provide the support needed themselves is suggestive of a context fraught with concerns in line with Geraldine's (Chapter 7) account, not least the financial implications. In this way, the increasing privatisation of additional educational support needs can be understood as not only an issue for families at the lower end of the social hierarchy, although these families are affected the most by these kinds of changes, but neoliberal policies are simultaneously productive of the downward mobility of a previously secure middle class. This changing reality of neoliberal governing ideology that is of course not limited to these specific issues within education, nor the education sector itself.

Indeed, one might argue that the implications of this reality are already evident in wider society as encapsulated in newspaper headlines like “Middle income families caught in homeless crisis: McVerry” (Horan 2014), which is a reference to a comment by the campaigner and homeless trust chairperson, Fr. Peter McVerry. Other headlines like, “Middle Class and Homeless” a blog post by Barbara McCarthy, a single parent priced out of the rental market in Ireland, or “Census 2016: Nearly one in five homeless adults have a job” (Murray 2017) are suggestive of a similar picture. In addition, official statistics are suggestive of a continued fracturing of society along lines of those doing better in the so-called recovery (e.g. the average household disposable income rose by 5 per cent to €48,476 last year), and those being left behind. Further divisions are evident in figures showing material deprivation (18.8 per cent down from 21 per cent) and a rising number of working poor (n=109,000 up 4,000 from 2016) (Social Justice Ireland 2018). The conditions of work precarity, and the uncertainty that this engenders for people across the social classes, highlighted in Chapter 2 (Bobeck *et al.* 2018, O’Sullivan *et al.* 2015, Loftus 2012, Nugent 2017) make visible how less and less of us are immune to this increasingly changing nature of social stratification with its pathway to the bottom built in. With this downward mobility, which in this study can be understood as similar in terms of meaning of structural violence identified by Wacquant (2008) comes social polarisation, produced in conditions conducive to profitability (Wolin 2010) in its corporatized form.

8.5 An Alternative Trajectory for a Real Democratic Politics

The final section of this discussion sets out an alternative process of decision-making, as it is informed by parents themselves. It is identified from a re-reading of the findings framed by the work of Jacques Rancière and his theory of the presupposition of equality (May 2010). Rancière’s theory claims an equality of intelligence among all individuals, that we are born with, but an equality that is undermined by the link that binds us all together and which is our acquiescence to inequality in the form of “comparing, setting up and explaining [hierarchical] ranks” (1992, p. 83). Using Rancière’s theory of a presupposition of equality as a lens for a re-reading of the findings is an attempt to subordinate that ingrained hierarchy by approaching social relations instead in a relationship of listener and narrator, or from a wish to hear, what the mothers wish to say. In this kind of relationship, it is what the person who is experiencing exclusion has to say that is crucial, met with the desire to hear their account.

8.5.1 An Alternative Theory of Knowledge

Chapter 7 of this study based on accounts of the three mothers who experienced exclusion in the context of their children’s schools are the findings used in this final section. Each of these mothers contributed ideas that collectively shaped both a broader and more far reaching definition of decision-making, to that being currently constituted in policy making, and which makes visible a

process for real inclusion. For example, firstly in Margaret's account (Chapter 7), clearly evidencing the silencing impact of the social structure on her role as a decision-maker in her son's school, she then takes us out of that space and into the space of community and family where she narrates herself as having an increasingly key role in decision-making practices. In the process of this shift from school to family, Margaret broadens the scope of relations from the economic, political, and social relations that have featured in this study to this point, to now being inclusive of affective relations. This relates to the "nurturing that produces love, care and solidarity that constitutes a discrete social system of affective relations" (Cantillon & Lynch 2017, p. 169). When narrating her story from this place, we begin to get insight into Margaret's perspective on decision-making practice, an alternative process of decision-making to that which has dominated throughout this study. Firstly, Margaret's notion of decision-making was inclusive of all the actors in the process; her son, herself and her mother. This was a process that involved Margaret listening to her son's wishes for greater independence, evaluating his request from a safety perspective, and devising a plan in response, together with her son and her mother, in order to create a way forward that was respectful of the desires of all three people. The process that Margaret set out found explanatory power in the work of Paolo Freire on pedagogy, and his theory of the 'gynosiological cycle' (McKenna 2013). This is a theory of knowledge as an unending and shared process, involving critical assessment of the state of play, for the building of new knowledge, and for moving forward in a way that is inclusive of all (McKenna 2013). Notably, this theory of knowledge which is dependent upon power sharing is contrary to the protection of knowledge and power that props up the class system. Indeed, this sounds to be more in line with social inclusion policy discourse, that names 'citizens having a say' as key to trust building between citizen and state, but an idea, shown in this study, to be subordinated by market logic.

8.5.2 The Demand for Equality

Encapsulated in the chain of events by Margaret is the idea that the person with less power in the field of relations was the driver of change. This was clear in Margaret's story where the process of decision-making was generated firstly by her son's wish for greater independence, wanting to walk to school unaccompanied. Margaret's fears for his safety on the roads suggested she would have preferred if he 'stayed close to home' for a bit longer but perhaps reluctantly Margaret listened to and took his wishes on board. A similar process of decisions being entered into in response to those with less power, expressed in terms of responding on a priority of needs basis, was evident also in Jane's narrative. Jane, whose older daughter was included in a literacy initiative/evaluation in her school felt that although it was a random selection process, a more purposeful selection process should have been employed to ensure that the children struggling the most with literacy would get access to the initiative first. Jane's older daughter, one of her two daughters in primary school had no problems with her reading. Both Jane (Chapter 7) and Margaret's (Chapter 7) stories overlapped

in this way, foregrounding a preference for decision-making being driven on a priority of needs basis, in other words by those currently excluded or at risk of exclusion. This idea links back again to the work of Rancière where he argues that equality cannot be entrusted to the part that already has a part but must begin from the demand for its recognition among those with no part (May 2010). This is distinct from having equality done to people, as was perhaps encapsulated in Jane's discomfort with her younger daughter receiving a service in the school that she felt was mismatched in the context of the particular reading problems that her daughter had. The problem here for Jane was that although she received a response from the school, the response was not targeting the actual literacy difficulties that she felt her younger daughter had, resulting in these difficulties being papered over. Put simply Jane felt she was not being heard.

8.5.3 Taking up the Struggle of the Part with No Part

Being met with what she described as 'a wall' in the school in terms of getting support for her daughter, Jane retold of how she took up the role of meeting her daughters education support needs herself, driven here by the view that if her daughter is to keep up with her peers, action has to be taken to ensure this is realised. Read in Rancièrian terms, Jane's actions are illustrative of her hearing her daughters demand for her equality and taking up that demand as her own. In Margaret's account a similar process is outlined where she involves her mother in a plan for developing a staged process where her son can begin to gain some independence by going from the school to her mother's house, nearer to the school than his home, and with the added benefit of not requiring any roads to be crossed.

8.5.4 Seeking Political Openings

Like the other mothers in Chapter 7, Geraldine's story is similarly one of taking up the role of responding to her son's needs. While like Jane, Geraldine 'goes it alone' by sourcing privately financed supports for her son, she also takes this a step forward, prompted by her concerns about being able to afford her son's support needs in the longer term. Geraldine had identified the forum of the National Parent's Council (Primary) (NPCP), an organisation focusing on the very issue that she was concerned about, parents' participation in decision-making in their children's schools. Here Geraldine's actions might be understood in the context of what Harvey (2000) calls 'spaces of hope', the seeking out of a mediating institution, where the dialectic between the particularities of the constrained and limited experience of parents' involvement in decision making that currently exists, and the universal effect that this (re)produces as evidenced in this study, might be altered in such a way as to be inclusive of Geraldine's voice at the decision-making table. In other words, Geraldine is attempting to broaden the parameters of what is taken to be parental involvement in decision-making in a way that would be conducive to producing this space as one that had a wish to hear what she has to say.

Read collectively, the findings in this section are in line with the ideas at the centre of a Rancièrian democratic politics, beginning from the part who currently has no part, understood in the context of the circumstances we are in, involving a process of educating one another, identifying political openings, and taking the democratic actions that arise as they arise in the name of equality (May 2010). Importantly, the range of ideas expressed by the mothers together set out a process for decision-making, a process that can emerge and be heard when those of us already included, or not the subject of exclusion on a particular issue refrain from explaining inequality to others, an act that Rancière names as one which merely reproduces that inequality in the very act of explaining (Rancière 1992). However, within a Rancièrian framework, there is instead the space to be vigilant so that the included can hear the excluded speak, and from that point take up the struggle (May 2010). Based on the argument the ignoring these kinds of struggles, and instead thinking and acting as private citizens, which merely goes towards the longer-term polarisation of society, the urgency to take up the struggle against inequality is clear. For the teachers this means thinking about their work with parents in politicised ways, being vigilant to what parents are saying and using their cultural capital to support the challenge against the inequality that parents experience according to the equality they demand. This refers to hearing what parents are saying, and responding in ways that encompass of course, but extend beyond, the supportive work currently undertaken in a way that legitimises their experiences of inequality.

8.5.5 Multiple Intelligences

In terms of operationalising Rancière's theory, one that is fundamentally a theory that recognises the equality of intelligences between parents and teachers, the work of Howard Gardner (1999) on multiple intelligences (MI) provides a vantage point for thinking about this in applied terms. Gardner's theory of MI is rooted in critiques from within anthropology and neuroscience. For example, it challenges the narrow-mindedness of a Western notion of intelligence from within anthropology where in some cultures the concept of intelligence does not exist, and in others it is defined very differently to how it is constructed in the west. For instance, he highlights that non-western cultures have been found to associate intelligences with good listening or moral fibre versus the Western construct that equates to the 'symbol analyst' and 'master of change'¹⁰⁰ (Gardner 1999). Contrary to reductionist notions of intelligence, Gardner, through research carried out with people who had brain injuries, theorised that humans have in fact MI that cut across not only problem solving but also the ability to create products. The very pluralisation of the word

¹⁰⁰ The symbol analyst, according to Gardner (1999) is the person who can, through hours of work, discern meaning out of a multitude of symbols – usually work on a computer. The master of change is the person who easily acquires new information, the problem-solver, if flexible, and adjusts easily to change.

intelligence can be understood to disrupt what is ordinarily thought, within psychology, to be a specific thing. Gardner defines multiple definitions as “a biopsychological potential to process information that can be activated in a cultural setting to solve problems or create products that are of value in a culture” (1999, p. 34). Among the range of intelligences that Gardener found to exist were linguistic and logical-mathematical, musical, bodily-kinaesthetic, spatial, interpersonal and intrapersonal intelligences. In terms of the applicability of this thinking for work with parents in schools, Gardner makes two essential claims in his work. Firstly, Gardner posits his theory of MI is an account of human cognition in its fullest; that humans possess a basic set of seven, eight or a dozen intelligences, thus he posited a new definition of human nature. Secondly, that each of us has a unique blend of intelligences, and with this knowledge, we can choose to ignore this fact, minimise it, or explore it. Crucial also is his point that intelligences are strictly amoral, and any intelligence can be put to constructive or destructive use. Working within this framing then serves to disrupt the connection that exists between the dominant notion of intelligence and the ‘good’ person that is made visible, but also requires a reflective approach for thinking through the consequences of avenues being explored as informed by the MI’s. Some key markers identified of successful implementation in schools include, a) *readiness* – where work on building awareness of MI and its application in practice occurs; b) a *culture* where diverse learners are supported and encouraged, c) ongoing *collaborative* exchanges, both formal and informal in order to create a space for problem-solving and decision-making, and d) a more open ended notion of *choice* so that the work being undertaken makes sense to parents, and their children’s, lives.

McCarthy & Hyland’s (2009) research and development project on MI across the Irish education context, including its use as a framework for revising the state primary school curriculum (1971 and again in 1999), points to the successes of its introduction for teaching and learning. Key was the change from a didactic class-based teaching to a guided discovery approach in the primary curriculum; teachers as facilitators and children as active learners in their own education. In this way, the new curriculum was found to align with MI theory in terms of its underpinning philosophy of recognising and fostering learning in a manner that takes account of the wider range of human intelligences. One of the findings from McCarthy and Hyland’s work was that MI strategies needed to be grounded in a rigorous curriculum planning and delivery framework, and one which for them dovetailed well with the theory of MI was Teaching for Understanding (TfU). This framework is underpinned by the goal in education for the cultivation of a “flexible capability to think and apply one’s knowledge” (Wiske 2005, in McCarthy 2008, p. 104). At its centre is the idea that understanding is demonstrated by performance, and so understanding is also demonstrated by performances of understanding (McCarthy 2008). As an approach to teaching and learning the TfU framework is topic centred, using a topic that is central to the discipline, interesting, accessible, and

relevant to students, and can be connected with other topics on the course. In addition, the framework is shaped by the questions of the aspects of the topic that need to be understood, how understanding can be fostered, and how it can be known what student understand¹⁰¹. Reflexive practice is a crucial component of this approach where teaching, based on what students bring to the classroom, becomes facilitating of student enquiry as it evolves in the interaction. While directed more at teaching practice and learning outcomes, the TfU can also be understood as a framework for undertaking work with parents in the school that is underpinned by the theory of multiple intelligences towards the creation of a programme of parental involvement that is emergent and informed by the parents, and their children's lives'. The feedback from teachers adopting this framework suggests that it is not only a positive experience for students, but also for teachers where both are learning in the process (McCarthy 2008).

Challenges for Teachers/Schools in using MI in their work with Parents

Operationalising this of course is not merely a matter for teachers and individual schools in isolation where schools are only one part of the wider context within which inequalities are produced. There are many challenges that would impinge on this work that exist at the macro, meso and micro levels, some which have been identified already at different points in this study. For example, inequalities in the education sphere are not a matter for schools, and even the education sector alone. Policies across health, housing, taxation, children and welfare all have implications on inequality and work in schools towards creating any kind of equality of opportunity would require changes in wider government policies. The gap in inequality that exists undermines the equality of condition that work in multiple intelligences is rooted in, and therefore would pose a challenge in terms of the culture for work with parents. In addition to this, the absence of equality proofing of the already existing policies, in schools and in society more generally would similarly undermine the production of an equality of condition for working at the local level. For example, the absence of supports, and/or the long waiting lists for supports in schools, or more widely the increase in work precarity, would both have an impact on the space for different intelligences to flourish. In terms of government policy, the already mentioned absence of a legal basis for the right to participate in school decisions in the Education Act 1988 (GoI 1998), poses a challenge for this kind of work not only as it pertains to parents, but also children, where without being mandated to include parents, the likelihood of this work being done, in what is an extremely busy school day is undermined.

¹⁰¹ See here for more detail on this approach
<http://eprints.teachingandlearning.ie/2912/1/McCarthy%202008.pdf>

For teachers, working in this way with parents would be new, and in order to mitigate against the challenges that this approach might bring, teacher training, not only on working with parents using a multiple intelligences approach, but also training on equality and inclusion, should be made available. Another meso level challenge relates to the capacity for schools to provide the kinds of supports that parents might identify, for example in Margaret's case (Chapter 7) in relation to support for her to help her children with their homework. Meeting this kind of support could be a role for wider community services, delivered in the school, or local community facilities.

Training for teachers in these areas would also facilitate more informed reflexive school-parent interactions. In the context of hidden feelings of shame, and/or the stigma attached to poverty, this would go a long way towards opening up spaces for parent to explore these issues, how they are informed and how they might impact on their children's life experiences and life chances.

In terms of the implications of this learning for parental involvement in decision-making, the role for policy then becomes one orientated towards the creation of conditions conducive to speaking out, for those experiencing exclusion, and in turn being heard. The kind of democratic politics Rancière posits (Rancière 1992) can be the antidote to the effects of neoliberal governance, which as this study suggests, is ultimately bad for us all.

8.6 Conclusion

This chapter presents a discussion of the research findings organised around the study aims and objectives. It highlights the processes through which the 'ideal' type of decision-making subject is being produced, that is, the subject of competition, investment and interest, and in turn how this occurs alongside the reproduction of unequal access to this subjectivity. This was shown to be informed in the intensification of neoliberal policies that was ushered in under austerity in Ireland; the government response to the financial crash of 2008. Government action and inaction as this related to how these policy reforms were implemented on the ground were found to serve in the constitution of the 'ideal' subject on one hand, and unequal access to this position on the other. By examining the non-decision-making sphere of school-parent relations, the chapter makes visible the processes through which the 'ideal' type of decision-maker is held in place, namely in the production of that field of relations as a de-politicised field. This is shown to be produced in relations that foreground individualisation in terms of the psychological aspects of life, while backgrounding the topic of economics, thus constituting the school-parent relationship as a site that disconnects key issues in lives lived by parents from the structural production of those issues. This is argued to serve for informing what is taken to be a legitimate topic for debate in the school-parent relationship, and in turn what is not. Caught up in the complexity of school staff intentions

to be supportive and caring of parents concerns, the dominance of the de-politicised field of relations is argued to be held in place also by the requirement for staff to actively forge 'positive' relations with parents where the meaning of 'positivity' similarly aligns with the unequal and de-politicised status quo.

A key finding is that the effect of the processes that go towards the production of the 'ideal' type of subject/citizen/decision-maker, on those at the lower end of the social hierarchy is shown to be the silencing of dissent. This is found in both discourse and practice, and the risk of jeopardising self-respect further serves to hold this silencing in place. Much of the resistance to this reality among parents is found to occur outside of the bounds of the school, and the processes of social closure, with the process of class power therein are discussed as key reasons for this. Notwithstanding this, usurpatory forms of social closure are also identified that show resistance by parents occurring also from within the school.

The chapter argues that examined collectively, the findings are suggestive of processes that are going towards a spatial re-drawing of the social order, in line with arguments made in the literature. This relates to an environment that is orientated towards the expanding of the space of the private citizen, or citizen of self-interest, in a more intensified way, an expansion that is conducive to the upward flow of capital to the space of the off-shore citizen, the citizen detached from nation and free to draw from the opportunities created in this kind of re-drawing. At the bottom end of the social hierarchy is a space of the non-citizen (not non-economic), that is, the citizen who has no voice in the game, but at the same is not outside of society, managing to remain on the inside through accessing credit, and becoming increasingly indebted. In this way, the study suggests that class relations continue to be produced in relations where those further up the social hierarchy accrue and retain the benefits and privileges at the expense of those below but being able to identify this is becoming more and more difficult to see. This is particularly the case in the continuing close paring of the worker and work, where the 'good' and moral person is being equated with the 'good' professional worker as measured by the logic of the market. However, the discussion makes the argument that in this process, and while felt most severely at the lower end of the social hierarchy, the negative effects of this reality can also be seen to affect the downward mobility of the middle classes. This is especially clear to see where parents and/or their children fall outside of what we are simultaneously producing to be the 'ideal' type of neoliberal subject. In summary, what the findings suggest here are processes made up of everyday relations that demonstrate the co-option of inequality, and which in turn are not only reproductive of class inequality but a more stratified inequality that is in turn producing downward mobility among the middle classes. Indeed, the processes set out here are not limited to the thoughts and actions of

educational professionals, and indeed parents themselves. The discussion makes visible how policy research can be equally implicated where the researcher as professional can similarly have the effect of closing down spaces for speaking out among marginalised groups. This occurs not only by taking government policy, as underpinned by neoliberal market logic as the framing for inquiry but also where the absence of reflexive exploration of the effects of the self on marginalised groups while in the field might occur.

By way of moving beyond this, the final section of the discussion undertakes a re-reading of the findings from the methodological approach of listening to what parents have to say, not only in relation to their experiences of exclusion, but also and importantly in relation to their views on how this can be overcome. Using a Rancièrian lens of a presupposition of equality, the findings are illustrative of an alternative space of politics, or a vantage point for what he would call a real democratic politics. This is a space where mothers speak of listening to their children, of aspiring to understand their needs, of devising ways to respond, that are inclusive of the support of others, of taking up the responsibility of responding themselves, but also a space where state support for them in the process of doing so is identified as crucial. In terms of the call encapsulated in the mother's stories for a more democratic process of working, the work of Howard Gardner on multiple intelligences is referenced with a view to making visible a theory for framing this kind of work in the school. As an approach to undertaking policy research, the discussion shows how a reflexive approach to praxis, one that strives to *hear* what marginalised groups are *speaking*, in that very act which attempts to undermine the divide between researcher and researched, we can together build a way forward that is for the benefit of the many rather than the few.

Chapter 9 Conclusion

This chapter concludes the study. I begin by restating and rounding off the ideas mentioned in the introduction, which provided the rationale informing the study aims and objectives. I then set out the key conclusions of the study organised according to the study questions. This is then followed by briefly highlighting why the research is important for researchers and practitioners. Here I point to the core components of feminist activist ethnographic research: knowledge, reflexivity, and power as crucial for understanding how neoliberal governance is operationalised, intensified, and, how this impacts people's lives and society more generally. This is distinguished from the more usual focus in policy research on efficacy. The chapter then concludes that we are moving away from the justice and equality underpinning of the directives for social policy set out in Article 45 of the Irish Constitution (Ireland 1945), by illustrating the discord between these directives and the study findings. Recommendations for policy research are then suggested, under three broad headings of epistemology, informational politics, and power, concluding that in a context of the increasing neoliberalisation of the university, and indeed the academic, this approach is more crucial than ever if we are not to contribute to the processes productive of the social polarisation predicted in this study. With a focus on creating an equality of condition for an actual active citizenship, the chapter makes the overarching policy recommendation of the introduction of a universal basic income. In tandem with this, and more specifically relevant to parents speaking out is the introduction of actually existing free schooling. The chapter concludes by arguing for work to be orientated towards the politicisation of social relations, not to the exclusion of the valuable and supportive work that currently occurs in the community context, but in addition to it, so that together we can work towards the dismantling the processes that orientate in the opposite way.

9.1 The Point of Inquiry

The point of departure for developing the inquiry in this study drew from the personal experience of what seemed to be an absence of any real seat for parents at the decision-making table in the design and implementation of a health promotion policy initiative in their children's primary school in an urban working-class area. As parents were named as one of the range of stakeholders in the health promotion programme, and citizen participation in policy-making is named as a key principle of government policy, this seemed problematic. While initially this concern orientated my thinking towards the question of how to better include parents in the decision-making process, my reading of the critical literature on social policy-making, social exclusion and inclusion, broadened out the frame for inquiry to become one concerned with the meaning of the concept of decision-making itself, and if and how this relates to inequality in access to the decision-making process. Returning then to the school-parent relationship, the focus for exploration of this inquiry became decision-

making as it was being produced to mean in the relationships between the school and parents, or the micro level. The intention from that starting point was to provide insight into how we might understand citizen participation as it is currently being produced under neoliberal governance in macro terms, and so the implications of this not only for parents but for society more generally. A review of the broader literature in this area, dovetailing with a review of austerity policies more recently introduced in Ireland, provided a theoretical framework for inquiring into the effects of the neoliberal intensification that was occurring. A feminist ethnographic approach was taken (Craven and Davis 2011) due to its value for being able to study, up close, the relations of power that make up every day unequal social interactions, as well as gain insight into alternative kinds of knowledge that can go towards the creation of more equitable practices.

9.1.1 Study Aims and Objectives

To recap then, the central aims and objectives of the study were,

- to undertake an exploration of the meaning of the ‘ideal’ decision-maker as it this is being produced in the school context,

This was done by:

- undertaking an exploration into how the meaning of the ‘ideal’ type of decision-maker is informed, as evidenced in school-parent relations, and
- making visible how this relationship is held in place
- to learn about the effects that the processes that go towards the meaning of the ‘ideal’ subject/decision-maker have for those lower down on the social hierarchy,
- to inquire into the implications of this for society more generally, and,
- to explore whether an alternative to this current social trajectory is desirable and if so, what this might look like, and how this might be achieved.

9.2 Key Conclusions

An existing and taken for granted inequality in decision-making in the school, as this pertains to the school parent relationship, was the point of departure for the study findings. This reality was attached to the notion that ‘ideal’ type of decision-maker was a person with particular knowledge, skills and capacities, or in other words, a particular type of intelligence. Aligning with this view, was an orientation towards the protection of parents by the school, from what would be a situation of disadvantage in the education sphere more generally, where not having the same skills as their middle-class counterparts would place local parents at a very particular disadvantage.

This view is problematized in counter-resistance terms within education (Lynch 1990) which propose that inequality in decision-making is perpetuated in order to ensure that the competitive

arena of decision-making that currently exists involving the range of education mediators, and which benefits some (those currently included in it) at the expense of others (those excluded) is left intact. The balance of tensions in this field of relations, it is argued, is a stabilising force ensuring the reproduction of the class-based education system, and classed society, which are crucial for making certain that class-based interests are met.

9.2.1 Inequality, Government Action and Inaction

On this basis, the study set out to understand how notions of the 'ideal' type of decision-maker come into being, and how this is held in place. In line with the literature (Read 2009) which highlights that under neoliberalism the competition subject is the subject of investment and interest, the findings in this study similarly show this to be the case. This was learned about through analysis of the complex interplay between government policy-making discourse and practice, in terms of how this shapes policy work with parents on the ground. Drawing from policy reform ushered in under austerity, the study concludes that not only does this serve in the production of a particular kind of 'ideal' decision-making subject, but also for the reproduction of inequality of access to that position. This was evident in the government's introduction of the 'productivity measure' that mandated more work time from public servants, in exchange for no further wage cuts, thus foregrounding the idea of the subject that invests time, as the subject of value. The investment of time as value was found to shape the work of parental involvement, thus promoting the production of the parent subject, through formal parental involvement work, in this same way.

While this kind of government action 'all the way down' was identified, government inaction was also found. This related to the renewed emphasis placed on citizen participation by government, including the promotion of citizens 'having a say' in the institutions of the state, as a mechanism at the centre of 're-building' citizen trust in government the institutions of the state. Despite this call by government, and in the context of parents as decision-makers, no changes to the Education Act 1998 were made, where only national parent bodies are recognised as having decision-making rights. Consequently, trust-building relations in the school were less about parents having a say in the institution of education, and more about building these relations at an inter-personal level. This was considered to be unsurprising in the context of the role of working with parents in the school, where attendance and retention are key measures of success. In addition to this, workers are in the position of evaluating themselves in their own work role, processes argued as among those collectively going towards the production of the 'good' worker. However, in this context, these processes are concluded to simultaneously serve for the reproduction of inequality of access to decision-making for parents, where trust building through having their say in the institution of education does not occur. Indeed, for the worker to challenge the status quo could simultaneously

serve for undermining their own interests as these relate to the production of the self a 'good' worker, or 'entrepreneur of the self' (Read 2009).

In this way, the combination of government action and inaction, not only at the macro level, but in the way it inter-relates with the meso level, serves for constituting not only the 'ideal' type of decision-making subject, the subject of competition, investment and interest, but simultaneously inequality in access to that dominant subject position.

9.2.2 Policy Work: Inequality Making?

In examining the topic of non decision-making power, or the wider agenda setting arena as this relates to the parent-school relationship, the study findings point to certain relations that are de-politicising, all be these perhaps 'misrecognised' (Bourdieu 1999). This was found in some of the ways that the anxieties that parents and families were living with were responded to in the school. Here, responses by school staff both in the form of one-to-one support for worried or anxious parents, and/or the introduction of in-house policies to lessen the financial burden of school going costs were identified as acts of kindness and generosity, but also acts that were silencing. This was argued to occur due to the way that these acts of kindness function performatively (Butler 1999). Key here was the issue of informal support as discursively reproductive of the notion that issues of psychological health and well-being are issues that require a private or individualised response, rather than a political response, the space for which could be created if such issues were part of the programme of formal parental involvement. Also argued was that the tweaking of in-house policies for making school going costs 'more accessible' could for some parents mean that speaking out about financial struggles become even more difficult, in a context where poverty is unspeakable, and figures for a working poor are on the rise.

The effect of this kind of 'misrecognition' (Bourdieu 1999) for parents was argued to be the silencing of dissent. Regarding the former, this was evident in the findings that illustrated parents taking out high interest loans, an option preferable to speaking out about financial struggles in their relations with the school, with the obvious potential for entrenching financial insecurity and poverty. Regarding the latter, the de-legitimation of psychological health as an issue for discussion in the political terms of its constitution in the formal processes of school, could be seen to result in the silencing of the mother (Margaret, Chapter 7) as this related to decisions being taken about her son's behaviour related difficulties his school.

A key conclusion also was that the processes of exclusion, and their effects, are not limited to the work of policy practitioners but must also be considered in terms of the work of policy research. This study clearly showed how the silencing effects interwoven through the processes that go

towards the constitution of neoliberal subjectivity were found exist even in my presence as researcher in the group with parents (Chapter 5). Similarly, the framework for research analysis, if limited to the parameters of the dominant ideology, can mean research being reproductive of the de-legitimisation of certain topics for debate that are silenced within that framing. This was clear in Chapter 6, in the diverging views on the topic of money and money struggles between Sarah (who was reluctant to speak to the school about the topic of money), and some school staff (who did not see money as a particularly problematic, or a newly problematic issue). Having already recognised the culture of inequality in education, this highlighted the need for me to reflexively critique these divergent views and ensure that the voices of those struggling to speak were heard and legitimised. Examining the views of the young mothers in this framing attempted to facilitate this process. Notwithstanding this, the findings in Chapter 7 show that despite consciously working in this way, I still misunderstood Margaret's suggestion concerning the need for support for parents wanting to better be able to help their children with their school work. Not hearing this point could well have served to de-legitimise that idea for Margaret. These findings highlight how policy work can be exclusionary. They also highlight the importance of policy work of inclusion being a process of continual proofing, or reflexive examination, of the possible effects of what we are doing.

9.2.3 Risk and Respectability: Neoliberalism's Tightening Hold

The concept of risk and respectability were key for understanding how the silencing of dissent was found to be held in place. More recent literature drawn from (Lazzarato 2009) argued that neoliberalism has ushered in a changed nature of risk, from something that might happen to you, something that you could avoid, now extended to have become something that originates from within the self. This was argued to have implications for how we manage our moral selves in market terms, thus in ways that hold the de-politicised and unequal status quo in place. This was found in this study in the examples of teachers and parents' reluctance around speaking out about the topic or experience of poverty, due to the risks this might have for one's status as 'good' worker or 'good' parent. Indeed, the study also showed the complex issue of respectability, or the avoidance of any risk to it being undermined, induced silence around the issue of poverty not only in terms of its implications for the 'good' parent but also the 'good' mother. Silence in this context can be seen to prop up the de-politicisation of school-parent relations.

Mitigating against the risk to the self, caused by the self was also found to engender particular responses that help in maintaining the unequal status quo. This ranged from teaching staff taking up the framing for relations with parents 'in the positive', a strategy for communications, promoted in teachers training but with the effect perhaps, of keeping 'the negative' at bay. Among parents the study pointed to responses such as opting for loans rather than speaking out, or 'going it alone' as the response to depleting access to additional educational supports, over any concerted

challenge, of the lack of support provision. The power of the risk of loss of face to the child associated with falling behind her peers in her school work, and to the adult for not being able to pay that the study suggested, would be caused by the parent themselves if they did not respond in these ways. Read in broader terms the effect of this changed meaning of risk is an intensification of conditions that produce responses which leave unchallenged the absence of the downward redistribution of resources. In other words, these serve to hold in place, or in the context of the austerity related cuts, widening, inequality.

9.2.4 Resistance: A Complex Layered Reality

Notwithstanding these ways in which the dominant neoliberal market logic is held in place, forms of weak resistance were found among parents and educational professionals. These included the creation of spaces, within spaces dominated by the market logic, where collective processes and acts of solidarity occurred, among parents, and between the school and parents, where an expression of values contrary to the individualising forces of neoliberal policy were found. This was clear in examples such as in Chapter 5 where formally identified spaces were sometimes used for informal purposes by parents, or in the accounts retold to me by parents of collective acts of protest where teachers and parents resisted government cuts together. Another example referred to in Chapter 5, was the rewriting by the school of questionnaires in plain English issued by the Department of Education and Skills to parents, so that the language was more accessible, with a view to creating the space for parents to consider the implications for them of the changes that were being suggested therein. Other examples included the rejection by parents of full compliance with the demands of economic costs, and management of same, by the school as evidenced in the young mothers focus group in Chapter 6, or, the example of travelling to national forums with the intent of finding alternative avenues for being heard in schools that we learned about in Geraldine's story (Chapter 7). Indeed, hope is the collective theme that emerged in this finding, identifiable in the fact that these acts of resistance were evident in lots of different ways, and all across the school community, suggesting a persistent determination to speak out in a context where being heard is increasingly difficult.

9.2.5 Implications for the Future

The international literature proposed that a course towards a more polarised society and changing typology of classed citizenship is being produced in relations shaped by neoliberal financialised capitalism. The findings in this study are suggestive of a trajectory towards a similar future. This is a society where at one end is a group of non-citizens (not non-economic / citizens still within the market framing), part of society but relegated to the margins with no avenues for speaking out having become detached from the political economy. In short these are citizens made absent from decision-making altogether.

This group, the findings forecast, will be accompanied by a group of private citizens, citizens produced to be increasingly and necessarily self-interested due to the very tangible risks of downward mobility that will result from not taking up an individualised, responsabilised and active (globalised) approach to work and life. Avoiding this will be difficult because the 'opportunities' made available through the private sector will dovetail with this reality. The relationship between this way of living and its negative implications for not only the working classes, but the middle classes also, will become increasingly difficult not only to identify, but to challenge, as 'decision-making' and keeping one's head above water become synonymous.

Understood in the context of the international critical literature on citizenship, this is contrasted with an off-shore citizenship at the other end of the pole. This will comprise a group of citizens with the kind of mobility no longer in need of attachment to nation. This is the citizen with the wealth capacity to take up the incentive of citizenship rights in numerous nations in exchange for the agreement of investment in property or business. Detached from the need for community and the social cohesion that this depends upon, it is concluded that this group of off-shore citizens will make decisions based purely on profit, devoid of social considerations at local, regional or national levels. The relationship between this reality and that of those at the opposite end is clear to see.

9.2.6 An Alternative Trajectory Forward

While bleak, what the study also found was a set of ideas pointing to the potential for an alternative trajectory. Identification of this trajectory was made possible by drawing on an alternative conceptualisation of the social posited by Jacques Rancière (May 2010), the presupposition of equality, as opposed to the current point of departure which is the presupposition of inequality. Social relations framed by a presupposition of equality function to actively subsume the taken for granted hierarchical nature of relations in society by replacing this with an interaction between a listener and a speaker, both active subjects in that process. This study showed how adopting this framing for communication opened up a space for the excluded to speak their equality, and for this to be heard. Read together these ideas inform a process of decision-making that is open, driven from the bottom up, and inclusive of all.

Read collectively these ideas proposed a process of decision-making that involved:

- the inclusion of affective relations alongside the more usual economic, political, and social relations as a place from where to speak out;

- a theory of knowledge that involves collective critical and ongoing assessment of current knowledge informed by what one wants to achieve leading to a process of collective decision-making informed by new learning;
- a process of knowledge making that is instigated by those currently excluded, or on a priority of needs basis, that is heard and taken up by those already included (as this relates to the particular issue of exclusion) who share in that struggle;
- a combination of responsibilisation and activation but with an expectation of support from the state in the form of state provided opportunities for a shared process of recognising and achieving equality,
- a seeking out of political openings in the state machine through which the current dialectic between the particular circumstances and universal dominant neoliberal market logic might be disrupted in a way that would create space so that the individuals who wish to speak would be met by a wish to hear.

The study concludes that the set of ideas posited by the mothers provide insight into the equality already presupposed by each woman, evident in their naming of same. It points to the crucial role of being vigilant in order to be able to hear what those experiencing inequality want to say, rather than imposing 'solutions' and 'opportunities' informed in a top-down way. It stresses that although the mothers communicated different ideas informed by varying circumstances, when viewed together, their ideas set out a pathway for collective action towards an outcome that would benefit not only all the mothers, but society more generally. Collectively, the mothers clearly foreground an *equality of condition* so that all can speak out, as the necessary basis for any struggle for equality in a society that is under the spell of its opposite, inequality.

9.3 Why the study is important for research and practitioners

9.3.1 Knowledge (over efficacy)

This study is important for showing how a focus on identifying the kind of knowledge that is being created in the relations between the individual and the state that are produced under neoliberalism can provide insight into how neoliberal policies exist in all of our lives, and in turn how this is related to the widening gap in inequality that we see nationally and globally. Crucially, the feminist ethnographic approach used here shows that the specific experiences of individuals in the ways that they are caught up in unequal relations of power provide a vantage point into what is occurring at the macro level, how that is being held in place and its implications for the individual. This kind of focus on the nature of knowledge that is being produced in the policy-making process, usually hidden in the more common emphasis in policy research on efficacy, provides a vantage point into both long existing and emerging inequalities that are relationally produced.

Crucially, this study is important for making visible the fact that **neoliberal policy is not neutral**. Instead the study shows that the notion of neutrality serves to block the view to the alignment of neoliberal policy with powerful interests. In this study this was clear not only in highlighting how the long established stable field of competition is maintained by education mediators, but that under the guise of austerity, this logic was extensively reinforced in the interplay of changes to state institutions across society, serving ultimately to legitimise actions that go towards the de-politicisation of relations and reproduction rather than transformation of inequality. That this functions for extinguishing resistance from below and legitimising choices made by the middle classes, that together prop up powerful interests is clear in the changing landscape of services access that was found in this study. A focus on the kind of knowledge that is being produced then is crucial for understanding that the very complex and hidden ways that neoliberal policy is a mechanism of dispossession of power/capital, from those 'below' by those 'above' (Harvey 2005).

9.3.2 Reflexive Practice

The study is important in that it shows that **reflexive practice** is important for researchers and practitioners in order to ensure that the work that we do, in the spirit of 'doing no harm', does not ultimately end up reproducing the de-politicised and unequal status quo. Employing reflexive practice functions for framing the focus of work on the ideas that are shaping the relations of work, and the implications of these relations in a way that facilitates the worker to interject where these are felt to be imbalanced. This is an approach that is particularly useful for working with marginalised communities, in the interest of undermining the power imbalance that exists. In this way, a reflexive approach transforms the researcher or practitioner into a conduit in the shaping of relations, with a focus on the nature of the wider field of relations rather than any particular individual in those relations. This was an approach that I tried to engage with all of the time in the process of doing fieldwork evidenced for example in my account of entering the field (Chapter 4) and being alert to the power relations that both could potentially 'put me in my place', and those which could result in 'me putting others in their place'. Being informed by the literature on reflexive practice (Wacquant & Bourdieu 1992) helped me to recognise this reality, think about what was occurring at the point of interaction, in terms of how this might be informed by the dominant ideology, and respond in ways that attempted to undermine the power imbalance identified therein. This is what Davis & Craven (2011) call putting the researchers' cultural capital to work. By way of conclusion, this approach to inquiry serves for offering a real inclusive meaning of democratic participation, one defined as *hearing and speaking*, and as such actively works to background the dominant notion of 'participation' as a process determined by professionals and experts and informed by the dominant ideology. The benefits for knowledge making of this alternative definition of participation became evident from the stories that the mothers told in

Chapter 7, and the insights acquired into ways in which we might move forward collectively. Working in this participatory way serves for re-politicising social relations while simultaneously setting out to transform rather than reproduce inequality.

Of course, for researchers this is not limited to work in the field, but must also inform the process of analysis, writing-up and dissemination where these are also discursive acts that contribute to future making. Reflexive practice helps to foreground the equal relationship as the barometer for interaction for researchers and practitioners in the minutia of every idea, interaction, sentence written, finding communicated, and action taken. Practice underpinned by equality is productive of equality. For researcher and practitioners, engaging in work in this way also serves for identifying the inequalities that we ourselves are subjected to under neoliberalism, how these are informed and so the basis upon which we too can challenge this reality.

9.3.3 Power

The study is also important for researchers and practitioners for making visible the various fields of power relations that make up neoliberalism's spheres, and within and between which power is exerted. This is crucial for understanding the ways that neoliberal power can be divisive and create uncomfortable alliances within and between individuals and groups, and which can cause a fracturing of relations within and across these fields. For example, Sarah, in Chapter 6, who highlighted the dilemma for her of needing to spread herself across her work, care of her younger pre-school children, and being an involved parent in her other child's school, illustrated how 'keeping up' in these three separate domains was a challenging set of expectations. For Sarah, it was the role of 'involved parent' in her child's school that more often got dropped, and although she was complying with government calls for women to enter the workforce, while also working in the home, she still expressed a feeling of inadequacy for being unable to also respond to the school's requests for her to 'give more time' to the school. Insight into these various fields of relations, the way that they pull women in so many different directions, and the rationale behind decisions taken can help for challenging uncomplicated perceptions of parental relations with the school.

Indeed, in line with the literature, the study showed how this can also occur at the level of community evident in the set of interactions between the young mothers in (Chapter 6) in creating an uncomfortable alliances. This was evident in the shift in position by Kate from her initial outspoken rejection of the power imposed by the school in the form of requests for payment for school costs, to one that was softened somewhat in the context of comments made by the other mothers in the group stating that they found these mechanisms helpful. While switching to more of an allegiance with the other mothers on this issue, the values that this was aligned with seemed

at the same time, to be uncomfortable for Kate. Her final point on this uncomfortable alliance was the statement that ‘no one pays the full €75 euro’ for the book rental scheme, suggesting that her compromise was some place between the two sets of values. Understanding these multiple sites of power can provide insight for understanding how policy work can lead to fractures or tensions within communities and the intervening factors that inform that conflict not only with the community but across communities in ways beyond the dispositions and propensities that make up the habitus (Bourdieu 1999).

The study shows how foregrounding the multiple sites of power and its effects in the work done by practitioners and researchers with others can similarly serve for its analysis in their own work lives. For example, for teachers the introduction of time as a ‘productivity measure’ by government under austerity, which not only functioned for reinforcing time as the value of work for work with parents, did so also for teachers. While this policy was challenged by teachers across the education system more generally at that time due to its undermining of the unpaid time already given freely by teachers, arguably the productivity measure functioned as a distraction from the real problem of the cuts to teachers’ pay and the introduction of the reduced pay for new entrants at that time. Indeed, for researchers also in the context of an intensification of academic work, spilling into and constituting not only precarious working conditions, but precarious lives (Gill 2010), this can be understood as similarly functioning as a distraction from the driver of these conditions in the form of the increasingly neoliberal university, with its shift to corporate models of management and the micro-politics that accompany this. The key point here is that when located at the forefront of our work, awareness of the nature and impact of neoliberal power not only on those lower down on the hierarchy but on researchers and practitioners also, we begin to see that there is more that links than divides us.

9.4 Implications for Policy

In setting out its ‘directive principles of social policy’ (Article 45), the Constitution of Ireland (Ireland 1945) committed the state to ‘promot[ing] the welfare of the whole people by securing and protecting as effectively as it may a social order in which justice and charity shall inform all institutions of the national life’ (45.1). The findings in this study contain implications for policy in terms of a divergence in the meaning of justice set out in the constitution and what has been found to be occurring in practice.

For example, the very fact that inequality in education has long existed, a reality that is reproduced in ways that ensure a stable classed system, benefiting class interests, is itself contrary to the constitution, and goes against the directive that sets out the need for ensuring that ‘*the ownership*

and control of the material resources may be so distributed amongst private individuals and the various classes as best to subserve the common good' (45.2.ii). The study findings make visible that it is in the very process of blocking access to decision-making for those lower down on the social hierarchy, by those further up the hierarchy, that the classed system is held in place. This raises questions about what is meant by 'the common good', such as, is inequality deemed to be for the common good, and who gets to decide this? This links to the next implication for policy, where the policy directives stipulate that free competition is to be regulated to avoid any '*concentration of the ownership or control of essential commodities in a few individuals to the common detriment*' (45.2.iii). In this study, competition was found instead to be managed in a way that the interests of those at the top of the social hierarchy are by far the most protected, while the interests of those at the bottom fair the worst. In addition, the more recent austerity driven changes to society were shown to further intensify this reality, providing an even more solid framing for the legitimization of the protection of competition in this way as has long occurred in the education system.

According to Article 45.2.iv, the policy directive states that '*in what pertains to the control of credit the constant and predominant aim shall be the welfare of the people as a whole*' (45.2.iv). Contrary to this aspiration, the study findings here are suggestive of credit being used as a mechanism constitutive of deeper levels of poverty and exclusion. This was clear in the example of the young mothers resorting to credit as the only option available to them in a context where speaking out about financial challenges is felt to be not possible. Rather than credit being controlled with a view to the welfare of all, the study suggests instead that credit is being used as a key lever in the production of social exclusion. This was most evident in this study in the relationship evident between the shutting down of options to speak out, resulting in opting for high interest loans and the class and gender inequality that this reproduces.

Regarding the conduct of private enterprise, Article 45.3.2 contains the policy directive of ensuring that '*private enterprise shall be so conducted ... as to protect the public against unjust exploitation*' (45.3.2). The study captures a shift occurring towards the promotion of privately provided educational supports, for children with additional educational needs. This was clear in Chapter 7 in Geraldine's story where she felt she was left with no option but to source and finance private supports in response to her son's additional education needs, due to the lack of avenues open to her through the state education system. That this had implications in terms of increasingly unsecure circumstances for this mother was clear due to her awareness of the long terms needs of her son. While Geraldine clearly had the economic capital to cope in the present, and cultural capital to work towards challenging this reality, for those with less capital this push towards the use of private services clearly has exploitative implications when thought of together with the previous

point about the use of credit. For families where the only route to providing support for children becomes sourcing credit, with the implications of this for producing social exclusion, the policy directive of ensuring private enterprise is conducted in a way that protects against unjust exploitation is clearly compromised.

The study also points to implications for policy-making that are contrary to the directive that stipulates that citizens have a right '*to form associations and unions*' (40.6.1.iii), and while these organizations are to be regulated '*in the public interest*' (40.6.1.iii), such regulations were to '*contain no political, religious or class discrimination*' (40.6.2). Of concern in this study was the depoliticisation that is occurring in the process of policy-making, particularly in ways that prevent and cut off ways those lower down on the social hierarchy can take part in political processes. The findings in this study showed the management of, while unintentional, or 'misrecognised' (Bourdieu 1999), the Parents Association in the school occurs in ways that largely reproduce, mainly through inaction, the Parents Association as a depoliticised entity. This was clear in the finding that framed the value of the fundraising *work* of the Parents Association in terms of 'time spent being involved', to the exclusion of economics (i.e. inequality). This was shown to be an orientation shaped by government policy-making in the first instance, from within the work-life balance domain, where time is named as the problem to be managed and given extensive momentum under austerity in the introduction of the 'productivity measure' introduced in the form the extra 36 unpaid hours per year. As the top-down dominant value of work promoted, investment of time replaces material value, and thus the inequality in education that is actually existing, from the Parents Association agenda, or in other words the politics of inequality.

Indeed, a final point about the implications that this study identified for policy-making relates to the directive that the state is expected '*to safeguard with especial care the economic interests of the weaker sections of the community*' (45.4.1). The typology of class that this study suggests we are building into the future, in the very work of policy-making that we are undertaking, based on the relations of power that this work is perpetuating, is shown to be constitutive of a class of non-citizen (not non-economic) at the lower end of the social hierarchy. This is a group of citizens with no voice in society, but at the same time subjected to the conditions of life (credit) that are constitutive of their exclusion and the entrenched poverty that this implies. Indeed, the fact that the findings are also suggestive of a downwardly mobile middle class the state's role of safeguarding the weaker sections of society is becoming greater as it is being unmet.

9.5 Recommendations for Research

9.5.1 Epistemology

Policy research must be reflexive in nature in order to ensure that it is carried out in a way that the assumptions of its historical production are made visible, as well as the kind of future making that this implies. A positivist framework for policy research is in danger of reproducing the unequal status quo, where terms of reference limited to what works in any given policy, merely orientates research towards the development of theories relating how that policy can function more smoothly, without any inquiry into the theories that inform that policy in the first instance. This in turn blocks the question of the effects and implications of this framing for inquiry on its target group, and following on from that, this blocks the question of the implications of making policy work, for society more generally. In this study, it was clear that parental involvement policy was underpinned by an assumption of inequality according to a particular theory of knowledge, which was informed by middle class values, which have historically operated successfully towards middle class ends, policy which is mutually causal of the marginalisation and exclusion of those at whom the policies are primarily targeted at including.

Considering this complex reality, it is recommended also that policy research must be about using its cultural capital in the identification of, and struggle against, the complex ways that neoliberal policy effects marginalised individuals and groups. In doing so, the role for policy research is activist in nature, one of being vigilant so that inequalities can be heard, understand the circumstances of that inequality, educate and be educated, seek political openings, and support the different struggles as they arise in working towards a reduction of inequality. A feminist activist ethnographic approach provides the theoretical framework for undertaking research in this way.

9.5.2 Informational Politics

In line with Davis and Craven (2011), it is recommended that feminist activist ethnography employs an interventionist lens on top of its role as both studying up (Nader 1972) as well as down, in order to be able to identify and make visible the way that policy reforms effect the status quo. In this study, this was shown to make visible how the intensification of an already existing neoliberal governing ideology, in the context of policies ushered in under austerity, in response to the global and national financial crash that occurred in 2008. In this study, use of this lens was shown to make visible the range of ways that this kind of intensification occurs as policy changes in a variety of different areas coalesce in ways that entrench already existing processes that go towards the reproduction of class and gender inequalities. In a global context that is moving into a post-neoliberal phase, this is more crucial again as the spaces for thinking critically about vital policy shifts are being more overtly eclipsed in the public discourse.

9.5.3 Power

On that basis, it is recommended that policy research take power relations as its central focus of study. In this study it was clear that current policies and policy reforms can be productive of division between individuals and groups, as well as productive of uncomfortable alliances. Both outcomes can result in tensions between parties, which are clearly bad for social cohesion, a quality necessary for any functioning governing ideology. Contrary to any critique that this may merely function for propping up the neoliberal project, this study shows that a focus on the power relations that are being reproduced in its name must be done with a view to making clearly visible how this is bad for us all.

Similarly, this current study as a body of knowledge could be perceived as being potentially divisive or tension producing due to the critical nature of the work. Indeed, bringing the learning into the academy, school and to parents may be a thought to be a complex process, if viewed as merely presenting an alternative, but similarly top down, set of ideas. Would this not be a reproduction of the kind of power relations that I critique throughout the study? However, I would argue that as dissemination praxis, the reflexive nature of this study must play a key role. This should involve building into the dissemination process, how I as the researcher was not outside of these power relations, but equally implicated, and am similarly learning how this occurs. This is crucial for undermining any potential for this study to be the cause of division between myself and colleagues in the academy, between myself school staff members and parents, or crucially, between schools and parents. I would argue that for critical work to stay true to its ethical underpinning of making visible the power relations that reproduce inequality, the dissemination process must necessarily become a space for discussion *between* the researcher, colleagues in the academy and researched, and as such used for creating the conditions for discussion and debate for developing a collective way forward. It is through working to establish an equality of condition that we can create the basis from where we can talk openly with each other and hear each other.

9.6 Recommendations for Policy

The final section here is drawn up with a view to supporting a re-establishment of policy-making along social justice lines for policy to better align with the directives and principles set out in the Article 45 of the constitution. It draws on the work of Murphy-Lawless and Mander (forthcoming) and their work *Supporting Early Years Meaningfully: Challenges for Scottish Policies on New Mothers, Families and Communities*. That study provides a framework for making visible a pathway between community and government, supporting real inclusion underpinned by the aim of creating agency for all, and which in turn orientates the work being undertaken towards meeting the government's call for citizen participation. In short, at the heart of this final section is the aim of

orientating policy-making towards the production of an *equality of condition* based on the idea that the role of policy needs to change from one that manages inclusion, to a perpetual and inclusive process of creating the conditions for inclusion. In response to what is clearly shown in this study to be a top-down problem of inequality in access to decision-making processes, two key recommendations are set out here, one at the macro level and the second at the meso level; a universal basic income and actual free primary schooling respectively. Together these could offer the fundamentals of an equality of condition, and as such would go towards opening up a space from where work underpinned by a multiple intelligences approach could occur.

9.6.1 A Universal Basic Income for a Rebirth of Citizenship

According to Basic Income Ireland (in Social Justice Ireland 2018¹⁰²) a basic income, is a payment from the state to every individual resident, without any means test or work requirement. It would be sufficient to live a frugal but decent lifestyle without supplementary income from paid work.

From the perspective of creating the conditions for increased political participation in policy making a basic income is highly significant. This is because it provides the conditions for the rebirth of citizenship (Bauman 1999, p. 182) and the potential for citizens to occupy the democratic void that is currently being generated in the policy-making process. A basic income would go towards providing the kind of security that is absent from the neoliberal society and which can be traced back to issues of economics in the neoliberal debt economy as was clearly found in this study. With the provision of a basic income, the capacity would be opened up for a re-orientation of thought away from citizen rights as being grounded in circumstances of ‘needing it the most’, with its links to debates around entitlement that are more often divisive in nature, and towards establishing the principle of rights in the enabling quality of being a citizen (Bauman 1999). In other words, the introduction of a basic income shifts the emphasis away from the polity being an agency of law and order, or one of crisis management, into a common weal¹⁰³. A common weal is an underpinning ethos in society that is orientated toward the common good based on what is shared and beneficial for all members of a society. Of particular relevance to this study, is the argument that a universal basic income should not replace or be used to legitimise further service cuts as a Universal Basic Income would only meet the basic needs of individuals¹⁰⁴.

¹⁰² <https://www.socialjustice.ie/content/policy-issues/basic-income-time-now>

¹⁰³ Scotland provides a model of civic action grounded in a common weal. See <http://allofusfirst.org/what-is-common-weal/>.

¹⁰⁴ Work into how these models might be costed are ongoing (see for example, Murphy & Ward 2016, Collins 2012, Healy *et al.* 2012), and if and how a model’s parameters would be established in the context of mass and global migration, along with discussions about the impact of a UBI on inflation.

9.6.2 Free Primary Schooling

In addition, with particular relevance for this study, and in the interests of ensuring the conditions conducive to parents speaking out in their children's schools, and in line with Article 42 of the Irish Constitution which states that it is a child's right to have access to free education, it is recommended that all children have unconditional access to free primary schooling. The relationship between poverty and the silencing of parents, and particularly women, was clear in this study. A genuine interest by government in parents having a say in shaping the institutions of the state in a way that is inclusive of their, and indeed their children's voices, would require this negative relationship to be undermined. Free schooling would go a long way towards this¹⁰⁵.

9.7 Conclusion

The conclusion argues that the political dimension of policy work carried out by researchers and practitioners must be central. This does not mean work orientated toward bringing the marginalised in, but instead work led by those marginalised, and orientated at the relations of power that produce that marginality.

¹⁰⁵ Pilot projects have been tried and/or are currently underway and are garnering greater attention (Social Justice Ireland 2018). Benefits documented to date range across poverty eradication, health and well-being improvements and from a feminist economic perspective, greater financial independence for women, all of which are particularly relevant in the context of this study. Equally from a feminist perspective, concerns have been voiced about the potential for the reinforcement of socially constructed care roles through the implementation of a basic income (Murphy & O'Connor, 2015), where women would find themselves confined to caring roles, essentially undermining the move towards gender equality that would occur in monetary terms. In response to this, the definition of a UBI set out by Social Justice Ireland (2018) recognises caring work, home duties and child rearing as being socially and economically imperative work that would receive additional recognition.

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Appendix I: Parent/Guardian Information Leaflet

Title of Study: An exploration of if, and how, parents of primary school children in working class areas have access to decisions taken in schools.

What is the study about?: This study will explore whether relations between schools and parents are such that parents and schools feel they can work together to make joint decisions about child health issues to be addressed through the school. In doing this, this study aims to identify factors that make it possible, or make it difficult, for parents and school staff to work together. This will involve looking very broadly at reasons why parents think that relations between schools and parents might be working well, or might be challenging. The findings from the study will be used to identify the conditions that would support positive working relations between parents and schools.

Who can participate? I would like to speak with parents who a) have children attending [name of school] primary school in the local area, b) are over 18 years of age, and c) can speak English.

What will participation involve? Participation in this study will involve you taking part in a one-to-one interview with the researcher. The researcher will have a short list of topics for discussion and the participant will be asked their opinion on these topics, and to add any additional ideas or topics that they feel are important. With your consent, the interview will be tape recorded so that it can be typed out later and used for analysis in the study. You can at any time request a copy of the typed out interview. The purpose of the copy of the transcript is that the participant can review and agree its contents with the researcher. The interviews will focus on the topic of your interaction with your child's school and your perceptions of that interaction.

Location of the Interview. The interviews will take place at a location and time that is convenient for you. We will arrange this over the telephone or in person.

Benefits of the Study. The main benefit of the study will be in its addition to knowledge about factors that make it possible, or make it more difficult, for parents and schools to work together to make decisions about child health related issues to be prioritised through the school.

Confidentiality. Your participation in this study will be confidential. Your name will not be used in the study and will not be disclosed to anyone outside the study. You will be given a different (fake) name and therefore any information you give that will be used in the study will be done so using that different name. The only person that needs to know that you participated is the researcher. The researcher is based in Trinity College Dublin and is not a member of the school staff.

Voluntary Participation. If you decide to volunteer to participate in this study, you may withdraw at any time. If you decide not to participate, or if you withdraw at any stage, this will not affect you negatively in any way.

Stopping the Study. Please be advised that the researcher may withdraw your participation in the study at any time without your consent.

Permission. This study has Research Ethics Committee approval from Trinity College Dublin.

Further Information. You can get more information or answers to any questions about the study, your participation in the study, and your rights, from the researcher, Karin O'Sullivan who can be telephoned at XXX. Please do not hesitate to contact Karin if you have any queries.

Appendix II: Parent/Guardian Consent Form

Researcher: Karin O'Sullivan

Project Title: An exploration of if, and how, parents of primary school children in working class areas have access to processes concerning decisions taken about the focus of child health initiatives in schools.

Researcher : Karin O'Sullivan

Study Background: This study will explore whether relations between schools and parents are such that parents and schools feel they can work together to make joint decisions about child health issues to be addressed through health promotion initiatives in the school. In doing this, this study aims to identify factors that make it possible, or make it difficult, for parents and school staff to work together. This will involve looking very broadly at reasons why parents think that relations between schools and parents might be working well, or might be challenging. The findings from the study will be used to identify the conditions that would support positive working relations between parents and schools.

What will participation involve? Participation in the study will involve you taking part in a one-to-one interview with the researcher. With your consent, the interviews will be recorded so they can be typed out later and used for analysis in the study. All typed out interviews will be stored securely on computer and will only be seen by myself and my supervisor in Trinity College Dublin. You can at any time request a copy of the interview. The purpose of the copy of the transcript is that the participant can review and agree its contents with the researcher.

Confidentiality and Voluntary Participation

Your identity will remain confidential. Your real name will not be used in the study and your name will not be disclosed to anyone outside the study. Participants will be given a different (fake) name for the purpose of the study. If you decide to participate in this study, you may withdraw from it at any time. If you decide not to participate, or if you withdraw at any stage, this will not affect you in any way.

Declaration:

I have read, or had read to me, the information leaflet for this project and I understand the contents. I have had the opportunity to ask questions and all my questions have been answered to my satisfaction. I freely and voluntarily agree to be part of this research study, though without prejudice to my legal and ethical rights. I understand that I may withdraw from the study at any time and I have received a copy of this agreement.

Participants Name: _____

Contact Telephone Number: _____

Participant's Signature: _____ **Date:** _____

Statement of Researchers Responsibility: I have explained the nature and purpose of this research study, the procedures to be undertaken and any risks that may be involved. I have offered to answer any questions and fully answered such questions. I believe that the participant understands my explanation and has freely given informed consent.

Appendix III: Information Leaflet School Staff

Title of Study: An exploration of how parents of primary school children in working class areas are formed as active participants in decisions taken about their children's health and well-being.

Introduction: This study will examine the inter-relations between parents and schools in order to explore the factors that together shape parents as participants in school based decisions on the health and well-being of their children. At a broader level the study is exploring how parents' voices contribute to national level policy making through local level processes. The study is drawing from and building upon an aspect of the Healthy Schools Programme Evaluation that is concerned with local level collaborative processes that inform the development of health promoting schools.

What will participation involve? Participation in the study will involve taking part in a one-to-one interview with the researcher. With the participants consent, the interview will be recorded so that it can be transcribed later and used for analysis in the study. The interview will focus on the topic of parental engagement in the school. You can at any time request a copy of the transcribed interview. The purpose of the copy of the transcript is that the participant can review and agree its contents with the researcher.

Location of the Interview. The interview will take place at a location and time that is convenient for you. This will be arranged over the telephone between the researcher and participant.

Benefits of the Study. The main benefits of the study will be in its addition to knowledge on school community led decision making processes as part of the development of health promoting schools. The findings from the study will also be used to inform wider policy making processes that are informed through bottom-up democratic decision making processes.

Risks for the Participant. There are no risks foreseen for participants in the study.

Confidentiality. Your identity will remain confidential. Your name will not be published and will not be disclosed to anyone outside the study.

Compensation: This study is covered by standard institutional indemnity insurance. Nothing in this document restricts or curtails your rights.

Voluntary Participation. If you decide to volunteer to participate in this study, you may withdraw at any time. If you decide not to participate, or if you withdraw at any stage, you will not be penalised and will not give up any benefits that you had before entering the study.

Stopping the Study. You understand that the researcher may withdraw your participation in the study at any time without your consent.

Permission. This study has Research Ethics Committee approval from Trinity College Dublin.

Further Information. You can get more information or answers to your questions about the study, your participation in the study, and your rights, from Karin O'Sullivan who can be telephoned at 087 916 1102. Please do not hesitate to contact Karin if you have any queries.

Thank you for taking the time to read this information leaflet.

Appendix IV: Consent Form/Teachers

School Staff

Researcher: Karin O'Sullivan

Project Title: An exploration of how parents of primary school children in working class areas are formed as active participants in decisions taken about the health and well-being of their children.

Principal Investigator: Karin O'Sullivan

Background: This study will examine the inter-relations between parents and schools in order to explore the factors that together shape parents as participants in school based decisions on the health and well-being of their children. At a broader level the study is exploring how parents' voices contribute to national level policy making through local level processes. The study is drawing from and building upon an aspect of the Healthy Schools Programme Evaluation that is concerned with local level collaborative processes that inform the development of health promoting schools.

What will participation in the study involve?

Participation in this component of the study will involve you taking part in a one-to-one interview with the researcher. With your consent, the interview will be recorded so that it can be transcribed later and used for analysis in the study. You can at any time request a copy of the transcribed interview. The purpose of the copy of the transcript is that the participant can review and agree its contents with the researcher. All data generated from the interviews will be securely stored and will only be accessible by myself and my supervisor. The interview will explore issues including experiences of working with children's parents, perceptions on parental participation in school based decisions and perceptions of parents engagement with schools in general.

Confidentiality and Voluntary Participation

Your identity will remain confidential. Your name will not be published and will not be disclosed to anyone outside the study. If you decide to volunteer to participate in this study, you may withdraw at any time. If you decide not to participate, or if you withdraw at any stage, you will not be penalised and will not give up any benefits that you had before entering the study.

Declaration:

I have read, or had read to me, the information leaflet for this project and I understand the contents. I have had the opportunity to ask questions and all my questions have been answered to my satisfaction. I freely and voluntarily agree to be part of this research study, though without prejudice to my legal and ethical rights. I understand that I may withdraw from the study at any time and I have received a copy of this agreement.

Participants Name: _____

Contact Telephone Number: _____

Participant's Signature: _____

Date: _____

Statement of Researchers Responsibility: I have explained the nature and purpose of this research study, the procedures to be undertaken and any risks that may be involved. I have offered to answer any questions and fully answered such questions. I believe that the participant understands my explanation and has freely given informed consent.

Researchers signature: _____ Date: _____

(One copy will be kept on file and a second copy will be given to the participant)

Appendix V: Topic Guide for Parent Interviews

General opening questions/experience of having children in school.

How many children do you have?

How many do you have in school? Which school? Boys or girls? Age/class?

Do your children like school?

What do you think are the most valuable things your child can get from attending school?

School specific clubs and supports

Are your children attending any specific clubs at the school? (e.g. after school sports, dancing, French classes etc..) How is that going?

Are your children receiving any specific supports at the school? (e.g. school completion programme, behavioural support, learning support, doodle den, SLT)

Can you tell me a bit about those supports – what they are and what they are for?

Why is your child attending these programmes?

How was it decided that they attend those supports?

What do you think of the idea that they are attending these programmes or supports?

Do you notice any differences in your child as a result of attending? What kind of differences/ why not?

If they are not attending any supports or clubs, do you think that your child would benefit from these supports? Are there other clubs or supports that you feel the school could supply that your child would benefit from? Why?

What kinds of things do you think are main concerns for parents of young children today? A) Concerns either for themselves, or b) for their children

General relations between the parent and school

What kind of contact would you have with the school over the school year? (e.g. Dropping the child off to school, involved in academic supports (maths for fun, reading initiative), parents association, parents interest groups, parent-teacher meetings, attendance at events, regular contact that is to do with issues that you are concerned with about your child?

How would you say your general relationship with the school is? Good / Bad? Why?

If participant has (had) other children in different schools down the years – is your relationship with different schools any different over the years? Why do you think that is?

Do you go to Parent-teacher meetings? What makes a good meeting? What makes a bad one?

What kinds of expectations do schools have of parents? E.g. helping children with homework, attending events, involvement in particular groups, contributions in terms of money, time for school fundraising, book scheme payments... etc.. Do you think the school has a realistic expectation of parents?

Do you think there is a role for parents in contributing to decisions made in schools?

What kinds of health and well-being issues do you think that schools should address?

How might parents take part in these kinds of decisions?

The view of the Department of Education is that parents should be involved in their child's education – what do you think of this?

Is there anything that would prevent you from being more involved in the school or in your child's education?

Parents Association

Have you ever been on the parents association? Would you like this role? Why/why not?

If currently on it ...

How did you come to be on the Parent's Association? Why do you get involved?

What kind of work do you do?

Do you like the work?

Are there any parts of it that are challenging?

What do you see the role of the Parent's Association as?

Have you been on a Parent's Association before or are you on other Parents' Associations?

Similarities or differences?

Do you think that it has been beneficial to be on the Association? In what way?

Parents own view of schooling

What was your own experience of going to school?

Do you think school is similar or different now – i.e. for your children, to when you were at school?

Do you think your view of school has changed since you have been sending your own children to school?

General profile of the parent.

Gender; Age; Number of children; Marital Status

Who is living at home?

Employment status/ individual/household/ nature of employment contract

Education/interviewee/household

Length of time living in local area.

Local network? Family nearby?

Appendix VI: Teacher /School Questions.

Curriculum

- Can you talk a little about the key aims and objectives of the current primary school curriculum?
- What are the main aspects of it that you find are good?
- Are there aspects of it that you find difficult, or more challenging to implement– why?
(Mainly to get an idea of the way that the teacher thinks about the curriculum, they see it as a means to an end for. Also, to get an idea of the values and norms being communicated through the curriculum).
- What are the more important aspects of the curriculum in your view? In general and in the context of this school?
- Do you have any leeway to decide which parts of the curriculum to implement / or focus upon – or how is it decided?
- What kinds of things do you think are important for the children in your class, or in this school, to engage with as part of their school experience?
- I noticed that children’s attendance at the different resources /initiatives can clash with each other or class times. Do you think it matters?
- While in both Senior Infant and First class classrooms I’ve noticed that ye do circle time – where children get to talk about different things. What is the thinking behind doing circle time? Do you think it is beneficial? If so how?
- Are there students that would typically do well at this level? Gender, ethnicity? Why do you think that is?
- What does it mean ‘to do well in school’ for the children? Is this particular to this school?
- What makes a group of children an ‘easy’ group or a ‘difficult’ one to teach in any given school year?

DEIS School

- When you started, can you remember if there were things about teaching (in this school/elsewhere) that surprised you – that you didn’t expect? About working in the classroom with the children and/or about interacting with parents?
- Do you think that teaching in a disadvantaged school has any influence on how you teach; the methods you use, the approach to teaching that you employ?
- Have you ever thought in a school that wasn’t a DEIS school? Did you notice any differences? Class sizes, general day to day processes – planning, content of plans, parent involvement?
- Do you like teaching in a DEIS school? Why?
- Is there any part of teacher training that focuses specifically on teaching in a DEIS school? What kinds of things are taught as part of this training?
- Are issues of health and well-being included as part of teacher training?
- Kinds of training that might be beneficial for working in a DEIS school that you feel could be added to teacher training?
- Class sizes. What difference do you think the small class sizes make for teaching and learning? Have you taught in larger classrooms? Differences for you?

Parents

- How would you see the role of parents in the context of your own work as a teacher? Are they important for your work?

- What role do you think parents should play in their children's education? Do you see a role for parents in the school more generally?
- How would you describe parents that are good at being involved in schooling?
- Which parents are those more likely to engage with you on an ongoing basis? Gender, age, race, class?
- At parent teacher meetings would you be more likely to meet fathers /mothers/both?
- Parent/Teacher meetings. Good sides of it and challenging side of it and why.
- Parent support for reading and homework. Important in the context of your job? I noticed that some children's parent's consistently don't sign the signers. What do you think that is about?
- Parent access to teachers? I've noticed that this is structured in particular ways – like getting parents to drop off children at the back door – taking notes of the teachers etc.. Is there a particular reason why this is being done this way?

Teaching in a wider political/economic context

- Try and get a sense of how teachers think of their jobs in the wider political context ? Maybe ask about Haddington Road? Croke Park Hours etc.. Do they see the current recession as affecting their roles? Class sizes, support resources etc..
- Do they notice any differences in the children since the onset of the recession? (Teachers may not have taught before the recession.)
- Do you get a sense that families are effected in any particular ways?

Appendix VII: Focus Group Topics.

School

Do you think going to school is different now to when you were at school? What is the same? What is different?

What kind of contact do you have with your child's school?

- For e.g. would you talk with the teacher. Drop in to organise things for school, take part in literacy, maths programmes, etc... Why/why not... If yes experiences of this...

Do you attend parent-teacher meetings? If so, what did you think of them? If not – was there any reason why not?

Are your children linked in with any specific supports in the school?

- If yes, what for? How did this come about? What do you think of the supports being provided?

Do your children do any after school activities? Do you think children should do after school activities? Why?

The day I was out introducing this project to you we talked a little about the idea of there being a Parent's Association in schools.

- Are any of you on the parent's association in your children's schools?
- What would you imagine that a parent's association might do in a school?
- Would this be something that you would like to take part in – why, why not?

Do you see yourselves as having a role in the decisions being made in schools, not only about the core subjects, but about how a school is organised to suit the needs or preferences of the pupils in it? (An example of this might be a greater focus on bullying issues, or a particular topic that you feel should be included in the SPHE curriculum – if you thought there was something that children should be learning – like about physical exercise, or safety in the playground?)

Have there ever been any instances where decisions were taken about your children in school that you were not happy about?

Parents

What were your own experiences of school? Did you like school? Why?

Has becoming a parent been what you expected, or is it very different to what you expected?

What kind of things are really important to you in the context of being a parent?

What kind of things are challenging for you in the context of being a parent?

How would you deal with challenges that you encounter as a parent? Would you try resolve them yourselves or would you look for support?

Appendix VIII: Home School Liaison

What are the main aspects of your role as Home School Liaison?

How would you feel that your role is divided up percentage wise?

Is the role one that requires you to be flexible adaptable or is the job description very prescriptive and one that has to be followed?

Home visits

What are the main reasons for making home visits to children's homes?

Frequency of those visits?

How do you find those visits?

How do you feel parents engage with you?

How would you see the Home Visits in terms of the development of relations between home and the school?

Parents Association.

How many parents are currently on the Parents Association? How did the Association form?

What is the role of the Parents Association?

What actually occurs – e.g. meetings, organisation of fundraising etc..

You mentioned before that parents take part in some policy decision making in the school. Would this be parents from the Parents Association? What would this be in relation to? Why those kinds of things? How does that go?

Earlier in the year you had mentioned that the Parents Association was struggling a bit. For what kinds of reasons might the Association struggle. (Point out that I am not asking about specific individual issues, but instead about reasons why the PA might struggle).

Would these be the main challenges in running a Parents Association or would there be others?

Do new parents regularly come onto the Parents Association?

Healthy Schools Committee.

What is the aim of the HS Committee?

Who is on it? Are parents on it? What does it do? How does it work?

Parent/Toddler group.

What is the reason for setting up the parent and toddler group?

What is the uptake like?

What is the profile of parents that attend? Age, gender, race?

Are there any particular challenges in running a parent and toddler group?

What works well about it?

General

Other key aspects of the role – check back with earlier in interview.

Have you worked in schools that are not DEIS schools? What would you say are the main differences between these schools – (e.g. resources, needs of the children, parent-school relations).

Do you think that the recession has affected parents in any particular ways? If so, what kinds of signs would you have noticed that suggest this is so or not.

Appendix IX: Principal Interview

School and School Supports

Do you think that schooling has changed over the years that you have been working in education? If so, in what ways?

What do you think are the main challenges associated with running the school?

Do you see any or all of these being particular to this school, or particular to DEIS schools? Do you think there would be similar challenges in a more middle class school?

What kinds of changes in Special Needs Resources have occurred in recent times? (e.g. Traveller specific supports)

Have changes in special needs supports had particular impacts on the school?

- a) in terms of the groups previously targeted through these supports, and
- b) the general pupil population of the school?
- c) for teaching staff

How important are SNA posts in the context of this school? Any examples to support this?

How important is the post of Home-School Liaison for the school?

How has the HSLO role changed over the years? What has contributed to bringing about these changes?

How important is fundraising for the school?

Restorative Practice: do you find it effective in the school? How? Is it used in the context of discussions with parents for any reasons?

Curriculum

Has the introduction of Aistear, involved a change in emphasis for any particular aspects of the curriculum?

Have these changes been beneficial/challenging in the context of this school?

Are there aspects of the curriculum that you feel are more important than others for children in DEIS schools?

Parent – School Relations

Have parent – school relations changed over the years? In what ways?

What do you think has contributed to these changes?

Do you think parental involvement in schools is important? Why?

What is your opinion on the view (ref the recent NPS(P) conference) that parents should be more involved in decision making in schools?

Wider Political and Economic Context.

Have Croke Park / Haddington Road had any impacts in the school?

Is austerity more generally having an impact on schooling or day to day school life?

Have you noticed any austerity related impacts on families / children? Has this had any knock on effects for the school?