Education and class formation in 20th century Ireland: a retrospective qualitative longitudinal analysis ('Version 2 – accepted for publication).

Jane Gray

National University of Ireland, Maynooth

(Corresponding author:

Jane Gray, Department of Sociology, NUI Maynooth, County Kildare, Ireland

Email: jane.gray@nuim.ie)

Aileen O'Carroll

Irish Qualitative Data Archive

Abstract

The article presents a retrospective qualitative longitudinal analysis of experiences of education and class amongst three cohorts of Irish people who started out in difficult financial circumstances. It shows how the intersection of education and class-formation in modern Ireland was 'realized' in different historical periods during the twentieth century. Some groups accumulated economic and cultural resources allowing them to convert education to upward social mobility during key periods, whereas others were 'shut out' from the project of the state. We argue that the concept of 'experience', understood as the realization of historically situated macro-sociological processes, provides a useful way of linking agency to structural change, bringing the strengths of macro-sociological quantitative analysis together with those of micro-sociological qualitative analysis within a longer temporal frame.

Key Words

Class-Formation, Education, Qualitative Longitudinal Methods, Life Histories, Ireland, 20th Century

Introduction

The part played by education in the creation and reproduction of class inequalities has been well established in the sociological literature on Ireland. Quantitative research provided a comprehensive account of how changing levels of participation in education intersected with the transformation of the class structure in ways that reproduced overall patterns of inequality. However, this literature was criticized for its reliance on weak models of rational action that, according to the critics, are essentially descriptive rather than explanatory. A complementary, qualitative research tradition documented the ways in which class is produced and reproduced in social action at the level of families, communities and schools. Until recently the quantitative and qualitative traditions developed along parallel paths, such that we lack a clear understanding of how micro and macro-level processes interacted in the reproduction and transformation of the Irish class structure over time.

This article aims to develop such an understanding through a retrospective qualitative longitudinal (QL) (Flowerdew and Neale 2003; Giele 2009) approach that examines processes of class-formation in twentieth century Ireland from the perspective of changing experiences of education. Our analysis is based on life story interviews collected from respondents to a national panel study. We argue that a theoretically informed analysis of 'experience' is central to understanding how macro-level processes are 'realized' (Sewell 1990) in micro-level social action. To that end we revisit the debate on 'experience' that developed in the 1980s around E.P. Thompson's understanding of class as a 'happening.' By anchoring our qualitative life story data in quantitative evidence about respondent socio-economic origins and destinations, we aim to mobilize the strengths of Thompson's approach, without the problems of teleology and determinism identified by his critics.

The article begins with an overview of the main research findings – both quantitative and qualitative - on education and class in Ireland. We discuss their principal theoretical differences, and comparative strengths and weaknesses, before elaborating our approach to uniting their strengths

in a historically grounded focus on the process of class-formation. We then introduce the 'Life

Histories and Social Change' (LHSC) database and proceed to an empirical analysis of experiences of

education and class amongst a sub-sample of respondents from three birth cohorts.

Education and social class in Ireland: quantitative and qualitative perspectives

The association between education and the creation and reproduction of class inequalities in Ireland

has been established at different levels of historical analysis, by a range of studies deploying distinct

methodological strategies. Quantitative research generated different insights depending on

whether the window of time was opened on generations, cohorts or periods (Elder 1992).

Educational achievement continues to be a key mechanism in the transmission of comparative

disadvantage between generations (Nolan et al. 2006: 121-149; Layte and Whelan 2002). Across

birth cohorts, relative inequalities in access to education have persisted over time (Raftery and Hout

1993; Smyth and Hannan 2000; Clancy 2007), while the significance of higher levels of education for

securing more advantaged positions in the labour market has declined (Breen and Whelan 1993;

Layte and Whelan 2000; Whelan and Layte 2004; Whelan and Layte 2006). Within particular

historical periods, changes in the size and composition of the labour market created opportunities

for upward social mobility amongst those able to secure higher levels of education. Thus, during the

1960s children from all class backgrounds (but especially those from within the farm sector)

increased their rates of participation in secondary education, while changes in the structure of the

economy meant that demand for employees with higher levels of education increased (Raftery and

Hout 1993; Breen et al. 1990; Hannan and Commins 1992). During the 'Celtic Tiger' period of rapid

economic growth (c.1997-c.2002), further 'upgrading' of the class structure created increased

opportunities for upward social mobility amongst children from working-class backgrounds,

although relative patterns of inequality within education and the labour market remained

unchanged (Whelan and Layte 2004).

Quantitative scholarship provided a complex, multi-faceted description of the intersection between changing levels of participation in education and the re-structuring of the Irish class system. However, it has been comparatively silent on how these structural patterns are produced at the micro-sociological level of social action. Insofar as they engaged with this question, Irish quantitative researchers generally relied on variants of rational action theory (Breen and Whelan 1993: 15; Layte and Whelan 2000: 107; Whelan and Layte 2004: 4). RAT explains the reproduction of social inequality in terms of how middle and upper-class people (are presumed to) deploy their resources in ways that secure their comparative advantage in the educational system and the labour market, whereas working-class children and their families must guard against the greater costs to them of a failed attempt at obtaining higher-level educational qualifications (Goldthorpe 2010).

However, RAT has been criticized for its weak explanatory power. According to Savage et al. (2005, p. 38), Goldthorpe's model relies on a commonsense understanding of what counts as a 'resource,' leading to the proliferation of descriptive categories, without any theoretical basis to choose between them. Lynch and O'Riordan (1998) pointed out that RAT models treat the preferences that guide educational decision-making as fixed, rather than constantly negotiated within the experience of schooling itself. In other words, social action is a 'black box' when deployed within a quantitative, macro-sociological framework (see also Hatcher 1998).

Whereas scholarship within the quantitative tradition focused on specifying macro-social trends in educational participation and class outcomes, scholarship within the qualitative tradition documented the voices of participants. This approach aimed to understand the actions and choices of students and their families within the context of their social experience. Thus Lynch and Lodge (2002) used qualitative evidence to show how, within a policy context that emphasizes voluntarism in school selection, state and school practices impose barriers to the exercise of 'choice' on the part of working-class families. In a QL study of the dynamics of early school leaving, Byrne and Smyth (2010) demonstrated how such negative experiences of the school environment precipitated a process of disengagement leading to the decision to leave.

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The strength of qualitative, micro-sociological approaches lies, therefore, in their capacity to open a window on the "dense fabric of micro-choices" (Hatcher 1998, p.21) that make up individual and family 'decision-making' around education, showing how agency is framed within class-differentiated experiences of schooling, and revealing the extent to which those experiences are shaped by political and cultural barriers and resources, as well as economic ones. Qualitative approaches aim to address 'the process as well as the outcomes of education' (Coffey 2001, p. 4). However, 'whilst qualitative data may take us closer to where the action is, they do not automatically provide a privileged lens on process' (Irwin 2009, p. 1136). In practice, qualitative analyses rarely connect back to the macro-level processes whereby, in Bourdieurian terms, assets and resources are converted from one field to another and accumulated over time (Savage et al. 2005, pp. 44-45). Analyses focusing on the cultural reproduction of class differences in educational attainment cannot account for the aggregate pattern of increasing levels of participation and concomitant social mobility (Goldthorpe 2010, p. 319). In other words, qualitative research has not successfully disentangled the cohort and period effects that give rise to social change. In the Irish context, we need to explain how, in different historical periods, some groups succeeded in accessing higher class positions through the education system whereas others continued to be excluded.

To address these questions we must expand the 'window' of qualitative analysis to the temporal frame adopted by quantitative macro-sociological studies. QL research creates the opportunity to develop just such an understanding of class as 'a happening' (E.P. Thompson 1966) – to link the insights generated within micro-level qualitative research to those generated within the macro-level quantitative tradition, through an analysis of changing <u>experiences</u> of education and social mobility. In QL research "[Time] is mediated through a *cultural* turn that explores the detailed *textures* of social life—the subjective meanings and active crafting of social relationships, cultural practices and personal identities and pathways" (Flowerdew and Neale 2003, p. 192). Thompson, similarly, sought to explain how processes of class formation varied across time and place, as people deployed historically and locally specific cultural frames - 'traditions, value systems, ideas and

institutional forms' (Thompson 1966, p. 10) - to interpret and respond to changing social and economic conditions. His scholarship opened a new window on agency and contingency in macro-social change, and inspired a generation of social historians. In sociology, Thompson's ideas influenced those of Bourdieu (Calhoun 1994; c.f. Bourdieu 1987, pp. 8-9), who was one of the first scholars to introduce Thompson's work in France (Vincent 2004, p. 140).

However Thompson's scholarship was increasingly criticized on the grounds that, in practice, his account of working-class formation rested on conventional teleological (and unexamined) assumptions about the overall pattern of macro-structural change, and was blind to differences within the working class (Sewell 1990, Scott 1992; Skeggs 2004, p.42).   Bourdieu's ideas have similarly been argued to suffer from latent forms of reductionism and teleology that limit their capacity to explain the transformation of the class structure over time (Jenkins 1992). We agree with Savage et al. (2005, p. 43) that focusing on the 'accumulation and convertibility of capitals' is key to overcoming these shortcomings in order to develop a genuinely processual understanding of class (see also Skeggs 1997, p. 10), one that is attentive to intersectionality amongst different forms of inequality in class-formation (Valentine 2007), and to how social positions are negotiated (Skeggs 2004). Thompson's 'experience' must not be understood simply as cultural 'responses' to structural (meaning social and economic) change, but rather as the process whereby different kinds of capitals, assets and resources (including cultural ones) are mobilized and accumulated ('realized') in ways that produce class as a differentiated and 'emergent effect.' In order to capture experience we require data that allow us to examine more precisely the changing interplay and accumulation of different kinds of assets and resources in *historical time*. Our retrospective QL strategy addressed this requirement by systematically collecting life stories from respondents to a representative panel study within specified birth cohorts.   In the next section we provide an overview of our data and methodology, followed by an analysis of the changing relationship between education and class-formation in Ireland.

Data and Methodology

Research for the 'Life Histories and Social Change in Twentieth-Century Ireland' (LHSC) project was

carried out with respondents from three birth cohorts who had previously taken part in all eight

waves of the 'Living in Ireland' survey (LII) - a nationally representative panel study conducted in

each year between 1994 and 2001. The complete LHSC database comprises 113 life story

interviews, life history calendars, and simple retrospective social network schedules.[1] This paper

focuses on accounts of education in the life stories of respondents who reported in LII that their

households experienced 'some' or 'great' difficulty making ends meet when they were growing up.

The variable is associated with parental education and class and is a strong indirect predictor of

exposure to poverty in adulthood, through its direct effect on individual educational attainment

(Nolan et al. 2006).

<Table 1 about here>

Table 1 shows how these variables were distributed amongst respondents in the

representative LII sample, and in the LHSC sample. It illustrates that the impact of household

difficulty making ends meet in childhood, on individual educational attainment and risk of poverty in

adulthood, varied by historical period and birth cohort. Respondents who grew up in the bleak

economic decades of the 1930s and forties were more likely to report that their households had

experienced difficulty making ends meet when they were growing up, and they were also more likely

to have experienced income poverty during the 1990s when they were reaching retirement age.

Members of the youngest cohort, by contrast, grew up during a period of comparative economic

prosperity, so proportionally fewer of them had encountered poverty either in childhood or as

adults when they were interviewed at the peak of their lifetime earning capacity in the midst of an

economic boom.

In the following sections, we examine and compare respondents' experience of education

during three distinct periods in the evolution of the modern Irish state and society: (1) the 'rural

fundamentalism' of the 1930s and forties, when state policy centred on establishing independence;

(2) the 'developmentalism' of the 1950s and sixties, when the policy paradigm changed towards promoting industrialization; and (3) the 'culture wars' that accompanied rapid social change in the 1970s and eighties. By 'walking with' three cohorts of respondents as they encountered education, we reveal class formation as a 'happening.' We show how state policies and socio-economic environments affected patterns of social mobility in different historical periods, and how some groups accumulated advantage over time, leading to a hierarchy of opportunity from which others were consistently excluded. We also explore how subject positions were negotiated in different historical contexts, showing that class was more prominent during the period of 'developmentalism.'

Rural Fundamentalism: Exclusion and Threat in the Thirties and Forties

Following the establishment of Saorstát Eireann in 1922, Irish government policy focused on securing the independence of the new state. After Fianna Fáil came to power in 1932, economic policy centred on attaining greater self-sufficiency by imposing tariffs to protect domestic industry and by encouraging tillage agriculture in support of the smaller farmers that comprised much of the party's electoral support base (Ó Gráda 1997, p. 5). Successive governments also sought to foster national identity by reviving the Irish language through the education system (Akenson et al. 2003, p. 727). Schools became central to the ongoing project of melding Catholic and nationalist identity in order to "provide a basis for the legitimacy of the functions of the state" (Ryan 1987, p. 108).

Because of the importance of children's labour in agriculture, schools were also sites of conflict between the objectives of promoting a small-farm economy and fostering Irish national identity. Aggregate demand for children's labour may have been relatively weak (Fahey 1992, pp. 387-388), but individual farm households depended on the flexibility of family labour to meet seasonal and family life cycle needs (Breen 1983). In this context, the School Attendance Act of 1926, which required every child to attend school from six until fourteen years of age, conflicted with parents' rights to dispose of their children's time. Sanctions for non-compliance extended from

visits and formal warnings to fines on parents and, ultimately, committal to 'industrial schools,' where children could be detained up to the age of 16 (Fahey 1992, pp. 379-380). Fahey (1992, p. 382) calculated that about a third of families with school-age children were affected by the implementation of this Act.

Later debates about further raising the school leaving age came down on the side of protecting children's labour contribution to the farm economy. An inter-departmental government committee concluded in 1935 that the withdrawal of juvenile labour from agriculture 'would be a serious hardship to parents' (quoted in Kennedy 2001, p. 126), and it was not until 1972 that the compulsory leaving age was raised to 15 (Kennedy 2001, p. 130). The percentage of 14-16 year-olds who were not in full-time education declined very slowly during this period, from 62% in 1929 to 58% in 1944 (Ó Buachalla 1988, p. 78).

Difficulty getting to and from school, the widespread use of corporal punishment, and the doubtful pedagogical value of what went on in the schoolroom may also have made parents and children reluctant to participate in education. Fahey (1992) suggested that basic literacy would have been achieved by age ten, and that in many cases poor instruction and boredom meant that children learned little from school teaching. Certainly, the first two factors are common themes in our respondents' accounts. James was born in 1924, the son of a gardener who was employed on a local landed estate. He remembers being afraid of the Guards (police) who attended the school once a week to monitor attendance: "Half the time you wouldn't be in it, you wouldn't be in."

   [Named garda] was in charge at that time. You'd be locked up. There was an industrial school

   there in [named place] and if you did anything out of the way or if you didn't attend school

   they'd put ya down there.

   […]

T' was wicked that time. [...] I knew one boy who went there alright, after my time, and ah he did some harm in the school anyhow and he was put down there [...] The Christian Brothers used to beat the devil outta him.

(James b.1924)

Given the recent levels of attention to past ill-treatment of children in public discourse, it is not surprising that memories of corporal punishment were to the forefront of our respondents' minds. Notably, however, cold, hunger and difficulty getting to school were just as salient amongst unhappy memories. Our oldest respondent's recollection of her childhood education combines these themes with that of poor instruction:

I remember, of course, a lot about school because I had to walk three miles in winter and summer [.....] And it wasn't easy, you know, and coming home sometimes it would be, our teacher, I don't know, the poor man, he seemed to spend half his time in the clouds, he might get a fit of talking to someone about something at half two when we should be going home and as a result we'd be leaving at three or four and it would be dark by the time we'd get home starving of the hunger.

(Joan b.1916)

These memories provide evidence in favour of Fahey's (1992) argument that the hardship entailed in getting to school, together with poor instruction and corporal punishment led to an aversion to education on the part of many children. However, a second, contradictory theme of regret at not having been able to pursue their education beyond the statutory age limit also appears strongly in our interviews, as do memories of good teachers who tried to encourage their pupils to go further.

Amongst those students who would have liked to continue their education, the obligation to help around the farm or care for parents was identified as a major factor in preventing them from doing so. In a number of cases, particular children were 'selected' to stay at home while their brothers and sisters received some further education. Patricia (b.1933) felt that her mother 'favoured' her younger sister who was given the opportunity to go to secondary school while she

was expected to help on the farm. When her older sister, who worked as a nurse in England, died tragically, she lost an advocate in the family for her own ambition to become a teacher. Even though some scholarships were available to assist 'bright' pupils with continuing their education, cost remained an inhibiting factor for others:

> You didn't know what to do at that time. There was five of us, five boys, in the same class. And there was a priest came over one day and he asked the teacher could they, she, recommend anyone that would like to go to college in, to [named place].... She picked out two boys and then she said I think there's a third fella as well she said but he couldn't afford it. [Laughter] We couldn't either. They were farmers y' see the two boys were picked.

> (James b.1924)

In summary, therefore, during the thirties and forties state policy and discourse centred on securing independence by promoting the economic interests of rural property-holders, and on establishing national identity through the education system. Within the smallholder class, some families experienced a mismatch between the opportunities presented by education and the economic requirements of the small farm economy. Many non-inheriting sons and daughters of small farmers were unable to convert the cultural assets that flowed from state favouritism towards their class to an accumulation of assets leading to upward social mobility. In accounting for their inability to take advantage of the opportunities presented by education, individual respondents from this class were more likely to refer to the gender and age hierarchies that structured the farm-household than to class inequality.

Nevertheless, the political culture of the state strongly favoured rural property holders, and as we will see, this was a period of 'primitive accumulation' of political and cultural assets (Savage et al. 2005) by farmers that allowed them to capture subsequent opportunities for social mobility through education. By contrast, landless agricultural labourers and urban manual workers were effectively shut out from the project of this state during this period. Weak institutional support for

their education combined with poverty and a harsh classroom environment to exclude them from any participation beyond the most basic level.

Developmentalism: Inequality Unmasked in the Fifties and Sixties

The second cohort of LHSC respondents grew up during a period of 'agonising reappraisal' (Garvin 2004) when the policies of 'rural fundamentalism' were yielding to those of 'developmentalism.' The nineteen-fifties were 'a miserable decade for the Irish economy,' when real national income virtually stagnated and net emigration reached its twentieth century peak (Ó Gráda 1997: 25-27). They were followed by a decade of rapid growth in the 1960s as economic policy changed in towards an export-oriented strategy and attracting foreign investment. After 1961, opportunities for employment in agriculture, and in low-skilled manual work diminished, while those in middle-class and skilled manual work increased (Layte and Whelan 2000).

Most of our respondents in this cohort were too old to avail of the free secondary education scheme that was introduced in 1967. Nevertheless, the percentage of 14-16 year olds in secondary and vocational education increased from 22% in 1944 to 46% in 1962 (Ó Buachalla 1988: 78). Publicly owned vocational schools (that did not charge fees) were introduced in the 1930s to provide 'general and practical training in preparation for employment in trades, manufacturing, agriculture, commerce and other industrial pursuits' (Vocational Education Act, 1930, quoted in Breen et al. 1990: 125). There were clear class distinctions between the different types of schools in the secondary sector, with voluntary secondary and boarding schools catering for middle class children, while children from working-class or small-farm families attended the local vocational school (Whelan and Hannan 1999, p. 291).

A number of LHSC respondents from urban backgrounds, who grew up during this period, remembered that their parents made great efforts to send them to secondary school. Doreen's (b.

1945) mother was 'too proud' to allow her older siblings to avail of scholarships to the 'posh' secondary school, but managed to pay her fees for a year:

> I went actually to the [secondary school]… but it was the posh secondary school, as they call it, you know, against the vocational school. And I went for a year and, God love it when I think of it, I mean they paid my fees for a year, and looking back on it I didn't have the common sense to think to continue it. You know, you know better, all my friends were going to the vocational so after a year then, I transferred to the vocational and did two years there.

Separation from her peers was also a factor in Sarah's (b. 1946) decision to leave secondary school against her mother's wishes:

> [It] was just the thing to do, to go to secondary. But all my friends left in primary and went to [the] technical school. And they went into clothing factories after at 14 then. My friend next door, she was working at 13….Most of my friends started working at 14. I left school at 16 and I could have stayed on, my mother would have let us stay on, you didn't have to leave or anything, she would have done everything to keep us at school. There was nobody I knew in my school anymore, so I left at 16, I went off to England at 16.

Some of the factors that discouraged continuing in education in the first cohort persisted in the experiences of respondents from rural backgrounds in the second. Michael (b. 1946) was unable to go past primary school because he failed to obtain a scholarship to a boarding school, and the distant vocational school was too difficult to access in the absence of a school transport scheme. Secondary education beyond a couple of years in the 'tech' was not expected or sought after by many children – especially not by boys. A growing gender gap in educational attainment began to emerge amongst those born after 1940 (Whelan and Hannan 1999: 293).

> Even up to my time, especially with boys, like fourteen was the finishing age and kids couldn't wait to finish school, there was no big incentive. They didn't see an education as

something, because generally what happened was, fellows in particular, went to England.

(Michael, b. 1946)

While corporal punishment re-appears as one of the negative memories of schooldays in this cohort, being treated differently because you were from the 'wrong' class background stands out as a much stronger theme.

I don't know, I think the nuns were too snobbish. Any children whose fathers had good jobs or professional jobs were treated differently than we were. We were put to the back of the class - didn't matter how good we were - we were always put to the back of the class and looked down on is all I can say. (Sarah. b. 1946)

Doreen (b. 1945) similarly remembered "never being picked for anything special …Because you were just one of the, the poor crew." A number of respondents recalled that physical punishment was not meted out to the children of better off people (an observation that also occurred in life stories from the first cohort):

If the child came from a family of substance the child was pampered and promoted. There was a judge's son that sat at the same desk as me that came in when, he was like he was dressed for his holy communion every day as opposed to going to school… and he never got a slap ever in his life and you could say that about the sergeant's son and so on and so forth (Bernard, b. 1946)

In summary, the childhood memories of education recorded by this cohort of respondents were formed during a transitional period in the development of the state. Especially amongst those from rural small-farm backgrounds, there is continuity with the earlier cohort in references to the obligation to work on the farm before and after school, and to a lesser extent, to the difficulty of getting to and from school. Corporal punishment continued to be mentioned by respondents from both rural and urban backgrounds. However, in this cohort class differences in the experience of

education – both in relation to the distinction between secondary and vocational schools, and in relation to treatment by teachers within the school environment – emerged as a striking new theme.

During the period when most of these respondents were growing up, public discourse began to centre on the perceived failure of Irish social and economic policy (Garvin 2004), and there was a new emphasis on meritocratic education in the development of human capital (Breen et al. 1990: 127-128). New opportunities in the labour market meant that the potential for converting educational qualifications into upward social mobility was considerably enhanced during this period, such that "the relative underachievement of children from working-class backgrounds put them at a very serious disadvantage in the labour market" (Hannan and Commins 1992, p. 93). While the children of small farmers had comparably low levels of educational participation in 1961, during subsequent years their families were substantially "more effective than working class families in utilizing the education system to gain access to...off-farm opportunities for their children." It appears that farmers were able to convert the cultural and economic capital accumulated during the period of rural fundamentalism into upward social mobility through education, even as the structure of the Irish economy shifted away from agriculture.

As the project of the state changed towards promoting industrial development and human capital, our respondents from working-class backgrounds became more conscious of how the educational system had failed them, especially since free secondary education became available shortly after most of them had left school. They articulated this sense of being failed in class-based terms. The emergence of new employment opportunities in manual work (both in Ireland and the U.K.), and in white collar jobs, meant that many of them felt little incentive to persevere with education at the time, although retrospectively at least some of them reflected on their decision to leave school with regret. In subsequent decades consciousness of class-based discrimination within the education system gave way to a pattern of indifference towards schooling, as relative class inequalities became consolidated despite increasing rates of participation and attainment overall.

Culture Wars: Disguised Inequality in the Seventies and Eighties

The 1970s and eighties, when the respondents in our third cohort were growing up, were decades of dramatic social change. Ireland joined the European Economic Community in 1973. Economic growth continued through the 1970s, but employment growth was "largely stagnant," with most new jobs being generated within the service sector (Breen et al. 1990: 135). Employment subsequently collapsed in the 1980s, due to the demise of indigenous manufacturing and the failure of foreign-owned firms to create sufficient numbers of replacement jobs (O'Hearn 2001: 159; Ó Riain and O'Connell 2000: 319).   These changes had consequences for the class structure: the proportions of men employed in both manual and 'non-manual' occupations continued to increase through the middle of the 1980s, but thereafter, manual occupations began to decline (Breen et al. 1990: 57; Layte and Whelan 2000: 95). Married female labour force participation increased strikingly during these decades, becoming especially pronounced after the mid-1980s (Fahey et al. 2000: 254). In addition to these 'material' changes in the structure of Irish society, significant cultural shifts also occurred. The 1980s were dominated by public debate surrounding sexuality and family life (Fahey and Layte 2007: 155-157).

Major changes in education policy also occurred in response to an OECD/Irish Government funded report that highlighted class and regional disparities in participation and a need to develop more vocational subjects (Breen et al. 1990: 126). Participation rates increased dramatically following the introduction of free secondary education in 1967 (Halpin and Chan 2003). However, significant class and gender differences in participation remained; Breen et al. (1990: 132) estimated that just 16 per cent of boys and 41 per cent of girls from semi or unskilled manual backgrounds attained the Leaving Certificate in 1981, compared to 59 per cent of boys and 71 per cent of girls from lower non-manual backgrounds. During the 1980s and 1990s, there were absolute increases in the numbers of young people from working class backgrounds who completed the Leaving Certificate, but "no significant reduction in relative inequalities between the different social classes"

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(Smyth and Hannan 2000: 117). Similarly, while all social groups increased their participation in third-level education during this period, relative class inequalities in access to third-level persisted (Smyth and Hannan 2000: 119).

Given the dramatic changes that their young lives traversed, it is initially somewhat surprising that the thematic data on experiences of education are considerably thinner for the members of the third LHSC cohort included in this study. For a start, there are simply fewer cases. Fewer respondents opted in to our study from this age cohort and, in general, a smaller proportion of them experienced financial hardship (as measured by the variable on 'making ends meet') when growing up. It is also likely that the way in which people remember their childhoods varies according to their current life stage (Brannen 2004). As we will see, however, the paucity of commentary on their experience of education is consistent with the longer-term shift within the project of the state towards increasing access to education understood as an individualized, meritocratic process preparing students for participation in the labour market. In this context, the experience of schooling has, in a general sense, improved, while processes of inequality have become hidden (Lynch and Lodge 2002).

Angela (b. 1965) thought the practice of streaming (placing children into different classes according to their academic 'ability') in secondary school was 'stupid,' but asserted that she never really cared because she and her peers 'didn't even think about' going on to third level education:

It was whatever you wanted to do you did, there was never pressure or anything. If you wanted to do that, you did that, if you didn't, you didn't. But the money wouldn't have been there to send you to college because [one of my brothers], he went first and like he saved and saved and saved and I remember he went to Dublin and he got digs and I think it was £40 or something a week and that was kind of bed and breakfast and your evening meal, that was £40. And to get the £40 to give him every week and the bus fare up and

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down was a big thing…We were never short of anything, put it that way, but to do something like that, you kind of scrimped and scraped to do that.

In a major recent study of early school-leaving in Ireland, the practice of streaming that Angela referred to was shown to precipitate disengagement from school by promoting a climate of low expectations, poor teacher-pupil interaction, and negative relationships with peers (Byrne and Smyth 2010, pp. 66-67).   Streaming is a significant part of the 'hidden' process whereby class and gender inequalities are reproduced through the education system, since working-class boys are more likely to be streamed into lower ability classes, and the practice of streaming is (today) disproportionately prevalent in working-class schools.

In our study, Áine's (b. 1969) experience of travelling out of her immediate area to go to school heightened her awareness of class differences. She told us that she felt like 'a fish out of water big time':

> Just like I suppose in terms of family income, even accents, a lot of that sort of stuff and some of it not quite chips on our shoulders but maybe conscious of not being at the same level so we tended to stick together, not as a gang by any means but I suppose other people would have come from different schools, maybe bigger groups so they would have known each other a lot more. So I did enjoy school. I was fairly good at school up to inter cert and I did enjoy it and I got a lot out of it and I suppose enjoyed the challenge and I used to be involved in tennis and hockey and I did a bit of running and the school choir and things like that as well. I enjoyed that.

In general, across our interviews with this youngest cohort of respondents there is an impression of enjoying school – especially its social aspects – without any strong commitment to education. Daly and Leonard (2002: 131), in a qualitative study of poor families carried out in 2000, found a similar pattern whereby "for a third of the children school was nothing other than a venue for meeting

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friends." Almost half of their child respondents "framed their reference to school either indirectly by discussing schoolmates or by actively indicating their dislike of school."

During the 'culture wars' of the 1970s and eighties the overt forms of discrimination experienced in earlier periods became increasingly unacceptable, but 'hidden' class practices continued to disengage working-class children – especially boys – from education, in ways that reinforced overall patterns of inequality. When members of our third cohort of respondents were starting out, young people with lower educational levels took longer to find their first job, experienced more and longer spells of unemployment, and a reduction of their relative position in the labour market within the first five years out of school (Smyth and Hannan 2000: 122-123). Lynch and Lodge (2002) observed that the "strong meritocratic ideology" that now pervades education inhibited the naming of class differences in their study, and ensured that class processes were "hidden" in everyday school practices like the streaming that Angela objected to (see also Reay 2006). This may go some way to explaining why the younger respondents in the LHSC study found less to say about education, compared to those in older cohorts. Moreover, increased *provision* of secondary education was accompanied both by a decline in formal curricular differences amongst the different categories of secondary schools (Smyth and Hannan 2000: 110) and by greater social segregation *between* schools: pupils are now less likely to have to travel outside their local area (as Áine did) in order to attend secondary school. These changes led to a reduction in the *visibility* of inequalities within the education system, which disguised the persistence of differences in participation and attainment that reproduced class and gender hierarchies.

Conclusion

We have argued that the concept of 'experience', understood as the realization of historically situated macro-sociological processes, provides a useful way of linking agency to structural change, bringing the strengths of macro-sociological quantitative analysis together with those of micro-

sociological qualitative analysis within a longer temporal frame. Furthermore, we believe that our approach enables a non-teleological, 'situated' understanding of class-formation in Ireland as a 'happening.'

Our retrospective QL analysis of experiences of education and class, amongst three cohorts of Irish people who started out in difficult financial circumstances, uncovered the processes whereby the intersection of education and class-formation in modern Ireland was 'realized' – that is, apprehended and acted towards – in different historical periods. We showed how, over the course of the twentieth century, some groups were able to accumulate economic and cultural resources in ways that enabled them to convert education to upward social mobility during key periods, whereas for others the system of education served to 'shut them out' from the project of the state. We also explored how the subject position of class was recognized, resisted and negotiated over time.

While outside the historical timeframe of this paper, it is interesting to note that during the Celtic Tiger period education came to play a diminishing role in the transmission of relative class advantage, given a rapid 'upgrading' of the class structure in the context of tight labour market conditions. For the first time in Irish history, working-class people substantially increased their ability to convert educational attainment into upward social mobility (Whelan and Layte 2007). However, during the recent economic crisis unemployment has increased most rapidly amongst young men with lower levels of education (Central Statistics Office 2010: 3). Ireland is entering a new phase in the relationship between education and class formation.

Notes

1. LII comprised the Irish module of the European Community Household Panel. Respondents to LII opted in to LHSC. The LHSC data are available for re-use through the Irish Qualitative Data Archive (www.iqda.ie)

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Biographies

Jane Gray is Senior Lecturer in the Department of Sociology and the academic programme leader for the Irish Qualitative Data Archive, both at the National University of Ireland, Maynooth. She was co-investigator with Professor Seán Ó Riain on the project 'Life Histories and Social Change in Twentieth-Century Ireland'. She has recently published a co-authored book on *Suburban Affiliations: Social Relations in the Greater Dublin Area* (Syracuse UP, 2010), with Mary P. Corcoran and Michel Peillon. Her research interests are in families and households, and in comparative-historical sociology.

Aileen O'Carroll is the manager of the Irish Qualitative Data Archive. Her role there includes the acquisition, preparation, dissemination and curation of qualitative data. She also was post-doctoral research assistant attached to the 'Life Histories and Social Change in 20th century Ireland' project. Previous to this she has worked on qualitative projects examining the lives of computer workers in Ireland and dockers in Dublin**.** Her book manuscript *Time and the Post Industrial Workplace: Unpredictability, Creativity and Knowledge Work* is under contract.

Table 1. Sample details.

Birth Cohort	Household difficulty making ends meet in childhood (A)	Comparatively low educational achievement within (A)=(B)[1]	Income poverty any year 1994-2001 within (A)[2]	Income poverty any year 1994-2001 within (A+B)
Living in Ireland Sample (Waves 1-8) (%)				
<=1934	61.9	52	67.7	82.7
1945-1954	54	44.7	45.9	67.3
1965-1974	36.3	48.8	45.3	63.2
Life Histories and Social Change Sample (N)				
<=1934 (N=43)	18	4	9	4
1945-1954 (N=42)	19	4	4	2
1965-1974 (N=28)	10	2	1	1

1. Cohort 1=no educational qualification; cohort 2=no secondary qualification; cohort 3=did not attain leaving certificate.
2. Equivalised below 60 percent median income.