

2018: Would theorist Kathleen Lynch agree that inequality in Irish society is perpetuated by the education system?

Kathleen Lynch is an Irish academic and activist whose work has centred around equality. Her key ideas surrounding equity in the education system are mainly covered in her 2004 book *Diversity in School*. This essay will discuss her standpoint on how inequality in Irish society is indisputably perpetuated by the education system. It will do so through the lenses of disability, class and membership of the Travelling Community. It will examine the changes proposed by Lynch, and the counterpoint of the writings of Key Thinker Robert Nozick, as well as including data from a number of sources.

The first aspect of inequality in Irish society which Lynch would argue is perpetuated by the education system is that of disability. In [*Diversity At School*](#), she outlines present and past discrimination around participation of disabled people such as segregation in schools in the 1990s. She criticises the fact that there are no automatic entitlements for young people with disability in the post-primary sector, and that research on inclusion by the Department of Education is limited. This makes education less accessible for disabled people, rather than working to include them. As education is a key springboard for later life, this perpetuates inequalities. This can be seen in the 2016 Census, in which 26% of the general population have a degree, compared to 13% of the disabled population. At post-primary level, an [*Inclusion Ireland*](#) report outlines the discrimination referenced by Lynch. It states that 84% of parents of children with disabilities say they don't receive the necessary therapy or support. It adds that ¼ of students with intellectual disabilities were put on shorter school days, ½ of whom were put on shorter days for 20 days or more without medical consultation and against their parents' wishes. From this data, we can see that Lynch is correct in saying that inequality around disability is perpetuated by the Irish education system.

To address this, Lynch outlines the importance of listening to disabled people, outlining that they are often ignored by those in power, "those who are least powerful to assert their rights can be ignored or treated unjustly". Lynch describes the importance of developing good educational practices, in cooperation with partners and representatives of those impacted by this inequality. *Diversity In School* also addresses admission and enrolment policies within education, and Lynch states that educational institutes must ensure that no one is denied a place due to any of the nine grounds of equality legislation.

She also argues that schools must make “reasonable” accommodations for disabilities and identify positive action measures to meet the needs of students. She calls for increased accessibility in the curriculum and how it is taught, and in schools as a whole. By doing this, she argues, we can create an inclusive education system which tackles inequality on the basis of disability and prevents this from being perpetuated into society as a whole.

The second ground on which Lynch argues inequality is perpetuated by the Irish education system is social class. In an opinion piece in thejournal.ie, Lynch writes ‘class and wealth, not merit, are rewarded in Ireland’s education system’. She argues that a class divide is feeding injustice into our education system, which then perpetuates the wider class inequality present in Irish society. She states that high grades and good degrees are often dependent on the money invested in a given child/adult over time, and that economic capital (money) and cultural capital (knowledge of how the education system works) aids those from wealthier backgrounds in accessing education. Lynch cites several examples of this, such as private grinds and ‘grinds schools’, private tuition for music, and being able to afford the Gaeltacht to achieve higher in the Irish exam. This is further evidenced by research carried out by [RTÉ](https://www.rte.ie), which found that 93% of non-DEIS students sit the Leaving Certificate, compared to 84% of DEIS students. According to the [Irish Times](https://www.irishtimes.com), 18/25 schools that send the highest proportion of students to the highest points courses are fee-paying. From this, we can see that class inequality is perpetuated in the education system, on the basis of private wealth and producing class-biased policies.

Lynch emphasises the need for government action to tackle this, to challenge the “neoliberal capitalist model that generates the growing income and wealth inequalities” present in Irish society and perpetuated by the education system. She argues for wider social action to tackle these issues at their root to work systematically, as well as accountable and actionable policies to ensure inclusion and equal access to education. Lynch argues that when any new vision or plan for education is being developed, it must include the introduction or development of a national strategy for equality addressing these issues.

Key Thinker Robert Nozick would likely disagree with Lynch’s arguments around class inequality and the education system. By addressing class inequality the state would be working to provide equality of opportunity in the education system, in which private wealth doesn’t guarantee additional opportunities or resources. Nozick argued the libertarian standpoint under which the

state should only spend to protect life, liberty and property. Taxation for any other purposes, according to Nozick, is tantamount to “theft”. Nozick [argued](#) that if one owns property, one is not morally bound to use it in ways that satisfy equality of opportunity. Therefore, he would oppose state action to address this class inequality and would stand in contrast with the thinking presented by Lynch. However, one could argue in return that the state is failing to protect life, liberty and security by allowing an education system which perpetuates inequality, inequality that is harmful to wellbeing and sense of security. Therefore, it is failing in its duty under the social contract as outlined by Hobbes and Locke and must therefore work to address this inequality in the education system.

The final ground on which Lynch argues inequality is perpetuated by the education system is membership of the Travelling Community, one of the nine grounds of discrimination outlined by the Equal Status Acts. In *Diversity in School*, she argues that the Travelling community has been historically overlooked in education policy and practice in Ireland. She writes that there is evidence schools continue to refuse to enrol Traveller young people, and reiterates the importance of equitable enrolment practices as discussed above. This inequality in accessing education is highly visible in the 2011 census, where only 13% of the Travelling Community finished second-level education, compared to 92% of the non-Traveller population. The [Irish Travellers' Movement](#) writes that only 1% of the Travelling Community have a college degree and the [Survey of Traveller Education Provision](#) found that 67.4% of the Travelling Community are at or below the bottom 20% in literacy. It is clear that this inequality is present and, as Lynch argues, perpetuates the wider inequality faced by the Travelling Community in Irish society.

Lynch outlines several actions to address this. She emphasises that when developing these plans, representatives of those who face discrimination should be involved in the creation and implementation. These policies should be designed with the Travelling Community and should elevate their voices in addressing the inequality. She states schools need to devise action plans- not just policies- with targets, measurable outcomes, and deadlines to fulfil a positive duty for furthering equality. Lynch also discusses the need for the Department of Education to put in place clear guidelines for emphasising education, and clearly monitoring these. Lynch furthers this with saying schools should specifically prohibit harassment on the basis of the nine grounds and have procedures in place to deal with this, particularly as bullying and social exclusion can be a key factor in the inequality faced by the Travelling Community. Finally, Lynch believes that the Department of Education should fund research strategies to support a focus on

equality in education. She puts forward that resources should be proactively invested in removing barriers in accessing and securing presence and participation across all nine grounds of equality legislation.

In conclusion, Kathleen Lynch argues that inequality in Irish society is perpetuated by the education system with regard to disability, class and membership of the Travelling Community and suggests a number of educational changes to increase equality in Irish education. She outlines the inequality faced with regard to each of these aspects, and the impact this has on wider society. Key Thinker Robert Nozick would likely oppose her standpoint and offer a libertarian counterpoint with regard to equality of opportunity. However, it is clear from Lynch's writings that this inequality is present and perpetuated in our education system, and must be thoroughly challenged and addressed. To achieve equality, we must teach tolerance, we must prohibit harassment, and we must listen to those most affected. I strongly agree with Lynch on her writings, as US Supreme Court judge Sonia Sotomayer said, "Until we reach equality in education, we can't reach equality in the larger society."