

### **Discuss the view that economic inequalities create educational inequalities.**

In one form or another, the right to education is embedded in the centre of all human rights declarations and many of the constitutions of the nations of the world. Article 26 of the UNDHR universally entitles people of all backgrounds to free primary education, while our own Bunreacht na hÉireann pledges in its 42<sup>nd</sup> article that the state will provide this free education. However, closer scrutiny of supposedly 'free' and 'equal' access to education invites us to question whether it is in fact only ever fully realised for those at the top of the social hierarchy at the expense of those at the bottom.

This of course depends on how you define equality. Thinkers from Durkheim to Nozick will point to the excellent educational attainment rates in first world democracies such as Ireland. In 2017 the CSO put the secondary level attainment rate in Ireland at 94% while some 45% go onto third level education. These figures at first appear to prove that the presence of the basic right to education is enough to grant any citizen access to an education, regardless of their economic standing. Nozick would argue that the fact that 96% of people are getting such an education means that the duty bearer has fulfilled their obligation regardless of the quality of that education, simply because equality of access has been provided.

However, mere provision of classrooms and teachers does not even come close to the equality of outcomes favoured by influential human rights theorist Martha Nussbaum. To see why, we need to look no further than Maslow's hierarchy of needs. Maslow tells us that certain preconditions must be met before any indivisible right can be fulfilled. Without food or shelter a child cannot possibly enjoy a decent education. And unfortunately, it is Ireland's current economic reality that many children do not even get past the first level of the pyramid of needs. According to Barnardos in 2018, one in nine Irish children go to bed hungry, while figures from the department of housing put the number of homeless children in Ireland at 3,778. How, Nussbaum might ask, can these children be said to have their right to education fulfilled to the same extent as a child from a more positive socio-economic background. Homeless figures and poverty rates are stark examples of economic inequalities which shine a very different light on that 96% attainment rate.

The effect economic inequality has on the realisation of the right to education becomes even clearer when one looks at the basic costs of education in Ireland. A report from Barnardos on the cost of schooling in Ireland reveals that 42% of parents with children in primary school and 47% of those with children in secondary school must cut back on household expenditure in order to afford items such as crested uniforms and schoolbooks. A shocking 14% of families now go into debt to pay secondary school expenses. It seems obvious to me that child whose family must go into debt to provide them with the tools they need to get an education, is not enjoying equal access to the right to education with a child whose economic fortunes allow them to attain these materials with ease. Most tellingly of all, the report concludes that the Irish education system needs a budget increase of €103.2 million to make completely free education a reality.

Gradually, Irish political parties are waking up to this, and their party manifestos are beginning to reflect the reality that economic inequalities are causing educational inequalities. Fine Gael and Labour both promise a free hot meal for all primary school children, a proposition that links directly to Maslow's pyramid of needs and acknowledges that a hungry child is not an equal one. Meanwhile, the Green Party are beginning to mention the concept of 'truly free' education which eliminates costs that put less fortunate children at a disadvantage, entirely.

These disadvantages are proven to exist annually with the publishing of the Feeder Schools tables. In 2019, half of the 20 schools which sent the highest proportion of students to third level, were private schools. Irish Times analysis of the tables concluded that economic background continues to be a factor in the academic attainment of second level students. Indeed, only 15% of students in disadvantaged areas made the jump to third level. In my view, this undeniably refutes the conservative idea of meritocracy and defends Nussbaum's concept of rights and something which should be measured by outcomes and capabilities, not just access.

Slowly, Nussbaum's view is beginning to be accepted. The creation of DEIS schools across the country and the policy changes of major political parties show this. However, until this problem is fully recognised and given the importance it deserves, the class struggle described by Marx will continue to play out within our education system. Until truly free education is established on the island of Ireland, Article 26 of the UNDHR will remain unfulfilled and Bunreacht na hÉireann's promise of the provision of free primary education, will remain hollow.