

Social Class in Initial Teacher Education (ITE) in Ireland: Considering the Formal Categorisations and Self-Classifications of 2013/2014 Postgraduate Post-primary ITE Entrants

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Introduction

The Diversity Profiling Initial Teacher Education (DITE) in Ireland research project, funded by the Irish Research Council, is a national, mixed-methods, cross-sectional, longitudinal study. It seeks to gather and analyse background and attitudinal data from applicants and entrants to initial teacher education (ITE) programmes in order to compare their socio-demographic profiles, their experiences with and beliefs about diversity, and their career motivations.

In this paper, drawing on the project's first applicant cohort dataset, we consider 2013/2014 entrants to postgraduate post-primary ITE (Professional Diploma in Education) programmes¹, focusing in particular on participants' socio-economic group profile (using Central Statistics Office (CSO) categorisations), and their related self-classifications.

Background, Rationale and Literature Review

Whilst our school pupil populations significantly diversified through immigration during the 'Celtic Tiger' years (Smyth et al., 2009), the homogeneity of our teaching profession is notable, with teachers being predominantly white, female, and of the majority ethnic and social class groupings (Author 2, 2011; Leavy 2005; Devine, 2005; Authors, 2013), especially at primary school level. This is in line with the international experience (e.g. in the US, Zumwalt & Craig, 2005; Tyler, 2011; in Australia, Hartsuyker, 2007; OECD, 2009).

Similar to the international context (cf. in the US, Zumwalt & Craig, 2008), in Ireland, research and national policy have emphasised the necessity of diversifying the teaching population (Author 2, 2012; Conway et al., 2009; Irish Teaching Council, 2008, 2011; Moran, 2008; Lynch & Lodge, 2004; DES, 2002). Any re-examination of entry procedures needs to be strongly evidence-based (Author 2, 2011). A number of studies in Ireland have included a focus on student profiles at post-primary (e.g. Author 2, 2008, 2011; Clarke, 2009) or primary (Drudy et al., 2005, Killeavy, 1993, 1998; Drudy & Lynch, 1993) ITE levels, but what we have been lacking is a solid statistical base which describes our *national* context.

1 Offered in Ireland's seven universities

Our focus in this paper, drawing on our first applicant cohort dataset, is 2013/2014 NUI entrants' social class profile. Research in Ireland on teachers' and ITE entrants' social class background has been relatively limited. That which exists points to the over-representation of those from farming and higher socio-economic groups (cf. Greaney et al. 1987; Clarke, 2009; Author 2, 2011), especially at primary level (Killeavy, 1998; Drudy et al. 2005). Research internationally suggests that the social class profile of ITE entrants in Ireland is a little different to other contexts. Studies from the US (Brookhart and Freeman, 1992), China (Su et al., 2001), and Australia (Richardson and Watt, 2006) report that significant proportions of ITE entrants are from lower socio-economic backgrounds.

Methodology

The wider DITE project is a mixed-methods, longitudinal study, using a) an online questionnaire (consisting of 79 items, including socio-demographic, background, and attitudinal items measured through categorical and continuous scales, as well as some open-ended items), and b) semi-structured interviews². In our study, participants' socio-economic and social class backgrounds are operationalised, and coded, using the national census categories (Central Statistics Office (CSO) 2012, Appendix 7) based on the occupations of their parents. We also included a self-classification question, inviting participants to categorise themselves as working class, lower middle class, upper middle class, upper class, or none of the above, and to provide an explanation for their answer.

We received responses from 527 entrants (42% of the national population of PDE entrants³) overall. 65.1% of entrants (N=343) supplied information about their parents' occupations. In some cases, insufficient or imprecise information given on occupations impeded totally accurate classification, and socio-economic group and social class required estimation.

Findings

For this short paper, we only consider participants' socio-economic group (CSO categorisations), and self-classifications. In our presentation, we will consider additional indicators of participants' social class profile.

² With a sample of applicants and entrants, and possibly, non-applicants, commencing late 2014.

³ In State-funded institutions

Socio-economic Group

The table below presents our participants' socio-economic group (DITE 2013 All Entrants). The inclusion of our results for DITE 2013 NUI⁴ Entrants allows for comparison with Author 2's (2011, 2013a) 2006 data for the same group, and we additionally include the socio-economic profile from the Irish 2011 Census (CSO, 2012) and the HEA for the undergraduate population generally (HEA, 2013) for national, and HE (undergraduate) comparisons.

	2006 NUI Entrants (Fathers)	DITE 2013 NUI Entrants (Fathers)	DITE 2013 All Entrants (Fathers)	CSO 2011 (Males)	HEA Facts and Figures 11/12 (Fathers)
A - Employers and Managers	12.9	12.2	15.7	16.7	18.9
B - Higher Professionals	8.8	7.9	9.9	7.1	11.0
C - Lower Professionals	12.9	10.2	10.2	9.7	9.3
D - Non-manual	12.4	13.4	12.2	14.5	9.3
E - Manual Skilled	22.4	24.8	20.4	12.5	11.9
F - Semi-skilled	3.5	7.9	7.0	8.5	5.5
G - Unskilled	1.8	7.5	6.1	3.7	2.4
H - Own account workers	5.3	2.4	5.0	5.6	8.4
I - Farmers	20.0	13.4	13.1	4.9	7.6
J - Agricultural workers		0.4	.3	0.7	0.8
Z - Other (homemaker)				16.1	15.0
Total (%)	100	100.0	100	100	100.1 ^{*2}
No. of respondents	170	254	343	2,272,699	24,064

In our presentation, we will examine these findings, focusing in particular on changes in the socio-economic group profile of NUI entrants from 2006-2013, including the considerable decrease in the percentage of entrants with fathers working as farmers, and the notable increase in entrants whose parents work in semi-skilled or unskilled occupations. We will also examine interesting differences in the socio-economic profile of ITE entrants to different universities. For example, in contrast to the other universities, a significant proportion of the sample of PDE entrants in the three main Dublin universities came from the top two socio-economic groups.

Self-classification: Social class

⁴ Four of Ireland's seven universities together constitute the National University of Ireland (NUI): NUIG, UCD, UCC, & NUIM

467 entrants provided a response to the self-categorisation question. 177 (37.9%) identified as working class, 140 (30%) as lower middle class, 118 (25.2%) as upper middle class, and 32 (6.8%) as none of the above. 266 explained their self-classification. Initial thematic analysis suggests a continuum, along which participants' self-position, encapsulating their reaction to the concept of social class categorisation. Broadly, this is a continuum of *acceptance-ambivalence-rejection* of the relevance of the concept of social class, and these will be discussed in our presentation, drawing on Skeggs' (1997) 'disidentification thesis' and other relevant scholarship (e.g. Skeggs, 2004; Savage et al., 2001; Sayer, 2002; Bourdieu, 1984; Author 1, 2009, 2011a,b, 2012, 2013). We are also currently examining how participants' self-classification relates to their CSO socio-economic group categorisation, and participants' views about the impact of socio-demographic factors, including social class, on individuals' achievement.

Conclusion

As part of the DITE project, which seeks to establish baseline data in relation to a range of diversity variables in ITE, in this paper we focused on the social class profile of entrants to postgraduate post-primary school ITE programmes in Ireland. These will be discussed in detail in our presentation.

References (outside of word count)

Note: To adhere to the requirements of double-blind review, we have anonymised our paper, taking out our names for previous publications, and replacing them with 'Author 1' and 'Author 2'. The references for the relevant papers are not included in this reference list as a result.

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