

Educational Disadvantage

Introduction

If you are a child or young person attending school in a disadvantaged area of Dublin, there is a 30 per cent chance that you will leave primary school with a serious literacy problem;¹ only a 50:50 chance that you will sit your Leaving Certificate,² and a 90 per cent probability that you will not go to college.³ In contrast, if you are a child or young person whose parents are from a professional background and you live in a prosperous part of Dublin, you have only a 10 per cent chance of leaving primary school with a serious literacy problem, you will almost certainly complete your Leaving Certificate and be part of the 86 per cent of young people in your area who go to college.

This snapshot highlights how, in prosperous Ireland, children living in economically and socially deprived communities do not derive the same benefit from the education system as do their peers, and how educational disadvantage is manifested in both *lower participation* and *lower achievement* in the formal education system.

Participation

Statistics for Leaving Certificate completion rates vary, depending on the source of information. The Department of Education in its *Annual Report* for 2004 puts the completion rate at 85.3 per cent.⁴ A national survey by the Central Statistic Office in 2006 showed that 88.1 per cent of young people then aged between 20 and 24 had completed the Leaving Certificate.⁵ However, the 2004 *Annual School Leavers' Survey* indicates that 18 per cent leave before completing second level.⁶ By any reckoning, the level of non-completion is significant and Ireland ranks only fifteenth in the EU in the percentage of its young people completing second level education.

Of even greater concern than the non-completion of secondary education, is the fact that approximately 4 per cent of children leave school without *any* formal qualification – i.e. without a Junior Certificate. These children are amongst the most vulnerable in our society. A further sub-group of around 1,000 children do not make the transition from primary to secondary school.⁷ Beyond the fact that about 10 per cent are from the Travelling Community,⁸ little information is available about these children.

Sustaining Progress, the Social Partnership Agreement for 2003–2005, included a commitment that, by

2006, 90 per cent of children would finish secondary school.⁹ This was not achieved and a revised date for meeting the target – 2013 – has now been set in the *National Action Plan for Social Inclusion 2007–2016*, which was published in February 2007.¹⁰ Apart from the question of a seven-year extension for reaching the target, it might be asked: does acceptance that 10 per cent of young people will not complete school constitute a sufficient 'vision' for a society which subscribes to the right of all children to education and prides itself on the role that education has played in creating its recent prosperity?

Effects of Early School Leaving

An extremely high proportion of young people (43 per cent) who leave school early are either unemployed or economically inactive.¹¹ Later in life, early school leavers have an unemployment rate that is three times higher than that for their age-cohort as a whole.¹² Most children leave school due to 'school factors' – under-achievement, alienation, and poor relationship with the school.¹³ High proportions of early leavers have literacy problems and a history of poor attendance. The Education (Welfare) Act, 2000 assigns responsibility to the National Educational Welfare Board for providing continuing education for young people aged sixteen or seventeen who have left school. So far, however, the Board has not had the resources to fulfil this role.

Absenteeism

Missing school is linked to educational under-achievement and early drop-out from school. Of primary pupils, 10 per cent miss more than 20 days in a school year; for secondary school pupils the figure is significantly higher: 19 per cent. In the most disadvantaged areas, the average missed days for each child is 17 for primary and 21 for secondary pupils. An analysis by the National Education and Welfare Board of the absences of those children who had missed more than 20 school days in 2004/05 showed that one-third had missed more than 40 days.¹⁴

Since absenteeism in primary school is often an indicator that a pupil will have difficulties later in their schooling, intervention to address the problem is vital. The National Education and Welfare Board, which has statutory responsibility for ensuring that all children receive an education, has indicated that it needs over 300 education welfare officers to cope

with the demand for its services. At present, however, there are just 109 officers. In 2005, 84,000 children were referred to the service, but lack of resources meant that only 8,500 referrals were followed up.¹⁵ The fact that the service was able to respond to only around one in ten of the children referred is alarming and indicates the scale of additional provision that is needed to respond to the problem of absenteeism.

Preventive measures to address early school leaving include the Home, School, Community Liaison Scheme and the School Completion Programme.¹⁶ The Home, School, Community Scheme sees parental involvement in the child's educational development and with the school as of paramount importance and aims to build solid relationships between parents, school and the community.¹⁷ The School Completion Programme links primary schools with local secondary schools to make the transition to secondary more fluid. The Programme also provides for extra-curricular activity and learning supports.

Literacy

Reading ability and achievement are closely linked. Yet in disadvantaged areas as many as one primary school child in three has severe reading difficulties. This is in sharp contrast to the national average of 10 per cent. Only 3 to 4 per cent of children in these areas are 'very high' achievers in reading, in contrast to 10 per cent nationally. Worryingly, there has been no overall improvement in literacy since 1980.¹⁸

The Government's Action Plan, *Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS)*, published in 2005, includes a commitment to target literacy problems. The *National Action Plan for Social Inclusion 2007–2016* sets the goal of halving the incidence of serious literacy difficulties in disadvantaged communities by 2016. Funding and resources will need to reflect the scale of the task of meeting this target, given that literacy has not shown any overall improvement in the last 27 years. Attempts to address literacy problems have focused on providing more support on a one-to-one basis outside ordinary classes. The role of literacy support *within* the classroom environment also needs to be examined. The Government's commitment to tackling literacy problems is welcome, yet the reality is that even if the 2016 target were to be achieved, this would still mean 15 per cent of children from disadvantaged communities having serious literacy problems.

Pre-school Provision

A 2005 report by the National Economic and Social Forum (NESF) sets out a framework for the development of early childhood care and education, including provision to address the needs of children who are

disadvantaged.¹⁹ A key recommendation of the NESF is that free pre-school education should be available for all children in the year prior to starting primary school, and that this should be rolled out on a phased basis, starting with the most disadvantaged children. Despite the fact that the Forum's report followed widespread consultation and that its development involved representatives of the Social Partners, the Government has made no commitment to implement its recommendations, including the key proposal of one year of free pre-school education.

Pupil–Teacher Ratio

The average class size in Ireland for primary school pupils is 24 (the second highest in the EU after the UK).²⁰ A Dáil Debate in March 2007 revealed that as many as 100,000 primary school children are in classes of 30 or more and that 35,000 pupils in secondary schools are in classes of this size. This means that 25 per cent of all pupils in Ireland are in classes of 30 or more.²¹

Under the *DEIS* framework, increased provision has been made for children in disadvantaged communities with the goal of reducing class sizes to a maximum of 20:1 (junior infant to second class) and 24:1 (third to sixth class).²² This is a welcome move, but it might be noted that in their 2002 *Programme for Government* the coalition parties that make up the current Government promised that for children under nine the average class size in the country as a whole, not just in disadvantaged areas, would be 20.²³

Assigning Teachers

Besides the issue of pupil–teacher ratio, attention needs to be given to the question of which teachers are assigned to teach which age-groups of pupils. A study published in 2005 highlighted that while 14 per cent of all pupils in first class are taught by a non-permanent teacher, for children in disadvantaged schools the figure rises to 30 per cent. The authors of the study point out that there is a commonly held view 'that experienced teachers should be placed in Senior classes because they are able to deal with more widespread incidence of challenging behaviour in these classes. Thus, Junior classes (where teacher characteristics are most strongly related to achievement) are assigned the least experienced teachers, despite this being counter to what research recommends.'²⁴

Expenditure on Education

While expenditure on education has increased in real terms, it has actually fallen as a percentage of GDP from 5.3 per cent in 1995 to a projected 4.5 per cent in 2007.²⁵ Ireland spends less on education than other developed countries: in 2003, for example, its

expenditure represented 4.4 per cent of GDP compared with an OECD average of 6.3 per cent.²⁶ Figures for spending on education have to take account of the fact that in Ireland the age cohort 0–24 stands at 35.3 per cent of the total population, which is higher than in any other EU country.²⁷

Some of the shortfall in public spending on education is reflected in the charges for extra-curricular activities and the 'voluntary donations' which characterise Ireland's 'free' education system. These costs and others associated with schooling, such as school clothing, books, equipment, stationary, and transport, obviously bear most heavily on families with limited incomes. In many other European countries, families are not burdened with such extra expenses.

Conclusion

Investment in education is widely regarded as having played a key role in laying the foundations for Ireland's economic success over the past decade. Educational opportunities have widened enormously – for instance, higher education, once the preserve of a small percentage of the population, is now availed of by 55 per cent of 17 to 19 year olds.

However, alongside the success story of Irish education there is the reality that too many young people leave school early and with either poor or no qualifications. In an employment market that is characterised by constant change and by demand for high levels of skills such young people are at serious risk of experiencing long-term disadvantage.

In recent years, there has been much rhetoric about the importance of tackling educational disadvantage. Additional funding and specific initiatives have been provided. But the reality is that targets for class sizes, literacy and educational attainment have not been achieved. In the future, the focus on providing extra resources for schools that are designated as disadvantaged must obviously continue. Alongside this, however, there needs to be a commitment to ensuring that all of the significant number of children elsewhere who, for one reason or another, experience educational disadvantage are provided with the additional supports that they require.

Educational disadvantage is both a consequence and a cause of economic and social deprivation and its persistence undermines the notion of equality of opportunity. Matching the rhetoric about tackling educational disadvantage with a level of investment in the facilities and supports necessary to effectively address the problem should be one of the key priorities of the next Government.

Notes

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12. Central Statistics Office, *op. cit.*, p. 2.
13. Shirley Gorby, Selina McCoy and Dorothy Watson (2005) *op. cit.*, p. 22.
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15. Eddie Ward, CEO National Education Welfare Board, quoted in Kitty Holland, 'Concern over School Absentees', *The Irish Times*, 14 March 2007.
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