

Equalising Outcomes in Education

Using community
development approaches
to tackle
EDUCATIONAL INEQUALITY



A practical guide for community / youth / education workers

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Summary

The role and impact of education in Ireland

Education in Ireland plays a dual role in the organisation and development of society. Firstly, through its processes and procedures (examinations, subject choices and the organisation of schooling) it distributes career opportunities and life chances. Naturally, this has a profound impact on the quality of life of individuals and families. In the case of disadvantaged communities it has a negative impact, producing students with poor levels of knowledge, skills and self-motivation. Although the education system claims that its outcomes are based on natural factors such as intellectual ability, and objective criteria like examinations, the reality is that the system is structured to benefit those with the greatest wealth and other forms of social capital. The end result is that those from settled communities and financially better off homes succeed, while Travellers, those with a disability and students from disadvantaged families are more likely to fail. Thus poverty, social exclusion and other inequalities are almost perfectly reproduced within the next generation

The second key role that education plays is one of instilling values and norms in existing and prospective members of society. This is a role that all educational systems play throughout the world, and it can mean that acceptable principles and standards of human behaviour are laid down and passed on to a new generation. Unfortunately, the dominant values that the Irish education system passes on to our young people have, throughout time, mirrored the values and priorities of those in power and have done nothing to move us towards a more equal and fairer society. For instance, prior to Independence, the British colonial influence on education meant that the Irish language and culture were deemed to be of less importance, and, as a result, constraints were imposed on the teaching of the Irish language. In more recent times, values that are reflective of the power that some social groups have in society have also left a mark on the processes and outcomes of our schools. For example, gender differentiation was and still is heavily promoted within schools, resulting in the re-enforcement of traditional roles for both boys and girls. Again, people with a disability and Travellers are not regarded as serious consumers of education, and schools continue to restrict the curriculum content and assessment criteria to subjects and appraisal methods that are familiar and comfortable to the dominant groups in society. Most insidious of all is that schools, by passing on values such as accepting that some deserve to succeed more than others, make it difficult to challenge the unfair outcomes that schooling produces, because people internalise lack of success as personal failure.

All this results in a school environment and curriculum shaped to produce a society with attitudes that reflect and compliment what is taught. Both the education system and the values it promotes are interlinked and unyielding and change is profoundly difficult to bring about. Even where there is some dynamic for change the school management structure is unable to respond locally because of the limitations of a highly centralised Department and the time constraints of a content laden curriculum. This leads to an inability to accommodate the needs of different communities or respond to individual needs within communities. In this scenario those who are disadvantaged will inevitably fail.

The education system

Contrary to popular belief, the Irish education system does not serve us well. 24% of our population between 16 & 24 are functionally illiterate and only 14% of lower socio-economic classes reach third level. While a sizeable proportion of students perform moderately, only an elite do really well. In order to explain this outcome the system encourages the belief that intelligence is a rare gift, which some possess and get the opportunity to develop, while others either don't have it, or, because of their circumstances, cannot develop it. This idea is termed essentialism, a belief that intelligence is a scarce commodity, which, for biological reasons, some have, or develop, more of than others. Once one accepts this notion, and roots it in a curriculum that ignores all other talents and credentialises it with a series of State exams that concentrate exclusively on literate and numerate ability, then the system is excused, with no pressure to examine why poor outcomes accumulate among those who are socially excluded. The system is thus not held accountable to its students or communities. It does not have to respond to the significant numbers who are not reaching its standards because unequal outcomes can be attributed to 'natural' factors. As a consequence the order created by educational outcomes corresponds almost exactly to the prevailing class structure.

The other key concept that underpins the education system is meritocracy. This is essentially a belief that if you work hard and have ability you will succeed i.e. intelligence plus hard work equals merit – thus it is contended that people who do well in school deserve to succeed. It does not take into account external factors or differences in starting positions that favour one individual over another in the classroom. For example:

- Travellers, who possess a rich oral culture of learning do not have this feature of their culture fully utilised in classrooms as a means of learning.
- Social circumstances and home environments have an impact. This can be an immediate barrier where the child experiences a different language to that used in the home. Expectations of behaviour may also be different. A child reared in an environment with broad similarities, language codes' and aspirations to that of the school will have an easier experience within education. From the start, children from non-mainstream social and cultural backgrounds are at a disadvantage as they struggle to fit into this unfamiliar space.
- Because their basic needs are comfortably met, those from better off families have more supports at their disposal. It is widely accepted that primary needs must be provided before it is possible to focus firmly on learning. Because poverty can be a constant factor in some families there is little opportunity to get beyond these primary needs. In this way poverty has an immediate and sustained impact on the child's performance in school.

The word that best describes the Irish system of education is elitism – a situation where students are educated according to their perceived slot in a hierarchy of 'natural' abilities, while a substantial minority are considered not worthy of a full and successful education. The existence of private fee paying schools is a prime example of elitism in operation, as it traditionally produces those groomed for management roles in the private sector and in governance. In the other extreme those from disadvantaged communities are conditioned to have lower expectations in their work lives.

A feature of Irish education is the lack of ownership by parents and communities. Planning and decision-making powers are not shared equally with those who have a primary interest in schooling and an acute awareness of local needs. Fundamental decisions about the curriculum, the school environment and the values promoted are made in the absence of some of the key stakeholders. School management boards, whose power is already limited, are further restricted in responding imaginatively because of the absence of a coherent voice from the community whom the school serves. As a result, co-ordinated responses, i.e. the planning of actions to combat educational disadvantage, between schools, statutory bodies, parents, communities & youth services are hindered.

The current resourcing of education is not being strategically targeted to bring about equality in educational outcomes. Primary education, the point where disadvantage begins to manifest itself, is chronically under-funded while tertiary (third level) education, which is largely the preserve of higher income social groups, is massively funded. The shortfall between that spent by the state on those who complete tertiary education in comparison with those who leave school early is approximately £25,000 per student².

Responses

Attempts at Department level to address inequalities in education have by and large fallen into three categories: those that are focused on the organisation of the schools; those that attempt to address the imbalance of resources available to high risk students or schools in disadvantaged areas, and; those concentrated on 'root causes'. Some responses are dual purpose.

Leaving aside *Youthreach*, which is essentially a compensatory programme for those who have not benefited from the system, *Early Start* and the *Home School Community Liaison* (HSCL) Programme are targeted on what are perceived as root causes, namely lack of pre-school education/development and, in the case of HSCL, difficulties within families. The *8-15's Programme*, *Breaking the Cycle* and the *Stay in School Initiative* are all focused on promoting change through the allocation of additional resources, either to provoke organisational change or to encourage schools to develop strategies to address specific needs. The pilot *Whole School Planning* initiative is interesting in that it is almost entirely concerned with organisational change within schools.

Outside of Department initiatives, the Youth Services have been of crucial importance in providing compensatory programmes for early school leavers and others experiencing difficulties. Youth Services have also increasingly focused on providing complimentary programmes in conjunction with schools aimed at the retention of young people deemed to be at risk of early school leaving.

The local partnership companies, funded under the Operational Programme for Local Urban and Rural Development (OPLURD) and the Combat Poverty Agency (CPA) have also been instrumental in developing pilot work, including local strategies to combat educational disadvantage. However, little of this work has been mainstreamed and it is disconcerting to see pilot programmes and other examples of good practice being repeated over and over again. Indeed, good practice has been piloted to death at this stage and there is a major question about continuing with this approach in the absence of clear links between model

work and mainstream change. In this respect Area Development Management (ADM) as managers of the Integrated Local Development Programme, and the new Local Development Social Inclusion Programme, and the Combat Poverty Agency, need to examine and reflect on their lack of success in leveraging substantial mainstream change.

Overall, changes in education provision have been largely instigated by and primarily focused on mainstream provision, and that which takes a focus on disadvantage has been minimal. Because of this the most profound changes have been universalistic in character. The introduction of free second level education in 1967 did raise overall thresholds, but comparative disadvantage remained and the gap was further widened by the introduction of free third level education for everyone, irrespective of family circumstances.

A framework for change

So, why has there been little success in altering the processes that produce such inequalities in education? The Community Workers Co-op (CWC) believe that there are a number of fundamental reasons for this. Firstly, education needs to be viewed as a human right that entitles everybody, whatever their starting position, to full development and self-realisation. Secondly, education needs to take a leap away from Platonic notions of intelligence that results in the creation of elites and to adopt the well-proven concept of multiple intelligences, which searches out and acknowledges the intrinsic capabilities of each individual. This would allow the free-flow of knowledge and skills appropriate to each person's needs and requirements.

In terms of the technicalities of implementing these approaches and concepts there is a need for significant structural change in the systems delivering education. Regional structures that allow for the development of local planning and strategising must be put in place. This means the creation of Regional Education Boards comprised of the deliverers and consumers of education plus other interests such as communities, trade unions, religious and the enterprise sector. Again, parents, as the primary beneficiaries of education, need to be positioned to take a real ownership in local school planning and implementation.

The choices made in relation to the allocation of resources are, of course, crucial determinants of outcomes. The failure to sufficiently invest in primary level schooling begets the problems that emerge in second level for children from a disadvantaged background. The huge investment that the state makes in the education of a person staying on to complete third level, some £40,000, compared with £16,000 for those who stay up to completion of the Junior Certificate illustrates the imbalance of investment between those who can avail of third level, mainly higher income social groups, and those whose education ceases in second level, almost exclusively lower socio-economic groups. In order to counter this imbalance investment in pre-school and Primary schooling needs to be massively increased to bring us into line with other European countries. It is at Primary level that all children participate and therefore there is a greater likelihood that all will benefit.

Underachievement in education comes about because of a failure to be proactive in addressing the needs of each child. Applying an inflexible and uniform system to all and sundry without acknowledging differences in starting positions amounts to an acceptance of the same differences emerging in outcomes. Resource allocations must reflect these different starting positions. The National Anti-poverty Strategy, which is currently reviewing its strategies and resetting its targets on educational disadvantage will be an important policy mechanism to bring about better targeting of underachievement.

Taking five key areas dealing with:

- ❖ Improvements in delivery and organisation;
- ❖ The fostering and promotion of parent and community participation and ownership;
- ❖ A financial restructuring of education with a bias towards Primary level;
- ❖ Targeting underachievement;
- ❖ Broadening the curriculum and radically altering the processes of the classroom.

These can then be located within a Rights-based framework that adopts a multiple intelligences approach, rejects the narrow essentialism that begets streaming and elitism, and espouses the right to full development and opportunity, a number of priority actions readily identify themselves:

Organisation

- The establishment of New Local Education Boards to co-ordinate delivery and provide effective guidance and structure to addressing inequalities in education.
- *Whole School Planning* should be introduced nationally and should include equality objectives, targets and performance monitoring.
- Schools, Youth Services, families and communities, as well as other community and service providers need to be involved in the development of education strategies and actions.
- Whole School Planning should be accompanied by the introduction of data collection and tracking systems that allow baselines to be set and outcomes to be measured.

Financial restructuring

- A comprehensive state system pre-school should be introduced.
- Funding to the Primary School system needs to be massively increased to enable:
 - Improved pupil/teacher ratios
 - More and better support services
- The provision of free third level to all should be discontinued and should be replaced by a system of support grants for those in need. A framework to facilitate education loans and insurance schemes should be introduced by Government.

Participation and Ownership

- Parents, families and communities are the primary stakeholders in education, and need to be central in the ownership, management and implementation of education.
- There needs to be an acknowledgement that tackling educational disadvantage requires consultation and participation by all the stakeholders affected. Planning and decision-making are not only a matter for professionals.
- Parent participation needs to be resourced and sufficient capacity and organisational capability created for them to effectively input into education strategies and school management and planning.
- Proposed Local Education Boards and School Management Boards should be required to include proportionate Parent and Community Organisation representation.

Targeting underachievement

- The NAPS targets need to be reset at higher levels and should be 'rolled out' locally through the *Whole School Planning* process.
- Schools in areas of disadvantage or with significant numbers of pupils at risk of disadvantage should be granted additional resources, including increased capita payments.
- There are opportunities, if resources are made available, through the Educational Welfare legislation to address early school leaving. To quote the Legislation: '*Under the legislation co-ordinated supports and strategies will be developed to ensure that young people remain actively involved in education up to early adulthood so that they have a solid foundation for full participation in society.*'³
- Integrated approaches involving schools, youth services and community organisations should be encouraged, resourced and facilitated. This will ensure a more rounded development for young people and greater opportunities for career and life choices to be exercised.
- There should be a focusing of resources and longitudinal supports on schools in disadvantaged areas and on disadvantaged social groups.
- Radical policies, including affirmative action, should be devised and implemented to get better inclusion of groups presently not benefiting from third level education.
- The Home School Community Liaison Scheme (HSCL) should cease to operate out of a 'cultural deficit' model (focused on perceived deficiencies within the family). HSCL should be restructured as a co-ordinating mechanism developing and focusing services on children in need.

Content and processes

- There should be a shift from a narrow curriculum to one that reflects the full range of needs of all children. Diversity and cultural difference must be recognised, as must differing attributes and propensities.
- Teacher training should include the acquisition of skills in equality mainstreaming and a knowledge of social exclusion issues. There needs to be a better understanding of the effect of school processes in promoting unequal and disrespectful relationships between teachers and pupils.

Conclusion

As Ireland experiences an economic upturn that will result in a new stage of development the Irish education system has come under scrutiny from a variety of perspectives. In terms of the development of the nation and the creation of an equitable, multi-cultural, and sustainable society it is crucial that the Government's commitment to social inclusion is implemented fully. Education, and the life chances it bestows, is one of the most important mechanisms in bringing this about because it has the capability to break the endless intergenerational cycle of poverty and inequality.

Economists also recognise that in a global economy that is more dependent on human capital than money capital, Ireland's comparative advantage will dissipate if we continue with a system of education that only adequately prepares an elitist majority, while the potential of a substantial minority is ignored. The implications therefore, of maintaining the existing system are that the present levels of buoyancy will be unsustainable. So there is a strong self-interest argument for tackling educational inequalities.

Finally, as society begins to develop a sensitivity to Fundamental Rights based on social justice and equality, more and more the basic political and civil rights that guarantee access become visibly inadequate. Granting a right in the full knowledge that it cannot be taken up, in effect means having no right. The introduction of the Equality Legislation and the development and enhancement of equality and fundamental rights instruments arising from the Belfast Agreement, when taken alongside the growing concern to use the Courts to establish basic rights for citizens, point towards the type of outcomes we should be looking for from the education sector.

Ireland is at the point of development where *all* is possible but nothing may result. We can choose to build a society built on social concerns, fair outcomes, and the full development of each individual or we can drift towards the type of inequitable, selfish and unsustainable society that inadequately linked social and economic planning produces.

Context

Context

1.1 Background

Over the past number of years the social and economic context within which education operates has dramatically altered. Strong economic growth and high Exchequer returns means that insufficiency of resources is no longer an issue restricting the redressing of inequalities in education. Government policy as articulated in the National Development Plan (NDP) makes a clear commitment to social inclusion, and there is a commitment of some £15B towards social inclusion measures, including education measures within the NDP.

Economists are also beginning to criticise the education system from a human capital perspective. In an increasingly globalised economy, with its emphasis on knowledge based skills, to maintain a system that produces a substantial under-educated and unfulfilled cohort is regarded as an economic nonsense. Increasingly, investment in *education for all* is seen as the surest way to ensure continued economic development.

But maintaining economic buoyancy is not the only concern. Political analysts are also aware that education has a primary role in maintaining social cohesion, democratic responsibility and social justice – the social formula necessary to sustain a coherent, functioning society. In short, investment in equalising educational outcomes also makes a major contribution to the continued well-being of both civil society and state.

At policy level the National Anti-poverty Strategy (NAPS) is also taking a renewed focus on education disadvantage and there are plans to set new targets and to 'roll out' the strategy at local level. The NAPS strategy is clear in making the connection between educational underachievement, poverty and reduced life chances in stating that: *'underachievement at school begets social difficulties which can lead to a life of uncertainty, marginalisation and dependence on the structures of social assistance'*⁴.

Responses to date have largely focused on the strategies in the NAPS, namely:

Early Start Programme. This initiative, established in 1990, is aimed at 3 and 4 year olds with an emphasis on cognitive and listening skills. Its purpose is to act as a 'targeted intervention in early education for children who are educationally disadvantaged and children with 'particular needs''⁵. It is modelled on the US *Headstart* concept which believes that capital amassed in the early stages of childhood will allow children from disadvantaged backgrounds to keep pace in later formal schooling. Educationalists differ in their opinion of the effectiveness of this Programme.

Home School Community Liaison Programme. The HSCL Programme is a State response to providing preventative action in areas of Educational Disadvantage. '*...The scheme seeks to address the discontinuity between the children's home and community experiences and the demands of schooling by maximising active participation of targeted pupils in the learning process and by promoting active co-operation and collaboration between home, school and community.*'⁶ According to the Department of Education and Science, the focus of this scheme is '*on the adults whose attitudes and behaviours impinge on the lives of the children, namely parents and teachers*'.⁷ In concept and practice it operates from a 'cultural deficit' analysis – a belief that the problem is located within the deficient cultures of families in disadvantaged areas. It therefore focuses on building appropriate cultural capital⁸ within the home.

8-15s Programme. This integrated response utilises collaborative processes and requires an element of system change within the school, as individuals from outside the school form part of the initiative and are involved in decision-making processes regarding the processes and content of strategies. As with the HSCL Scheme the '8 to 15s' is a reflex response to persistent poor educational outcomes in disadvantaged areas. The Programme is loosely based on local initiatives piloted under the Integrated Local Development Programme and the Combat Poverty Agency's Education Disadvantage Programme. The initiative is struggling to fully grasp the concept of integrated working and as a result has not yet addressed the mainstream issues prevalent in schools with students who are educationally disadvantaged.

Youthreach This Programme also acknowledges the threat of unemployment and poverty that young early school leavers face. The Youthreach programme, a joint response initiative of the Department of Education and Science and the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment represents the only form of statutory provision in favour of unqualified early school leavers.⁹ The Programme is intended to utilise a holistic approach to its client young people with the approach being dialogue based and participant led. Unfortunately, it often operates out of the very processes that contributed to the original early school-leaving problem.

Breaking the Cycle. Under this initiative schools are given an invitation to apply for extra school funding after satisfying certain criteria based on consultation with the Combat Poverty Agency on disadvantage indicators e.g. number of pupils from lone parent families, number of pupils who are receipt of a medical card, etc. This initiative is likely to be superseded by the 'Giving Children an Even Break' initiative.

Stay in School Initiative. £4.5 million has been pledged to target 100 plus schools (with a further extension planned) in this initiative to increase retention rates for 'at risk' students. Each school must submit a plan detailing a range of measures and will operate on a multi-agency basis with other stakeholders. This plan must be agreed with the Department and continued resourcing is dependent on the school achieving its targets.

Youth Services are also increasingly providing after-schools support programmes and the National Drugs Task Force has also identified school attendance and parent involvement as important in the fight against drugs. In the case of supports provided by the Youth Services, local youth actions are increasingly focusing on the inability of the education system to tackle the problems of early school leaving and the inequality of outcomes resulting from the virtual exclusion from the system of *the* most disadvantaged young people. As a result of this the youth work sector has gradually moved into supporting the most disadvantaged pupils through after-schools programmes and other compensatory early school leaving initiatives.

All of these responses are within the frame of *additional resources*, and, with some exceptions, most notably Youth Service programmes, little in the way of responses that question the nature, content and organisation of education has been developed. A notable exception was the Department's Humanities Programme, which was widely piloted over an extended period of time. Some of the innovative concepts of the Humanities Programme were incorporated into the Junior Certificate – broader based curriculum and continuous assessment being two examples. Unfortunately, this innovation was not carried further into the system.

Outside of Department driven provision one interesting model was the Combat Poverty Agency Programme on Educational Disadvantage. The CPA programme focused on building networks and partnerships that brought schools, parents, communities, youth services and statutory agencies together to build local integrated actions. This pilot programme developed some interesting and innovative area strategies to combat the fragmented nature of local education delivery and the promotion of greater parent/community participation in schooling.

The ADM funded Local Area Partnerships, funded under the Operational Programme for Local Urban and Rural Development (OPLURD) and more lately the Local Development Social Inclusion Programme (LDSIP), have also developed some useful project work aimed at strengthening supports for pupils at risk, providing compensatory pathways for early school leavers and building greater co-ordination and co-operation among existing provides.

There are also numerous models of good practice within the community education sector that use adult and community focused approaches to tackle issues of educational disadvantage in areas with high levels of social exclusion. In this approach, building education capital within communities is the preferred strategy to bring about a sustainable improvement in outputs from formal schools systems.

Although relatively modest in terms of scale, these integrated area based initiatives do provide a body of learning to inform the development of a new framework to promote changes in policy and practice. Indeed, given that this work formed a significant strand of a national programme, the Integrated Local Development Programme (OPLURD), there is considerable disappointment that area strategies have not made a greater contribution to policy development.

1.2 Situation

Despite these additional complimentary and compensatory programmes and some increases in resources, the fundamentals of mainstream schooling and the inequality in outcomes remain largely unaltered. Basic failings include:

- The educational system remains grossly under funded at primary levels in comparison with other EU countries. Ireland rates 3rd from bottom in the OECD league of pupil teacher ratios;
- Early school leaving remains a huge problem and there are still many children who get lost between primary and secondary systems;
- 17% of sixteen to twenty five year olds are operating at the minimum level of literacy functioning. One quarter of the population is functionally illiterate;
- Educational underachievement is widespread in disadvantaged areas;
- Relative entries into third level education is still disproportionate in the lower socio-economic classes. Problems of restricted choices where 3rd level entry is gained and high drop-out rates from colleges and universities for lower socio-economic groups are other factors contributing to inequalities
- Moreover, our young people are significantly less literate than those in comparator countries with the exception of Poland.¹⁰

Across a range of indicators, it is self-evident that for many people Ireland's education system is operating at minimal levels. Comparative figures place our

Country	IALS Literacy Level 1	% GDP spent on Education	Primary Ratios Teacher : Student	5% School Absence Reported	Average School Life
Sweden	6	4.7	13.4	45	19.4
Germany	9	2.9	21.6	37	16.8
Netherlands	10	2.9	17.8	26	17.2
Belgium	15	3.3	14	52	17.3
Australia	17	3.3	17.9	76	20
Switzerland	18	4	16.3	13	16.2
Canada	18	4	21	59	16.7
New Zealand	21	4.7	24.7	80	17.1
England	23	3.5	22	76	17.1
USA	24	3.4	16.5	60	16.8
Ireland	25	3.4	22.6	77	15.9
Poland	45	3.8	18	N/A	15.6

Expenditure spent excludes Tertiary Education. Some figures are approximated.

system, and our children in a less than favourable light against other countries (see chart below).

Clearly, there is a need to focus on policy change including:

- A redefinition of education within a human rights and human development framework;
- The development of a better organisational management structure;
- An improved curriculum with a wider content appropriate to a range of needs, including those of a multicultural society;
- The participation of parents and communities and an alteration in the power relationships that exist within education.

The evidence is therefore overwhelming that, although thresholds have risen as those with traditional access to education begin to over-consume (81% now complete the senior cycle), little has altered in terms of comparative outcomes. In response to this unchanging situation the Minister of Education and Science has set up an Education Disadvantage Committee under the Chair of Professor Áine Hyland of UCC. The Minister has also set up a Forum to Address Educational Disadvantage, and appointed a Programme Director to co-ordinate education disadvantage strategies in the Primary schools system.

1.3 Schooling in Ireland

Clancy points out that *'in Ireland education is rooted in the progressive development of the economy and the system seeks to integrate this with the individual goal of personal fulfilment.'* There is little evidence of a real commitment to enabling individuals to participate fully as citizens in society. Attempts to redress this imbalance have been dominated by additions and adjustments to the existing educational system. This blurs the fact that the system at core operates to distribute opportunities in an unequal and class-biased manner that acts substantially against the creation of a fully integrated and sustainable society.

It is vitally important therefore that education enhances and develops each individual to their full potential, as well as meeting the broader needs of society, including the social and political development of future citizens and communities. In order to do this the system needs to take a leap away from its present essentialist and meritocratic disposition. The present system is constructed to provide winners and losers, to promulgate false notions of inferiority and superiority and ultimately produce a society that is hierarchical, unequal and socially unsustainable.

Traditionally, the responsibility to address educational disadvantage was considered to lie exclusively within the remit of professionals within the education system. As a consequence interventions to address this disadvantage have aimed at instilling values regarding the importance of staying in school - not in itself a bad thing. Despite these interventions exclusion continues, because the system itself is not critically examined. Reforms that have been introduced have succeeded mainly in bringing about some gain for those among the disadvantaged with somewhat better capital than others.

A Framework for Change

2.1 Education as a fundamental right

The United Nations Declaration of Human Rights declares that:

*'Everyone has the right to an education...Education should be directed to the full development of the human personality and to the strengthening of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms.'*¹¹

This right is reinforced through the European Union with the 1996 European Social Charter's (Article 30) emphasis on Social Exclusion¹². Education in Human Rights terms means people being able to access a range of opportunities to explore their own abilities bringing with them their own cultural perspectives, experiences and aspirations to share with others. It also requires a respect and accommodation for diversity and difference and a commitment to equalising the status and quality of the various outcomes of education.

In order to do this education in essence must acknowledge the wide range of intelligences that humans possess and it should strive to identify and develop these within the individual. Education therefore needs to be viewed as a systematic approach to learning and development that contributes to the achievement of full human potential.

2.2 Guiding principles

The Community Workers Co-operative seeks to ensure the inclusion of, and to bring about equality of outcome for, those currently experiencing social exclusion. Education is one of the primary experiences that all people, including those from socially excluded backgrounds are exposed to. It is the mechanism through which life chances are distributed; and, through its cultural and social endorsement of values and norms, is the means whereby society's standards or goals are accepted or challenged. Education through schooling, therefore, has huge potential to impact on the social and economic condition of its participants. To date it has failed to challenge fundamental social inequalities and it continues to reproduce advantage and disadvantage in its outcomes. If Ireland is to become a sustainable and developing society then schooling must be utilised as a tool to intervene and positively alter, rather than reinforce, existing inequalities and marginalisation.

2.3 Organisation and management

The manner in which education is delivered is a crucial determinant of unequal outcomes and of the efficiency of measures to tackle educational disadvantage. Schooling in Ireland is delivered in a fragmented and unintegrated manner. There is insufficient involvement of key stakeholders, including parents and community interests.

Responsibilities and governance in the Irish education system presents a complex and confusing situation. Overall responsibility lies with the Department of Education and Science, who lay down the curricula and overall framework of

schooling.

However, ownership of schools is largely non-state and there is no effective line of accountability between individual schools and the Department, save on core matters such as capita payments, curriculum and examination procedures. In effect, the organisation of schooling - the teaching processes, the laying down of standards and administrative procedures, the targeting of resources, and the deciding of priorities and core focus - are all left to individual schools. Were schools constructed more democratically this might be more acceptable, if slightly incomprehensible. When this situation is added to the rudimentary management capacity within schools, many of whom rely on core teaching staff to administer and manage the school, the result is a weak system with little ability to direct resources, make strategic decisions, respond to changing needs and alter approaches. Thus we have a schooling system that is inflexible, incapable of assuming appropriate responsibility and desperately looking for direction and motivation.

Regional structures.

Although centrally directed by the Department of Education and Science, there is little in the way of coherence to the education system as it is implemented locally. The only regional structure is the Vocational Education Committees (VECs) and the number of (second level) schools over which they have a management/co-ordination responsibility is very small. Most second level schools, other than multi-denominational schools and VEC community colleges, are under religious ownership and are managed by an independent Board. The primary system is managed at local level through the diocesan structure, normally under the management of the parish priest or vicar. It is difficult therefore to develop area-based strategies and build co-operative agreements on sharing resources, and promoting cross learning. There is simply no effective devolved structure to bring this about.

The development of devolved local/regional structures to administer education would result in the creation of better conditions in which to develop effective strategies to tackle educational disadvantage. Schools operate as stand alone units and because of this they have difficulty in addressing inequalities, which require a more consistent regional or local approach. Such structures would maximise the potential to target resources, achieve co-ordinated actions and formalise and facilitate education networks aimed at tackling inequality. The creation of new regional bodies would have a greater capacity to develop an integrated response, working in partnership with other agencies and the community sector and would allow *'greater opportunities to tap into existing financial and human resources, thus generating an impetus for bottom up demands for reform'*¹³

Financial Supports

Investment in the Primary education system is of fundamental importance. It is at this level that disadvantage becomes aggregated and begins to be accepted and systemised. Disadvantage is then carried through the following stages of schooling and this in turn makes effective interventions at later stages all the

A Framework for Change

more difficult.

Clancy recognises this in demonstrating that targeted individual investment is not adequate or effective at the later stages of an individual's education. Thus dramatic differences in access opportunities and educational achievement for lower socio-economic groups at third level can be traced back to chronic under-investment at primary level. As some notable educationalists put it: '*For tertiary education to be equitable, primary education & secondary education too, must be equitable*'¹⁴. However, although Ireland's funding for 3rd level is 100% of that of 28 OECD countries, primary funding is a mere 63% of the average. This under-investment is related to figures on employment and relative earnings, which indicate that educational disadvantage at primary level can affect life chances and earning potential. Indicators suggest that those with a Junior cycle qualifications earn some 17% more per hour than those with only primary schooling, and those with degrees earned 86% more¹⁵. The present economic situation masks the reality that those who have only a minimal qualification, or none, but who are presently employed are at risk of again becoming extremely marginalised and poor in times of recession. Financial support must therefore be targeted at the earliest possible opportunity for a proactive and preventative intervention in order to prepare for this eventuality.

Holding people in second level education is important and will be a central strategy of the revised National Anti-poverty Strategy, which is currently under review. However, participating in second level does not necessarily mean achieving a tangible benefit, and there needs to be a focus on improving the results achieved in schools that cater for pupils from disadvantaged communities and social groups. This has resource and targeting implications and a requirement that funding needs to be channelled into providing additional supports to achieve this outcome

An effective method of targeted funding must be established. The present imbalance of resource allocation to the third level sector means that the middle classes, who are by far and away the predominant consumers in this sector, are the main beneficiaries. While improved participation in third level is a necessary factor to ensure continued economic and social development, and efforts need to focus on supporting broader access, this participation should not happen at the expense of addressing huge inequalities in the core primary and second level schooling systems.

Data collecting and tracking

Addressing educational disadvantage requires the putting in place of data gathering and tracking systems. Too many young people disappear within and between schooling systems. Particular difficulties arise in the transition from primary to secondary education where children from disadvantaged backgrounds have most difficulty and may find the upheaval traumatic, resulting in 'drop out' within the first two years. The educational needs of the child at risk can also be lost within different agency provision and there are many cases of children as young as eleven not attending schools for several years, or not returning at all. Unfortunately, the evidence is overwhelming that those who opt out of education in school-going years are among those most severely affected by social exclusion in later years. Targeting and monitoring those at risk

is vital, particularly in this transitional phase.

The Dept. of Education and Science needs to assume some responsibility in eliminating this trend and leading the development of actions to address it. The development of data gathering and monitoring systems, which schools and other local bodies can use in the implementation of local actions, is therefore vital.

Developing integration of services.

Educational disadvantage is a multidimensional phenomenon. It is related to health and other social and community issues as well as formal education provision. The basic human needs of diet, shelter and security must be in place before a child will be able to learn, therefore support services and resources are key issues, and co-ordinated inter agency and inter-sectoral approaches are crucial.

The National Development Plan (NDP 2000-2006) advocates 'partnership' and area-based responses to educational disadvantage. This is an approach that has been successful in other social arenas, especially within the local development process. It remains to be further developed around educational disadvantage. Ideally, local development interests needs to take the lead in developing prototype structures involving a partnership of schools, families and communities focused on responses to education disadvantage. This work could in time be transferred to new Local Education Boards. This would result in coherent and seamless approaches to educational disadvantage issues being developed locally.

Structures set up to address local education needs should include parents, students, and representatives from other interested agencies and organisations, including community development organisations. Although parental participation is evident on school management boards, there must be a proactive approach to ensuring their full participation and accountability to the wider community. This needs to happen in a coherent form and to be resourced effectively. This level of inclusion of these services and interests, especially the involvement of community organisations and Youth Services, which deal with children at risk from educational disadvantage, would bring greater awareness of all the factors affecting the child. The sharing of knowledge in this approach would also aid the development of much broader strategies and inform the type of actions necessary to actively address individual agency issues. Collaborative actions between schools and youth services have been readily and successfully incorporated into the *8-15's Programme*, demonstrating that local and national actions can be linked. In this respect it is worth making some specific comment on the contribution of the Youth Services to the development of more co-ordinated and holistic approaches.

Over the years the youth work model has been proved to be a successful method for knowledge acquisition and is widely regarded as contributing positively to the social and personal development of young people. Good quality youth work recognises the right of young people to engage in and have input into their own development and learning and the development of the society in which they live. The social development and informal education methodologies used in youth work focus on the needs of each individual, are reflective and promotes further

experiential learning.

The youth work approach is a particularly effective mechanism to hold the most vulnerable within the system and as such should be an integral part of the school's education strategy. Education provision needs to recognise the role of the Youth Services in the education of young people and validate it accordingly by resourcing it and learning from it.

School management, planning and evaluation.

Schools have a responsibility to effectively manage their devolved responsibility and to devise actions and procedures that contribute to this goal. Ineffective management means that measures aimed at addressing inequalities in education cannot be successfully developed and implemented. Similarly, existing measures, whether Department driven or locally contrived, cannot be effectively monitored and critiqued without good management systems. Because of the poorly developed nature of local planning processes there are presumptions made in education priorities and Department Programmes without sufficient review or evaluation of their effectiveness. There is a need for a more thought out and systematic approach to planning and evaluation of education disadvantage strategies.

Any reforms aimed at tackling educational disadvantage must be organised in a 'whole school' manner. In this regard accountability, both in a quantitative and qualitative way is necessary and should be a core part of school planning.

The concept of *Whole School Planning* introduces a systematic approach to meeting the needs of all students and could be an important primary mechanism to monitor existing outcomes and promote equality measures for specific target groups and individuals. *Whole School Planning* has been piloted with considerable success and could be further developed as a management aid to support better, more targeted provision for those groups experiencing educational disadvantage. For this and other reasons *Whole School Planning* should be introduced nationally. However, in order for the process to be maximised as a mechanism to promote greater equalities in education it needs to incorporate a set of disadvantage support measures and be integrated with other measures to combat educational disadvantage. In other words, *Whole School Planning* will only work if it is an integral part of a broader framework to address educational disadvantage.

2.4 Improved curriculum and process changes

It is generally accepted that interventions will have their optimal success if they are targeted at the earliest stage of education. The longer an individual is exposed to failure the more their confidence in their own ability lessens. Those at risk in the Primary education stage need access to a curriculum, which allows them to participate and benefit fully in early education. 'Children must be educated and instructed in such a way that their lives fulfil demands everyone can support, no matter from which of the inherited social classes one might come.'¹⁶ Increased finance at the primary level is needed to reduce the risk of early school leaving by providing additional resources to tap into a broader range of learning experiences to cater for all, thus allowing children to recognise where

their talent lies and enabling them to develop it.

At present there is little accountability on primary schools regarding the level of attainment reached by their students. Students can go through the entire primary education system and enter second level with little if any educational attainment. Continuous assessment would allow identification of students whose needs fail to be met at earlier stages.

At second level the curriculum is overly restrictive and over-focused on economic outcomes, again reflecting dominant values. There is inadequate scope and choice in the curriculum and insufficient attention given to political, social education and development. Although the introduction of Civic, Social and Political Studies as a compulsory subject in the Junior Certificate is to be welcomed, it remains to be seen what level of training teachers are likely to receive to deliver this and the status and value that this subject will be assigned in the curriculum. Differences and preferences in class culture and ethnic culture are also poorly catered for and there is practically no mainstream provision for those with disabilities or special needs. Every individual should have a right to an education that allows them to access and develop to their full potential. A rigid standardised curriculum is by definition exclusive to the few with 'appropriate' conditioning and the 'correct' capital to succeed in that environment. Many teachers are struggling to engage learners in a system, which restricts them to a narrow curriculum that revolves strictly around a timetable that stifles spontaneity and ignores the development of other intelligences and social attributes. Current systems cater for a single class, homogeneous society that fails to reflect diversity and ill prepares the individual to integrate successfully in an increasingly multicultural society. Grant, in stating that: '*All students should receive an education that continuously affirms human diversity*'⁴⁷ makes the plea that there is a duty of provision on all schooling to invest in methods that effectively promote this.

Streaming, which is a widespread practice in schools, needs to be eradicated if there is to be fuller participation in schooling and greater equality in educational outcomes. Because of streaming children are categorised educationally at an early age and this results in lower expectations and an acceptance of a culture that some are '*almost simply born to failure*'. Locating education within a human rights framework and challenging essentialism and elitism in education as contra to human development principles will remove any legitimacy for streaming.

The lack of flexibility and pressure to produce results for some students, means that the potential abilities of teachers are not given an opportunity to flourish, particularly with respect to the development of pedagogic styles and methodologies. If a range of teaching methods were used a broader sweep of approaches and practices could be employed in engaging and developing other intelligences within children. Introducing flexibility and diversity of styles would require change on a 'whole school' basis, both in the classroom and in the general school culture.

Individuals from minorities must have their own prior learning and experiences legitimised, acknowledged and valued throughout their school experience. This would provide more equal opportunities to learn and would promote heterogeneity. It would also lead to a variety of reflective and reflexive teaching styles and delivery from teachers in their approaches while maintaining high expectations for all.

Teacher training and teaching methods

By far the majority of teachers come from middle class backgrounds and broadly share the same culture. In disadvantaged urban areas teachers do not normally live in the catchment area of the school, so there is a further separation in terms of opportunities to develop an understanding of different norms and expectations. This can result in a difference in perspectives with those of the local community on the priorities and objectives associated with schooling. It is important to educate teachers to prepare them for teaching in an increasingly diverse arena by equipping them to operate in this environment through the provision of training that challenge prejudices, both their own and others. This will lead to a heightened awareness of the system's current trend to reproduce societal inequality. Teachers also need to have an understanding of social exclusion and an analysis of Irish society. They also need to have a knowledge of equality frameworks and to develop some skills in the promotion of equal outcomes.

'*Education is the key to escaping poverty*⁴⁸ and therefore as a tool for reducing social exclusion, teachers must be trained with this in mind. One example of the initial barriers that children and their families living in or at risk from social exclusion is that of school language codes. Middle class families tend to use a language similar to that promoted as desirable parlance in schools, whereas children from disadvantaged areas and minority groups struggle to straddle this difficulty from the earliest point. Language code differentials can also be intimidating for the parents of these children and as a result a positive parent-school relationship is never adequately developed. The traditional method of teaching subjects is also disadvantaging those who have different learning methods and is detrimental to the classroom learning experience. By employing wide varieties of methods in lesson planning, the teacher is accessing greater opportunities for the child to participate in the classroom. These opportunities can range from the constructivist approach to integrated peer teaching, giving the child greater ownership of their education.

Special Needs.

The educational experience is also a prime site where social skills, intercultural dialogue and inter personal skills are developed. All students must be given the opportunity to learn to live in a society that is culturally, socially, physically and intellectually diverse. Mainstreaming students with special needs should not result in segregation but in the mainstream classroom adapting to include them. 'Remedial teaching' is stigmatising and pupils receiving this provision are looked upon as less able. Similarly, 'special schools' often means lesser provision and set a pattern of exclusion that is carried into future areas such as training and employment. People with disabilities and learning difficulties bring with them their own talents and experiences, that with a little accommodation, they too can share with others.

2.5 Organisational changes

Education should carry a provision of duty to each child and each community and community of interest. It should not be accepted that some social groupings do not benefit or participate while accepting that others can over-consume. Resources should be channelled to ensure fairer distribution, and the position where third level is comparatively well resourced while investment in primary schooling remains one of the lowest in Europe needs to be balanced.

There is an urgent need to equalise relationships within the school. Parents, communities and young people should be treated as partners in education. This requires schools to show greater respect for parents and children and to promote participation and ownership in education. The ownership issue should be prioritised and very specific work should take place to empower parents not only to engage with the Education System but also to challenge it in a meaningful and constructive way. A clear equality framework needs to be developed in locally appropriate ways so that this work can progress.

Parent participation.

Cullen's report '*Policy Discussions on Educational Disadvantage*' states that 12% of children's lives are spent at school, with 78% of the remainder of time spent at home and in the community. The home is the primary learning place and research identifies this as an area that educational providers must acknowledge and engage with. Obviously this is a two way process for both schools and families and there is a need for community development approaches in building capacity and developing structures for this to happen. However, the primary responsibility for acknowledging and integrating 'home capital' and parent participation is in the hands of the schools and, until this happens, it is clear that little will change in terms of better outcomes for young people from disadvantaged communities. As Cullen says: '*No effect on academic performance should be expected if existing inequalities in power relationships are perpetuated*⁴⁹.'

Empowerment of families in order for parents and children to gain ownership over the education process is a fundamental and proactive step towards addressing educational disadvantage. Many changes are necessary including: lessons designed for use in the home, the development of family learning centres/groups. This will require the opening of a dialogue of mutual respect between educationalists, parents and families that respects the right of parents to input into the content and thrust of their children's education.

Promoting Change: Strategic Priorities

3.1 Education as a Human Right

In a climate of economic buoyancy and increased wealth the prevalence of educational inequalities is testimony to the failure to link economic development to social gains for those who are most marginalised in society. A number of strategies now need to be implemented to redress this situation. These strategies, each of which will lever change throughout the school system, need to be applied as a package of integrated measures designed to impact in a profound and positive manner.

The Community Workers Co-op believes that, in line with the Declaration of Human Rights, education must operate out of a human rights framework that values the individual and their cultural perspective and sets the goal of full development for each person. For this to happen there needs to be a strong shift from competitive, elitist frames.

- Education must reject the core assumption that intelligence is a singular thing, which some have more of than others (*essentialism*). The concept of *multiple intelligences* should be adopted as a framework to meet the developmental needs of all children.
- Streaming should be condemned as a discriminatory and non-productive practice in schools. Streaming has promoted and legitimised unequal treatment of individuals and certain social groups and categories in education.

3.2 Improved delivery and organisation of education

Schooling in Ireland is delivered in an incoherent and disjointed manner. This acts against the development of co-ordinated responses and effective strategies to combat disadvantage. A number of changes are advocated including:

- New Local Education Boards should be established to co-ordinate delivery and provide effective guidance and structure to addressing inequalities in education.
- *Whole School Planning* should be introduced nationally and should include baselines, equality objectives, targets and performance monitoring.
- Schools, Youth Services families and communities, as well as other community and service providers need to be involved in the development of education strategies and actions. Educational disadvantage must be acknowledged as a multi-dimensional issue, which requires an integrated and multi-faceted approach. Integrated approaches to develop strategies to address educational disadvantage need to be initiated through Area-based Partnerships.
- Whole School Planning should be accompanied by the introduction of data collection and tracking systems that allow baselines to be set and outcomes to be measured. Targets and indicators, such as overall improvement in grades, need to be vectored into the planning process.

3.3 Promoting parent and community participation and ownership

Parents, families and communities are the primary stakeholders in education, and education outcomes are a crucial determinant of the economic and social status of communities. Parents and communities need to be central in the ownership, management and implementation of education, where they can provide unique insights and understandings.

There needs to be an acknowledgement that tackling educational disadvantage requires consultation and participation by all the stakeholders affected. Planning and decision-making are not only a matter for professionals. Management will only provide effective strategies when awareness on the issue is comprehensive and ownership is on equal terms.

- Parent participation needs to be resourced and sufficient capacity and organisational capability created for them to effectively input into education strategies and school management and planning.
- Proposed Local Education Boards and School Management Boards should be required to include proportionate Parent and Community Organisation representation.

3.4 Undertaking a financial restructuring of education

Funding for the education system is disproportionately focused on third level education, where lower socio-economic groups benefit least in terms of participation. In contrast, Primary education, where all social groups participate, is poorly resourced (Ireland is one of the worst spenders on Primary education in Europe). Pre-school is another area where Ireland has invested poorly. Again, the funding of elite schools continues despite its obvious contribution to inequality and unequal outcomes.

- A comprehensive state system pre-school should be introduced.
- Funding to the Primary School system needs to be massively increased to enable:
 - Improved pupil/teacher ratios
 - More and better support services
- The provision of free third level to all should be discontinued and should be replaced by a system of support grants for those in need. A framework to facilitate education loans and insurance schemes should be introduced by Government.

3.5 Targeting underachievement

Targeting inequalities in education requires a focus on disadvantaged areas and social categories experiencing disadvantage. It also needs effective dedicated programmes and the concentrating of resources to where there is most need.

- The NAPS targets need to be reset at higher levels and should be 'rolled out' locally through the *Whole School Planning* process. Currently a NAPS review is underway where each of the targets for educational disadvantage are being examined and initiatives to target those at risk of under-attainment are discussed. This work in consultation with interested parties will be published by November 2001.
- Schools in areas of disadvantage or with significant numbers of pupils at risk of disadvantage should be granted additional resources, including increased capita payments.
- There are opportunities, if resources are made available, through the Educational Welfare legislation to address early school leaving. *'Under the legislation co-ordinated supports and strategies will be developed to ensure that young people remain actively involved in education up to early adulthood so that they have a solid foundation for full participation in society.'*²⁰ Additionally, schools, will be required to develop attendance strategies and track attendance and the National Educational Welfare Board will be required to maintain a register of all early school leavers.
- Integrated approaches involving schools, youth services and community organisations should be encouraged, resourced and facilitated. This will ensure a more rounded development for young people and greater opportunities for career and life choices to be exercised.
- There should be a focusing of resources and longitudinal supports on schools in disadvantaged areas and on disadvantaged social groups.
- Radical policies, including affirmative action, should be devised and implemented to ensure better inclusion of groups presently not benefiting from third level education.
- The Home School Community Liaison Scheme (HSCL) should cease to operate out of a 'cultural deficit' model (focused on perceived deficiencies within the family). HSCL should be restructured as a co-ordinating mechanism developing and focusing services on children in need.

3.6 Broadening the content of education and improving the processes of the school and classroom

The diversity of factors contributing to any individual or group educational experience requires an educational system that is flexible and accommodating and be able to respond in an increasingly diverse society. However, this will only effectively benefit everybody if the processes of the classroom are altered and the destructive effects of the 'hidden curriculum' are challenged.

- There should be a shift from a narrow curriculum to one that reflects the full range of needs of all children. Diversity and cultural difference must be recognised, as must differing attributes and propensities.
- Teacher training should include the acquisition of skills in equality mainstreaming and a knowledge of social exclusion issues. There needs to be a better understanding of the impact of school processes in promoting unequal and disrespectful relationships between teachers and pupils.

Notes

- 1 See Bernstein, B 1971 *Class, Codes and Control*, Vol 1. London, Routledge and Kegan Paul
- 2 Archer, P in *Rich and Poor*, CPA 2000
- 3 Dr. Michael Woods T.D. Minister for Education and Science in the Foreword to the *Education Welfare Act 2000*
- 4 *National Anti Poverty Strategy* P9
- 5 *Programme for Prosperity and Fairness* P167
- 6 *Support for the Educationally Disadvantage - An introductory guide to government funded initiatives in Ireland*, Brian Murphy, Page 11
- 7 Department of Education and Science 1997
- 8 *Cultural capital* refers to particular resources obtained or imparted, which can be utilised directly or translated into other forms of capital that bestow advantage. For instance, education capital can be translated into economic capital through credentials that provide access to jobs.
- 9 *Support for the Educationally Disadvantage - An introductory guide to government funded initiatives in Ireland*, Brian Murphy, Page 23
- 10 Lynch, K *Equality in Education* (1999) p171
- 11 Article 26, UN *Declaration of Human Rights*
- 12 Article 30, *European Social Charter* Strasbourg
- 13 Cullen, B (2000) *Policy Aspects of Educational Disadvantage*
- 14 *Access & Equity in Higher Education* (2000)
Emeritus Prof. Malcolm Skilbeck & Dr Helen O'Connell
- 15 *Bust to Boom*: (2000) ESRI p137
- 16 An Introduction to Waldorf Education, An Essay By Rudolf Steiner, 1919
- 17 Grant, C.A. (1990). *Desegregation, racial attitudes, and intergroup contact: A discussion of change.*
- 18 Hart, B (2000) California Centre for Community-School Partnerships
- 19 *Combat Poverty Demonstration Programme on Educational Disadvantage* as quoted in Cullen, B (2000) *Policy Aspects of Educational Disadvantage*
- 20 Dr. Michael Woods T.D. Minister for Education and Science in the Foreword to the *Education Welfare Act 2000*



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