Educational disadvantage children and schools a preliminary report for Dublin healthy cities partnership

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Educational Disadvantage

Children and Schools

A Preliminary Report for Dublin Healthy Cities Partnership

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INTRODUCTION

The following report aims to provide a preliminary summary of educational disadvantage related issues and understandings in Ireland. The key purpose is to present a descriptive summary rather than an analysis. This is necessarily more expansive in certain aspects than others. Furthermore, it should be noted that the following focuses on educational disadvantage and related issues concerning children and schools. The objective is not to document educational disadvantage in young people comprehensively and exhaustively, but rather provide evidence as a basis upon which a decision of whether to continue to with the research may be made, hence, certain aspects of the template are limited or yet to be fulfilled. These areas are less developed due to time constraints rather than a dearth of information. Educational disadvantage and its consequences, data, and actions to address for adults and with regard to third level education are topics which also merit examination, although it is beyond the scope of this report to do so.

DEFINITIONS OF EDUCATIONAL DISADVANTAGE

It has been observed that:

> "*In the Republic of Ireland, most research on educational disadvantage has not been concerned with defining the term and finding explanations for the problem. Instead, it has focused on identifying the extent of educational disadvantage, identifying factors which relate strongly to it, and proposing measures to address the perceived problem*" (Boldt & Devine, 1998;8).

Confirming this, the Department of Education and Science's joint report with the Combat Poverty Agency, a key document for this subject in Ireland, *Educational Disadvantage in Ireland* discusses the concept, although it does not provide a definition. It is however noted that "*although the term educational disadvantage is widely used, there have been remarkably few efforts to define it*" (1996:2). However, the foreword includes the Combat Poverty Agency's:

> "*understand(ing of) educational disadvantage to mean that young people from socially and economically deprived backgrounds benefit substantially less from educational expenditure than those from better-off backgrounds*" (Kellaghan 1996:x).

The CPA is also involved in a number of programmes to address educational disadvantage, and the definitions employed are quoted below.

The Demonstration Programme on Educational Disadvantage states:

> "*the complex interaction of factors at home, in school and in the community (including economic, social, cultural and educational factors), which result in a young person deriving less benefit from formal education than their peers. As a result they leave the formal educational system with few or no qualifications, putting them at a disadvantage in the labour market, curtailing personal and social development, and leading to poverty and social exclusion*".

The Programme for Peace and Reconciliation cites the following definitions:

> "*Educational disadvantage is leaving school early without any qualifications or having failed the junior cycle examination.*"
> Damian Hannan of the ESRI

"In an educational sense young people are considered disadvantaged if they leave school at or near the minimum school leaving age of 15 with no effective formal qualifications".
Tony Crooks, Chief Executive of ADM.

The narrow definitions of educational disadvantage which predominate in Ireland have been criticised by Boldt and Devine (1998:10) who advance the following definition:

"In relation to a student in the formal education system, educational disadvantage may be considered to be a limited ability to derive an equitable benefit from schooling compared to one's peers by age as a result of school demands, approaches, assessments and expectations which do not correspond to the student's knowledge, skills, attitudes and behaviours into which (s)he has been socialised (as opposed to those to which (s)he is naturally endowed)."

The authors present a series of recommendations, foremost that:

"The 'educational disadvantage' concept needs to be clarified and specified as it is experienced in Ireland, so that numbers can be accurately measured, programmes can be focused on those in need, improvements can be monitored, research findings can be compared and interventions can be evaluated" (1998:25).

DESCRIPTION

The concept of educational disadvantage, in the opinion of the National Anti-Poverty Strategy (NAPS) working group, is as follows:

"Educational disadvantage is considered to result from discontinuities between the school and non-school experiences of children. This discontinuity makes the initial transition from home to school difficult and leads, throughout the school years, to a situation in which the academic performance of disadvantaged children is consistently lower than that of other children. Such discontinuity occurs for cultural and socio-economic reasons and involves the needs of the disadvantaged child".

To be completed.

THE IMPACT OF EDUCATIONAL DISADVANTAGE

A study of educational disadvantage in Ireland (Kellaghan 1996) comments that research shows a range of circumstances may place a child at risk of educational disadvantage. With regard to home conditions these relate to how time and space are organised and utilised; how parents and children communicate and spend their time; the values and rewards that govern parents' and children's' choice of activities; and exposure to actuate and potentially chronic stresses. Scholastic conditions may also contribute. This is possible if classroom language draws unevenly from the sociolinguistic home experiences of the child; if teachers have low expectations or set undemanding standards; or make lower socio-economic status (SES) parents less welcome than higher status parents. Further, if status differences based on either 'ascribed' characteristics (e.g. SES or gender) or 'achieved' characteristics (e.g. academic performance) are compounded by grouping practices which in turn impact social interactions, instructional process participation and learning.

Poverty and educational disadvantage exist in a mutually exacerbating relationship. The likelihood of obtaining qualifications is associated with social background, and the majority of individuals with few or no qualifications come from disadvantaged circumstances. This in turn informs employment prospects.

CPA observes that educational disadvantage is related to:

- Socio-economic factors like inadequate income, poor housing, ill health and community or family problems;
- High costs associated with participation in education;
- Lack of resources to deal with learning difficulties;
- Lack of relevance of school curriculum; and
- Expectations of teachers, parents and children themselves.

CPA also note that:

> "*children who have been born into poor households or live in deprived areas are most subject to educational failure and subsequent labour market exclusion. Research has clearly documented that experience in the labour market is a major factor in determining the risk of poverty and that the level of educational qualification and attainment is a key factor in determining success in the labour market. The main consequence of educational failure is a substantially greater risk of unemployment and poverty. The connection between poor educational qualifications and unemployment becomes more pronounced over time, reinforcing the cycle of poverty and inequality. As well as limiting market choices, educational failure can also curtail personal development. Poor educational achievement can lead to low confidence levels and a poor sense of morale and self-confidence*" (Kellaghan 1996:ix).

ADM observes the main consequences of educational disadvantage to be:

- Unemployment (80% of new jobs will go to people with a degree, a diploma, or a good Leaving Certificate. The 1996 School Leavers Survey found 69% of those who left school with no qualifications were unemployed one year after leaving);
- Low confidence levels;
- Low levels of self-esteem; and
- Potentially hindered socialisation and communication skills.

The NAPS observes:

> "*More than ever, under-achievement at school begets social difficulties which can lead to a life of uncertainty, marginalisation, and dependence on the structures of social assistance. Lack of qualifications can combine with unemployment, dependence on social welfare, accommodation difficulties and health problems, and create a situation where various types of disadvantage become mutually reinforcing*".

In contrast, Boldt and Devine remark that:

> "*it is difficult to state with confidence the consequences of educational disadvantage, because of the problems associated with the definition of educational disadvantage, and also because there are no easily measurable causal links between educational disadvantage and outcomes referred to as consequences. These consequences could be the result of personal or socio-economic factors, economic changes or other variables. Nevertheless, there are statistics which relate to the circumstances of early school-leavers which may be considered consequences.*" (1998:20).

These 'consequences' are primarily related to unemployment and participation in the labour market.

INDICATORS IN USE

Indicators in use in Ireland to identify educational disadvantage are primarily those employed by the Department of Education and Science. These were subject to a review in 1996 by the Educational Research Centre and the Combat Poverty Agency within an overall analysis of educational disadvantage in Ireland.[1]

The Scheme of Assistance to Schools in Designated Areas of Disadvantage, subsequently renamed the Disadvantaged Areas Scheme, gathers information from schools on a number of criteria, including accommodation, welfare benefits, and academic information. Extra information is required from post-primary schools.

It should be noted that Kellaghan et al (1995) observe in their key report that examination of applications revealed the indicators did not work in exactly the same way in urban and rural locations. Additionally, it was found that small schools are less likely to be designated as disadvantaged, due to the nature of the information upon which the decision is made, that points are calculated on the absolute number of pupils. Furthermore, with regard to the information for post-primary schools, as some points are dependent upon examination results, those who drop out prior to taking any exams cannot contribute to the overall score.

Primary and post primary schools, to qualify for designation as educationally disadvantaged must complete a form and achieve a certain points score. The information sought from schools is as described below.

Primary schools

Information for the Scheme with regard to primary schools is sought from schools on factors associated with disadvantage, particularly poverty, among the families of pupils in the school.

- The number of pupils in the school whose families reside in local authority housing and the number of pupils whose families reside in local authority housing and the number of pupils whose families reside in a flat or non-permanent accommodation;
- The number of pupils whose families hold medical cards;
- The number of pupils whose families are in receipt of unemployment benefit or assistance under schemes administered by the DSCFA.

An index of disadvantage is calculated for each school on the basis of information supplied in response to the above. The overall total is weighted to reflect the relative positions in terms of pupil-teacher ratio and schools are selected by reference to the total points carried following this procedure.

In developing the application form, other indicators were tested in addition to the above. These were not included in the final version because of difficulties in interpretation in a pilot of the application form. Those rejected were:

- Attendance rates;
- Percentages of pupils 'in clear need of remediation';
- Average size of family;
- Percentage of 'necessitous children' benefiting from the free-book grant; and

[1] taken from *Educational Disadvantage in Ireland.* Thomas Kellaghan, Susan Weir, Séamus Ó Huallacháin, Mark Morgan (1996). Dublin: Educational Research Centre, Department of Education, Combat Poverty Agency.

- Family mobility (how many left the school area and how many came to the school area in a specified time.

Post-primary schools

The questionnaire for post-primary schools seeks information on a larger number of indicators than the primary school questionnaire. These questions are related to factors associated with family background, particularly poverty:

- No. of pupils whose families are in receipt of unemployment benefit / unemployment assistance;
- No. of pupils whose reside in rented local authority houses;
- No. of pupils who reside in local authority flats;
- No. of pupils who reside in non-permanent accommodation;
- No. of rural pupils from a deprived economic background;
- No. of pupils whose parents hold a medical card; and
- No. of pupils living with lone parents.

Further questions are asked on pupil attainment and achievement:

- Principals asked to estimate the number of first year pupils with significant literacy and numeracy difficulties;
- Percentage of pupils who drop out of school at or about 15 years of age without formal educational qualifications (those who leave either without having attempted a public examination or having achieved fewer than 3 Ds in such an examination and do not progress to any other educational or training programme in the year after leaving school.

All questions apply to first year pupils except the last, regarding those who drop out. An index of disadvantage is calculated on basis of this information. Points scores are adjusted on the basis of each school's performance on the Junior Certificate Examination criteria which are:

- No. of candidates achieving fewer than 4 D grades;
- No. of candidates taking Foundation-level English;
- No. taking Foundation-level Maths;
- No. taking Foundation-level Irish.

Finally, these points are added to those from the responses to the questions above, to sum a grand total.

BACKGROUND

To be completed.

FACTS

Facts and hard data on educational disadvantage are available, such as the number of schools who qualify, under the Department of Education and Science's criteria, as disadvantaged. However, although like other issues pertaining to social exclusion, it can be measured and 'facts' produced, there are concerns regarding this, and cautions on the validity and reliability of these. Efforts to measure the extent of educational disadvantage involves methodological difficulties, leaving those already socially excluded unidentified. This occurs, for example, by the pupil remaining on school registers, but they are effectively out of school, be it through limited attendance, continuous suspension and through non-attendance do not achieve their full academic and educational potential.

Research and consultation conducted within the Programme for Peace and Reconciliation highlighted a widespread concern that official statistics do not present an accurate portrayal of the level and scale of problems associated with non-attendance and early school-leaving. Specifically, it was felt that the statistics significantly under-estimated the number of people who have 'disengaged' from the formal educational system at a comparably early age.

The extent of and experience of educational disadvantage, in addition to the consequences and causes will necessarily differ geographically. In rural locations transport and access to facilities will inevitably play a more significant role than in urban settings. Kellaghan (1996) also noted that the Scheme for Assistance in Areas of Disadvantage discriminates against smaller and rural schools.

DATA

The Census provides data on education received by the Irish population. It also collects information on employment status and occupation, which are also relevant to educational disadvantage.

The 1996 report of the ESF Evaluation Unit within the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment estimated that approximately 15, 000 young people leave school without attempting the Leaving Certificate. This figure includes those who do not progress to secondary level, those who leave secondary level without a qualification, those who have only completed their Leaving Certificate, and those who have completed this and a Vocational Preparation Training Course.

Analysis in the School Leavers' Survey recorded a reduction of the number leaving school without qualifications of approximately 2,200 per annum, matched by an increase in those completing second level education (up to and including Leaving Certificate examinations).

The Educational Research Centre (in research for CPA) estimate that approximately 16% of the school going population are educationally disadvantaged (1996). Of those, 12.5-16% of children who have reading difficulties; 16% of all school leavers who left school around or prior to their Junior Certificate exams; and 16% of families who fall below 60% of average national income.

INFORMATION

To be completed.

WHO EDUCATIONAL DISADVANTAGE AFFECTS

In terms of groups in society who are at greater risk of educational disadvantage and who it especially affects, literature indicates a link between it and poverty. As Boldt and Devine observe,

> *"The concepts 'poverty' and 'educational disadvantage' have a special relationship in that poverty is often identified as a factor which contributes to educational disadvantage, and educational disadvantage is often seen as a factor which perpetuatutes poverty. It is suggested that one of the consequences of being poor is that one will be educationally disadvantaged, and one of the consequences of educational disadvantage can be poverty."* (1998:13).

The authors go on to note that the relationship is not necessarily causal and that it cannot be assumed that every individual experiencing poverty will necessarily experience educational disadvantage and vice versa. That said, poverty is a well acknowledged 'risk factor'.

In the context of this then it should be observed that although educationally disadvantaged children are more likely to come from circumstances involving the following factors, the relationship is not concrete or causal. Many children in disadvantaged areas are not disadvantaged (Kellaghan:1996), however, the following circumstances may be interpreted as risk factors for educational disadvantage.

With regard to location, those in rural areas are potentially negatively affected by difficulty in maintaining involvment in education, or by accessing facilities. For out-of-school educational provision there are fewer opportunities at both formal (Youthreach Centres, Community Training Workshops) and informal (youth groups / clubs) levels in rural areas.

Already maintianing a relationship with poverty and social exclusion, factors such as unemployment in a family contribute to those affected by educational disadvantage. Ethnic minority, for example Traveller children, those coming from lone parent families, or exposed to an abusive home environment are also especially affected. Children are at greater risk if a culture or tradition of low education exists in an area or home, with parental education levels also retaining a deciding role. Children of parents with low formal educational achievements are affected by educational disadvantage, with maternal education especially indicative.

Finally, quantitative analyses show that greater numbers of boys than girls leave school with no qualifications; or leave having completed the Junior Certificate only; or leave having completed the Junior Certificate and a VPT course; or did not achieve five passes in the Leaving Certificate examination.

STATUTORY AGENCIES INVOLVED

The Department of Education and Science obviously operate a key role as a statutory body. It operates the Scheme for Schools in Areas of Disadvantage, outlined below.

The Combat Poverty Agency retains considerable involvement in examination of, research into and methods to combat, educational disadvantage. In their 1999 document, *Facts and Figures on Poverty*, the Agency argues that "*Education is one area in which projected demographic changes and economic growth should mean the availability of increased resources.*" The Agency continues, proposing these be used to achieve a number of objectives. These concern targeting resources to the most disadvantaged; tackling disadvantage at every stage in the educational process; providing assistance to low income parents with scholastic expenses, both direct and indirect; investment in programmes; and integration of services at local level.

VOLUNTARY AGENCIES INVOLVED

A variety of voluntary agencies retain one or more functions pertaining to educational disadvantage, or with particular populations who may be especially vulnerable to educational disadvantage. These functions include a focus, assistance in alleviating the causes, ameliorating the consequences, or research and a policy advisory and / or informative role. A selection of these are:

- The Irish Youth Federation
- Barnardos
- Children's Rights Alliance
- National Youth Council
- Society of St. Vincent de Paul
- Irish National Teachers' Organisation
- Irish Travellers' Movement
- Pavee Point
- The Education Network (CPA)

NATIONAL ACTIONS

National agreements form the Government's strategic programme for a set period. A series have been in operation since 1987 and are devised in negotiation and collaboration with the social partners. Partnership 2000 for Inclusion, Employment and Competitiveness was replaced this year by the Programme for Prosperity and Fairness. Their actions in relation to educational disadvantage are summarised as:

Partnership 2000 for Inclusion, Employment and Competitiveness

P2000, in a series of measures to contribute to the alleviation of social exclusion, includes a focus on education and observes "The link between educational disadvantage and unemployment and social exclusion is very strong. Accordingly education policy will continue to be oriented in such a way to give priority in the allocation of resources to those in greatest need." Actions proposed in this document relevant here are briefly summarised as follows:

- Policy and strategy to priorities the objectives of:
  - Breaking the inter-generational cycle of poverty and disadvantage;
  - Increasing retention and completion rates in school education;
  - Addressing the requirements of children with special needs;
  - Increasing support for the involvement of parents as partners in education;
- Co-ordination strategy to tackle early school leaving;
- Further early intervention at pre-school and primary level to improve access to continued education for disadvantaged groups;
- Strengthening the education service for Travellers and those with a disability;
- Expanding provision of opportunities for social and personal development.

Programme for Prosperity and Fairness

The PPF includes an extensive series of actions in the area of education, many of which will contribute to alleviating disadvantage. A summary of those especially pertinent to educational disadvantage in childhood is as outlined below:

- Establishment of the Early Childhood Agency;
- Development of a quality framework for early education;
- Promotion of a Quality in Education mark for providers in the sector;
- Provision of targeted interventions in early education for educationally disadvantaged children and those with special needs;
- A co-ordinated literacy measure incorporating:
  - A public awareness campaign;
  - Promotion of a national reading initiative;
  - Improvement of the school remedial service;
  - Development of culturally appropriate supports;
  - Systematic monitoring of progress.
- Strategy to prevent early school leaving, including, amongst other actions:
  - Improvements in staffing, teacher allocation and deployment and class size;
  - Enhancement of home / school / community liaison and remedial services;
  - Expansion of the National Educational Psychological Service;
  - Establishment of a National Educational Welfare Service (including representation by the Community and Voluntary pillar);
  - The New Deal – A Plan for Educational Opportunity, including annual review;
  - Establishment of an Education Disadvantage Committee;
  - Promotion of community links;
  - Development of youth work responses;
  - Strengthening of the educational guidance service in schools;
  - Measures to support participation by Travellers and children with disabilities;
  - Consideration of a strategy to involve participation by young parents in education and training.

National Anti-Poverty Strategy

The NAPS states both a specific objective and a specific target regarding educational disadvantage:

Overall objective:

> *"To ensure that children, men and women living in poverty are able to gain access, participate in and benefit from education of sufficient quality to allow them to move out of poverty, and to prevent others from becoming poor."*

Overall target:

"To eliminate the problem of early school leaving before the junior certificate, and reduce early school leaving such that the percentage of those completing the senior cycle will increase to at least 90% by the year 2000 and 98% by the year 2007, and having regard to the assessment of their intrinsic abilities, there are no students with serious literacy and numeracy problems in early primary education within the next five years."

The relevant NAPS policy actions to achieve these are under the headings of:

- *Participation* – increased support
- *Pre-school education* – increased services
- *Preventing educational disadvantage* – increased school resources, encouraged parental involvement, expanded schemes, and targeted reduction in class sizes
- *Special educational needs* – securing a continuum of provision
- *Travellers* – improved measures for enrolment and participation
- *Early school leaving* – community integration, support and evaluated pilot initiatives

Scheme of Assistance to Schools in Designated Areas of Disadvantage

The Department of Education and Science established this programme in 1990. It was subsequently renamed the Disadvantaged Areas Scheme. Initially it provided support for concessionary teaching posts, Home School Community Liaison and additional grants for general management and school books. Specific actions or measures resourced through the scheme and other Departmental initiatives to address educational disadvantage are:

- *Early Start Programme* - this supports pre-school centres attached to existing national schools.
- *Home School Community Liaison Scheme* – co-ordinators are employed in schools.
- *Remedial Teachers* – providing support for children experiencing learning difficulties.
- *Teacher Counsellors* – employed to work with pupils with particular social and emotional needs / problems.
- *Breaking the Cycle* – employment of a full-time co-ordinator, an enhanced capitation grant per pupil and a contribution towards teaching materials and equipment.
- *Educational Psychologists* – employed to work in schools in areas rather solely in individual schools.

Furthermore, the *8-15 Early School Leavers Initiative* (ESLI) is comprised of three main components. These are a project element, a research element and a support / evaluation element. Pilot projects aim to test models for the development of an integrated area based co-ordination of services for young people at risk of early school leaving. The objective is to devise models of good practice with a view to their integration into mainstream policy and practice.

REGIONAL ACTIONS

Educational Disadvantage in the Southern Border Counties

ADM and CPA are jointly responsible for the European Commission's Peace and Reconciliation Programme in the southern border counties. Following a focus on a number of thematic areas which potentially retain significant impact on quality of life, research illustrated a need for a special initiative on educational disadvantage. Rates of early school leaving in this region are the highest in Ireland outside of the main urban centre. This has been addressed though a focus on development of local educational consortia. By mid-1999 twenty one consortia had been established. The types of actions which have been encouraged as a result are diverse, from primary to post primary transition work, homework clubs, increasing parental involvement in education and support for both child and parent.

LOCAL ACTIONS

Area Partnership Companies

Although Area Partnerships' primary target is long-term unemployment, those at risk of this, and those who are socially excluded are also focused upon. Most Partnership companies retain alleviating social exclusion as a key priority and a means of hindering unemployment. Education co-ordinators are employed and these have piloted and supported a range of local initiatives.

Local Integrated Strategies

CPA and Youthstart's *A Learning Experience: Case Studies on Local Integrated Strategies to Tackle Educational Disadvantage* (1999) aims to produce examples of good practice in initiatives developing responses to educational disadvantage. These case studies also provide examples suitable for this report, examples of local initiatives combating educational disadvantage. Evaluatory measures were gauged for each project, although formal sets of 'performance indicators' were not necessarily employed. A brief summary of a selection of the initiatives is as follows.

Lebo Project: Cox's Demesne Youth and Community Project

Set up in 1991 to respond to the needs of the young people on the estate, the overall aim was to enable them to make choices regarding returning to full time education, remaining within the education system, and accessing vocational training. The project was managed by local residents, statutory organisations and community groups. The programme of activity consisted of personal development; vocational skills; leisure / sport activity; literacy / numeracy programme; after care; and college class components.

Jobstown Educational and Training Strategy

The aim of the strategy was to devise a model framework within which schools, families, pupils, community organisations and state bodies could work to decrease educational disadvantage, improve retention in the formal school systems, and to intervene in the poverty cycle and its links to education. A co-ordinator was employed. Young people at risk of early school leaving were identified and approximately two thirds of these selected to participate in the strategy. The programme consists of a class, summer projects, team building activities, team teaching and assistance with transition through the formal educational system.

Second Chance Early School Leaver Project
This project involves a range of academic, personal development and social skills interventions in Tipperary Town and its environs. The aims were to work with young people who had left school early but were too young to avail of training schemes or take up full time employment and to either get these individuals back into school or into a position whereby they would be able to access mainstream training schemes. Community, statutory and voluntary agencies were involved. The programme consisted of schooling, a homework club, social skills and group work, outdoor pursuits, computers and catering components.

STORIES

Although the potential outcomes of educational disadvantage are, as evident from the above, well researched and substantial strategies and actions to alleviate it are underway, little exists by way of portrayal of the experience of being educationally disadvantaged. This is clearly an area requiring further qualitative research. However, Scott Boldt's longditundinal study of the post-school experiences of early school leavers in Ireland, Hear My Voice includes detailed profiles of four early school leavers. These are, Boldt states, "*to give the reader a sense of the diversity of the sample and a deeper insight into the post-school experiences of some people who decide to leave school early*" (p.24).

RESPONSE WEAKNESSES / GAPS

To be completed.

RECOMMENDATIONS

To be completed.

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