

Introduction

'Educational disadvantage' refers to a situation whereby individuals in society derive less benefit from the education system than their peers. In Ireland it is manifested in many ways, most notably in low levels of participation and achievement in the formal education system.

Educational disadvantage is closely linked to the issue of poverty. A substantial volume of research indicates that individuals from poorer socio-economic backgrounds and communities are more likely to underachieve in the education system than their peers from higher income backgrounds.¹

Educational disadvantage is also considered to be a factor that perpetuates intergenerational poverty.

Key Facts

- An estimated 1,000 pupils do not transfer annually from primary to post-primary education.²
- In 1999 (the year for which most up-to-date statistics are available), 2,400 young people or 3.2 per cent of the cohort left the formal education system with no recognised qualification, i.e. before taking the Junior Certificate Examination. A further 10,600 young people left after the Junior Certificate but before the Leaving Certificate.
- The 1998 National Assessment of English Reading revealed that 1 in 10 children still leaves primary school with significant literacy problems despite reductions in class sizes and increases in library resources and in the availability of learning support teachers in recent years.

¹See, for example, Kelleghan, T. et al. (1995), *Educational Disadvantage in Ireland*, Department of Education, Combat Poverty Agency, Dublin: Educational Research Centre; Boldt, S. et al. (1998), *Educational Disadvantage and Early School Leaving – Discussion Papers*, Dublin: Combat Poverty Agency; Smyth, E. (1999), 'Educational Inequalities among School Leavers in Ireland, 1979-1994'. *Economic and Social Review* Vol 30, July: 267-284; Smyth, E. and Hannon, D. (2000), 'Education and Inequality' in Nolan, B., O'Connell, P. and Whelan, C., *Bust or Boom*, Dublin: IPA; NESF (2002), *Early School Leavers Forum Report No 24*, Dublin: NESF.

²NESF (2002), *Early School Leavers Forum Report No. 24*, Dublin: NESF.

- There is continued evidence of a direct relationship between the social background of a child and his or her educational outcome (see Tables 1 and 2). Additionally, research has shown that the educational problems of a child from a poor background are exacerbated if he or she is at a school where the majority of the other pupils are also from poor backgrounds.³ Research has shown that, while Ireland achieved the fifth highest score among 27 OECD countries with regard to literacy, 11 per cent of Irish 15 year-old students are at or below the Level 1 literacy score (i.e. are able to complete only the most basic reading tasks). Additionally, the achievement scores of students in schools that are designated as disadvantaged are substantially lower than those of students in non-disadvantaged schools.⁴
- The participation of Travellers in the education system continues to be extremely low. For example, only 1,381 Travellers participated in post-primary education during the 2001/02 school year. Twelve per cent of that number participated in the senior cycle (Transition Year, Fifth Year and Sixth Year) while just over 3 per cent of that figure enrolled in Sixth Year with a view to undertaking the Leaving Certificate examination.⁵
- Between 1994 and 1998, 24 countries/regions, including Ireland, participated in the International Adult Literacy survey (IALS) – a survey of the literacy skills of adults in three domains: prose literacy, quantitative literacy and documents literacy. On the IALS prose

literacy scale, which assessed ability to read and understand continuous texts, Irish adults (aged 16-65 years) ranked fourteenth of 22 countries/regions (OECD/Statistics Canada, 2000). They performed significantly less well than adults in 10 countries/regions, better than adults in five, and about the same as adults in six.

Definition of Educational Disadvantage

Various definitions of educational disadvantage exist. The Education Act (1998: 32 [9]) refers to educational disadvantage as:

the impediments to education arising from social or economic disadvantage which prevent students from deriving appropriate benefit from education in schools.

Boldt and Devine⁶ view educational disadvantage as a limited ability to derive equal benefit from schooling compared to one's peers and also note that educational disadvantage must be understood at a number of levels:

- in the context of the individual deriving less benefit from education while participating in the formal education system
- in the context of the diminished life chances of the individual who has left formal education without recognised qualifications.

An important distinction in defining educational disadvantage is that it is a relative term. Individuals are educationally disadvantaged relative to others.

³ Information drawn from enrolment estimates of the Department of Education and Science.

⁴ Thrupp, M. (1999), *Schools making a difference. Let's be realistic! School mix, school effectiveness and the social limits of reform*. Balmoor Backs: Open University Press.

⁵ See Shiel, G., Cosgrove, J. et al (2001), *Ready for Life: The Literacy Achievements of Irish 15-year-olds with comparative International Data*, Educational Research Centre, Dublin.

⁶ Boldt, S. and Devine, B., 'Educational Disadvantage in Ireland: Literature Review and Summary Report' in Boldt, S., Devine, B., Mac Devitt, D. and Morgan, M. (1998) *Educational Disadvantage and Early School Leaving Discussion Papers*, Dublin: Combat Poverty Agency, p.10.

Factors Causing Educational Disadvantage

Educational disadvantage is a multi-dimensional problem and not simply an education-related issue. While it is a problem in its own right, educational disadvantage is more correctly understood as a symptom of a wider range of issues affecting the lives of children and adults, their families and their communities, and the structure and content of the education system. Among others, these include:

- the welfare needs of children not being met (diet, sleep, etc.)
- high participation costs of education (clothes, books, meals, etc.)
- lack of family/community tradition in education
- the failure of school curricula to reflect and validate the cultural backgrounds and learning styles of all learners
- the failure of the education system to address the needs of minority groups (e.g. Travellers, people with disabilities, etc.)
- barriers facing adults seeking to return to education (transport, childcare, etc.)

Research indicates that it is people living in poverty who constitute the majority of those who do not benefit fully from education. For example, the NESF (2002) notes an over-representation of individuals from unskilled and manual social class backgrounds among those leaving formal education with few or no qualifications (Table 1).

Clancy (2001) also highlights an under-representation of low-income groups entering higher education. He points to the fact that only 10.5 per cent of all those

Table 1: Comparison of Post-Junior Certificate School Leavers (1999) by Socio-Economic Group

Socio-Economic Group	% of Group
Unskilled Manual	25.0
Lower Professional	5.6
Higher Professional	7.7
Employers & Managers	8.2

Source: NESF (2002), *Early School Leavers Forum Report No. 24*, Dublin: NESF, p.34

enrolled as new entrants to full-time higher education in autumn 1998 came from households where the father was unskilled or semi-skilled.

By contrast, 41.8 per cent of new entrants came from households where the father was an employer/manager or worked as a professional.

Tables 1 and 2 (next page) indicate that certain individuals, social groupings and communities are more vulnerable to educational disadvantage than others, most especially individuals from low-income or working-class backgrounds (both rural and urban).

Other vulnerable groups include people with a disability, members of the Traveller Community and/or other minority ethnic groups.

Inequalities in educational participation and achievement reflect a wide range of social and economic inequalities in Irish society and the widening gap between the better off and the less well off in Ireland. Where there is greater socio-economic inequality, there is an increased likelihood of educational inequality.

The OECD,⁷ for example, has noted that countries with the highest levels of income inequality are also those countries with the most significant literacy inequality and has

⁷ OECD (2001), *Education at a Glance*, Paris: OECD.

Table 2: Fathers' socio-economic status of 1998 entrants to higher education & national population under 15 years in 1996

Socio-Economic Groups	Higher Education Entrants in 1998 (%)	National population under 15 years in 1996 (%)
Employers and Managers	21.6	14.8
Higher Professional	10.1	5.2
Lower Professional	10.1	7.7
Non-Manual	9.4	15.0
Manual Skilled	13.6	19.1
Semi-skilled	7.4	10.6
Unskilled	3.1	8.5
Own Account Workers	7.2	7.8
Farmers	16.6	9.4
Agricultural Workers	0.7	2.0
Total %	100	100
Total N	19,087	766,057

Source: adapted from Clancy (2001) *College Entry in Focus: A Fourth National Survey of Access to Higher Education*, p.51

identified Ireland as having the third highest levels among OECD countries on both scores.

Effects of Educational Disadvantage

Education and related qualifications determine to a large extent the life chances of people. Those who leave the formal education system with few or no qualifications are at a disadvantage. Their personal and social development is curtailed and they are at increased risk of poverty and social exclusion.⁸

Educational disadvantage also impacts negatively on society at large. Underachievement within the education system reduces the pool of skilled workers available and, consequently, diminishes the state's capacity to compete economically.

Educational disadvantage not only results in foregoing economic benefits to the state from a reduction in human capital. It also increases costs to the state in supporting those who are unemployed and in dealing with personal and social problems associated with disadvantage.⁹

The National Anti-Poverty Strategy

The National Anti-Poverty Strategy (1997), *Sharing in Progress*, and the revised National Anti-Poverty Strategy (2002), *Building an Inclusive Society*, represent a major policy initiative by the state to place the needs of the poor and socially excluded at the top of the national agenda in government policy development and action.

Given the considerable link between poverty

⁸ Johnston, H. (1997), 'The Nature and Effectiveness of Irish Policy Interventions in Addressing Educational Disadvantage' in *Transitions in Youth: Combating Exclusion*. Proceedings of the fourth European Workshop of Network on Transitions in Youth, Dublin: ESRI & Combat Poverty Agency, p.307.

⁹ Kelleghan, T. et al. (1995), *Educational Disadvantage in Ireland*, Dublin: Department of Education, Combat Poverty Agency, Educational Research Centre.

and educational underachievement, educational disadvantage is one of the principal themes of the strategy. The strategy aims to support those at risk of leaving, and those who have left, the education system with inadequate qualifications to participate fully in the economy, in employment and in society.

To achieve this end, three key targets have been set in the revised National Anti-Poverty Strategy (2002):¹⁰

- To halve the proportion of pupils with serious literacy difficulties by 2006
- To reduce the proportion of the population aged 16-64 with restricted literacy to below 10 to 20 per cent by 2007 (restricted literacy being defined as falling below 200-225 on the International Adult Literacy Survey scale or equivalent)
- To reduce the number of young people who leave the school system early, so that the percentage of those who complete upper second level or equivalent will reach 85 per cent by 2003 and 90 per cent by 2006.

While the setting of targets within the NAPS to address educational disadvantage is a welcome development, a number of commentators highlight that the educational priorities set by NAPS merely aspire to improving educational outcomes in general and do nothing to reduce the gap in educational achievement between the social classes.

Initiatives to address Educational Disadvantage

A range of significant policy initiatives have been developed by successive governments to address the issue of educational disadvantage in Ireland. These include the following:

- Expenditure in excess of €33m over three years (2000–2004) to address educational disadvantage in the primary sector through the Department of Education and Science Programme – *Giving Children an Even Break by Tackling Disadvantage* (2001)
- The establishment in 1998 of a Social Inclusion Unit within the Department of Education and Science to co-ordinate policy on educational disadvantage
- The launch of a statutory Educational Disadvantage Committee¹¹ in March 2002 to advise the Minister for Education and Science on policies and strategies to identify and correct educational disadvantage
- The establishment of the Educational Welfare Board in May 2001 as a national authority to implement the provisions of the Education (Welfare) Act [2000], to promote school attendance and prevent early school leaving
- The production of a White Paper on Adult Education – *Learning for Life* (2000) – marking the adoption of lifelong learning as the governing principle of educational policy.

¹⁰ Further education-related targets have been set with regard to Traveller participation in post-primary and Third Level education and with regard to the participation of people with disabilities in Third Level education.

¹¹ This committee is provided for in Section 32 of the Education Act (1998).

¹² Established in 1984 at primary level and 1990/91 at post-primary.

- The development of initiatives throughout the 1980s and 90s designed to allocate additional resources to schools located in areas of considerable socio-economic disadvantage – the Scheme of Assistance to Schools in Designated Areas of Disadvantage, the Home-School-Community Liaison Programme¹³, Early Start¹⁴, and the Breaking the Cycle Initiative¹⁵ – Urban and Rural.
- ensure that early identification of young people at risk of underachievement within the education system, and early intervention, are core parts of any initiative to tackle educational disadvantage
- view educational disadvantage as a symptom of a wider range of problems affecting the lives of children and adults, their families, their communities and the structure and content of the education system

Key Priorities for Tackling Educational Disadvantage

Based on work undertaken by the Combat Poverty Agency in relation to educational disadvantage, in particular its Demonstration Programme on Educational Disadvantage (1996-2000), it is the Agency's contention that initiatives to tackle educational disadvantage should:

- develop and implement appropriate targets for the ending of educational disadvantage and the promotion of educational equality, emphasising, in particular, an alteration in the relationship between educational achievement and social background¹⁶
- ensure integrated responses to educational disadvantage at a national level to guarantee effective delivery of professional services and programmes
- ensure that integrated multi-level responses, involving the home, school, adult education, community and relevant services, are at the core of any local response to address educational disadvantage
- Address educational disadvantage through a system-wide response that builds on good practice emerging from the range of pilot initiatives operated by the Department of Education and Science and mainstream actions that are supported by structures and people.
- provide appropriate re-entry opportunities and pathways of progression for individuals who have left the education system, afford increased recognition and appropriate accreditation to non-formal and non-academic learning and create the conditions required to fulfil the concept of Lifelong Learning.

¹³ Established in the late 1990/91 school year at primary level and the following year at post-primary.

¹⁴ Established in 1994.

¹⁵ Introduced in autumn 1996.

¹⁶ This applies not only to individuals from particular social classes, but applies also to individuals from specific social/cultural groupings, such as Travellers and members of ethnic minorities, people with a disability, etc.