



POLICY SUBMISSION

Position Paper for The National Forum on Early Childhood Education

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1. The Combat Poverty Agency

The Combat Poverty Agency is a state agency which works for the prevention and decrease of poverty and social exclusion and the reduction of inequality in Ireland by striving for change which will promote a fairer and more just, equitable and inclusive society. It is a centre of expertise on poverty issues, policies and practices. A key element of its work is advising government on all aspects of economic and social planning in relation to poverty.

The Agency is committed to addressing the causes of poverty and social exclusion by seeking to influence life chances in particular through working for a reduction in long-term unemployment and educational disadvantage. The Agency also seeks to address the consequences of poverty by working for the empowerment of those who are marginalised and excluded as a result of poverty and by addressing the problems that are manifested in disadvantaged urban and rural communities. Strategies needed to tackle child poverty are a key concern of the Agency.

2. The National Forum on Early Childhood Education

The Agency welcomes the establishment by the Minister for Education and Science, Micheál Martin, TD, of the National Forum on Early Childhood Education.

The Agency's position paper for the National Forum on Early Childhood Education is based on our philosophy of education which sees it as a fundamental social right and our belief that the education system should provide a vision of society which is committed to the values of social equality and justice.¹

The paper begins by defining poverty and outlining recent statistics on child poverty in Ireland. It then provides an examination of the causes and consequences of educational disadvantage, with a particular focus on its links with poverty. The role of early childhood education in combating poverty is then discussed followed by a section which discusses the possible role the Forum could play in the context of the National Anti-Poverty Strategy. The paper concludes with an articulation of the Agency's position in relation to early childhood education.

3. Child Poverty

In the Agency's view, poverty is about not having an acceptable standard of living which is based on the norm for other people in society. People in Ireland are poor where their resources are so inadequate as to preclude them from enjoying a minimum acceptable lifestyle. Such a view of poverty takes account of the fact that people have social, emotional and cultural needs as well as basic physical needs. Thus poverty is about exclusion, isolation and a sense of powerlessness as well as a lack of money.

The National Anti-Poverty Strategy (NAPS), a Government commitment to tackle poverty, has agreed the following definition of poverty:

People are living in poverty, if their income and resources (material, cultural and social) are so inadequate as to preclude them from having a standard of living which is regarded as acceptable by Irish society generally. As a result of inadequate income and resources people may be excluded and

¹ See: Combat Poverty Agency. (1993). *Education, Inequality and Poverty: A response to the Green Paper on Education For a Changing World*. Dublin: Combat Poverty Agency.

marginalised from participating in activities which are considered the norm for other people in society.²

The significance of the NAPS in relation to the National Forum on Early Childhood Education is discussed in more detail in section seven of this position paper.

Evidence from the 1994 Living in Ireland Survey shows that households with children face a significantly higher risk of poverty³ than households without children, and that children are much more likely to be poor than adults.⁴ The survey found that in 1994 children were two-thirds more likely to be in poverty than adults at the 50% income line), 29% compared to 18%, and that since 1987 (the last time a poverty study was published prior to 1994) the situation for children has worsened. The survey also found that households with four or more children were at a particularly high risk of poverty (38.2%). Four main reasons have been cited for the high risk of poverty for families with children: unemployment, low pay, lone parenthood and government fiscal policy which saw the relative financial burden on families increase during the 1980s.⁵ Last year, when the results of the parallel surveys carried out in other EU countries was published, it was revealed that Ireland had the second highest level of child poverty in Europe.⁶

There is general agreement that children from poor backgrounds often do not derive the same benefit from their schooling as children from more comfortable backgrounds and are therefore at greater risk of experiencing educational disadvantage. The next section of this papers examines the concept of educational disadvantage in more detail.

4. Educational Disadvantage

Although the term educational disadvantage is widely used, it has not been rigorously defined. Other terms such as 'inequality', 'marginalised', 'underprivileged' and 'at risk' are often assumed to be equivalent in meaning, and disadvantage is often referred to by its correlates of poor performers, low achievers or those who have not attained high grades.⁷

There are different theories about why some people are educationally disadvantaged and others are not. Some argue that a child from a socially and economically disadvantaged background does not have the necessary cultural bases for success at school since the lack of cultural resources in the family leads to backwardness in the intellectual development of the child and in particular in the cultural and linguistic bases required for success at school. Others argue that educational disadvantage is caused by the fact that some families or communities have inadequate resources to

² The NAPS, launched in April 1997, is an attempt to bring a strategic approach to tackling the underlying causes of poverty and social exclusion. It marks the development of agreed targets and goals to fight poverty and social exclusion. For further details see: National Anti-Poverty Strategy. *Sharing in Progress* (1997). Dublin: Stationery Office.

³ The risk of poverty experienced by a particular group tells us what proportion of that group actually falls below an income line, and therefore to what extent that group is at risk of poverty.

⁴ Callan, T., Nolan, B., Whelan, B., Whelan, C. and Williams, J. (1996): *Poverty in the 1990s: Evidence from the Living in Ireland Survey*. Oak Tree Press, The Economic and Social Research Institute and the Combat Poverty Agency.

⁵ Nolan, B. and Farrell, B. (1991) *Child Poverty in Ireland*. Dublin: Combat Poverty Agency.

⁶ Eurostat. (1997/6). *Statistics in Focus Population and Social Conditions*.

⁷ See: Boldt, S. and Devine, B. (forthcoming). *Educational Disadvantage in Ireland: Literature Review and Summary Report*. Dublin: Combat Poverty Agency.

enable their children to participate in the education system so that they can derive the maximum benefit from it. Educational disadvantage can also be explained at a systems level. Here, the culture and language used in school may not reflect or appreciate the culture and language of the children, teachers may have low expectations, or certain practices of the schools, such as streaming, contribute to adverse learning conditions for some students.

In reality it is more than probable that these problems are interconnected and mutually supporting. They manifest themselves in difficulties in adjusting to school which, in turn result in poor educational performance. Signs of difficulty are usually in evidence from an early age and, as children progress through the system, the achievement gap between students from advantaged and disadvantaged backgrounds tends to widen. Eventually, the student from a disadvantaged background is likely to leave school early, with poor formal qualifications and poor employment prospects.

On the basis of the discussion so far, the following definition of educational disadvantage is advanced:

‘educational disadvantage is 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 education 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.’

5. Education perpetuating Poverty

The Irish education system has been described as reflecting a high level of educational disadvantage. Evidence indicates that differentials exist among social groups in access to, treatment by, and in outcomes of educational systems. As a result, young people from deprived social class backgrounds are more likely to leave school with low or no qualifications.⁸ It is clear that the number of young people leaving school with no qualifications continues to decline - the most recent figures indicate that 4% of school leavers in 1996 left with no formal qualifications. However, the consequences of educational failure have become more severe over time, with those without qualifications - drawn mostly from lower working-class backgrounds - being more limited to unskilled manual occupations at high risk of unemployment. As Callan and Nolan note: There has been a sharper polarisation between those who leave school early without qualifications and their more successful peers. A priority must be to address the needs of this particularly disadvantaged group.⁹

Research evidence for the 1980s and early 1990s shows a strong and growing link between the lack of qualifications and an increased risk of unemployment. In 1980, the unemployment rate for those without qualifications was 14 percentage points greater than for those who had attained the Leaving Certificate (22 per cent and 8 percent respectively). By 1996 this differential had grown to 53 percentage points

⁸ Hannan, D.F. (1989) ‘Equality of Education in the Republic of Ireland’ In E. Hanna and M. Love (Eds.). *Towards Equality*. Social Studies Conference and SSC Publications.

⁹ Callan, T. and Nolan, B. (1994). *Poverty and Policy in Ireland*. Dublin: Gill and Macmillan. p. 218.

with the unemployment rate among those who left with no qualifications standing at 61 per cent compared with 8 per cent among those who left with a Leaving Certificate.¹⁰

Previous research indicates that this gap remains, if not widens, over time. For example, in one five year follow-up study, those who had no qualifications started out in 1987 with an unemployment rate of around 61% and ended up five years later with almost the same rate, at 58%. However, for those with a Leaving Certificate, the unemployment rate started in a relatively better position at 32% and five years later had declined to 10%.¹¹

It is also noticeable that over half (55%) of early school leavers come from families where fathers are unemployed, compared to less than one in five (20%) in the total cohort. Most of the unemployed are working class so that the combined percentage of early leavers who are either working class or unemployed comes to 88%. These figures indicate a cycle of disadvantage, reproduced intergenerationally, where the children of those in poverty are also at high risk of poverty, so a cycle is created which deepens the extent of poverty among certain households and communities.

As well as limiting labour market choices educational failure can also curtail personal development and the young person's transition to independence and adulthood.¹²

6. The Role of Early Childhood Education in Combating Poverty

While there is no simple causal link between poverty and educational disadvantage there is an increased likelihood of children in poverty suffering school failure. Research results reported by Hayes indicate that high-quality early educational services have a positive impact on future educational and social success of children born at risk of educational and/or social exclusion.¹³ Hayes reported the following important findings:

- early education leads to immediate, measurable gains in educational and social development
- good quality early educational programmes are particularly beneficial to children from disadvantaged backgrounds and for those over 3 years of age
- to be effective such programmes must be child-centred, of a high-quality, well-resourced with appropriately trained staff and a good adult:child ratio
- programmes must provide children with a curriculum that emphasises 'mastery' - i.e. a belief that if they try they can succeed - the curriculum must also encourage positive self-esteem, a commitment to learning and problem-solving, and a positive outlook when entering formal schooling

¹⁰ Williams, J. and Collins, C. (1997). *The Economic Status of School Leavers, 1994-1996: Results of the School Leavers' Surveys*. Department of Education and Science; Department of Enterprise Trade and Employment; and the Economic and Social Research Institute..

¹¹ Hannan, D. (1996). *School to Work Transitions in Ireland: Problems and Possibilities*. Paper prepared for the National Economic and School Forum, January 1996.

¹² See Hannan, D.F. and O'Riain, S. (1993) *Pathways to Adulthood in Ireland: Causes and Consequences of Success and Failure in Transitions Among Irish Youth*. The Economic and Social Research Institute. Research Paper Number 161.

¹³ Hayes, N. (1995). *The Case for a National Policy on Early Education*. Dublin: Combat Poverty Agency. Poverty and Policy Discussion Paper Number 2.

- parental involvement, in the form of a parent-professional partnership, can facilitate the success of early education programmes
- investment in high quality early education pays off in terms of later economic savings to society.

Hayes identifies the fragmented nature of current early childhood policy and planning as an issue requiring attention and calls for the formulation of a national policy on early education in her paper. In a more recent report, Hayes notes that *There is no national policy to co-ordinate early childhood services, with the result that there are, for instance, no training regulations governing the education of pre-school teachers: neither is there a recognised pre-school curriculum.*¹⁴ While warning against over estimating the role which educational interventions can play in impacting on poverty and social exclusion, she argues that early education has a role to play in improving the quality of life of young children and in shaping a positive future for many.

Longitudinal research currently underway at the Early Childhood Education Research Centre in the Dublin Institute of Technology will examine the relationship between early childhood experiences at the age of 4 and the children's cognitive, language, social, physical and academic development at age 7, all having relevance to later school performance and success.¹⁵

7. The National Anti-Poverty Strategy (NAPS)

The work of the National Forum on Early Childhood Education is significant in the context of the NAPS. The NAPS, which was initiated in response to the Government's commitment at the UN Social Summit in Copenhagen in 1995, will ensure that all government departments and state agencies include the reduction and prevention of poverty as key objectives in the development and implementation of their policies and programmes. The strategy has been developed on the basis of five themes: educational disadvantage, income adequacy, unemployment, urban concentrations of poverty and rural poverty.

The overall objective of the NAPS in relation to addressing educational disadvantage is *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.*¹⁶ To achieve this objective, the NAPS identifies a number of policy actions. Of particular relevance in the context of the Forum is the NAPS recommendation that policy actions are necessary to increase pre-school services in partnership with community interests, including the development of pre-school interventions, designed to address educational disadvantage and a phased extension of *Early Start*. Policy actions were also considered necessary by the NAPS to increase support towards the costs of participation in education for welfare dependent and low income families. The NAPS Working Group on Educational Disadvantage also recommended that all savings emerging from the demographic dividend should remain within the education system and be targeted at those at risk of poverty and disadvantage. There was agreement that preventive strategies at the pre-school and primary school levels would have a high priority in this regard.

¹⁴ Hayes, N. and O'Flaherty, J. with Kernan, M. (1997) *A Window on Early Education in Ireland: The First National Report of the IEA Preprimary Project*. Dublin: Dublin Institute of Technology.

¹⁵ For further details see Hayes, N. *et al.* *op cit.* (1997).

¹⁶ National Anti-Poverty Strategy. *op cit.* pp. 9-11.

The National Forum on Early Childhood Education should consider its work in the context of the National Anti-Poverty Strategy and recommendations from the Forum should be audited to ensure that they are consistent with the NAPS.

8. The Agency's position

Pre-primary education should be within the remit of the Department of Education but it should be recognised as a distinct stage of education. The learning needs and learning styles of very young children differ, in significant respects, from those of older children. These are not adequately addressed in the provision that is available in the primary sector for four and five year olds. Nor is the level of resourcing adequate, either in terms of the lower pupil/teacher ratio requirements needed to deliver effective early education, or the curricular and pedagogic approaches that are best suited to children of these ages. There is a need to form an integrated policy for the provision of early educational and day-care facilities in Ireland.

Early educational interventions are important in combating educational disadvantage. They can have beneficial effects both in the intermediate term and the longer term. However, such interventions need to be carefully planned and resourced and need to be linked properly to primary educational provision. The Agency notes the Minister for Education and Science's recent announcement concerning the development of an integrated area-based co-ordination of services for young people (8-15 year olds) at risk of early school leaving.¹⁷ A similar model should be considered in the context of early childhood education with a particular focus on the successful transition of young children into primary education. The development of best practice in the area of integrating care and education in the field of early education should also be encouraged in this context. This issue is also important in the context of reducing barriers, such as the lack of childcare, faced by some parents (particularly women) in trying to gain access to the labour force.¹⁸

If early childhood education provision is "left to the market", children living in poverty are likely to benefit less from such provision than their more advantaged counterparts. Thus the allocation of State resources in this area should favour targeting towards more disadvantaged children and their families. Targeting of resources, however, should be balanced by a need to reduce segregated provision on social class grounds and a commitment to facilitate the integration of children from different social and economic backgrounds.

For pre-primary education to be effective, it needs to take account of the different learning needs and learning styles of very young people. Emphasis on the role of exploration and play in the learning of young children is important. There should be national training for all pre-primary workers.

One of the objectives of the Agency is to address the consequences of poverty, in particular by working for the empowerment of those who are marginalised and excluded as a result of poverty and by addressing the problems that are manifest in

¹⁷ The Agency is also currently running a Demonstration Programme on Educational Disadvantage, which has a strong focus on integrated responses. The aims of the programme are to develop an integrated response to the problem of educational disadvantage at a local level and to influence policy at a national level drawing from the local experience. The programme runs from 1996-1999 and it is operating in four areas: Tralee, Tuam, Killinarden in Tallaght and Drogheda.

¹⁸ See, for example: McCashin, A. (1997) *Employment Aspects of Young Lone Parenthood in Ireland*. Treoir and National Youth Federation. pp. 52-53.

disadvantaged urban and rural communities. In this context the Agency believes that parental and community involvement in the planning and development of early childhood education is imperative if best practice in this area is to be achieved.¹⁹

In conclusion, the Agency recommends that the following principles should be applied to the development of policy concerning early childhood education.²⁰

- early education should be *child centred*
- *quality* provision should be a priority - in terms of content, staff, and environment
- *equality* of access and participation, with targeting to families experiencing poverty in order to address the inequality that they experience in relation to resources and life chances should be a priority
- early childhood education should be *accessible*, in terms of location, for children and parents with disabilities and in terms of any application procedures that may apply
- *flexibility* should apply, both in terms of funding arrangements and opening hours
- early childhood education should be *culturally appropriate* in the context of Ireland becoming a multi-cultural society.

¹⁹ For a discussion of this point see, for example: Hill, U. "False Start to Early Start". *Poverty Today*. Number 26. December 1994/January 1995. Dublin; Combat Poverty Agency.

²⁰ The Agency proposed that similar guiding principles should inform the development of a national policy on childcare in its submission to the Partnership 2000 Expert Working Group on Childcare *The Role of Childcare in Tackling Poverty*. Copies of the Agency's submission to the Partnership 2000 Expert Working Group on Childcare are available from the Agency on request.