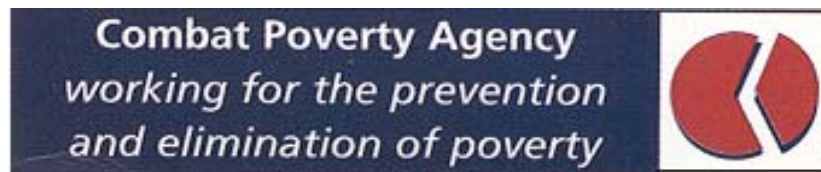


Policy Submission

**Submission to the
First Educational Disadvantage Forum
of the
Educational Disadvantage Committee**

November 2002



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1. INTRODUCTION

The Combat Poverty Agency welcomes the Educational Disadvantage Committee's first Forum on Educational Disadvantage and welcomes the opportunity to submit its views on effective policies and procedures to address educational disadvantage in Ireland.

Educational disadvantage has been a priority issue for the Agency for a number of years and has been addressed in successive strategic plans. This interest in educational disadvantage has evolved from growing concern nationally with the issue of early school leaving and mounting evidence of the relationship between educational under-attainment and poverty.

In making this submission, the Agency is fulfilling its statutory responsibility to advise on all aspects of social and economic policy relating to poverty. The submission is informed by the government commitment to the reduction and prevention of poverty, including educational disadvantage, as set out in the National Anti-Poverty Strategy.

The submission also draws on work undertaken by the Agency in relation to educational disadvantage. The Agency has produced a number of policy statements and research reports on this topic. Similarly, the Agency piloted an integrated local strategy for tackling educational disadvantage. The Agency's Demonstration Programme on Educational Disadvantage (1996-2000) supported four local education networks¹, involving representatives from both the formal and informal education sectors, to develop and implement an integrated local response to educational disadvantage.

Combat Poverty's submission is presented as follows:

- In the first instance, the submission presents the Combat Poverty Agency's understanding of educational disadvantage.
- Secondly, Combat Poverty identifies core principles that should guide any policy response to educational disadvantage in Ireland.
- Finally the submission highlights the Agency's recommendations regarding a range of specific issues identified as relevant to the forum:
 - Literacy and numeracy;
 - Early intervention;
 - The needs of children, parents & communities;
 - Challenges to teachers & ways of teaching and learning;
 - Access to and retention within education;

¹ Drogheda Youth Educational Network, Co. Louth; Killinarden Education Network, West Tallaght, Co. Dublin; Network for Educational Support Tuam Area, Co. Galway and Tralee Education Network, Co. Kerry.

- Structures – linking services.

2. UNDERSTANDING EDUCATIONAL DISADVANTAGE

Educational disadvantage is a complex phenomenon and it is clear that a variety of definitions exist nationally. There are a number of aspects to the Combat Poverty Agency's understanding of this problem:

- 'Educational disadvantage' is a relative term. It refers to a situation whereby individuals in society derive less benefit from the education system than their peers. Individuals are educationally disadvantaged relative to others who are considered to be educationally *advantaged*.
- Educational disadvantage is manifest in many ways, most notably in poor levels of participation and achievement in the formal education system. Those who experience educational disadvantage tend to leave the formal education system with few or no qualifications. This puts them at a disadvantage in the labour market, curtails their personal and social development, and puts them at risk of poverty and social exclusion².
- Educational disadvantage must be understood at a number of levels³:
 - 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.
- Educational disadvantage is a multi-dimensional problem. It is not simply an education-related issue. It is rooted in the complex interaction of factors in the home, in the education system and in the wider community.
- Educational disadvantage is closely linked to the issue of poverty. Poverty is frequently identified as a factor that contributes to educational disadvantage, while educational disadvantage is also considered to be a factor which perpetuates intergenerational poverty. This is evidenced by the substantial volume of research that suggests individuals from poorer socio-economic backgrounds and communities are more likely to underachieve in the education system than their contemporaries from higher income backgrounds⁴. Families with children have a higher risk of poverty, with

² 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 p307.

³ See Boldt S and Devine B, Educational Disadvantage in Ireland: Literature Review and Summary Report in Boldt S, Devine B, Mac Devitt D & Morgan M (1998) *Educational Disadvantage and Early School Leaving Discussion Papers*, Dublin, Combat Poverty Agency p10.

⁴ See, for example, Clancy (1995), Kelleghan et al (1995), McCormack & Archer (1997), Boldt & Devine (1998), Smyth (1999), Smyth & Hannon (2000), NESF (2002).

those consisting of four or more children or only one parent with children having a one in two chance of being poor. In addition, a quarter of under 18 year olds live in poor households, with Ireland having a relatively high level of child poverty.

- f) Certain individuals, social groupings and communities are, therefore, more vulnerable to educational disadvantage than others, most especially individuals from working class backgrounds (both rural and urban), people with disability, members of the Travelling Community and/or other minority ethnic groups.
- g) The significant minority of individuals experiencing negative outcomes within the education system relative to their peers is reflective of a wider range of social and economic inequalities in Irish society. Educational disadvantage must be viewed in the context of the growing gap between rich and poor in Irish society. Where there is greater socio-economic inequality, there is increased likelihood of educational inequality. The OECD⁵, 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 identified Ireland as having the third highest levels on both of these scores.

3. PRINCIPLES FOR POLICY TO TACKLE EDUCATIONAL DISADVANTAGE

In light of this understanding, Combat Poverty believes that the following principles should guide any policy response to educational disadvantage:

- Policy should reflect an understanding that, while 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.
- Given the complex range of issues contributing to educational disadvantage, an integrated multi-level response, involving the home, school, adult education, community and other relevant services, should be at the core of any local response to address educational disadvantage. This integrated response would incorporate diverse and relevant perspectives in the local decision-making process, would allow for local solutions to be developed to local manifestations of the problem and would facilitate the sharing of responsibility for tackling disadvantage.
- This integrated response at a local level should be reflected at a national level. Programmes and the delivery of professional services cannot be integrated effectively at a local level if government departments and statutory bodies are not integrated and co-ordinated at a national level.

⁵ See OECD (2001), Education at a Glance....

- Early identification of young people at risk of underachievement within the education system and early intervention must be a core part of educational policy.
- Educational disadvantage must be addressed through a system-wide response. The education system has demonstrated an over-reliance on pilot initiatives⁶ to tackle educational disadvantage over the last two decades and now needs to develop more mainstreamed actions across the system supported by structures and people.
- Learning and education do not simply take place during distinct phases of an individual's life. Learning is an ongoing process throughout life and this should be reflected in the provision of educational services and opportunities. Educational policy should, therefore, provide appropriate re-entry opportunities for individuals who have left the education system, should afford increased recognition to non-formal and non-academic learning and should create the conditions required to fulfill the concept of Lifelong Learning⁷.
- The provision of educational supports must be based on the individual needs of each learner. To build equality in educational achievement and outcome, it is imperative that all learners are treated equally. This does not mean, however, that all learners be treated the same. Provision must be made for differences in learning styles, natural abilities, learner background, prior learning experience, etc, and this requires flexibility of approach among teachers and other education providers.
- Policy must ensure that appropriate targets are set for the ending of educational disadvantage and the promotion of educational equality. The existing key policy targets⁸ of eliminating early school leaving and halving the number of children with literacy difficulties will not remove inequality in educational outcome. Appropriate policy targets should emphasise an alteration in the relationship between educational outcome and social background⁹ and should work towards the goal that individuals from poorer socio-economic backgrounds achieve to equivalent levels of those from middle- and higher-income backgrounds.
- Finally, policy must view educational disadvantage within the context of broader socio-economic and political conditions. Inequality in the education system is but one aspect of growing inequality in Ireland. Ending educational disadvantage must take place within a framework of eradicating both

⁶ Generally in specific geographical areas.

⁷ As outlined in the White Paper on Adult Education – *Learning for Life* (2000).

⁸ i.e. targets relating to educational disadvantage within the National Anti-Poverty Strategy (2002).

⁹ 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 disability, etc.

consistent and relative poverty in Ireland. This calls on all structures within Irish society to contribute to this process, not just those in education.

4. RECOMMENDATIONS

4.1 *Literacy and Numeracy*

- Ensure an adequate level of financial resourcing and targeted provision of learning support services to eliminate literacy problems among school children. Increase investment to facilitate the provision of learning support in Mathematics in all primary schools.
- Literacy should be seen as a key element within life-long learning provision. This could be facilitated through work-based literacy programmes and legislating entitlement to educational leave from work for those who are educationally disadvantaged.
- Continue the development of the National Educational Psychological Service and increase the speed with which its development is taking place. Similarly, ensure immediate and appropriate provision for young people with special needs throughout the school system, but particularly at primary level.

4.2 *Early Intervention*

Given the volume of research that highlights the positive impact of high-quality early educational services on subsequent educational and social success of children, including those born at risk of educational underachievement and social exclusion¹⁰, it is recommended that all children in Ireland should have access to quality early education before their entry into primary school.

Specifically,

- Universal early education provision (taking account of state, community and private sector provision) should be introduced on a phased basis, prioritising disadvantaged children including those from the Travelling community, children with disabilities, children from lone parent families, homeless children and the children of refugees and asylum seekers.
- The costs of early education provision should be subsidised for low-income families. There are often direct costs for pre-school care, in addition to substantial indirect costs at primary and secondary levels such as books/materials, outings and activities, clothing, lunches and transport.
- The collective resource base in schools in disadvantaged areas, such as libraries, are often lower and this should also be urgently addressed.
- Service planning and provision should take account of the developmental level of children, their cultural background and their individual needs. Early

¹⁰ CMRS (1992), *Education and Poverty*, Dublin: CMRS, p.xvii

education services for young children should be integrated into a community policy that is inclusive of parents and family.

- Current and future provision of early education should be child-centred, of high quality, well resourced with materials and with appropriately trained staff, and with appropriate child/staff ratios.

Additionally,

- Ensure that current interventions at primary and post-primary level are effective in targeting children most at risk of educational underachievement and leaving school without qualifications, and address their academic, social, emotional, behavioural and cultural needs as soon as these needs become evident.
- Every school-going child should be tracked and monitored, including those with school attendance problems. In this regard, adequate resourcing should be made available to implement the Education (Welfare) Act as efficiently and effectively as possible.

4.3 *The Needs of Children, Parents & Communities*

The Agency contends that young people's full participation in education should not be hindered due to the direct or indirect financial costs associated with education, particularly for low income groups and groups from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds.

Consequently, the Agency recommends the following:

- Eliminate the costs of participating in education for families of school-going children:
 - establish the full costs of clothing and footwear for school-going children and upgrade the clothing and footwear scheme to meet these costs;
 - provide additional financial support through the Back-to-School clothing and footwear scheme to cover additional costs associated with transition from primary to secondary school and from junior to senior cycle in second level;
 - integrate access to above supports with other educational subventions such as school meals and schoolbooks schemes;
 - enhance and broaden the scope of the school meals scheme. In particular the government should invest €15m in a reformed school meals scheme to provide higher quality meals (breakfast and lunch) for more low-income children.
- Provide adequate investment for appropriate in-school equipment for children with disabilities and special needs and review the procedures to ease the claiming of such costs by schools.

- Improve measures for Traveller children and other minority groupings, particularly measures that reflect and validate the cultural identities of these groupings.
- Ensure that there is adequate and appropriate provision of public and private transport to and from schools, including rural area provision.
- Enhance investment in the Home/School/Community Liaison service to further develop home, school and community links.

4.4. *Challenges to Teachers & Ways of Teaching and Learning*

- All teachers should be aware of the global, national, local and personal dimensions of poverty and exclusion, their educational relevance and actions to combat them. This should be done through the development of appropriate modules both within initial teacher training and as part of ongoing in-service provision.
- Teachers must take cognisance of individual learner's developmental levels, cultural backgrounds and individual needs in tailoring their teaching to maximise the benefits of education to learners.
- Teachers should be aware why certain social groupings and social classes underachieve within the education system relative to others and consider the manner in which the content, structure, discipline policies, ethos, etc. of the school system can further alienate individuals from the education system.
- Resource ongoing curriculum development to a) ensure the relevance of primary, post-primary, further and adult education curricula to the diversity of learners' social, cultural and ethnic backgrounds and learning styles and b) to allow learners to make choices relevant to their abilities and aptitudes.

4.4 *Access to and Retention in Education*

- Ensure that actions to reduce early school leaving take account of less formal education and training opportunities and interventions outside the mainstream setting. Identify and develop progression routes for young people and ensure that each individual has access to mentoring services to help them identify and plan their education or training paths.
- Resource and evaluate non-formal education facilities to ensure high quality, relevant and efficient provision for those pursuing education and training opportunities in Youthreach, Community Training Workshops, Senior Traveller Training Centres, VTOS, etc.
- Ensure that sufficiently strong incentives are in place to reduce the risk of children leaving school early to enter the workplace. At the same time, it is

important to ensure that workplace initiatives for young people who are in need of basic education and literacy training are provided.

- Draw on the learning of other initiatives designed to address the needs of young people at risk – Neighbourhood Youth Projects; Springboard Initiatives; Youth Diversion Projects of the Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform; special projects undertaken by Area Based Partnerships and community organisations; the Educational Disadvantage Initiative of the Programme for Peace and Reconciliation and the work of the networks of the Combat Poverty Agency Demonstration Programme on Educational Disadvantage.
- Ensure implementation of core recommendations from the White Paper on Adult Education - a national adult literacy strategy, expansion of part time options in further education through a Back to Education Initiative, improved opportunities for adult participation in third level education, a strengthened role for community education, the enhancement of supporting services such as guidance, counselling and childcare, and the establishment of a National Adult Learning Council and Local Adult Learning Boards for improved co-ordination, integration and planning, nationally and locally.
- Ensure appropriate and high quality evaluation of all preventative interventions addressing educational disadvantage and early school leaving, and ensure the publication and dissemination of evaluation documents in the public domain.

4.5 Structures – Linking Services

Based on the experience of developing the Demonstration Programme on Educational Disadvantage, Combat Poverty contends that local integrated multi-level responses, incorporating all interests involved in the education and welfare of learners, should be at the core of efforts to address educational disadvantage in Ireland. Specifically, the Combat Poverty contends that there is a key role for local area-based networks in stimulating and developing integrated responses to educational disadvantage, the model developed in its Demonstration Programme.

Additionally,

- A full-time employed network co-ordinator is a necessary resource for local areas in the promotion of integrated responses. A co-ordinator is central in a) creating the conditions for new ways of collaborative working to develop, b) developing and sustaining effective inter-agency relationships and c) stimulating and supporting new initiatives to tackle educational disadvantage which respond to particular needs identified locally. The role of the network co-ordinator is primarily one of enabler and is essentially about supporting and resourcing the process of networking.

- Teacher involvement must be at the centre of integrated responses to tackle educational disadvantage. Whilst there is an implicit recognition of this at policy level, the capacity of teachers to engage is limited by the demands of their job. There is a need to facilitate the engagement of teachers in integrated processes and to release them, within agreed parameters, from direct teaching responsibilities for this purpose.
- There is a need at educational policy level to affirm and resource the role of informal education providers, particularly in the context of educational disadvantage, and draw in expertise within this sector to complement in-school provision with particular reference to teaching methodologies, curriculum content and monitoring.
- Resources are needed to support the development of new and emerging models of parental involvement, which support parents as equal partners in tackling educational disadvantage.
- The development of integrated structures and processes at local level should be matched by parallel structures and processes at central policy level. Links and intermediary mechanisms between these levels are needed to direct issues and lessons on the ground into policy development at national level.
- There has been a welcome recognition of the need for whole school planning and review. Training and support will be needed to maximise the potential of this approach. In addition, consideration should be given to including non-school educational partners (e.g. local youth and community organisations, statutory services, etc.) in this process as appropriate.