

The Impact of Educational Disadvantage on Adult Citizenship and Participation in Ireland

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Introduction

Annually a little over 2,000 young people leave school in Ireland without any formal qualification (i.e. before taking the Junior Certificate). Indeed, according to the National Economic and Social Forum (NESF) an estimated 1,000 pupils do not transfer annually from primary to post primary education. More often than not educational disadvantage is the reason behind this early school leaving. In the context of adults, this article will examine educational disadvantage in Ireland and its impact on citizenship and participation in Irish society.

Defining Educational Disadvantage in Ireland

Literature on educational disadvantage in Ireland highlights that educational disadvantage is multi-faceted and finds its roots in the wider context of socio-economic disadvantage. The Education Act (1998) sees educational disadvantage as a product of such social and economic disadvantage, and defines educational disadvantage as “the impediments arising from social or economic disadvantage, which prevents students from deriving, appropriate benefits from education in schools” (Section 32.9). Similarly, the Green Paper on Education (1992), *Education for a Changing World* noted the interplay of social and economic factors that create “barriers to participation, which mitigate against those from disadvantaged backgrounds” and “influence the extent to which young people and adults participate in education” (p. 45). Evans sees educational disadvantage as:

those pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds, who fail to reach the necessary standards in schools, often drop out, and as a consequence fail to become integrated into a normally accepted pattern of social responsibility, particularly with regard to work and family life (1995, p.13).

Cause of Educational Disadvantage in Ireland

There is substantial evidence in the literature that poverty is the predominant underlying cause of educational disadvantage. This indicates that those from poorer socio-economic backgrounds are more likely to underachieve in education, compared to those coming from advantaged socio-economic backgrounds. A survey by the St. Vincent de Paul on educational disadvantage and its causes as seen by its service users revealed that “many of the difficulties associated with educational disadvantage have their origins in households and individuals struggling to live on inadequate incomes” (2003, p.2).

The Combat Poverty Agency emphasises that certain groups within society are vulnerable to experiencing educational disadvantage “most especially individuals from low-income working class backgrounds (both rural and urban). Other vulnerable groups include people with a disability, members of the Traveller Community and/or other minority or ethnic groups” (2003, p.2).

Kelleghan (2002) recognises the overarching causes of educational disadvantage as being problems associated with low income and material poverty. From this, Kelleghan outlines that poverty gives rise to individuals being marginal to the labour force, which is evident in rates of unemployment, particularly long-term unemployment. This disadvantage is transmitted across generations, hence limiting upward social mobility. Consequently, individuals in disadvantaged circumstances rely heavily on the State for income support. In general these individuals have limited schooling and/or poor levels of achievement. Commonly, disadvantage is concentrated in what are called areas of social deprivation in cities, in conditions that breed crime, drug abuse, family breakdown, and general social disorganisation (p.17). In essence, educational disadvantage gets caught in the cycle of poverty.

There is much reference in the literature to family circumstances creating educational disadvantage. Alongside poverty, family issues rank high as being causes of educational disadvantage in that both intertwine – poverty can create family issues and family issues can create poverty. Archer and Weir refer to evidence in the literature that “children's academic achievement and general development are influenced to a great extent by the kind of educational roles adopted by their parents” (2004, p.9). Such roles may include the parents' attitude to education as well as their level and experience of education. Archer and Weir emphasise findings from studies that “show a strong association between

children's performance in school and home process variables" which are "mostly related to the ways parents interact with their children and how stimulating the home environment is" (ibid, p.9). Substantiating this view are the findings of school effectiveness literature, which show a positive association between student achievement and the level of parental involvement in the work of the school. However, parents who experienced educational disadvantage are generally less involved in the school, primarily due to their own negative schooling experiences.

The literature sees the community as an important variable in contributing to educational disadvantage. This ties in with the notion of educational disadvantage as being multi-faceted and related to socio-economic problems. The Combat Poverty Agency refers to this view that wider issues involving the community cause educational disadvantage. The Agency states that while educational disadvantage is a problem in its own right it "is more correctly understood as a symptom of a wider range of issues affecting the lives of children and adults, the families and communities, and the structure and content of the education system" (2003, p.3).

Legacy that Educational Disadvantage Leaves

The legacy of educational disadvantage is well documented. Ultimately, literature shows that educational disadvantage is debilitating for the individual who experiences it and has a negative impact on society. Educational disadvantage can become apparent at school through low attainment, low satisfaction and self-esteem, lack of participation, truancy, school refusal, drop out, behaviour problems and delinquency. At school level children who become educationally disadvantaged may experience difficulties in numeracy and learning to read and write; as adults their participation in society will be hindered by such difficulties.

Disadvantaged children are more likely to drop out of school, often without formal qualifications. Hence early school leaving is a consequence of educational disadvantage. Generally from here the cycle of educational disadvantage repeats itself whereby individuals have poor employment prospects in the same way their parents had as a result of educational disadvantage. Literature shows that early school leaving is linked with unemployment. It is commonly held that those most involved in crime and drugs are from educationally disadvantaged backgrounds. The Combat Poverty Agency sums up the consequences of educational disadvantage as follows:

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 (2003, p.3).

For the wider society educational disadvantage has negative consequences. Lack of achievement in education can mean a reduction in the skilled labour force. A country without a skilled labour force is one that cannot compete efficiently in the world economy. Those individuals who become reliant on the State for welfare benefits as a consequence of educational disadvantage put a burden on the economy. Educational disadvantage increases social problems in society, which presents a further burden for the State to deal with.

Evidently, the legacy of educational disadvantage presents a number of barriers for adults trying to participate in society and raises a number of questions about citizenship. The barriers to participation can arise out of poor attainment at school and consequent lack of confidence and self-esteem. The main questions that arise in relation to such participation barriers are: is there an onus on Irish society to dismantle these barriers, how has the issue been addressed and how should it be addressed in the future?

Breaking Down the Barriers to Participation

There is an onus on society to tackle educational disadvantage for numerous reasons given the known consequences of educational disadvantage. If human resources within society are looked at in terms of capital, then educational disadvantage has an impact on all capital within that society, economic, social and cultural.

Research has shown that educational disadvantage is intergenerational so combating educational disadvantage can have a positive impact on future generations. Kelleghan (2002) argues that educational disadvantage can be perceived as a threat to democracy and social justice. Klasen (2000) refers to the fact that children experiencing educational disadvantage grow up as adults who experience social exclusion and may be unable to be healthy, well nourished and well housed. Klasen further argues that social exclusion may have close empirical relations to other “social problems that threaten the stability and prosperity of society at large such as crime and violence” (2000, p.8).

Educational disadvantage is often looked at in terms of the children that it affects, rather than in relation to its impact on adults. Since the mid 1980s there has been a concerted effort on the part of successive Irish administrations to tackle educational disadvantage. This has been evident in the number of initiatives on educational disadvantage that have emerged since then; however, such initiatives have predominantly been at school level as preventative measures. Since the late 1990s a more holistic approach has been taken and a commitment to tackle social exclusion and educational disadvantage was put on the National agenda in the National Anti-Poverty Strategy (NAPS) *Sharing in Progress* (1997), and remained on the agenda in the revised NAPS (2002), *Building an Inclusive Society*. This 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.

Kelleghan argues that “as disadvantage is multi-dimensional ... procedures to deal with it should also be multi-dimensional, and should involve communities, families, schools, and other institutions in society” (2002, p.19). Kelleghan goes on to state that:

where possible, services should be integrated and co-ordinated. Since their educational needs ... cannot be separated from their economic and social needs, it would seem obvious that problems that might arise in meeting these needs should not be addressed in isolation (2002, p.19).

Likewise, the Combat Poverty Agency puts forward the belief that tackling educational disadvantage should ensure integrated responses to educational disadvantage at a national level to “guarantee effective delivery of professional services and programmes”. In addition, the Agency recommends ensuring “integrated multi-level responses, involving the home, school, adult education, community and relevant services” (2003, p.6). At an international level, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) claims that “the integrated provision of education, health and social services is regarded by many member countries as the most promising solution” to educational disadvantage. (2000, p.13). As with most other commentators on integration, this indicates that educational disadvantage is multi-dimensional.

Role of Lifelong Learning

To date, attempts to make an integrated response to educational disadvantage have been put forward in the National Development Plan (NDP). This has involved the identification of the areas with the highest levels of disadvantage, followed by state investment, which is channelled through the RAPID programme in urban areas and CLÁR programme in rural areas. The NDP (1999) notes that the need for a lifelong learning approach is necessary as it holds that “addressing educational disadvantage requires intervention in the context of a continuum of provision from early childhood through to adulthood” (pp. 97-98). The focus of the NDP’s investment in education includes:

- Meeting the diverse needs of specific groups in society
- Providing opportunities so that all individuals can attain an adequate level of literacy and numeracy skills
- Preventing early school leaving
- Expanding adult and second chance education and training opportunities
- Widening access to third level education
- Facilitating the development of lifelong learning
- Linking training to the labour market needs

Lifelong learning marks a critical departure from the traditional understanding of the role of education in society. The key elements of the concept are: providing learning opportunities over the life span rather than only in the early years; widening recognition to embrace new forms of learning; recognising that learning takes place in a range of settings wider than schools and colleges; developing more flexible forms of provision.

Since 2000, a number of policy documents have emerged, including the White Paper on Adult Education *Learning for Life* (2000) and the *Taskforce on Lifelong Learning* (2002). Regarding greater flexibility in learner mobility, the National Framework of Qualifications was set up in 2002 so that “all learning may be achieved in relation to each other in a coherent way” and to define “the relationship between all education and training awards” (p.3). Within the past number of years the provision of second chance education has increased significantly in Ireland. Second chance education is seen as about catching up on missed opportunity, which may be in reading, writing or some other educational area.

However, with all of these developments it is important that they don't simply provide more schooling. Rather they should provide for a needs led educational approach with the learner at the centre of the education process. Embracing a collaborative approach to education involving the learner and the teacher may be the most productive way forward. It is also important that everyone works in accordance with the goals that are set out and subsequently evaluated to inform continuous development. In addition to this, it is important that such provision does not just mask any defects in the schooling system. Rather tackling educational disadvantage should be a continuum that addresses the needs of all age levels.

Educational disadvantage debilitates one's level of participation in society and therefore infringes on one's rights as a citizen and one's contribution to citizenship. Tackling educational disadvantage is essential for the well being of the individual and for the nation as, "the relationship between education and society is dynamic and interactive. Education not only reflects a society but is an influence in shaping its development" (Primary School Curriculum, 1999).

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