Early Childhood Care and Education in Ireland and the Challenge to Educational Disadvantage

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**Recommended Citation**

doi:10.21427/D7NB1X
Available at: [https://arrow.tudublin.ie/ijass/vol2/iss2/7](https://arrow.tudublin.ie/ijass/vol2/iss2/7)


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**Abstract**

Acknowledging the common assumption locating the impact of education in its role to act as a mediator between origins and destinations, this paper examines Early Childhood Care and Education [ECCE], particularly the role state provided, compensatory education plays in challenging educational disadvantage. Initially operationalisation is made of the key concepts of ECCE, equality of opportunity and educational disadvantage. I then move to briefly describe the historical development of ECCE and compensatory education. Three state provided compensatory education programmes are identified: Rutland Street Project, Breaking the Cycle and Early Start. I conclude by outlining the significant impact early interventions can have in a young child’s life and endorse the notion that targeting towards more disadvantaged children and their families is an initial prerequisite in the challenge to educational disadvantage.
Introduction

Children living in poverty are at an educational disadvantage relative to children from more comfortable backgrounds. As a result, there is a cycle of poverty by which the children of poor parents are destined to remain poor and marginalised in the future unless specific programmes aimed at changing the situation are implemented (Combat Poverty, 1993:6).

Recent research in Ireland indicates that children are more likely to experience poverty than adults and that households with children especially lone parent families and those with three or more children are at risk of poverty (Callan et al, 1996). In effect, children in Ireland, similar to children across the EU are becoming a minority as other age groups such as the elderly see them as competitors for the same limited resources (Wazir and van Oudenhoven, 1998:1). This paper takes as its central focus educational disadvantage and young children. Issues surrounding marginalisation, social exclusion and later life social inequality are key terms of reference. An emerging argument in recent years is that any exploration of young children's early educational experiences must refer to concepts of inclusion and participation: the focus must be on all children and not some children (Hennessey and Hayes, 1994). Within the parameters of the present paper though, attention is directed towards the role of Early Childhood Care and Education [ECCE] particularly compensatory programmes that have been established to overcome educational disadvantage in designated disadvantaged areas.

An initial difficulty with this topic concerns operationalisation of ECCE. Following Bekkers (1998:3) the use of early education appears a useful term. Although it may invoke an overemphasis on pedagogy and preparation of the child for education alone, Bekkers (1998) maintains that it also emphasises a holistic approach to child development, parental involvement, location within lifelong learning and the creation of situations where children learn through play.

But where does the concept of care fit in? O' Flaherty (1995) and Hayes et al (1997) suggest there exists an artificial divide between care and education. The distinction within early years settings in terms of those that stress care and those that stress education has become blurred: integration of the two concepts of care and education to the benefit of the child is gaining more recognition (Hayes et al, 1997:10). In this paper I will use the term early childhood care and education [ECCE].

A second difficulty relates to the extent of the discussion. Drawing from literature in the wider area of ECCE, I will particularly focus on state provided, compensatory programmes for 3-5 year olds both in Ireland and abroad. Hayes (1998) argues that in Ireland, state support for early years services remains one of the lowest in OECD countries. Notwithstanding this, two recent initiatives have been heavily promoted: Breaking the Cycle and Early Start.

For the majority of children in Irish society, the social context of their lives is located within a family. The Irish family has undergone a structural transformation in the past four decades (Clancy, 1991; Commission on the Family, 1996; Curtin, 1986; Flanagan and Richardson, 1992; Kennedy, 1986, McCashin, 1993). This demographic transformation has had a significant impact on children's lives (Children's Rights Alliance, 1997).
One effect has been a growing interest in ECCE (Hayes et al., 1997). Greater numbers of children aged 0 to 6 are availing of ECCE services, ranging from childminding, through to playschools, play groups, private/workplace créches, Naoinrai and Early Start. In addition, although the legal age for entry into primary schools is 6, 65% of 4 year olds and almost all 5 year olds are enrolled in infant classes in primary schools (White Paper, 1995: 14). Thus much of what is considered pre-schooling in other countries is already incorporated into the primary school system in Ireland (White Paper, 1995: 14).

The aim of this paper is to provide an overview and tentative assessment of the role of ECCE in challenging educational disadvantage with particular attention paid to the state provided, compensatory programmes. Ultimately assessment of the impact of ECCE must be understood within the context of wider social, cultural, economic and political inequalities. These must be tackled in the first instance, if educational inequalities across all sectors are to be effectively challenged.

Equality of Opportunity and Education in Ireland

The crucial role education plays in mediating between origins and destinations, in providing employment opportunities, in alleviating and overcoming social disadvantage and in providing a general sense of well being in individuals, communities and societies cannot be overestimated (Halsey et al., 1997; Coolahan, 1991; Drudy and Lynch, 1993; Clancy, 1995). Analysis of the development of the Irish education system generally can be located in the social, political and economic climate of particular eras. In addition, educational policy since the foundation of the state has developed in an ad-hoc manner as other social interests have at various junctures superseded educational issues. The publication of two educational bills in 1997 alone in an attempt to create a comprehensive legislative framework for the future of education in Ireland, illustrates the ways in which a volatile political climate can impact on what is otherwise considered a major social policy issue within Irish society.

A social democratic ideology emphasising equality of opportunity has dominated Irish education policy since the 1960s. In 1966, the Investment in Education report delineated two specific concerns which continue to penetrate educational policy: the relationship between education and the economy and social justice issues. These two concerns have themselves been influenced by the dominant theoretical approach - a consensual one - founded on structural functional principles with an underlying image of society which is based on or should be based on meritocratic principles (Drudy, 1991; O’ Sullivan, 1992). Equality of opportunity can be defined in terms of equality of access, equality of participation and equality of outcomes between different social groups (Baker, 1987). Policy makers have attempted to redress inequalities by addressing these three main dimensions. The effects of the various reforms (see, Coolahan, 1981, 1995; Drudy and Lynch, 1993; Mulcahy and O’ Sullivan, 1989) are illustrated in particular by increased rates of participation of all socio-economic groups in primary, second and third levels.

Despite there being a lessening of inequalities within Irish education, educational inequality between different social classes and genders persists (Breen, 1986; Breen et al, 1990; Clancy, 1988, 1995; Hannan and Boyle, 1987; Hannan et al,
There are two main types of explanations for educational inequality:

- the focus is on presumed deficiencies in the child’s cognitive, cultural and linguistic abilities and those of her/his family (see, for example, Bourdieu and Passerson, 1977; Bourdieu, 1997; Bernstein, 1971; Greany and Kelleghan, 1984)
- the focus is on the role of knowledge systems, school organisation and educational practices (see, for example, Willis, 1977; Bowles and Gintis, 1976).

Towards an Understanding of Educational Disadvantage

Kelleghan et al (1995:1-2) suggest that whatever way equality of opportunity is defined, the provision of identical treatment for all children will not be sufficient to achieve equality: if equality of participation or outcomes is to be achieved it is necessary to treat pupils differently. Such a perspective enables justification of policies that allow educational systems and the state to allocate and target greater resources towards pupils who are viewed as disadvantaged and at risk of educational failure.

The CMRS (1992) argue that underlying the concept of educational disadvantage is the notion that there is a discontinuity between the school and non-school experiences of children who are poor. Discontinuity occurs within the context of basic divisions in society around distribution of power and wealth. Further, it suggests that two key components are family poverty and failure to benefit from the education system. As a result of a variety of factors in the social, cultural and physical environment coupled with the school’s inability to cope with the needs of disadvantaged children, some children develop characteristics which make the transition to school difficult and which may impede progress (CMRS, 1992; NESC, 1993; Kelleghan et al, 1995). Problems associated with educational disadvantage manifest themselves in difficulties adjusting to school [evident at an early age]. This, in turn, can result in poor educational performance, early school leaving, little formal qualifications, literacy problems and poor employment prospects.

McDonald (1997) states that research on explanations of educational disadvantage have distinguished between main factors:

- distal factors: these are based around the socio-economic circumstances of the child’s home and community. Thus communities and families that experience poverty, unemployment, lack of parental education and low levels of occupational attainment, influence the nature and extent of educational disadvantage amongst the children of these communities and families (Kelleghan et al, 1995)
- proximal factors: these are more directly linked to child interactions at home and at school, including attitudes and behaviours. Such proximal factors appear to relate to disadvantage independently of the variance they share with the conceptually more distal conditions of socio-economic disadvantage: for some individuals thus there occurs a discontinuity between their home and school experiences (Kelleghan et al, 1995:2). Proximal factors are revealed in
person-environment interactions that define day-to-day experiences of children and adolescents.

McDonald (1997) suggests that in general proximal factors are more relevant than distal factors. Therefore the organisation and structure of the home and the provision or not of opportunities for cognitive development may contribute to educational disadvantage: inadequate housing conditions, poor nourishment and diet, little or no out of school educational experiences and the absence of role models are all contributory factors (O’ Flaherty, 1995). Conditions in the school may also contribute to and reinforce disadvantage. For example, the language of the school may emanate from the socio-linguistic experiences of certain sectors of society (Labov, 1972). Teachers may have lower standards and expect less from so-called disadvantaged children (McDonald, 1997; Kelleghan et al, 1995).

Educational disadvantage is distributed across society. It is arguably more visible in urban areas but is also a problem that affects rural areas (NESF, 1997; Fourth Joint Committee on Women’s Rights, 1994). Indicators of the multi-faceted nature of educational disadvantage nationally include poverty, family structure and size, socio-economic status, unemployment, location and school performance of pupil.

Early Childhood Care and Education

ECCE includes both primary and pre-primary school children. Generally pre-primary care and education is provided for children under compulsory school going age - 6 in Ireland. However, the huge numbers of 4 and 5 year olds attending primary school in Ireland has meant ECCE is already occurring for many children in a school context. ECCE includes public and private provision and services which can operate on a full or part time basis. Hayes (1995:1) suggests that research indicates that high quality early education services has a positive impact on the future education and social success of children born at risk of educational failure and/or social exclusion.

O’ Flaherty (1995) comments on the difficulties inherent when outlining the main aims of ECCE as the range of services are so diverse. Notwithstanding this, the author identifies a number of aims that permeate the literature in this area:

- to offer care and protection to children from deprived or neglectful backgrounds
- to provide a secure and stimulating environment in which young children can socialise with each other
- to encourage cognitive and language development
- to provide support to parents in caring for their children
- to try to redress social inequalities by providing extra help to children from disadvantaged backgrounds
- to provide a solid educational and social basis upon which the child can build and develop for the rest of her/his life (O’ Flaherty, 1995:7; see also Bekkers, 1998; Wazir and van Oudenhoven, 1998; Reynolds and Temple, 1998).

A significant aspiration within ECCE policy in Ireland is recognition of the fact that children’s development is interactional and that early education must be developmentally appropriate (National Forum, 1998a; see also Hatch ed, 1995). Quality and appropriate training are necessary if ECCE is to be
effective in achievement of its aims. However, there is some disagreement amongst professionals as to what comprises the critical range of quality indicators (National Forum, 1998a; Abbott and Roger, 1994). Identifying a critical range will be reflective of dominant values on how children should be cared for, at what cost and by whom (Kloprogge, 1998; Gammage and Meighan, 1995).

A variety of training routes are available to ECCE workers in Ireland. Within the Department of Education infant classes, 4-6 year olds are taught by qualified primary teachers. Since statutory regulations of early childhood services have only recently been introduced, it is difficult to assess the training and experience of people involved in ECCE (Hayes et al, 1997). Hayes (1995:26) comments that as training is being given greater recognition across Europe, there is a growing acceptance that adults working within ECCE must have at least three years training.

Historical Development of Compensatory Education

The compensatory education movement, characterised by awareness of the special needs of children who are disadvantaged or at risk in society, has led to planning of larger scale intervention in terms of special compensatory programmes designed to give these children a more equitable start in education (INTO, 1995:xi). Compensatory education can be defined as a form of intervention into people’s lives judged to have socio-economic difficulties which are assumed will limit school achievement and general life chances.

A question emerges as to whether compensatory measures are preventative or curative or both. I would argue that the term compensation invokes a curative dimension because it is concerned with curing the effects of extant deprivation. On the other hand, it could also conceivably invoke prevention as it seeks to prevent educational failure and its consequences in later life.

Most of the developments in compensatory education emanated from the United States of America. National Headstart, launched in 1965, aimed to assist communities to fund centres for children of limited opportunity. The main aim was to prepare children from all over the USA for entrance into ordinary school. The High/Scope curriculum originated in the 1960s and was characterised as a cognitively oriented curriculum, based on the work of Piaget. The programme focused on social, physical and cognitive development: teachers and children planned and initiated activities together (INTO, 1995). Barnardos is a major exponent of the High/Scope curriculum in Ireland.

According to O’ Flaherty (1995) the literature on compensatory early educational provision, indicates that there are long term benefits to be gained from well planned provisions. It may be the case though that the benefits are more about enhancing the life chances of disadvantaged children than actual academic success. This form of ECCE can occur in a variety of settings and not just the school. Sylva and Wiltshire (1993:36-37) reviewed the impact of early learning on children’s development, particularly in disadvantaged areas and concluded:

- pre-school education leads to immediate measurable gains in education and social development
high quality early education leads to lasting cognitive and social benefits in children
- the impact of early education is found in children from all social groups but is strongest in children from disadvantaged backgrounds
- the most important learning in pre-school concerns aspiration, task commitment, social skills and responsibility and feelings of efficacy.

Early Childhood Care and Education in Ireland

The development of early intervention provision in Ireland was affected by the lack of clarity as to which type of intervention is most effective. The INTO (1995) suggest that three considerations can be identified which have influenced the intervention programmes that currently exist:

- early childhood experiences are important for the child’s development
- entry to formal schooling is a major transition for children, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds
- early disadvantage affect the child’s enduring experience within formal schooling, where such disadvantages tend to be persistent and cumulative.

As mentioned above, at present early education provision in Ireland occurs in a variety of settings, operated both privately and publicly. In this paper, the focus is on state provided, compensatory programmes which have in the main come under the auspicious of the Department of Education. However, under the Health Act (1970), the Department of Health is empowered through the health boards to provide grants towards the operating costs of centres for children and families in need of special support. Under the terms of the Child Care Act (1991) responsibilities in relation to pre-schools lie with the Minister of Health [now Health and Children] who in January 1997 implemented the guidelines and regulations governing preschools in Ireland. Whether pre-schooling is provided by the public or private sectors is influenced to a large extent by the type of child who attends, in terms of socio-economic background (O' Flaherty, 1995). Hayes (1993) concludes that of the 7,263 children aided by the health boards, it can be assumed that most experience some degree of socio-economic disadvantage.

Rutland Street Project

A number of initiatives have been promoted in Ireland vis-à-vis ECCE. Mention must be initially made of the Rutland Street Project, a pioneer project operated by the Department of Education. The programme began in 1969 and sought to provide children in a pre-school setting with experiences which would facilitate the development of knowledge, skills and attitudes appropriate to later school success.

Parental involvement was also encouraged. Kelleghan and Greany (1993) followed the progress of participants in the preschool programme and a control group to second level and beyond. There occurred initial short term benefits that appeared to diminish subsequent to the child entering school. However, some long term benefits were also observed in terms of programme participants being significantly more likely to take
public examinations. Further, 10% of the participants in the preschool completed second level education, while none of the control group did.

Breaking the Cycle

In 1995, the Combat Poverty Agency and the Education Research Centre conducted a detailed study of current approaches to identification and support of pupils in disadvantaged areas within the scheme of assistance to schools in designated areas of disadvantage at primary level. A key recommendation was adoption of a more targeted approach aimed at selected urban and rural areas which have high concentrations of children suffering educational disadvantage. Prior to this, schools seeking disadvantage status were assessed and prioritised as to need on the basis of socio-economic and educational indicators - unemployment, housing, medical card holders, information on basis literacy and numeracy and pupil/teacher ratios. Breaking the Cycle was introduced to achieve more selected targeting. It seeks to positively discriminate in favour of school in selected urban and rural areas. In urban areas, the focus is on schools which already have disadvantaged status. Thirty-three schools from Dublin, Waterford, Cork, Limerick and Galway have been included in this initial phase. In rural areas, a targeted programme of supports is being made available to 25 clusters of schools with five teachers or less. All schools within this initiative have access to special grant assistance for purchase of books and materials.

Early Start

This pilot pre-school intervention programme was first established in 1994 in eight schools within designated disadvantaged areas. In 1995, a further 32 schools were included in the scheme. The main aim is to expose young children to an educational programme which will enhance their overall development and lay a foundation for successful educational attainment in future years: to compensate for background deprivation. Catering for three to four year olds, the children are viewed as active agents in their own development, within a learning environment which encourages creative expression. Staffed by two qualified primary school teachers and two qualified childcare workers, parental involvement is also encouraged at three levels:

- parents belong to an advisory group in each centre
- parents participate in the everyday running and organisation of the centre
- parents join their children in many of the centre’s activities.

The project is currently being evaluated and the interim report is awaiting publication. As yet there is no official curriculum. Other Department of Education initiatives include the Home/School Liaison Project to provide full time, locally based co-
ordinators to groups of schools in areas of particular disadvantage, and partial funding of developing pre-school services for Travellers run by private and voluntary organisations.

Discussion

The rationale for ECCE initiatives under the direction of the Department of Education is primarily compensatory. The literature reviewed in the previous section implicitly indicated that although such a philosophical approach is necessary, a clearly articulated preventative based approach to educational disadvantage might secure more beneficial results. This, I would argue, could be achieved by ECCE playing its part properly in the wider remit of education to act as a mediator between origins and destinations. Compensation implies making up for deprivation in other areas of the child’s life. This assumption has been challenged by research into other explanations of educational inequality and disadvantage (see, for example, Labov, 1972).

The issues are complex though. Evidence from the international arena suggests that short and long term benefits are in evidence in such schemes (Reynolds and Temple, 1998). O’ Flaherty (1995) notes the ‘sleeper effect’ whereby the effects of early intervention on the child’s cognitive processes remain dormant until triggered by new demands in the young person’s life. A question remains though as to whether it is the pre-school experience itself or factors associated with the pre-school experience that are responsible for these benefits.

Hayes et al (1997) is the first published analysis of the Irish Phase 2 element of the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Attainment [IEA] Pre-School Primary Project. The main findings indicate that there are significant differences in the early educational experiences of Irish four year olds.

Such differences are related to whether they are attending a school or a pre-school rather than whether they are living within a designated disadvantaged or a non-disadvantaged setting. In light of continuing policy initiatives within the scheme of assistance to schools in disadvantaged areas, questions must be asked as to the effectiveness of this policy. One question concerns the issue of whether all children and schools in designated areas are in fact disadvantaged? Conversely, are all children in non-designated disadvantaged areas actually advantaged? A further concern observed by Hayes et al (1997) relates to appropriate training and curriculum development for ECCE. The authors advocate the need for more research in this area but question the absence of a national policy on quality ECCE provision in Ireland (see also, Hayes, 1995). The report of the National Forum on Early Childhood Education (1998) took on board some of these issues. In particular, a strong case was made for the inclusion of ECCE within general education debates, policy initiatives and research. Proposing a new era in early childhood provision, the report outlined a number of focal concerns that must underpin developments within ECCE:

- recognising and responding to the potential of each child
- equity
- economic investment
employment concerns
value to parenting
changing experience of childhood with particular regard to changing care situations in Ireland
experimental outcomes vis-à-vis pedagogical methods

In essence, the report called for a sophisticated policy framework and more in-depth research in the area. Specific mention is made of the investment potential and the benefits to accrue from such investment for the individual child, the family, local community, the economy and wider society. The diversity within current provision is outlined. Such diversity is welcomed but according to the National Forum (1998b: 137) only within the context of greater clarity of the role of all the key parties and a greater co-ordination of services. The establishment of an Early Years Development Unit which would address early years issues for the 0-6 year age group is recommended to be run jointly by the Department of Health and Children and the Department of Education and Science.

Regional structures should be put in place which would link in with national co-ordinating bodies to ensure adequate service provision and delivery. Concern about quality provision and recognition of qualifications were also highlighted. Targeting of young children in disadvantaged areas was suggested as a type of positive discrimination within the parametres of the National Anti-Poverty Strategy. In its conclusion, the National Forum (1998b) stressed that the spirit of partnership must prevail.

The report is to be welcomed in its attempts to pull a rather fragmented area together with the aim of designing and delivering an effective early childhood care and education programme. I would argue however, that at a theoretical level, similar to other education reports from 1966 onwards, the National Forum (1998b) operates largely within a consensus/structural functionalist view of education and society. Thus, great emphasis is placed on the degree of fit or homology (see, Willis, 1978) between education and the economy and the parallel importance of social justice issues. It is to be expected that the forthcoming White Paper on ECCE will not deviate too much from this consensual view of society and education. The continual difficulty with such a theoretical perspective as it informs policy making and practice, is that the broad divisions in society are left relatively untouched.

Due to the historical division of responsibility between the two Departments of Health and Education, adequate co-ordination of services, training and quality of provision has been weak. Combat Poverty (1993) suggest that pre-primary education is a distinct stage of education. Greater commitment to ensure effective channels of communication between the Departments and the private and voluntary sectors would benefit from a coordinated national policy for ECCE. The Forum is to be welcomed in this regard. The evaluation studies of Breaking the Cycle and Early Start should not be rushed through to facilitate a volatile political climate. Neither though should these evaluations be unduly delayed.

As I argued earlier, understanding of educational disadvantage must be understood in the context of the broad schisms in society that are continually reproduced in favour of the most
advantaged sections of society. Notwithstanding this, I would endorse Combat Poverty’s (1993:15) comment that if early intervention provision is left to the market, children living in poverty are likely to benefit less from such provision than their more advantaged counterparts. Initially, while the wider focus should be concerned with tackling general social, economic and cultural inequality, the allocation of state resources in this area should favour targeting towards more disadvantaged children and their families.

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Networking: Promotion of ‘Horizontal’ Partnership in the Local Development Programme

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Abstract

Social partnership, or ‘the search for consensus on economic and social objectives between sectoral interests’ (Walsh et al., 1998) has gained increasing importance in Irish public policy in recent years. The Programme of Integrated Development in Disadvantaged Areas 1995-1999 (P.I.D.D.A.), under the Local Development Programme, is one of several initiatives to stem from the Irish commitment to social partnership. The Programme represents a locally-based response to unemployment and disadvantage. Two of its principal objectives are as follows:

- To improve the capacity of local communities ‘to participate fully in local development and to counter social exclusion’ (Ireland, 1995, p. 60).
- To ‘improve coordination and evaluation at local level of mainstream programmes and policies to ensure their effective delivery to the long-term unemployed and the socially excluded’ (A.D.M., 1995, p. 9).