ERRATA:

Due to a layout error, a number of paragraphs in Chapter Seven are missing.
These are correctly printed here in this reprint of the opening pages of Chapter Seven.

CHAPTER SEVEN

The School System: Equality, Inclusion and Rights

'The educational system is shaped by public policy, criteria of selection for different tracks, the way it is financed, the cost of study for students and their families, and the availability of continuing education...To sum up: the best way to increase wages and reduce wage inequalities in the long run is to invest in education and skills'.
(Piketty, 2014, pp. 305 & 313)

'Although good schools make a difference, the biggest influence on educational attainment, how well a child performs in school and later in higher education, is family background...More unequal countries and more unequal states have worse educational attainment'
(Wilkinson and Pickett, 2009, pp. 103 & 105)

INTRODUCTION

The focus on equality and inequality in education has been a significant feature of educational research. This is because of the marked variation in educational experiences and outcomes of a number of social groups. Research on equality and inequality poses questions. These questions are vital to successful policy-making, concerning the capacity of schools to foster social solidarity, inclusion, academic achievement and personal growth, on the one hand, and to assess the impact of power and inequality on the outcomes for different groups, on the other. In this chapter, we will review the evidence on equality, rights and inclusion in the Irish educational system in order to assess the gains, achievements and remaining challenges, and to highlight potential directions for policy and improvements.

Equality is a concept about which there is sometimes a lack of clarity. It does not mean that the ambition is to make everyone the same. On the contrary, equality involves respecting and valuing diversity. Nor does it mean treating all individuals exactly the same. Sometimes trying to achieve equality necessitates giving additional resources to disadvantaged groups. As the Educational Disadvantage Committee (2005) pointed out, equality of opportunity, access and participation has been the focus of many previous policy interventions in Ireland. However, equality of outcomes is the more challenging aim insofar as research has consistently found that even when improvements in access and participation occur in the school population as a whole, there are still persistent inequalities between the different sub-groups.

"Equality is a concept about which there is sometimes a lack of clarity. It does not mean that the ambition is to make everyone the same. On the contrary, equality involves respecting and valuing diversity."

In defining equality, Baker et al. (2009) endorse the concept of equality of condition, which, in the area of education, would involve providing educational and occupational options that give everyone the prospect of self-development and satisfying work. Baker et al. (2006: pp. 413-414) argue that material inequalities - such as income inequalities - make up some of the important inequalities in industrialised countries and in the world as a whole, but that there are also important inequalities of respect and recognition: inequalities in the relative status of members of different groups, expressed in the varying degrees of esteem and contempt that they show towards one another and that social institutions and structures embody (ibid.). In monitoring equality, quantitative as well as qualitative measures are useful and some valuable indicators include assessing the participation and achievement levels of different target groups and we will explore these below.

When thinking about equality in education, an important and very closely linked concept is that of inclusion. Inclusion is essentially a principled, rights-based approach to education (see below on rights). In its profile of inclusive teachers the European Agency for Development in Special Needs Education (2012) points out that inclusive education is an approach for all learners, not just those who are perceived to have different needs and may be at risk of exclusion from educational opportunities. This, they add, is an important distinction that shifts the focus of inclusion beyond meeting the needs of specific groups of learners (e.g. those with special educational needs). Thus, inclusive education should be seen as an approach for all learners. The focus of teachers' work should be upon overcoming barriers to learning for all learners. This involves a move away from seeing inclusion as an approach for a minority of learners, based on identification of their differences, or a consideration of labels that may have negative consequences for learning. It can be seen that thinking has moved on beyond the narrow idea of inclusion as a means of understanding and overcoming a deficit and it is now widely accepted that it concerns issues of gender, ethnicity, class, social conditions, health and human rights encompassing universal involvement, access, participation and achievement (ibid. 23-26).

A third key concept in the equality and disadvantage debate is that of human rights. Human Rights as a concept is often associated with legal and civil rights but is also core to current debates on education and equality. As human rights thinking and international instruments have developed, the concept of human rights has become very holistic and incorporates social, economic and cultural rights as well as political rights. Education is obviously of core relevance here. As UNESCO (2016) asserts, education is a fundamental human right and essential for the exercise of all other human rights. It promotes individual freedom and empowerment and yields important development benefits. The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child is of particular relevance to education bringing, as it does, economic, social and cultural rights together with civil and political rights in an innovative manner (Children's Rights Alliance, 2010). Of particular importance to education are Articles 28 and 29.

To summarise, the issue of the level of equality in the education system is assessed through the study of the impact of inequalities arising from class, disability, ethnicity, religion, gender and sexual orientation on educational outcomes. Therefore, inequality in education is the very obvious 'elephant in the room' in any discussion on education. Inclusion is also a key concept at national and European levels. Finally, the various obligations arising from human rights covenants and treaties place great obligations on education systems, schools and teachers to maximise the participation and achievement of all children. We will now look at the evidence on gains and challenges in the above mentioned areas and will start by looking at the findings relating to social class/socio-economic disadvantage.

SOCIAL CLASS/SOCIO-ECONOMIC DISADVANTAGE

A glance at the statistics on educational participation from primary to third levels from 1965/66 at the time of the Investment in Education Report (1965a) to the present day illustrates the enormous increase in participation. In 1965/66, the participation numbers were 504,865 at primary, 142,983 at second level and 20,698 at third level. In 2014/15, the numbers were 544,696 at primary, 372,296 at second level and 173,649 at third level. These represent proportionate increases of 8% at primary, 160% at second level and 739% (more than eight fold) at third level, while the population increase was 61% over the period (CSO, 2016). This is undoubtedly one of the great successes of the Irish state and of generations of educators. Nevertheless, in spite of these considerable achievements, the issue of inequality relating to social class/socio-economic disadvantage is still very evident and is a matter of concern to educationalists. Research evidence from Ireland, and from around the world, shows that investment in education yields very significant economic and social benefits for society at large (Smyth and McCoy, 2009).

So, what does the evidence tell us about contemporary social class/socio-economic inequality? Ireland, by the end of the so-called 'Celtic Tiger' 'boom' period, ranked well above the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) average on the overall poverty rate and on measures which indicated poverty among children (OECD, 2009, pp. 91-93). The country was on the lower end of the range on the indicator of average public social spending and of net social spending (ibid., pp. 97-99), partially due, perhaps, to the dominance of neo-liberal, pro-market policy philosophies. Ireland had made relatively poor progress at the time of its highest prosperity on measures of social cohesion.

Social class inequalities in society are closely interlinked with educational inequalities. Indeed, it has been argued by many sociologists that education both maintains and reproduces social class and socio-economic inequalities. The failure of education as a social institution to eliminate social-class-related inequalities is well documented in Ireland and elsewhere (Lynch and Lodge, 2002). The persistence of educational inequalities relating to socio-economic background is also well documented and persisted right throughout the period of Ireland's apparent economic prosperity (Lynch and Moran, 2006). For example, recent figures on the economic status of school leavers (Byrne et al., 2008) show that school leavers from professional backgrounds have a high share of further and higher education places relative to those from other socio-economic backgrounds. Those from manual and non-manual backgrounds were more likely to go straight into employment. Those from unemployed backgrounds had similar labour market participation levels as these manual and non-manual groups, but a greater share of these young people were themselves unemployed (ibid.).

The findings of the largest cohort study ever conducted in Ireland are continuing to provide valuable insights into the impact of socio-economic inequality on children's education. *Growing Up in Ireland*

(GUI) is a government-funded study of 18,000 children and follows their progress from infancy (10,000 nine month olds originally visited by researchers in 2007 and 8,000 nine year olds selected randomly through the primary school system). The children have been followed up as they developed: the nine-year-olds at age 13, the infants at ages three and five. Further information is to be gathered at ages seven and nine from the infant cohort and at 17 and 20 for the child cohort. Already information on a wide variety of dimensions of the children's lives has been analysed and published and further results will emerge over the coming years (www.growingup.ie) The anonymised *Growing Up in Ireland* data from the child (13 years and nine years) and infant (nine months, three years and five years) cohorts are available for request for bona fide research purposes by professional and postgraduate researchers through the Irish Social Science Data Archive (ISSDA).

A very useful dimension of the information gathered by GUI concerned the kinds and frequency of activities engaged in by children out of school. These included a range of different activities, i.e. structured activities (sports and cultural clubs/classes), active recreation (sports and exercise), sedentary pursuits (including watching television and playing video games), the use of ICT for different purposes, spending time with friends, and helping out with chores at home (McCoy et al., 2012). Children from unskilled manual backgrounds and economically inactive households were much more likely to spend time on sports and watching television. Nearly half of children from economically inactive households were in the TV/sports group. Children from working-class backgrounds were somewhat more likely to be involved in sports/computer games (accounting for typically one-quarter of these children) than children from more advantaged backgrounds. Participation in cultural activities was strongly differentiated by social class; one in three children from professional backgrounds were engaged in cultural activities compared to less than one in 10 of the most disadvantaged children. The study points out that these types of structured activities have been found to enhance school engagement and academic performance. Clear differences were evident in reading and Mathematics performance according to the types of out-of-school activities in which the children engaged. Even taking account of a wide range of background factors, children who engaged in cultural activities and social networking performed better in reading and Mathematics than other groups. Those taking part in sports/computer games also had higher Reading and Mathematics scores. The lowest test scores were found among those who spent their time on TV/sports and among those with 'busy lives' - i.e. a diversity of activities. The results also suggested that low income operates as an additional barrier to participation by children because of the paid nature of many out-of-school activities (Ibid.). We concur with the recommendations of McCoy et al. that greater collaboration with, and financial support for, non-governmental organisations could play an important role in developing greater and more diverse leisure and cultural facilities and infrastructure for children, particularly for those from disadvantaged backgrounds. We agree also that during the school day, principals and teachers should encourage children's learning in the broadest sense, facilitating access to a wide range of enrichment activities for all children and moving beyond a narrow academic focus.

As well as out-of-school activities, we must also consider the importance of early education. Research from a variety of studies shows that high quality early pre-school education is essential to improve educational outcomes and to combat disadvantage, such as early leaving and unemployment (Pascal and Bertram, 2013 – also see Chapter 2 of this report for an analysis of the development of Irish policy on early education). Ireland has one of the lowest rates in pre-school enrolment in the OECD for three year olds. In 2013/14, the enrolment rate in Ireland for children aged three was 46%, the sixth lowest of all countries shown (OECD, 2016a, p. 308) but because so many Irish children begin primary school at age four or five this pushes up the figure for four and five year olds above the OECD average. By primary school, socio-economic disadvantage is already very evident. For example, regarding the literacy of educationally-disadvantaged children, a report by the Irish school Inspectorate has shown, *inter alia*, that despite some good practice and initiatives, nearly half the primary school children in disadvantaged schools evaluated had very low scores in reading, while almost two-thirds of children scored poorly in Mathematics (Department of Education and Science, 2005a). Most of these disadvantaged schools come under the DEIS (i.e. Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools scheme) and receive additional resources. Lower scores in Reading and Mathematics in the most disadvantaged DEIS primary schools were observed in a study of student outcomes over the period 2007-2013 (Smyth et al., 2015).

> "By primary school, socio-economic disadvantage is already very evident."

The DEIS schools experienced an improvement in planning for teaching and learning, and in setting targets for achievement during the period (ibid.). Previous evaluation studies had indicated a significant improvement over time in the literacy and numeracy test scores of students in DEIS primary schools, with greater increases for literacy than for numeracy. The ESRI study found some mixed and varied results on student outcomes at primary level and that, overall, the achievement gap between urban DEIS and non-DEIS schools did not show any marked improvement over time, albeit in the context of worsening economic conditions for disadvantaged families over the recession. No doubt, the high concentration of children with multiple disadvantages was a factor here. However, at post-primary level, the study showed a slight but significant narrowing of the gap in average Junior Certificate grades as well as in English grades between DEIS and non-DEIS schools over the period 2003 to 2011 (ibid.). In its most recent action plan (DES, 2016j) the DES points out that there has been a significant improvement in the number of students in DEIS schools who have remained in school until their Leaving Certificate examination. This proportion, according to the DES, has grown from 68.2% ten years ago to 82.7% for those students who began second-level school in 2009. This contrasts with a retention rate for non-DEIS schools of 92%. While literacy and numeracy outcomes have improved in DEIS schools, the DES argues, achievement data show that outcomes are below

the national norm (ibid.). Thus initiatives taken under the DEIS scheme have resulted in improvements but these data suggest that much more remains to be done in relation to social class inequality,.even in schools in the DEIS scheme.

Another important factor in assessing the impact of social class and socio-economic inequality on educational performance has been the level of segregation or stratification of the different elements of the school system (see Drudy and Kinsella, 2009). The results of the OECD's Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) show that, in a number of different countries, the effect on student performance of a school's average economic, social, cultural status is very substantial, and that socio-economic differences at student level are much less predictive for performance than the school's socio-economic context (OECD, 2004b, pp. 189-190). One of the key features of the Irish second-level system is that it is divided into a hierarchy of four main strata. Fee-paying voluntary

Continues at the top of page 116 of the main book

ERRATA:

The following paragraph was inadvertently omitted by the author. It should be inserted at the end of Chapter 3 on page 56.

CHAPTER THREE

Curriculum

The chapter argues that while flexibility and school and teacher-based curriculum and syllabus development and innovation are appropriate and in line with international good practice during the compulsory school period (i.e. up to the end of junior cycle), a different approach must be taken at senior cycle, particularly in relation to the (established) Leaving Certificate curriculum, which is accepted by the third level sector for selection purposes. Currently, the specification which is provided by the NCCA for the new or revised Leaving Certificate subjects consists only of topics and learning outcomes. The NCCA has argued that this is in line with international best practice. This author has undertaken research on the approach taken in other countries which provide national certification at the end of senior cycle, especially countries where this certification is accepted by the university sector for selection purposes. The research found that in all jurisdictions against which the revised syllabi were benchmarked, considerable detail, including depth of treatment, sample lessons, advice regarding practical and other assessment as well as sample examination papers are provided centrally. This author holds that it is not sufficient to specify a high-stakes examination syllabus in terms merely of topics and learning outcomes. More detailed information about the depth of treatment of subjects, teacher guidelines and examination requirements will have to be provided to bring the revised Leaving Certificate into line with international good practice and to ensure that it will continue to be of the high standard expected by society and the higher education sector.