

ASTI Submission

On

ESRI Report, “Learning from the Experience of DEIS”

Introduction

The ASTI welcomes the opportunity to submit observations on the ESRI Report, “*Learning from the Evaluation of DEIS*”. It is absolutely essential that education policy is based on up-to-date research on what is happening in our schools in terms of students’ experiences, their educational achievements and their wellbeing. It must also take into consideration the experience of teachers who are a critical source of knowledge in the education system.

All over the world, the social outcomes of education are increasingly to the fore of education policy, in particular the challenge to address educational disadvantage. The invitation to make submission on the ESRI Report is timely given that the DEIS programme is now ten years in operation.

Irish society has changed significantly since 2005. High levels of unemployment, poverty – including in-work poverty - and emigration and the increasing polarisation of wealth are now dominant characteristics in our society. Austerity policies have reduced the incomes of hundreds of thousands of families, contracted their living standards and their capacity to meet basic social needs, including education and health. ESRI research in 2012 found that 22% of the Irish population are living in jobless households: 25% of children live in such household. (1) More recently, the EU Commission Council Recommendation on the 2015 National Reform Programme of Ireland stated that the proportion of children living in households with low work-intensity is nearly three times the EU average. (2)

The social consequences of austerity have deeply influenced school communities. Increasing numbers of students are experiencing poverty and its attendant negative consequences for participation, engagement and achievement in school. Young people’s mental health is increasingly a matter of concern and there is strong evidence that many are experiencing high levels of stress.

Educational disadvantage is a complex social phenomenon, which is not reducible to one single factor such as low income or poverty – however the latter is defined. However, there is strong relationship between socio-economic status and educational status which cannot be ignored. Education policy must be responsive to changing social structures, including the impact of immigration, and the greater numbers of families experiencing poverty and its attendant negative consequences for young people’s educational and social well-being. The ASTI is of the view that the publication of this ESRI Report should underpin a re-think of how best each and every schools can be supported to address the changing nature of educational disadvantage.

Observations on DEIS – current provision

The official title of DEIS is *“Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools: An Action Plan for Educational Inclusion”*. It was based on the premise of targeting students in areas of greatest social need and providing an integrated response to ensure improved educational outcomes for young people in disadvantaged communities. In this sense, as is evident from the ESRI report, DEIS has met some important targets. As noted, at post-primary level there has been a slight but significant narrowing of the achievement gap in average Junior Certificate grades, including English, over the period 2003 to 2011. Improved educational outcomes are also manifested in significantly improved attendance, retention and to a lesser degree, school completion.

The 2011 Inspectorate report, *“An Evaluation of Planning Processes in DEIS Post-Primary Schools”*, provides detailed information on how the DEIS programme impacts at school level. It examined the planning processes in relation to the six DEIS strands, namely:

- Attendance
- Retention
- Progression
- Examination attainment
- Literacy and numeracy
- Partnership with parents and others

The findings of the Inspectorate report, indicate many areas of good practice, particularly in relation to school attendance, retention and completion. However, it also raises questions as to the effectiveness of DEIS planning processes: *“lack of coordination and leadership to oversee the process (of DEIS planning) results in schools experiencing limited or no success”*. (p.36) From the ASTI’s perspective, the findings raise fundamental questions about the level of investment in our schools, in particular, investment in human resources. The issues identified in the DEIS planning processes underline the need for strong in-school management structures; time for teachers to develop team-approaches around the six strands; opportunities for ongoing school-focused professional learning; supports for effective school leaders. It is worth noting the report’s conclusion that:

“Schools which had effective leadership, had good planning structures and communication mechanisms and engaged the whole staff in a collaborative process were effective at implementing strategies and in achieving impact”. (p.33)

The positive correlation between effective school leadership and good planning is also highlighted in the ESRI report. The ASTI must put on record its view that the institutional factors identified above have relevance to the success of any innovation in schools. The Inspectorate’s report clearly demonstrates that centrally devised policy innovations must also address the issue of capacity before a sense of ownership for the innovation can be established at school level. One of most important capacity requirements is teacher time. If teachers do not have time during their working day to engage in vital non-classroom teaching activities, the latter suffers. This fact is clearly borne out by the Inspectorate’s analysis of DEIS planning processes.

Suggestions for Future interventions to Combat Educational Disadvantage

Deficiency in current approach

DEIS is the only programme to address educational disadvantage in our schools. It is a targeted programme focusing on areas with high levels of deprivation as demonstrated by key socio-economic indicators. The rationale for targeting is twofold. When resources are finite, targeting areas of greatest need is demonstrably fair. Secondly, targeting is meant to address the “multiplier

effect”, wherein schools with significant numbers of students from disadvantaged backgrounds have specific dynamics which are school-wide and on students’ achievement. As is demonstrated in the ESRI report, significant progress has been achieved in terms of narrowing the achievement gap between DEIS and non-DEIS schools and school completion.

However, the ASTI believes that this one-model only approach is seriously flawed in that it does not address the needs of educational disadvantaged students outside areas with high levels of deprivation. The research evidence demonstrates that numerically speaking, the majority of educationally disadvantaged young people do not live in DEIS-designated areas. An earlier ESRI report on educational disadvantage (3) concluded that:

“National survey of school leavers indicates that 61% of young people from semi-skilled/unskilled manual backgrounds and 56% of those from non-employed households attend non-DEIS schools”
(P.16)

The schools which these students attend do not receive any additional funding to put in place interventions to meet their needs. Frequently, this difference in funding occurs in the same town or rural area with the absurd result wherein siblings attend different schools, one-DEIS the other non-DEIS.

The ESRI report also raises the important issue of whether the current DEIS model is adequate to meet the complexity of needs of students living in urban Band 1 DEIS schools. This must be addressed in future policy.

A further flaw in the current DEIS-only model is that the profile of students in a school changes over relatively short periods of time. Schools not designated DEIS status pre-2005 may now have a significantly different student profile. The 2015 EU Commission Recommendation further stated that Ireland has one of the highest proportions of people living in ‘low work-intensity’ households in the EU. This generates serious social challenges and raises the risk of child poverty.

Meeting the needs of all

The ASTI believes that a more effective policy response to educational disadvantage must be a model which continues the DEIS approach but which supplements the latter by an additional model of provision for schools which do not meet the thresholds in the DEIS criteria but have educationally disadvantaged students. The ESRI evaluation highlights the sharp distinction at post-primary level between DEIS and non-DEIS schools and recommends a *“tapering of funding”*. The EU Report also recommends a tapering approach to social supports for families with children. (p.4) The ASTI supports the ESRI’s recommendation for a tapering approach and believes that, as in the current discussions on a new model of allocation of additional teaching supports for SEN students, that the school is best placed to make decisions on which students require additional supports – teaching or otherwise.

From a policy perspective, the concept of *“progressive universalism”*, in the 2013 DYCA report on early childhood education, is of interest. This approach combines strong universal services with tiered secondary and tertiary services, ensuring *“help to all and extra help to those who need it most”*. (p.2) (4)

The set of proposals currently with the Minister for Education & Skills from the NCSE for a new model of allocation of teaching supports to SEN students has particular relevance in this regard, given its focus on matching resource allocation to the profile of the school. The research base on which this advice is premised moreover acknowledges the strong relationship between levels of socio-economic disadvantage and the prevalence of some categories of special educational need – in particular emotional and behavioural disorders and learning difficulties. The potential capacity of the

new model to provide a framework for providing supports to disadvantaged students in non-DEIS schools must be part of the evaluation of the pilot project. The inclusion of the Special Education Support Service (SESS), the National Behaviour Support Service (NBSS) in the new Inclusion Support Service under the NCSE underlines this potential.

The ASTI would also make the point that we now have more data on the socio-economic profile and educational experiences of our young people than at any time in the past. In particular, the Growing Up in Ireland study is already providing both a quantitative and qualitative data base on children. The most report has indicated a higher risk of “economic vulnerability” for the 2008 cohort because of the recession. (5).

A strong message from this report is that persistent economic vulnerability increases the risk of socio-emotional disorders and its attendant consequences for engagement in school life. The school report provided by the primary school since the introduction of the National Literacy and Numeracy is also enriching the data base of second level schools on the educational profile of new entrants. The biennial PISA reports also provide important data on participation and achievement in second level education over time.

School culture and organisation

There is a large body of Irish evidence which demonstrates that schools make a difference over and above prior student characteristics. (6) High teacher expectations, positive disciplinary climate and good teacher-student interaction, consistent opportunities for student involvement in school life are consistently associated with higher levels of retention, school completion and achievement. As noted in the 2011 ESRI Renewal Paper, there is a rich evidence base in Ireland on ‘*what works*’ in terms of school organisation and process, namely, ability grouping, school climate, teaching and learning methods, and curriculum and assessment. (7) The gradual embedding of school self-evaluation across the system is important in this regard.

Curriculum choice

Curriculum choice has a particularly strong influence on students’ opportunities to succeed in school. It is a matter of particular concern to the ASTI that less and less schools are providing the LCA programme, and not just as a result of cutbacks in education. The fact that only DEIS schools are allowed to provide the Junior Certificate Schools Programme is also deeply problematic, notwithstanding the ongoing issues in relation to the Framework for Junior Cycle.

Guidance Counselling in schools

The 2014 ESRI school leavers’ study has provided conclusive evidence of the importance of guidance counselling to students from lower socio-economic groups. (8) The latter were more reliant on school-based forms of guidance. Young people valued the detailed information offered and the personal qualities of the guidance counsellor, highlighting in particular the importance of one-to-one sessions. However, issues were raised by interviewees regarding constraints on time for guidance, particularly for more personalised, one-to-one discussion. Concerns were also expressed about the absence of information on options other than higher education and on the employment opportunities following from the courses in which they were interested.

Given the developments taking place outside schools in relation to entry routes to third level (not to mention the high drop-out rate from third level), the rationalisation of education and training services under FAS and various labour activation measures for young unemployed people including school leavers, it is increasingly untenable that second level students do not have access to quality

guidance. It is also evident that students are not getting the developmental supports that they need for their wellbeing and mental health.

Specific focus on immigrant students

Future policy on educational disadvantage must take on board the issues in relation to the experiences of immigrant students. The majority of non-English speaking immigrants have lower average household incomes than Irish nationals and have experienced more job losses and a higher unemployment rate. PISA data since 2009 demonstrates that non-English-speaking immigrant students have much lower achievement scores in Maths and Reading. At the height of the economic boom ten years ago, several studies advised that Ireland learn from experience of countries with longer histories of immigration to avoid future deep-rooted problems of social marginalisation arising from limited social mobility and low levels of educational achievement.⁽⁹⁾ This advice remains highly valid and includes continued investments in training and professional development for all teachers as “language teachers” to support not only communicative English language acquisition but also to focus on academic language development; ensuring that immigrant parents are better informed in their decisions about their children’s education; obtaining data on applicants and enrolments by immigrant status to further encourage schools to adopt diversity and inclusive education and a coherent framework for continuous feedback embedded in policy evaluation.

The ASTI must put on record its view that one of the most important social outcomes of any education system is the development of a strong sense of social solidarity and citizenship. Political developments in the EU and globally underline the need for increased efforts to promote inclusion, tolerance and respect for diversity. The long-term societal consequences of low educational achievement and social marginalisation for immigrant students are evident in other EU states.

Sustaining the school in the local community

The ESRI school leavers’ study provides strong evidence of the need for education policy to avoid social segregation in terms of the social mix of schools. What is perhaps the most significant new insight is the importance of school social mix in shaping opportunities and outcomes for young people. Above and beyond an individual’s own social background, the social mix of the school is a strong influence on academic success and on the likelihood of progressing to post-school education and training. Young people from socially disadvantaged backgrounds and economically inactive households repeatedly emerged as least likely to make successful transitions across each stage in the educational process and ultimately in the transition to, and successful completion of, post-school education.

The concern with the *multiplier effect* in the original DEIS programme underlines that this is not a new phenomenon. However, since 2005 significant changes have taken place in terms of population diversity – 17% is foreign born - and residential patterns, both of which impact on the social mix of schools. The ongoing recession is also altering the socio-economic profile of communities. The ongoing public debate on the school admissions legislation reflects complex social processes in terms of school choice. Education policy must reflect the broader social goals of education and must seek to ensure that the local school remains the school of choice for parents and young people. PISA reports consistently underline that equity and excellence in education are not exclusive goals. In fact, the highest performing education systems are those that combine quality with equity, the latter defined as:

Equity in education means that personal or social circumstances such as gender, ethnic origin or family background, are not obstacles to achieving educational potential (fairness) and that that all individuals reach at least a basic minimum level of skills (inclusion). In these

education systems, the vast majority of students have the opportunity to attain high level skills, regardless of their own personal and socio-economic circumstances. (p.3) (10)

The OECD recommends specific measures to ensure a better school mix such as making funding strategies responsive to students and schools' needs; manage school choice to avoid segregation; design upper-secondary curriculum pathways to ensure completion; a focus on teacher quality and supports for effective leadership. All of these measures are relevant in the Irish context.

Concluding remarks

At present, we have a confluence of factors which require a new policy approach to educational disadvantage. Most significant among these is the data on changing patterns of income distribution and poverty in society. Within the education system, factors such the developing evidence base on the socio-economic profile of young people; the piloting of new model for allocation of resources to schools for SEN students; international educational studies and, very importantly, consistent national studies which increasingly demonstrate the complex interplay between school profile, school culture and organisational practices and educational progress.

References

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4. *"Right from the start: Report of the Expert Advisory Group on the Early Years Strategy"*, DYCA 2013
5. *"Dynamics of Child Economic Vulnerability and Socio-Emotional Development: An Analysis of the First Two Waves of the Growing Up in Ireland study"*, ESRI 2014
6. *"Do Schools Differ?"*, ESRI 1999; *"Choices And Challenges, Moving From Junior Cycle To Senior Cycle Education"*, ESRI 2011; *"From Leaving Certificate To Leaving School: A Longitudinal Study Of Sixth Year Students"*, ESRI 2011; *"Leaving School In Ireland: A Longitudinal Study Of Post-School Transitions"*, ESRI 2014
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