Introduction: Initial teacher education and socio-economic inequality

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Time For Action

Re-shaping Initial Teacher Education to Meet the Challenge of Socio-economic Inequalities in Education

Discussion Papers by:

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

These papers arose as a result of a seminar on socio-economic inequality in education and initial teacher education, organised by a network of initial teacher educators addressing educational disadvantage. The network, the seminar and this publication were funded by the Combat Poverty Agency.

Invitations to the network were sent to at least one member of staff in all the teacher education colleges and departments and that person was invited to pass on the invitation to anyone else they thought might be interested. Over the course of the 18 months that the network met, at least one staff member from most teacher education departments took some part. Those who contributed significantly to the organisation of the seminar included Brian Tubbert, Claire W. Lyons, Neil Haran, Ann Louise Gilligan, Concepta Conaty, Maura Grant and Maeve O’Brien. Marie Kiely read and commented on the chapters in this volume.

The network and the seminar was facilitated by the Centre for Educational Disadvantage Research (CEDR) at Mary Immaculate College. The seminar organiser at CEDR was Ann Kilby. None of this work would have been possible without the contribution of the CEDR secretary, Kitty Martin.
In 1992 the Conference of Major Religious Superiors in Ireland (now CORI) observed that ‘the continued existence of a link between education and poverty represents the greatest single challenge facing the education system’ (CMRS 1992, p. 99). Eleven years on, there are still significant numbers of young people leaving school early (Hyland, 2002). The extent of literacy difficulties in younger children has not declined significantly over a ten year period (Irish Times, 21st January 2000). Nor is there evidence to suggest that the relationships between education and poverty or education and social class have become any weaker. It is appropriate, therefore, to restate this position today: the continued existence of a link between education and poverty still represents the greatest single challenge facing the education system.

The papers in this volume discuss how this single greatest challenge is to be faced by those who work in initial teacher education (ITE). These papers are a call to action. They are infused with the belief that education is never neutral: either it reflects and respects diversity (in social class, ability, cultural background, skills, ethnicity, language etc.) or it hides diversity and, in doing so, marginalises diversity and turns ‘different’ into ‘abnormal’. In education, apathy leaves the education system the way it is, and the way it is, is part of the problem. As the Brazilian writer Paulo Freire has put it, “When we try to be neutral, like Pilate, we support the dominant ideology. Not being neutral, education must be either liberating or domestinating” (quoted in Sterling, Bobbett and Norris 1995, p. 63). These papers seek to challenge us to explore how initial teacher education can be liberating for our students and for their pupils.

This introduction will describe some of what we know about socio-economic inequality (‘educational disadvantage’) in Ireland. It will identify that educational disadvantage is not something that can be treated as an ‘additional issue’, or an issue for some urban areas but is to be found in almost every classroom in the state. As such, teaching of educationally disadvantaged pupils cannot be regarded as a specialism to be added to ‘core teaching skills’: it is a core part of the daily life of almost every one of our student teachers (whether we or they recognise this or not). Secondly, this chapter will describe different conceptions of ‘educational disadvantage’ and identify the questions these raise for initial teacher education practice. Finally, this chapter will briefly introduce the other chapters in this volume.

The relationship between initial teacher education and the education system is similar to the relationship between education and the broader society. Initial Teacher Educators have a role to play in the formation of teachers’ sense of self, their sense of their profession, and the way in which they work. At the same time, we should not overstate our role in tackling socio-economic inequalities in education. Other factors also play a role in the formation of teachers, including their own experiences as pupils, their assumptions as to the nature of the role, and their experiences and relationships when they join the teaching workforce. Nor should we overstate the role of the education system itself in tackling educational disadvantage. The education system is unlikely to be able to prevent some parents from continuing to buy competitive advantages for their children (Smyth and Hannan, 2000, p 113). For all these reasons, it is clear that initial teacher education alone will not bring an end to educational disadvantage. But, it is also clear that it can make a distinctive contribution to a more equitable education system. Indeed, it could be argued that if we are not making that contribution, we are, in effect, contributing to the problem.

The Distribution of Educational Disadvantage in Ireland

In public debate on the issue there is often a perception that educational disadvantage can be understood best as existing in urban ghettos. This urban bias
is noted by Kellaghan et al., who note (1995, p 38):

> [e]ducational disadvantage tends to be regarded as largely an urban phenomenon. This is because it appears in its most concentrated and visible form in inner-city flat complexes and in suburban housing estates characterised by poverty, high levels of unemployment, and low quality housing.

This perception is clearly also strong among researchers, since many Irish studies of educational disadvantage feed into this perception by studying only or primarily urban areas. Craft's study of the educational effects of mother's value orientations (1974), Faugnan's (1987) and O'Brien's (1987) studies of curriculum development programmes, Kellaghan's study of the Rutland Street project (1977), and Boldt's study of early school leaving (1994) were all Dublin-based. Lysaght's study of the Moyross intervention programme was Limerick-based, whereas Boldt's (1996) collection of interventions draws from Cork, Derry, Dublin and Limerick.

In light of this urban focus, it is quite striking to note that educational disadvantage in Ireland is, in fact, predominantly a rural phenomenon.

**Table 1 Geographical Distribution of the 16 Percent Most Disadvantaged Pupils**

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<th>Area</th>
<th>Percentage of disadvantaged living in this type of area</th>
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<tr>
<td>Dublin</td>
<td>25.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Urban areas outside Dublin</td>
<td>4.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Towns with populations of 10,000 to 40,000</td>
<td>9.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Towns with populations less than 10,000 and open countryside</td>
<td>60.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>100</td>
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Source: Kellaghan et al. (1995, p. 46)

The 1995 Kellaghan et al. study is particularly instructive in this respect. They examined the geographical distribution of the 16 per cent most disadvantaged pupils (those who were both poor and had low attainment on a standardised test) and discovered that over 60 percent of them lived in small towns or in the open countryside (the details appear in Table 1). Given that the public debate usually focuses on urban areas, it is arguable that the majority of the disadvantaged are largely ignored in public discourse and possibly also in practice.

Although they run counter to many people's expectations and experiences, Kellaghan et al.'s findings have been confirmed by a number of others studies. Power and Tormey (2000) identified that, in rural areas, even where working class children do make it to Leaving Certificate, they attain, on average, substantially lower grades than middle class pupils. McDonald's (1998, p. 212) study of the performance of pupils on a reading test shows that that while 11.1 per cent of pupils in disadvantaged schools have a very low reading score, as many as 7.3 per cent of pupils in non-designated disadvantaged schools have a very low reading score. This means that, on average, in a non-designated disadvantaged school, perhaps one child in twelve (in an average class, two to three pupils) may well have major reading problems.

It is worth asking why the research findings are so at odds with commonly-held beliefs. Part of the answer may lie in the specific nature of rural poverty. Jackson and Haase (1998, p. 61-66) suggest that, in Ireland, rural poverty is largely hidden for a range of reasons. One reason is that it carries with it a stigma which is not so evident in cities - a stigma which may cause rural dwellers to hide their poverty. A second is that the low population density causes the impression of a greater mixing of social classes in rural areas which in turn creates...
the impression that rural areas are classless. Therefore, it may well be that children from poor or working class homes are not as easily recognised in rural areas as in urban areas. Consequently it may be that their comparatively poor performance may not be associated by educators with their background and instead may be put down to a lack of ability.

Despite the widely held assumptions about disadvantage, the research findings suggest that educationally disadvantaged children are to be found in classrooms throughout the country. While urban areas may experience a polarisation between largely middle class schools and largely working class schools, and while there may be specific circumstances that pertain in urban schools with a high concentration of working class pupils, in a typical day, a typical Irish teacher is teaching educationally disadvantaged pupils. Dealing with educational disadvantage is not, therefore, a ‘specialism’ that some teachers need to develop, but which can be understood to be an addition to ‘core teaching skills’. It is as much a core part of the everyday job of almost every Irish teacher as teaching maths or history.

This raises a question for teacher educators: Do we equip our students to take for granted dealing with educational disadvantage as a normal part of their job?

To understand how best to answer this question it is necessary to look at what exactly people mean when they say ‘educational disadvantage’.

How do we understand disadvantage in Ireland?

One of the things that makes understanding educational disadvantage so difficult is that a variety of people are often using the term to describe a variety of different phenomena, with a host of different causes happening to a range of different people. It may even be that people are unaware of the fact that they are actually talking about different things and different people, while using the same term. For this reason, it is worth injecting some clarity into the various unspoken definitions of educational disadvantage. (The question of how educational disadvantage is to be understood is the subject of O’Brien’s chapter in this volume, therefore, I will not deal with the matter in too much depth here).

Most writers work on the basis that there are basically two different ways of understanding educational disadvantage, the ‘deficit’ model and the ‘difference’ model (CMRS, 1992; Drudy and Lynch, 1993; Kellaghan et al., 1993; INTO, 1994).

Two types of causes are identified.

♦ The first type identifies the cause as being a deficit in the family or community of the disadvantaged person: this may mean particular patterns of parent-child interaction, neglect or abuse, a culture of poverty or an urban ghetto.

♦ The second type identifies cultural difference or dissonance as being the primary cause for educational disadvantage. The focus then is on the cultural capital that is valued by the school (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977) including the language choices the school makes (e.g. Tizard and Hughes, 1984) or on the style of teaching and thinking that the school chooses to value.

Although this difference/deficit division has some usefulness, it also has its limits. Within each of these two classifications there are a range of positions on a whole host of important educational questions.

I would suggest that it is more useful to distinguish between five different views of educational disadvantage. They include educational disadvantage as:

- a synonym for Special Educational Needs
- a result of particular parenting styles
- a result of ghetto culture
- a result of the cultural choices of the school
- a result of access to resources

I will explore these in turn.

Educational Disadvantage is seen as synonymous with Special Educational Needs: It is not unusual in educational debates to come across references to
educational disadvantage as referring to any child that has learning difficulties or who has a low attainment. Pupils who attain comparatively poorly due to social or cultural factors are grouped together with those with behavioural problems, learning difficulties, mental or physical handicaps etc. This is the loosest definition of educational disadvantage and is sometimes used by policy makers (see Fine Gael, 1998 for example).

This model is sometimes criticised for being insufficiently precise. Given that we already have a variety of synonyms such as educational problems, educational failure, special educational needs etc., there seems to be little point in simply inventing a new one. Critics of this approach argue that the title ‘educational disadvantage’ should be reserved for educational failure which derives from a specific cause or set of causes.

Educational Disadvantage is caused by Parent-Child Interaction: Educational Disadvantage is often understood as the educational result of social or cultural factors in the child’s family which lead to the child not having the knowledge, attitudes and skills to be able to attain in school. It is argued that some parents do not provide the same opportunities for the child to develop intellectually as others. Writers from this perspective note factors such as the child’s opportunity to talk in the home, the monitoring of progress, the emotional safety of the learning environment and the support and direction offered by parents (Kellaghan et al. 1993). It should be noted that writers working within this model do not necessarily hold that working class culture is less valuable in its own right, simply that there are patterns of parent-child interaction which are more associated with school learning, and others which are less associated with school learning.

This model is the dominant model in the psychological literature on educational disadvantage. Its critics (e.g. Murdock, 2000) point to its tendency to individualise the problem as being a function of the child and their home, rather than exploring their relationship with the school and the curriculum.

Educational Disadvantage is a result of a Ghetto Culture: Some people argue that the disadvantages associated with some homes and communities go beyond patterns of parent-child interaction. For them, educational disadvantage is a result of inappropriate environments for children. While the first two models focus on a child who is attaining comparatively poorly in education, the focus here is much wider, taking in also children who are identified as disruptive or ‘antisocial’. This view can be found in the report of the Special Education Review Committee (SERC), who noted:

High unemployment, poverty, poor levels of education among adults, high levels of crime, poor attendance at school, truancy, school failure, early drop-out from school and disruptive behaviour were among the factors which were considered initially in the identification of the first schools which were designated as being in areas of disadvantage. To these might be added today violent and criminal behaviour, general family dysfunction, and substance abuse (Ireland 1993, p. 144).

Some people would specifically associate such a pattern of life with urban ‘ghettos’, in which a ‘culture of poverty’ is said to exist.

While the ‘parent-child interaction’ model is the dominant one in the psychological literature and the ‘cultural difference’ model is the dominant one in the sociological literature, most policy interventions and plans in Ireland are heavily influenced by this ‘ghetto culture’ model (Tormey and Prendeville, 2000). There is also evidence that this is the dominant ideology within the teaching profession (see INTO, 1994). It is worth noting that this model is not amongst those most often proposed in academic research. In light of this, it is worth noting Drudy and Lynch’s suggestion that the existence of such views tell us more about the perspective of those who hold them than they do about poor or working class children (1993, p. 151).

It is also worth reiterating that even if this model was accurate in its explanation of the comparatively poor educational attainment of some poor or working class children it could account for only a
proportion of the disadvantaged – in particular, it would fail to account for many of the rural educationally disadvantaged.

Indeed, it may even be the dominance of this model which contributes to the apparent invisibility of the rural disadvantaged. If disadvantage is seen as being about disruptive behaviour, crime and family dysfunction, we may fail to look for, and fail to see, working class children who are attaining comparatively poorly where such factors do not exist.

As Derman-Sparks puts it (2002): “The meaning of advantage is the ghost that lurks within the meaning of disadvantage”.

The three positions we have looked at so far have made the disadvantaged person the focus of their attention. The next two approaches make the advantaged person and the education system the focus of theirs. Such writers shift attention from ‘disadvantage’ to ‘advantage’. Since the word ‘advantage’ literally means ‘to be in a better position than someone else’, this implies that as long as advantage exists, there will always be someone in a worse position – someone disadvantaged, i.e., since the existence of ‘better’ implies the existence of ‘worse’, the presence of advantage necessitates the presence of disadvantage. As Derman-Sparks puts it (2002, p. 59): ‘The meaning of advantage is the ghost that lurks within the meaning of disadvantage’.

*Educational Disadvantage is a result of Cultural Difference between Home and School:* While the previous three models have focused in on what the child brings with them into school, this model focuses on what school does with the children who come in the door.

Cultural difference thinkers argue that educational disadvantage needs to be understood in terms of the cultural choices which a school makes. These choices include a choice in what form of language it deems appropriate, what sort of cultural activities are represented in the curriculum, the dress and speech style of the teacher and the sort of behavioural patterns which are expected of children. If the school chooses to legitimate certain cultural forms and not others, children whose families share those cultural forms will do better.

It is argued that the language capacity and culture of working class or poor children is not worse than that of middle class children, it is simply different. The process of disadvantaging happens when the teacher comes across this difference and labels it as ‘deficit’.

Internationally, this cultural difference model has been the dominant model in sociology for the last thirty years. In the 1980s and 1990s the focus on the cultural difference between home and school led some educators (particularly in the UK and the US) to an increasingly political focus on education. American and UK educators like Giroux and McLaren (1989), Michael Apple (1996), and Robin Richardson (1990), see a need for the classroom to be a way of politicising pupils. Since the dominant curriculum is kept in place by the advantaged (teachers, middle class politicians and parents, the university intelligentsia etc.), disadvantaged pupils must be taught to be critical of this curriculum and to appreciate their own culture and language. Others have been less political, focusing on community development initiatives as a means of changing the cultural bias of education.

As with all the other approaches described here, this understanding of educational disadvantage is subject to criticism, however like the ‘parent-child interaction’ model, none of these criticisms have been sufficiently strong to really damage its claim to explanatory capacity. Nonetheless, some argue that if some children do develop general learning knowledge, skills and attitudes in the home and others do not, then there is no way of preventing those children making more progress than others, short of denying them educational opportunities or tying them up (Nash, 1990). They argue that the idea of a truly learner-centred education is a romantic myth.

*Educational Disadvantage is the result of limited access to resources:* Like ‘cultural difference’ thinkers, those who focus on resources as the issue identify that educational disadvantage is one of the
the power is structured within our society.

Drudy and Lynch (1993) and Lynch and O’ Riardon (1999), for example, argue that, in Ireland, differences in attainment can be explained in terms of differences in the capacity to purchase success within the educational system through the purchasing of additional resources either through selection of schools, provision of educational aids, private tuition and grinds or the capacity of the family to absorb the opportunity cost of an economically unproductive family member in college.

This focus on resources has long been part of the work of the Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI). Smyth and Hannan suggest, quite simply, that:

If social groups continue to differ in their financial and cultural resources, then differences in educational participation are likely to persist. Only in Sweden (and, to a lesser extent, the Netherlands) has there been any significant reduction in inequality of educational opportunity over time, a process that is attributable not only to educational reform but also to diminishing social class differences in income and living conditions (2000, p. 113).

Reviewing the Five models: Looked at in terms of these five models, the great diversity of debate and practice on educational disadvantage that exists in Ireland can be explored. From the researchers’ perspective, the three most logical and coherent accounts of educational disadvantage are those that focus on patterns of parent-child interactions, those that focus on the cultural choices schools make, and those that focus on the broader question of social power and resources. At the same time, it appears that the dominant ideology of educational disadvantage in Irish education is based on a far less logical and coherent ‘ghetto culture’ concept. Indeed, it may well be that the dominance of this way of thinking in Irish education is also a factor in the production of disadvantage.

Although both the ‘parent-child interaction’ model and the ‘cultural difference’ model have been criticised, both retain a good claim to explanatory capability. Indeed, it might be argued that these two models form two sides of the same coin: one focuses on the extent to which children are prepared to meet school as it is, while the other focuses on the extent to which school is prepared to meet children as they are. It could be argued that, despite their difference in emphasis, both are essentially concerned with the relationship between the child/family/community and their school. It may well be, therefore, that we need to put this relationship at the centre of our work to address socio-economic equality issues through initial teacher education.

At the same time, Smyth and Hannan’s contribution to the debate is an important one. Educational disadvantage is not only an educational problem, it is a function of the limited distribution of social power in our society. While we may carry out educational reform to limit the direct contribution of the education system to disadvantaging, it may well be that those with resources will continue to buy advantage for their own children, and consequently, disadvantage for the children of others. Nonetheless, recognising that initial teacher education does not hold all the answers does not excuse us from our obligation to make all the difference that we can.

So, what is the difference that we can make? It is to this issue that I now turn.

Models of Tackling Disadvantage

The standard response in Ireland to educational disadvantage has been to introduce an initiative to ‘tackle the problem’ (Smyth and Hannan, 2000, p. 112). Indeed, throughout the 1990s, dozens, if not scores of different initiatives and pilot programmes were introduced, the best known of which include:

- Schools in areas designated as areas of disadvantage
- Breaking the Cycle
- Home-School-Community Liaison
- 8 – 15 Early School Leaver’s Initiative
- Leaving Certificate Applied Programme
Many of these programmes could be lauded as targeting resources at those most in need. At the same time, they could equally be criticised for seeing disadvantage primarily as an area-based phenomenon, rather than recognising the true spread of disadvantage into almost every classroom in the country.

As I noted in the National Anti-Poverty Strategy Social Inclusion Forum Conference (2003), it could also be argued that the effect of focusing on and targeting groups and individuals who were regarded as ‘failing’ within the education system was to allow the educational system itself to escape substantial examination as to its role in producing disadvantage. My colleague Marty Holland sometimes uses the analogy of the ‘bowling ball’ to describe such educational processes. It goes something like this: The children are lined up in the classroom in the full array of their uniqueness and individuality and with a wide range of diverse cultures, language styles, social backgrounds and abilities. The teacher responds by rolling a lesson down the middle of the room, aiming to hit as many as possible. Those who are not bowled-over by our lessons are labelled as having ‘special needs’ and become the subject of an ‘intervention programme’. Looked at in this way, the child’s designation as having ‘special needs’ (or of being disadvantaged) is a function of the way we teach in relation to diversity. If we aim for the middle (or if we teach with middle class children in mind), if we fail to relate to children in their own context, it may well be that we will not only meet disadvantage, we will actually produce it.

Oddly enough, this view of Irish education is one that is not exclusively held by external critics of the system. No less a person than the Minister for Education and Science, Noel Dempsey has noted:

"Sometimes our formal one-size-fits-all model of schooling seems an inappropriate response in the context of different communities with different local needs, conditions and cultures (Dempsey, 2002)."

This image of a ‘one-size-fits-all’ system is a useful one for us to use in questioning our own practice in initial teacher education:

- Do our students learn to develop ‘one-size-fits-all’ lessons and educational programmes for their pupils?
- Do we encourage them to think of particular approaches to teaching as being best-practice (i.e. ‘normal’) or do we unpack with them the extent to which those approaches may be more or less appropriate to the diversity of social groups in their classes?
- Do we encourage them to see teaching and learning primarily as relational activities, or do we encourage them to see teaching as primarily a technical activity involving the transmission of a pre-defined set of knowledge to a group of learners?
- In light of the centrality of the child/family/community – school relationship, do we seek to teach them the skills and knowledge they will need in order to engage with diverse communities with “different local needs, conditions and cultures”, in order that they can construct culturally responsive lessons and can assist communities in preparing children for school?

These are only some of the questions that initial teacher educators may wish to consider in exploring how our practice can best challenge educational disadvantage.

**The Chapters in this Volume**

Each of the chapters in this volume explores a different aspect of the relationships between educational disadvantage and initial teacher education. They all draw to a greater or lesser extent...
from the presentations and discussions which arose from a Combat Poverty Agency funded seminar which was held in Limerick in February 2003. Initially, it was intended that the papers here would include an account of our discussions on that day, however that has not been possible in all cases.

Maeve O’Brien’s chapter explores the question of what we mean when we talk about socio-economic inequality in education. She explores the different ways in which education can play a role in bringing about socio-economic inequality in education and identifies the range of issues that teacher educators should take cognisance of in planning teacher education programmes and courses. She also raises an issue that will be a recurring theme in these chapters – the role of colleges in the student’s emotional development, and its role in their capacity to engage with diversity.

Philip Garner argues that we need to pay attention to the sort of person we want teachers to be. He argues that being an inclusive teacher is not about the technical skills of curriculum development, or classroom management, but about the personal qualities and attitudes that the teacher brings to the classroom. “In other words”, he writes “teaching children with learning difficulties or those who are otherwise disadvantaged is more about soul than about mind”.

O’Brien notes that a number of voices are often excluded from discussions about teaching and teacher education. One of these voices, is that of students or former students. Tormey, Ryan and Dooley seek to redress this exclusion by presenting some data from a study of recent teacher education graduates from Mary Immaculate College. The data shows that while many of the graduates feel confident of their capacity to teach after their initial teacher education experience, they often feel less confident about teaching in designated disadvantaged schools. Substantial numbers of them also suggest that their teacher education programme could include more focus on how to work with parents and communities, and on how to deal with challenging behaviours in school. While the data is drawn from graduates of one course, it provides a basis for those working in other teacher education programmes to think about their own programmes.

Ann Louise Gilligan’s chapter returns to the question of the students’ emotional development during their time in initial teacher education. If teaching can be understood as ‘emotional labour’, then the student teacher’s emotional development must be at the centre of our work. If educational disadvantage is understood in terms of the teacher’s capacity to relate to a diversity of pupils, then the development of empathetic capacity is central to working to challenge such disadvantage.

Conclusion

Educational disadvantage is a core part of the teaching job of almost every Irish teacher – it is as much a part of their daily life as the teaching of English reading. For those of us engaged in initial teacher education, educational disadvantage cannot, therefore, be seen as a specialism to be learned once the core teaching skills have been grasped.

At the same time, it is not always clear how educational disadvantage is to be best tackled through initial teacher education since a host of competing understandings of disadvantage are to be found in public discourse on the issue. It seems logical to suggest that part of our task in initial teacher education may be to challenge in our students the less coherent but more prevalent ‘ghetto culture’ understanding of educational disadvantage. It also seems logical that we should pay attention to those areas that we could hope to affect – this implies that we should focus attention on the contribution of particular forms of schooling to educational disadvantage. It also seems logical that we should pay attention to the role of the child/family/community – school relationship in a child’s learning, and should aid our students in developing the capacity to engage in this relationship positively.

Educational reform and reform of initial teacher education will not end educational disadvantage. The evidence suggests that only a move towards greater economic equality in our society will accomplish such a task. Nonetheless, we can work to reduce educational
disadvantage through addressing our own distinctive contribution to the problem. If we fail to do that much, then we may in fact be contributing to the disadvantaging of another generation of Irish children.

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The Irish Times, 21st January 2000


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HOW DO WE UNDERSTAND SOCIO-ECONOMIC DISADVANTAGE AND ITS RELATION TO EDUCATION?

Maeve O’Brien

Introduction
This chapter reflects the first part of the discussion in the seminar which was concerned with initial teacher education and educational disadvantage. In particular, this chapter endeavours to discuss key aspects of the relationship between socio-economic disadvantage and education. It aims to tease out how this relationship has been understood and constructed within various sociological and educational paradigms. As knowledge and research are not value neutral, so the ways we have of describing and understanding social and economic relationships reflect particular ideologies and world views (Gouldner 1970).

I begin the discussion by exploring the relationship between the equality of opportunity perspective within education and disadvantage. As other authors have pointed out, this is a perspective that has been powerful in the Irish context in shaping how we define the relationship between socio-economic inequalities and the educational system (Drudy and Lynch 1993). It has also shaped and underpinned the kind of research that we have engaged in around socio economic inequalities and educational disadvantage over a number of decades. The discussion will then focus on some of the more post-modern approaches to inequalities in education, focussing on issues of identities. Within this perspective, consideration will be given to substantively different types of questions to those addressed within the equality of opportunity position. It will address questions such as: what does it mean to inhabit a working-class identity within the education system and what are the costs for students of maintaining or rejecting that working-class identity? The chapter will then focus briefly on more radical egalitarian approaches to understanding the relationship between educational inequality and socio-economic inequality and criteria for action to bring about this type of equality. It will draw on the work of the Equality Centre at UCD (1995, 2001) which attempts to frame inequalities within four domains and contexts; the contexts of distribution, recognition, power, affective or emotional well-being.

The discussion here is not just an intellectual exercise but a call to understand, in order to shape action and change…

Although this discussion will draw on argument and the literature in the field, I hope that we can also engage in this exploration by drawing not just on intellectual and academic engagement in this field, but also most importantly to draw on our own human experiences and our emotional selves. Indeed, there is considerable evidence to suggest that we understand not just with our minds but also with our emotions and our whole selves (Nussbaum 1995, Kittay 1999, Goleman 1995). In dealing with issues of social justice in particular, (and certainly the issue of the relation between education and socio-economic inequalities is one), Nussbaum has argued that emotions are fundamental to understanding the plights of others as:

Calculating intellect is a blunt and relatively obtuse instrument, unless aided by the vivid and empathic imagining of what it is to live a certain sort of life (Nussbaum, 1995, p 381).

The discussion here is not just an intellectual exercise but a call to understand, in order to shape action and change, within our own spheres of work and relationships. Therefore, as we proceed, it would be fruitful that we engage with the discussion from a holistic and reflexive stance; that we reflect on our understandings of socio-economic disadvantage and its relation to education from our locations and experiences, be they as student, teacher or academic. How and where we locate ourselves within this discussion of inequality and education necessarily reflects our own biases and
identities (Grenfell and James 1998, Reay 1997) and so part of this process of sharing our understandings means making explicit our own ideological and multivalent identities (Fraser 1995).

The Equality of Opportunity Perspective and Educational Disadvantage

Despite the 'celtic tiger', ...twenty-five percent of the population live below the official poverty line with Ireland listed as having the second highest incidence of child poverty in Europe.

It has been argued that most of the thinking, research and policy making in Ireland with respect to what we call 'educational disadvantage' is located within the liberal view of equality of opportunity (Lynch 1999). This view is underpinned by hegemonic 'meritocratic' assumptions; that those who are academically able and make the effort 'deserve' to and can succeed in the educational system irrespective of class and cultural backgrounds. However, this perspective ignores the narrow way in which we define ability (Goleman 1995, Gardner 1983, Sternberg 1998) and effort in both education and larger society. The individualistic meritocratic perspective has become so far beyond question that it is a powerful ideology underpinning much thinking and practice in education today.

The liberal view of equality of opportunity operates within this meritocratic ideology although it is profoundly inequalitarian, in both how it conceptualises ability and effort, and in its effects. It bolsters a view that society should reward individuals for their possession of these types of academic abilities and academic efforts while others are excluded or marginalised because of their 'lack of ability and/or efforts'. It is suggested under this liberal view that interventions can be made so that individual students irrespective of their class origins and socio-economic backgrounds can participate and succeed within the educational system once they play within the rules of meritocracy. Yet, we are keenly aware from empirical work in Ireland that only tiny percentages of the poor and working-classes succeed even within the educational system in Ireland (Clancy and Wall 2000); the link between class inequalities and education persist. Although "upward mobility" is apparently possible for the few within this definition of success, educational inequality persists among working-class groups and the Traveller community in Ireland. Despite the 'celtic tiger', according to Combat Poverty Agency (2001), twenty-five percent of the population live below the official poverty line with Ireland listed as having the second highest incidence of child poverty in Europe. Moreover, seventy-five percent of adults below the poverty line have left school with no educational qualifications. The relationship between education and socio-economic inequality remains strong.

...despite changes in policy and educational interventions over the last two decades in Ireland students from semi- and unskilled-working class groups continue to be severely underrepresented in third-level education...

Over the years, the equality of opportunity position has fuelled the production of a large body of empirical work both internationally and in Ireland. This research highlights strong correlations between non-educational, material and social variables, educational ‘success’ / ‘failure’ and social mobility (Coleman et al. 1966, 1987, Halsey 1980, Floud 1970, Greaney and Kellaghan 1984, Kellaghan et al. 1995). This work indicates that parental occupations, parental school qualifications, housing and income play a significant role in the educational chances of students. Traditionally, the solutions were seen to lie in promoting interventions that would enhance the educational experiences and performances of working-class students so they could catch-up on middle-class peers. Yet, those coming from what have been traditionally defined as middle-class and working-class backgrounds continue to differ significantly in their performance and achievement within the educational system. The work of Clancy (1982, 1988, 1995) and more
recently Clancy and Wall (2000) suggests that despite changes in policy and educational interventions over the last two decades in Ireland students from semi- and unskilled-working class groups continue to be severely underrepresented in third-level education and particularly within the university sector. These groups are perceived therefore as ‘educationally disadvantaged’ and in need of supports to make up for that disadvantage. There are clearly significant barriers in operation when so many working-class students in Ireland are at risk of leaving school before the completion of their Leaving Certificate, and even when they do manage to stay in the system, they take less honours subjects and perform less well than their middle-class peers (Hyland 2002).

However, in order to understand more clearly the nature of these barriers in relation to education for groups of working-class students we need to go beyond correlations of social class variables and educational performance. We need to look more closely and critically at the process of education and the educational system itself. Why should social class be connected to educational outcomes? How do such ‘educationally irrelevant variables’ (Drudy and Lynch 1993) have such a strong relation to educational performance and participation? We also need a broader theoretical base in order to explain the dynamic that continues to keep working-class students unjustly on the margins of the educational system.

The Re-Production of Class Inequalities and the Educational System

Why is it that schools and third-level institutions that pertain to be fundamentally about teaching and learning, tend to privilege middle-class over working class groups? Why does economic reality make a difference in the classroom? In relation to poverty, it is possible to understand that lack of adequate nourishment, sleep, clothing and shelter can affect students’ ability to engage in education and that factors associated with poverty such as stress, lack of services and the daily struggle deeply affect the energy and motivation of children and families to engage with the educational system (O’Neill 1992, O’Brien 1987). However, even in better times when economic circumstances relatively improve for working-class people the gap between their participation and that of the middle-classes still remains.

The answers also lie within the system itself. Theoretical work suggests that there are powerful structural and systemic links between what happens within the school system and both the reproduction of social class relations and the economic relations of class (Bourdieu and Passeron 1977). The work of researchers and theorists within a range of paradigms (e.g., Bowles and Gintis 1976, Bourdieu 1986) suggest that there are lived practices and structures within the school system itself that perpetuate inequalities within education and the larger society. Bowles and Gintis’s seminal work, Schooling in Capitalist America, has suggested that schools prepare working-class students for working-class jobs and working-class status in the larger society, as well as teaching technical knowledge required for particular occupations. However, while this theory highlights some of the apparent functions of education in relation to the economic sphere of society, critics have argued that this is too instrumental and deterministic a view of the process of education. There is no ‘one to one correspondence’ between individuals’ schooling and the positions they then occupy.

Bourdieu’s (1986) metaphors of capitals and habitus, however, are very useful in attempting to examine classed cultural practices and their production and reproduction within the educational field. According to Bourdieu, the socio-economic realities of working-class life ensure that the working-classes embody ways of being, thinking and acting that are relevant to their own social contexts but have little currency within the cultural milieu of the educational system. The educational system has adopted and supports the practices and values of the dominant class, the middle-class. Educational institutions thus differentiate and militate against individuals and groups who do not have the appropriate cultural currency to participate (Bourdieu 1996). Distinctions in dress, speech patterns and preferences of taste become translated into deficits or advantages depending on your class practices.
The educational system has adopted and supports the practices and values of the dominant class, the middle-class. Educational institutions thus differentiate and militate against individuals and groups who do not have the appropriate cultural currency to participate.

The power of the educational system in legitimating class practices contributes to the reproduction of cultural inequality. However, it also thereby reproduces socio-economic inequality, as the lack of cultural credentials that individuals possess on leaving the educational system then contributes to restriction in the type of jobs they can apply for and get. Educational qualifications are a form of cultural capital but those from working-class groups are more restricted in acquiring these educational credentials because they have little educational credentials in the first place, little knowledge of how the system works and how to work the system (see Reay and Ball 1997 on education markets and school choice). Thus there may be little desire to participate and stay in this system that marks these individuals and groups as lesser. There is little option but to make the ‘choice of the necessary’ which is often to leave and look for jobs that have traditionally been available to their class. Thus individuals unconsciously and consciously make classed choices based on the logic of their class practice (Bourdieu 1990), choices that ultimately influence their educational and economic ‘trajectories’.

One of the important points that Bourdieu (1984) argues in relation to the use of capitals and the education system is that those who possess significant economic capital also have the possibility of purchasing some forms of cultural capital. Economic resources can, as we often see in the Irish system, be used to purchase educational grinds and to pursue activities, like trips abroad and cultural pursuits that advantage students in gaining educational credentials (Lynch and Lodge 2002, O’Brien 2001). So, not alone are those in difficult economic circumstances disadvantaged economically, but also culturally, through their lack of purchasing power. Bourdieu’s ‘theory’ of cultural and economic production can be interpreted at the macro-level of structure, education and society, but also has the potential through the concept of ‘practice’ to explain what is happening to disadvantaged students from working-class backgrounds within the micro-level of the classroom and teacher/student relations.

The metaphors of capital and habitus can, for example, be used in interpreting the classic work of both Willis (1977) and Mc Robbie (1978) in relation to the process of cultural class resistance and reproduction within education. In both these works, it is clear that working-class boys and girls interpret class differences within the second-level educational system through their peer group membership and in their rejection of the formal curriculum, school success and middle-class practices. Students tend to associate on the basis of ‘who is like’ and ‘not like them’; Working-class students resist the middle-class authority exerted by teachers and the schools and form groups that express anti-school cultures. While working-class students derive a sense of belonging and power from resistance and membership of these groups, this group membership also maintains them in their classed and cultural separateness. The girls and boys do not buy into the official culture of the school because it cannot offer them relevant choices. So they leave school without acquiring educational qualifications (cultural capital) for the world of work or home and family (depending on traditional conceptions of gender appropriate work). These young people then enter into the economy in the low-paid and culturally working-class occupations that are available to them. Although decades have passed since these pieces of research were conducted, there are still similar processes at play for young people within our middle-class-dominant educational system, albeit within a changed occupational and social context (see Walkerdine, Lucey and Melody 2002, O’Brien 2003 (a), O’Brien 2003 (b)).
The Question of Working-Class Identities, Disadvantage and Schooling

In this section, a third key question is posed which is more concerned with post-modern understandings of what it is like, how it feels and what it means to have and inhabit a working-class identity within the educational system. If I come from a particular background I will reflect my cultural practices and I will embody the survival mechanisms of that class culture. When I participate in the educational system how are these practices and my identity received, are these ‘ways of being’ valued or devalued? Is the individual who embodies these practices accepted or are they made to feel different and marginalised within the system?

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Diane Reay (1998) talks about ‘working class identity’ as being a spoiled identity, that it has been imbued with a strong sense of ‘otherness’, particularly within the educational system. Within the school system, to become ‘respectable’ the young working-class person has to cast off what they were brought up with, in order to fit in and to acquire the apparent right ways of being, the right ways of speaking, of walking, of dressing (Reay 1997, Skeggs 1997, Mahony and Zmroczek 1997). There are many ways of exploring the issue of identity, so for the purposes of this chapter I have chosen to take two examples of school practices and to discuss how these contribute to the systematic rejection of working-class identity and to the marginalisation of students from socio-economically struggling backgrounds.

Style, Identity and Respectability

Schooling is not just concerned with academic learning but also with fostering socialisation and compliance to a dominant culture, underpinned by middle-class, patriarchal values. In a recent study of students as they made the transfer from first to second-level education, O’Brien (2001) found that students inhabiting working-class identities perceived the rules of their schools as strongly problematic. In the area of uniform and style, working-class girls in particular, tried to resist middle-class codes of feminine dress and presentation, while their middle-class peers generally conformed, although they might complain. For some working-class girls, the social and emotional costs of taking on an embodied middle-class identity are too high, and so it is actively resisted. They take the hard path of resistance; of getting into trouble and being sanctioned and marginalised within the officialdom of the school for the sake of preserving their own classed identities. In this study of transitions to second-level schooling, working-class girls who conformed to middle-class styles of presentation were seen by peers as ‘swots’ and ‘licks’ and ‘posh’. Economic and cultural identities are experienced as intertwined. Likewise, this can be observed in the social-class-work that working-class mothers do in order to present themselves as ‘respectable’ when they need to visit the school and their awareness of the subtle classed codes of practice (Reay 2000, O’Donoghue forthcoming).

The Curriculum and the Organisation of Learning

The formal curriculum and the organisation of learning in schools, particularly at the post-primary levels (Hargreaves, Earl and Ryan 1996), also play a role in the ‘othering’ (Weiner 1996) of working-class identities, as well as those from ethnic minority backgrounds (for example Travellers). The nature of the subject knowledge and its organisation within the curriculum and the practices adopted in its transmission, favour those with particular language styles, that are white and middle-class (Bernstein 1977), and therefore discriminate against those individuals and groups who do not possess this style. It is important however, when interpreting research around language codes, codes of behaviour and discipline systems within the home and community not to fall into constructing differences within home and community as
The serious question that remains partially unanswered in education is how to include the knowledge and experiences of groups who have traditionally been marginalised within the formal curriculum. This has to be an inclusion that accords these experiences, knowledge and codes the status that has traditionally been associated with dominant white patriarchal knowledge and practice (Freire 1972, Giroux 1983).

A further difficulty within the Irish educational system with respect to the organisation of schooling is that many Irish second-level schools still persist in the practice of grouping students according to academic performance (Smyth 1999, Lynch and Lodge 2002, O’Brien 2001). Evidence suggests that middle-class students tend to be over-represented in higher ability groups and working-class students in lower ones (Hargreaves 1967, Lunn 1970 and Ball 1981, Hallinan 1987) and moreover, that when students are allocated to streamed groups they tend not to move streams during their school careers (Lynch 1989). The emotional effects of being placed in lower streams at second-level impacts strongly on students. Students who have been reasonably confident about their performance in primary school now see themselves in a negative light academically. This is reflected in the language they use to describe themselves such as ‘slow’, stupid’, ‘not as bright’ at second-level (O’Brien 2001).

In Britain, Reay and Lucey (2001) remark upon the negative effects of the organisation of second-level education markets on working-class students’ identities. Since the apparent removal of the school selection system at second-level with the abolition of the ‘eleven plus’ examination, the second-level school system is constructed as a free market place where rational consumers can choose the best schools from published league tables. However, this is blatantly inequitable as a growing body of research shows that only those who have insider knowledge and experience of the middle-class white school system know how to choose ‘best’ in the first place and moreover, have the resources, including economic resources, to do so (Gerwitz, Ball and Lowe 1994, Reay and Ball 1997, Reay and Ball 1998). Secondly, identity shapes our vision of ‘best school’ and often the local school, no matter what particular facilities it can offer to individual children, is perceived as best for those who are outsiders. According to this body of research on school choice and reformed second-level policy, those who are struggling economically, those from working-class backgrounds, and ‘outsiders’ from other cultural and racial groups are not free to choose and often experience confusion and exclusion in the ‘so called’ free education market.

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There is a great deal more to be said in relation to forms of knowledge, curricular practices and how schools organise learning in ways that marginalise less dominant groups and ‘other’ their identities. In so doing they minimise both the desire to participate in school and aspirations to succeed in the alien system (see Plummer 2000 on working-class girls). As this discussion only sets out to frame these questions it is not possible to tease them out in detail here. However, there is one further point that it is useful to name in relation to socio-economic inequality and educational disadvantage and that is the cross-cutting of gender identities in relation to class and education. At a time when public discourse expresses shock at the apparent gap in
educational performance between boys and girls, and all the rumpus has pushed sideways a concern about differential performances between class groups (Lucey and Walkerdine 2001). It is important to ask questions that focus not only on how socio-economically disadvantaged girls and boys experience the education system differently from each other but also with respect to middle-class peers. The feminist educationalist Arnot (2002) points us to the work of bell hooks, a black feminist academic, who urges us as teachers to constantly question social categories but in particular social class. Class lies at the heart of the educational system and “shapes, values, attitudes, social relations and the biases that form how knowledge is given and received” (hooks, 1994, p 178).

Missing Voices and Making them Heard

I am very conscious that there are groups who were not at our seminar as we attempted to name issues and explore relationships between socio-economic inequality and educational disadvantage. It is students and parents from those struggling backgrounds that could articulate their diverse and common experiences that are missing. Their voices would be very powerful because they would talk about their experiences from the inside out, while we as educators may speak from the outside in. For this reason I want to share a short piece from a student from a severely economically deprived area of Dublin who did make it into third-level, to university. This young person speaks of the power and possibility that lies within education to transform through an access programme he participated in:

The objectives of the Programme (Access Programme) would be to change students’ views of college, they aim to get students from areas that have low transfer rates and to get the working classes better qualified for jobs, it tries to make university a reality for kids by talking about it so it’s in their minds, it aims to make college a friendly place, to make a partnership between the schools and the university, there’s a monument in Ballymun that links us to the university so that’s always in the back of our minds (NDA Access Programme Evaluation 2003).

This intervention offers hope as it illustrates how, working at many levels, transformation is possible. It shows the centrality of building and expressing relationships, so that working class people feel welcome and respected for who they are. Yet, there are so many more talented young people from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds who never have that choice; they become even more disadvantaged at the hands of the educational system and leave school early or are excluded (17,500 annually leaving school without a Leaving Certificate [NCCA, 1999]). The major task of creating educational equality and the conditions necessary to achieve this is still to be achieved. The work of the Centre for Equality Studies UCD (1995, 2001) names four equality goals which are necessary in order to properly tackle the relationship between socio-economic inequality and educational inequality:

- Firstly, they outline the necessity to ensure equal formal rights and opportunities of access for working-class people which should tackle direct and indirect discrimination on the basis of class.
- Secondly, they suggest that equal participation be achieved through educational resourcing that would enable working-class students to participate on equal terms with those from more economically advantaged backgrounds. This would also require alternative forms of educational organisation as has been discussed in the course of this chapter.
- Thirdly, equality of access would then make it possible to ensure equality of outcome; where rates of success for economically marginalised groups would be on a par with those of dominant groups. However, to achieve this goal would also require radical distributive changes in the resources available to these households, change outside the educational domain. Clearly, even with economic changes this would take a very long time and would need to be complimented
by quota policies in higher education.

- The fourth equality objective to eliminate educational inequality for working-class people would involve equality in the spheres of the economic and the political. This is necessary as, even when significant changes are made within the educational realm, those with power and wealth can always adapt to egalitarian changes in education policy alone. This is always possible since they have the resources and the voices to maintain the advantage and ensure maximum conditions for their own well-being over that of other groups.

There is a great deal more to be said in relation to these objectives that cannot be addressed here, but they do provide a broad framework for understanding the complexity of the relationship between socio-economic inequalities and educational inequalities. They suggest the broad-based radical actions that real equality necessarily involves. They also challenge us as educators and teachers in preparation, to think carefully about the role of education itself in relation to inequality in the socio-economic sphere, but to also be aware and prepared to accept the radical and political nature of the changes that are necessary to this social justice project.

Forum Discussion

The discussion of our understandings of the relationship between socio-economic inequality and education reflected the interests and concerns of the various groups who participated in the seminar on initial teacher education and educational disadvantage; students from colleges of education and Higher Diploma Programmes in the universities, academics from the colleges of education and the education Departments of the Universities and researchers in education. The main themes of the discussion are summarised and organised in this section so as to give as full a flavour of the debate as possible and to put some shape on a lively and lengthy debate that moved backwards and forwards around key concerns.

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The discussion firstly focused on exploring and naming the barriers that young people and their families from poor, working-class and marginalised socio-economic backgrounds experience as they try to participate in the educational system. It then moved from identifying and naming these barriers to an examination of cultural and educational practices that are institutionalised within the educational system and that create further inequalities in education for students from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds. In the course of the discussion, there was considerable exploration of how teachers and educators can be unaware of their cultural and educational practices and/or unable in their isolation within the system to challenge these sufficiently in order to combat the systemic process of marginalisation that students can experience at all levels of the education system. The discussion of practices and barriers within education also included considerable debate in relation to the selection, education and assessment of primary school teachers.

**Barriers to Equality in Education for students from Disadvantaged Socio-economic Backgrounds**

This first part of the discussion focused on both the visible formal barriers experienced by socio-economically disadvantaged students but also on the invisible and taken for granted values and assumptions that create educational inequalities for individuals and groups:

- Poverty was acknowledged as a significant barrier that prevented students from participating in education. The problematic nature of defining poverty only as a function of class position was noted and reference was made to changing class
structures and particularly in countries that have undergone significant political and social changes in recent years. The example of Estonia was given where the middle-classes are now economically worse off than during communism but still have high hopes for and place great significance on the value of education and see this as key to their survival. In Ireland, it was also noted that we need to question how class identities have also changed alongside the rapid changes in economic and social circumstances and to consider this when discussing ‘class’ and educational disadvantage.

- There was some debate as to how we can still use categories of class in relation to social groups and what these categories now mean. Distinctions were made between being economically and culturally working-class. A number of people reflecting on their own lives believed that although economically they came from working-class families that there had been great value placed on formal education and that they or family members had been steered away from manual work to the world of teaching. There appeared to be a suggestion that, at least in the past, that one could overcome the economic barriers that existed in relation to participation in education. However, to be culturally working-class meant it was more difficult to access education, in particular third-level education and to succeed there. This point was taken up in a significant way in relation to education practices and the dominant middle-class cultural norms that prevail within formal education.

- An area that was seen as problematic and a significant barrier was the dominant style of language employed within the school system, its formality, vocabulary and systems of thought and being, which is seen to be a million miles from the reality of the lives of students who live in economically disadvantaged circumstances. It was suggested that barriers go even beyond language to modes of self-presentation and embodiment that differ significantly with life-style. There is nothing wrong with diversity, but the problem lies in the fact that the normal codes of the school reflect the codes of dominant socio-economic groups in our society. It was also suggested that cultural practices act as barriers to exclude those who do not adhere to dominant norms but that this process is subtle and taken for granted. The hegemony of particular forms of practice make it difficult to explicate these practices and to make them visible and transparent to each other. It was suggested that awareness and dialogue need to happen between teachers and educators around cultural practices. The hegemonic statuses of some practices over others and the consequences of this hegemony needs debate. In particular the expectations that teachers have were mentioned. It was argued that teachers need to question the assumptions and expectations they impose on students and indeed their awareness of the social and economic realities that students had to cope with day to day.

- A formal and visible barrier to the inclusion of students at third-level that has implications for how children are educated, is the lack of a specific access programme for students from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds into the teacher education colleges. Despite evidence from recent research that students from the lower social class groupings are excluded disproportionately at third-level (Clancy and Wall 2000) and that access programmes have a significant value in supporting students from such backgrounds to firstly enter into third-level education and to subsequently succeed in their chosen courses (O’Brien 2003 b), little has been done with respect to teacher education. The example of one of the teacher education colleges was cited. The college had secured a substantial economic grant for the setting up of a pilot access programme and after intense attempts to meet with the Department of Education and Science over almost two years, no meeting has been held. The will of the DES to address this equality issue was questioned. There is a serious issue as to who will lead in these areas
when we know what needs to be done and that it is now time for action by those in positions of authority.

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A further barrier that was named was a lack of critical evaluation across the educational system and:

“we use the expression ‘our educational system is really good’, but without uncovering what we really mean by that. If we look at what the good really means, it’s around the academic, we have a good method for transporting people through the system and we forget that twenty percent of them don’t get there. We’re quite happy with that evaluation and one of the structural barriers is that lack of critical evaluation of that term good. That brings us to values and practices and we haven’t put resources in to really understanding the complexity of classroom lives, how teachers make sense of diversity so I think it’s virtually unknown in Ireland”.

In relation to organisational practices, the issue of grouping students according to their perceived abilities in second-level education was highlighted. The question as to why we only value particular forms of knowledge and intelligence and talent within education was also posed. It was suggested that in Ireland we had missed out on significant debates in relation to this and are stuck in old models. This was seen to be exacerbated by a traditional and inflexible system of assessment at the completion of second-level schooling and within the third-level system. Experiential knowledge tends not to be valued and this is particularly exclusionary for mature students.

The lack of flexibility and the persistence of traditional formal assessment were seen to be particularly problematic in relation to the assessment of teaching practice in initial teacher education. Students expressed feelings of disappointment that they felt obliged to do practice in schools where they might not be so challenged while being assessed. There were pilot programmes in place in individual colleges where students participated in teaching practice modules which were free from the traditional types of assessment. Students reported they felt freer and more able to experiment in their practice. Students believed that this freedom was necessary in order to choose to do practice in the more challenging disadvantaged schools.

There was a tension early in the discussion around practice for some of the participants. It was stated that looking only at our own practices and being reflexive could be construed as navel gazing. It ran the risk of forgetting those larger political questions around socio-economic inequalities and the need to create changes in the socio-economic domain itself. While it was acknowledged that this was a valid and important point, it was also felt that we have a responsibility to be reflexive and reflective in terms of our practice as this is a domain over which we can exercise some control and of which we have specific knowledge.
was also stressed that it is important to limit our action to areas that we can transform; otherwise we may end up doing nothing.

- The issue of the isolation of teachers and the individualistic approach to teaching merited discussion. It was suggested that teaching is a messy and problematic activity and so teachers need to have a safe yet challenging place to bring the "messiness of their thinking"; otherwise the practices will be repeated and remain unchallenged. Dominant practices will otherwise remain unquestioned and continue to contribute to educational marginalisation of students from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds. It was also suggested that individual acts of resistance are difficult and not perhaps effective in trying to instigate change and that leadership and teamwork within schools and third-level institutions is fundamental.

- A final point that certainly brought a worrying and international perspective to the discussion came from the keynote speaker Professor Philip Garner. He advised that we take cognisance of how teacher education has recently evolved in Britain with a growing divide between the colleges and universities that are academically and research driven and institutions that valued 'hands on', experiential knowledge and practice. The former is seen to be high status and the latter devalued. It was suggested by Professor Garner that to be truly concerned about practice and equality in education, we must ensure a ‘hands on’ approach to teacher education. We need to have teachers with experience involved in doing things with students, experimenting, drawing upon their own knowledge rather than being totally dependent on what remote and esoteric research tells us about practice and teacher education.

Conclusion

This section of the seminar focused on trying to understand the relationship between socio-economic inequality and educational disadvantage. Clearly, there is a need for changes within the economic domain itself and for the more equitable redistribution of wealth within our society to combat poverty and social exclusion. However, there are also fundamental ways in which the educational system itself replicates the production of economic and social inequalities. As indicated in the discussion, it does this through both the persistence of formal and institutional barriers and through cultural practices. The main themes that arose in the discussion suggest that teachers are central to inclusionary and exclusionary processes. However, the teacher education colleges tend only draw students from particular class groupings. It has been strongly argued here that access to teacher education is urgently required for students from disadvantaged communities and that political will appears
to be absent with respect to this issue. However, formal access routes are only part of the problem as the ways in which teachers are selected, educated and assessed still reflect traditional hegemonies. It is strongly suggested that teachers learn to challenge hegemonic practices at the level of the school and the classroom but that this should be mirrored also within the colleges and the universities.

As educators acting to combat educational inequalities, we require a forum and places to ask critical questions in order to understand our thinking around the types of knowledge we value and the modes of transmission we adopt. It is up to us to explicate and transform practices so that the children and young people in our classrooms can find meaning in what we do. We will only achieve a breakthrough if we cease to act in isolation and can harness the leadership in our institutions in this direction. It was felt today that we have in fact a moral obligation to engage with the reality of social inequality since it is perpetuated by the complacency of the educational system.

I hadn’t even thought about college until I heard about the access programme, I knew I wouldn’t get the points, wouldn’t be able to afford it, and would just end up working in a pub or in a factory. Mostly in my school they prepare them for interviews for the factories rather than for the college courses and that’s just because that’s the reality (North Dublin Access Programme 2003).

Education can make a very real difference to our lives, but the nature of the intervention must be relevant to individuals and excluded groups in order to see the reality and the possibility.

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ON BEING AN INCLUSIVE TEACHER: RE-SHAPING TEACHER EDUCATION TO MEET THE CHALLENGE OF DISADVANTAGE

Philip Garner

I recall, on a previous visit to Ireland, talking with a small group of teachers about ways in which some teachers tend to become ‘risk provocative’ rather than ‘risk insulative’. This theory, which has been shamefacedly recycled from elsewhere within the study of education, implies that amongst any group of teachers will be those who are more receptive to engagement with the positive outcomes of educational inclusion (‘risk insulative’ teachers). Others will be less inclined to support – or even be overtly resistant to – any suggestion that they ought to explore new ways of reaching and teaching a wider range of children (‘risk provocative’ teachers). In summarising this position, Michael Shevlin and his colleagues note that ‘Teachers, in their classroom interactions with students with disabilities, could empower, comfort or defeat those students’ (Kenny, McNeela, Shevlin & Daly, 2000 p. 22). In so doing they point to the importance of teacher education.

It is not the … curriculum content, pedagogy, assessment arrangements and so on which ought to be placed most firmly at the heart of defining what constitutes an ‘inclusive’ teacher. Rather, the term is best delineated by the personal qualities and attitudes that the teacher herself brings to the classroom encounter. In other words, teaching children with learning difficulties or those who are otherwise disadvantaged is more about soul than about mind.

This conversation led me to begin a process of thinking about what it is to be a teacher whose main responsibility is directed towards working with children and young people with special educational needs (SEN) – what I refer to as ‘inclusive teachers’. My own area of professional experience has been mainly with children who underachieve in school on account of their so-called ‘emotional and behavioural difficulties’ (EBD). What is apparent to me, however, is that many of the issues raised by this group of youngsters for teachers appear to correspond with those for disadvantaged school populations generally. Indeed, the terms used in conjunction with this pupil-group – alienated, disaffected, challenging, learning disabled and so forth – are often interchangeable.

The argument I wish to follow in this paper is that it is not the technical equipment (the curriculum content, pedagogy, assessment arrangements and so on) which ought to be placed most firmly at the heart of defining what constitutes an ‘inclusive’ teacher. Rather, the term is best delineated by the personal qualities and attitudes that the teacher herself brings to the classroom encounter. In other words, teaching children with learning difficulties or those who are otherwise disadvantaged is more about soul than about mind.

This is very dangerous territory to be treading at a time when accountability, payment by results, and role-clarification seem to be at the very heart of what central governments throughout the European Union appear to be moving inexorably towards. And to pursue, and ultimately validate my position, I will attempt to map the following territory. First, I will say something about the fragmentation of society as a whole, leading towards a brutal landscape in which the weakest and most unsustainable will suffer most. These will be the children and young people who will be disadvantaged most within the very education system which is (supposedly) designed to support them. Next I will briefly survey one government’s preoccupation with technique rather than soul in teacher education – leading to a threat of a teaching profession which is informed solely by official protocol, self-interest and reward. Then I will argue that being an ‘inclusive’ teacher has always meant, still means, and will continue to
mean, something much more than this bankrupt scenario — leading to a suggestion that, however colourful it might sound, we must move from functionalism to sainthood in doing our job in disadvantaged settings.

Living on the margins, teaching on the margins

The rhetorical malarkey of fresh starts, new deals, social inclusion and so forth simply has, I believe, acted as banal elastoplast on gaping wounds in a society in which the discrepancy between rich and poor, favoured and non-favoured has become more pronounced as time has gone by.

Special educational needs has always been more sensitive to, and impacted by, economic, social and cultural factors — more so than most other aspects of education (Tomlinson & Barton. 1983). Social class continues to delineate much of ‘who gets what’ from education and the other human services, and yet it is an unfashionable lynchpin for policy-makers. As one commentator has recently observed, ‘…class is now hardly a respectable concept anywhere within political discourse. Yet the relationship has never been challenged, much less disproved; it has been simply forgotten’ (Johnson, 1999 p. 3)

But the rhetorical malarkey of fresh starts, new deals, social inclusion and so forth simply has, I believe, acted as banal elastoplast on gaping wounds in a society in which the discrepancy between rich and poor, favoured and non-favoured has become more pronounced as time has gone by. Highlighting this trend, Dennehy et al. (1997 p. 45) point out that ‘Britain stands out internationally in having experienced the largest percentage increase in income inequality between 1967 and 1992’. Statistics widely available from the European Community note that the proportion of children living below the poverty line in the UK was 32%, compared with a Community average of under 20% - I can only surmise that a similar precarious position exists in Ireland. There is a depressing cycle of disadvantage, in which those who experience learning difficulty in school will be over-represented in prisons, secure units for young offenders, and so forth. Reporting on this situation, as it obtains at the present time in Mountjoy Prison in Dublin, O’Mahony (1997) observed the ‘very low level of educational attainment (which) demonstrates a clear tendency for the prison population to have failed educationally’. This is, of course, something which is as old as society itself, and a fact confirmed by Devlin (1997).

Given that there has always been a significant correlation between deprivation and educational performance (notably SEN) it becomes vital that we attempt to identify those qualities which are most likely going to allow us to ‘make a difference’ in the educational and social lives of ‘the hard cases’ — those who have become disengaged from the process of formal, compulsory education. By doing this we might stand some chance of breaking what has become an endemic cycle of disadvantage for some children and young people. Moreover, this will be of gathering importance as we move towards a more sophisticated and widespread version of educational inclusion. I will argue, as the core theme of this paper, that we need to be thinking along lines which help create and sustain a very ‘special’ work-force to enable such an inclusive vision to materialise.

‘You don’t want to do that’. Where not to look for a model of teacher education

The Warnock Report (1978) marked the beginning of the ‘modern’ era of provision for children with learning difficulties in England. Amongst its enlightened content was a set of recommendations relating to teacher education and training. Warnock stated that:

‘Our broader concept of special education …will make extensive demands on teachers and our proposals in this chapter for increasing their knowledge of special educational needs are therefore of the utmost importance. (1978 p. 226)
Such words are a reiteration of one of the core themes of the Newsom Report, over fifteen years previously (DES, 1963 p. 98), which stated unequivocally that ‘Whatever happens in schools depends on the men and women who staff them’. In keeping with the pre-eminence given to human resources, the language of the Warnock Report is tellingly forthright. It is ‘vital’ and ‘imperative’ that ‘all teachers’ ‘must have’ the insight, positive attitudes and capacity to identify, and then help meet, the learning needs of those with SEN.

Four of its recommendations stand out:

- a special education element should be included in all courses of initial teacher training
- those responsible for validating teacher training courses should make the inclusion of a special education element a condition of their approval of all initial teacher training courses
- the training provided through existing initial teacher training courses directed to work with children currently described as severely educationally sub-normal should be closely monitored
- the deployment of college staff with training and experience in particular fields of special education should be considered on a regional basis

But the promise of post-Warnock re-orientations in thinking regarding teacher education and the deliverance of its practices were dramatically prejudiced by the 1988 Education Act, somewhat perversely termed the Education Reform Act. A procedural, inflexible and heavily policed National Curriculum (NC) was introduced, which though suggesting putative equality for all children in reality meant a reinforcement of old-fashioned educational hierarchies based on selection and privilege. Open enrolment, together with the public scrutiny of the performance levels of schools, ultimately in league tables, ensured the onset of the market place within education. In such a context, the damaged goods of SEN were soon to be viewed as commodities unlikely to represent good business for a school, nor hold a high residual value for future bargaining.

The effect of these changes on the position of SEN in teacher education was profound and lasting. The focus was placed ever more firmly on the value of subject knowledge within an ambit of technical rationalism geared to measurable outputs, and its status was confirmed by the Department for Education (DfE), which indicated that: ...the focus of ITT should be on the subject knowledge and the practical skills required by newly qualified teachers, which equip them to teach effectively and (which) are the foundation for further professional development. (DfE, 1993, p. 5).

The child — still less the disadvantaged child with learning difficulties — became an irrelevance. Optional areas of study on teacher preparation courses, like multiculturalism, pastoral care and special educational needs were sacrificed on the altar of subject-knowledge, standards, effectiveness and ‘quality’.

Elsewhere (Garner, 2001) I have described some aspects of the witheringly negative impact of the 1988 Act on SEN inputs in teacher training in England. The case of ‘educational studies’ programmes within teacher education courses is illustrative. As a result of the preoccupation with subject-knowledge, there began a diminution of the amount of time available for reflection, based upon a critical and humanistic tradition. Such courses would cover elements of the ‘hidden’ curriculum of schooling: equality, learning differences, pastoral care, social skills, values, citizenship, gender, race, class and culture amongst them. Though by no means perfect, these courses provided the arena in which personal reflection held sway, enabling new teachers to forge a vision for a life’s work in education. Such a level of self-examination, I am arguing, is particularly essential to sustain a commitment to teaching those children who are variously disadvantaged by social, economic or intellectual factors.

One illustration of the impact of the NC in teacher education can be seen in the failure of providers to cater for the training needs of teachers in relation to EBD pupils. Cooper, Smith & Upton (1994), in
summarising the post-Elton position concerning ITT and pupils whose behaviour caused concern, stated that teachers in general are unprepared by their initial training, and by in-service training arrangements for dealing with emotional and behavioural difficulties... and specialist teachers in the field have been shown to place their requirement for further training in the area high on their list of priorities. (1994 p. 3)

The consistent failure of ITT courses to provide much in the way of input regarding the 'social skills curriculum' has subsequently had serious implications for the inclusion agenda. EBD pupils are a major focus of controversy in the inclusion debate. In some of my recent work, for instance, (Garner, 1998a; 1998b) I suggest that mainstream teachers regard this pupil grouping as the least likely to be considered for inclusion. And they continue to form the raw material for the production of Mountjoy, Albany or Strangeways prisoners.

The Code of Practice on the Identification and Assessment of Special Educational Needs (1994) in England contained only one substantive reference to teacher training. Given that the Code highlighted the critical role of the classroom teacher in both identification and provision, this omission takes on the hallmark of wanton neglect. And even a casual examination of the Code will show no mention of induction, or the role of university departments as partners in teacher training.

Subsequent to the Code, the pivot of the most recent developments in England was to be the adventurously titled Programme of Action, announced by the DfEE in 1998 and directed towards 'meeting special educational needs' (DfEE, 1998). In Section Four, the Programme blandly asserted, under a key aim of 'giving greater emphasis to SEN within teacher training' that New requirements for initial teacher training...will ensure that all newly qualified teachers understand their responsibilities under the SEN Code of Practice, are capable of identifying children with SEN, and when appropriately supported are able to differentiate teaching practice’ (p. 29)

However, these much-heralded regulations contain only peripheral mention of SEN – and nothing at all explicit about inclusion – amidst 851 specific criteria for the award of qualified teacher status. Thus, amidst this copious documentation of subject-knowledge no meaningful emphasis is placed on the development of the skills and aptitudes necessary to reach the ‘hard to teach’. The Programme quickly assumes the status of a rhetorical document in this respect.

It is at this point that re-consideration of Warnock's four main recommendations for teacher training ought to result in embarrassment for those involved in policy development in teacher training in England. We have seen a gradual but serious erosion in the time made available for SEN inputs, as well as its resourcing. My colleague John Dwyfor Davies and I have sought, over the last four years, to highlight this truly regrettable disregard. In 1997, for instance, we pointed out that more than 85% of newly qualified teachers surveyed received 6 or more sessions of direct SEN inputs, whilst a similar percentage indicated that they felt unprepared for the challenges facing them in schools (Davies & Garner, 1997).

In 2000, we identified a continuing, pervasive problem, at a time when increasing responsibility was being placed on the new teacher to intervene in SEN (Garner & Davies, 2000). Meanwhile, the National Advisory Group for Special

Children whose behaviour was 'challenging' or otherwise seen as 'problematic' were viewed as a threat, a group who brought only negative experiences to the classroom. When discussion turns to 'educational inclusion', amongst such teachers, it is never long before EBD children, and others similarly disadvantaged, are highlighted as suitable cases for exclusion.
Educational Needs (NAGSEN), constituted in 1998 by the new Labour administration to help define educational policy, has signally failed to include the views of committed and genuine practitioners in teacher training.

More recently, in a survey of mainstream secondary school teachers I was able to identify an almost callous militancy on the part of some teachers towards children whose behaviour was cause for concern (Garner, 2000b). Children whose behaviour was ‘challenging’ or otherwise seen as ‘problematic’ were viewed as a threat, a group who brought only negative experiences to the classroom. When discussion turns to ‘educational inclusion’, amongst such teachers, it is never long before EBD children, and others similarly disadvantaged, are highlighted as suitable cases for exclusion. One wonders what recognition has there been of the cycles of disadvantage experienced by these children. One also is left wondering about the roots of such a deficit-laden and bankrupt intervention…does teacher training have a case to answer?

Without a concerted attack on these kinds of attitudes it seems that ideology has become the altar on which the lives of many children with learning difficulties are being routinely sacrificed. As the North American writer Sowell states, policy now seems to rest on the …perceptions, beliefs, assumptions of an elite intelligentsia, whose revelations prevail over others in determining policy’ and create a situation in which ‘…empirical evidence is neither sought beforehand or consulted after the policy has been instituted. (Sowell, 1995 p. 3)

These policy-makers have failed to seriously consider teacher education, SEN and disadvantage in almost every critical decision they have made in the last 25 years. Now, with a dramatic focus being placed on inclusion in the widest sense, it seems that the time is opportune to commit to a vociferous campaign to secure a more equitable portion of time and resource for discrete SEN-inclusion provision in ITT courses. By doing this we can create the time necessary for student-teachers to consider what it is to be ‘inclusive’.

Making special teachers: notes for career politicians, administrators and the Tiger

In commenting about the North American educational dream, Silberman (1973) stated that innovation and change grinds to a halt when we fail to study history, when we fail to involve ordinary practitioners, and when we fail to ask questions. My own agenda for change would largely be predicated by these core principles – certainly, we do need to return to Warnock for some substantive guidance in respect of teacher education. In particular we need to examine what we believe in, and how these beliefs are translated into actions. We must, in other words, move from technical functionalism to reflection and celebration.

…all of which seem to return to a core premise: the capacity to connect with children by knowing one’s self

Lawton & Chitty (1988) have referred to this as the bureaucratic versus the professional approach to curriculum building, suggesting that Whereas the professional approach focuses on the quality of the input and the skills, knowledge and awareness of the teacher, the bureaucratic approach concentrates on output and testing. Whereas the professional approach is based on individual differences and the learning process, the bureaucratic approach is associated with norms or bench-marks, norm-related criteria and judgements based on the expectations of how a statistically normal child should perform. Whereas the professional curriculum is concerned with areas of learning and experience, the bureaucratic curriculum is preoccupied with traditional subject boundaries. (1988 p. 202)

So, in other words, we need to recover what it is to be ‘special’ in this work that
we do. I would suggest that it is only by developing and then retaining a sense of ‘soul’ in doing this work that we can establish the conditions necessary for other aspects of learning to materialise for children experiencing disadvantage. In mapping out some thoughts about this I draw on illustrations from a wide range of sources, all of which seem to return to a core premise: the capacity to connect with children by knowing one’s self.

Firstly, however, I want to present some evidence to you. I draw from two sets of data, which provide insights into (a) what teachers themselves regard as essential qualities for work with EBD children (b) what the pupils themselves have to say about their teachers and (c) the ‘official’ version as defined by government.

Figure 1 is based upon the views of teachers from 283 schools for children with EBD, gathered during a Department for Education and Employment (DfEE) study between 1996-1997 (Cole, Visser & Upton, 1998). It is worth noting that ‘good subject knowledge’ is only rated the 11th most important characteristic, whilst ‘skilled behaviour management’ is ranked 20th. Of the characteristics identified in the ‘top ten’, only ‘good planning’ and ‘understanding individual needs’ are associated with the ‘technical’ function of teaching. A similar set of characteristics permeated data which I presented at last year’s IATSE Conference in Dublin (Garner, 2000).

In constructing a personalised vision I’m conscious that special educational needs and the wider issue of inclusion needs to be framed against a set of further developments. As far as the promotion of ‘inclusive teaching’ is concerned, it is clear that certain conditions need to prevail in order to insulate disadvantaged children from further marginalisation. Certain teacher competencies will be needed in order to secure this, with the practitioner developing the

- capability to problem solve, to be able to informally assess the skills a student needs (rather than relying solely on standardised curriculum)
- capability to take advantage of children’s individual interests and use their internal motivation for developing needed skills
- capability to set high but alternative expectations that are suitable for the students; this means developing alternative forms of assessment
- capability to make appropriate expectations for each student, regardless of her capabilities. If teachers can do this, it allows all students to be included in a class and school
- capability to modify work for students by differentiating classroom activities
- capability to learn how to value all kinds of skills that students bring to a

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**Figure 2: Special Teachers: teachers’ views regarding teaching ‘style’**

1. Good planning (87 nominations)
2. Consistency (60)
3. Good sense of humour (56)
4. Enthusiasm (45)
5. Understanding individual needs (42)
6. Adaptability (37)
7. Empathy (29)
8. Patience (28)
9. Ability to form positive relationships (27)
10. Gives positive reinforcement (26)

**Figure 2: Pupils’ views regarding teachers’ characteristics**

1. Fairness
2. Organised
3. Sense of humour
4. Consistent
5. Friendly
6. Ability to listen
7. Manages own discipline
8. Respectful
9. Hardworking
10. Calm

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10. Calm
class, not just the academic skills and to make it explicit that all skills are valued

• capability to provide daily success by achievable targets for all students. Teachers have to work to counteract the message all students get when certain students are continually taken out of class for special work

• capability to recognise that every child in the class is their responsibility and viewing each child in the class as an opportunity to become a better teacher rather than a problem to be coped with

• capability to move away from the assumption that someone else will teach ‘problematic’ children

• capability in developing skills in working as a team with parents and others in the community

And although I do not have space to discuss these, I finally outline ten further – more general - actions which could further ensure the illumination of an ‘inclusive’ landscape, based on the sad lessons learnt from my own country. In Ireland it will be incumbent on those with iron in the soul to defend and extend inclusive teaching from those excesses which are a direct result of the bleak, materialistic power-based ideologies of increasingly globalised responses in education.

• incinerate school league tables based on SATS (*they are an affront to the dignity of the learner*)

• replace OfSTED by peer-evaluation, utilising mandatory SEN indicators (*competitive schools seriously damage children with SENs*)

• replace all educational quangos with locally/regionally elected groups (*5000 quangos represents a deflection of resources from the real business of education*)

• require professional development in inclusion/SEN for all (*‘hard-case’ teachers are the single biggest threat to educational inclusion*)

• end the selective system in education (*inclusion cannot co-exist with selection*)

• open a more honest debate regarding inclusion (*large-scale, longitudinal studies will empower rather than threaten inclusionists*)

• professionalise LSAs and youth workers (*let us celebrate and reward these unsung foot soldiers*)

• training salaries only if a substantive SEN component is followed (*take affirmative action…dangle a carrot if need be!*)

• terminate the romance with ‘education management’…(*references to inclusion can be counted on one hand*)

• re-introduce the study of history, philosophy, sociology and psychology in ITE (*in the interests of an education for the teacher’s soul*)

Conclusion

I would prefer to see all of these measures, however fanciful they may appear, as pro- rather than re-active, as positive measures which might help us construct something of a new beginning in supporting children who experience disadvantage.

In keeping with such an outlook, it seems appropriate to me that, at a time of formidable challenge in the field of special educational needs and teacher training, a suitable metaphor might be drawn from adventure sport. Allinson (1975 p. 91), in speaking of the ‘what for?’ in rock climbing, suggested that he took risks in order to

... escape the potted, computerised, cellophane existence which is ours in the twenty-first century; to play at life’s brinkmanship, find freedom and the right to accept a challenge, test emotion and exhilaration, brain, heart, eyes, strength and balance united in a single purpose – to live like a searchlight of survival searing through the total darkness of failure; to taste the
stinging wine of danger, but to sweeten it with the total joy of existence. That’s what life’s all about, that’s what dreams are made of.

It is mind-and-emotion in action, rather than a sorry mantra of official protocol, directive or interrogation, that will mostly sustains us as inclusive teachers. It takes us closer to the heart and soul of those children who experience disadvantage, and best describes our emotions when a small victory is won in the classroom – against all odds.

What my analysis is telling me is that, at various points over the last 25 years, opportunities have presented themselves to us, as an educational and educated community, to make a major contribution to the well-being of children and young people who experience learning difficulties. These constitute a shaft of light, however dimmed this might at times appear in the face of draconian approaches by governments. The integrity and resolve, which is so apparent amongst those committed to the field, has to be gathered in this new century. A new, radical version of teacher education in SEN, action-based and operating at local level, for and by the people, is, I believe, the only way in which we can restore the work we do to combat disadvantage to a position of integrity.

References


A commitment to social justice issues has long been part of the mission and work of Mary Immaculate College and staff members have, over a period of decades, been involved with local communities in developing responses to the problems of economic and educational disadvantage (e.g., Mission Statement, MIC, 2003; CDU, n.d.). In 1999 this commitment led to the appointment of a lecturer with specific responsibility for the area of educational disadvantage and the development of the Centre for Educational Disadvantage Research (CEDR). In 2003 research was conducted to explore the views of former graduates in relation to the extent to which this commitment and expertise in the college was impacting on their teacher education experience. The research sought to identify which issues of educational disadvantage they felt were being dealt with effectively in the Bachelor of Education (B.Ed.) degree course in Mary Immaculate College and also to explore issues which they felt could be dealt with more effectively.

The two target groups selected to participate were the 1999 and 2001 graduates of the B.Ed. degree course in Mary Immaculate College. By surveying groups who had experience of the degree course at two different stages in the recent past, changes and improvements to the course in line with ongoing developments in education could be considered when analysing the findings. In particular, it enabled us to explore the experiences both before and after the appointment of the lecturer in educational disadvantage and the foundation of CEDR.

The research found that students generally leave with a strong sense of their own capacity as teachers. A large majority felt that they were equipped to carry out a number of what they identified as important teaching tasks. There were also a number of areas in which many felt less than satisfactorily prepared. These included their understanding of educational disadvantage, their ability to work with what they see as problematic behaviour and their ability to work with parents and community members. Although the situation can be seen to have improved between 1999 and 2001, the data from the 2001 cohort suggests that there is room for improvement in these areas.

Background and methodology

The data presented here is based on the returns from a survey which was sent in April 2003 to all B.Ed. graduates from Mary Immaculate College of the classes of 1999 and 2001. The purpose of the research was to explore the views of former graduates in relation to the extent to which the College’s commitment and expertise in the area of educational disadvantage was impacting on their teacher education experience. The data presented here is based on an analysis of the quantitative elements of the survey. A further qualitative analysis of their textual comments is ongoing.

The questions in the survey were developed following a literature review and based on qualitative data from two focus groups of recent graduates (currently teaching in designated disadvantaged and non-designated disadvantaged schools respectively). The involvement of focus groups in the pre-design stage enabled us to offer back to our graduates phrases and forms of words which had arisen in the focus group, and as such, to test the extent to which the views of the focus groups were widespread. Where such views seemed to draw inordinately on a particular perspective of disadvantage (often the deficit, ‘ghetto model’ discussed in Tormey’s introduction above), balancing questions were also added.

Part A consisted of questions requesting information about the respondents and the respondents’ schools. Part B dealt with the skills, knowledge and attitudes considered important for teachers to have in both
designated and non-designated disadvantaged settings. The teaching experience of the participants’ since graduating was sought, in addition to a review of their experiences of the B.Ed. degree. Items included both structured response items as well as open-ended items and the questionnaire was piloted with a group of recent graduates. Three main scales were used throughout the survey: i) a 5-point scale with a ‘neutral/no opinion’ option; ii) a 4-point scale with no ‘neutral option’; iii) a 3-point scale that asked respondents to rate whether there was “too much,” “just the right amount,” or “not enough” coverage of various issues within the B.Ed. course.

The survey was sent to a total of 438 graduates. The overall response rate was 41% (n=180). The gender breakdown for this was 93% female (n=168) and 7% male (n=12) such that male graduates (on average approximately 10% of all graduates) are slightly under-represented in this sample. Thirty seven percent (n=65) of graduates from 1999 responded and a slightly greater proportion (44%; n=115) of those from 2001 completed the survey. This may have been partly as a result of difficulties in obtaining recent addresses for these graduates. 31% of respondents (n=56) were teaching in a designated disadvantaged school. Respondents were given a definition of designated disadvantaged schools as “schools identified as such under the Department of Education scheme for designation of schools in areas of disadvantage” while non-designated disadvantaged schools were defined as “those schools that were not officially designated under this scheme.”

Limitations of this study

In reviewing the data presented here the reader should bear in mind a number of qualifications:

- The data are primarily the perceptions and opinions of the respondents. Given that respondents had graduated either two or four years prior to the study, their responses are based on their recollections of issues described. Such recollections may not always be accurate.
- Not all student teachers “master” the particular subject matter as presented to them (as evident in the spread of scores on examinations). In this respect, students may not be in a position to accurately reflect all of what was taught to them in the course of their studies.

- Initial teacher education forms only part of the continuum of professional development. There is a limit to what can be expected of student teachers at the pre-service formation stage and there is a need for ongoing induction and in-career development of teachers to develop and build on the development that has begun in pre-service teacher education.

- This study focused on their experiences in relation to designated disadvantaged schools and non-designated schools. As such, it has little to say about their experiences in relation to rural disadvantage.

- A student’s view of their experience of dealing with educational disadvantage in their degree programme will be filtered through their own perceptions of what educational disadvantage is and how it is to be most effectively challenged. As such, it would be a mistake to simply take at face value their perceptions without seeking to make sense of them in light of their underlying conception of disadvantage. When asked to note three key words that they associate with “disadvantaged pupils,” the vast majority (78%) of the descriptions or terms referred to were entrenched firmly within the deficit and ‘ghetto model’ perspective. Reference was made to deficiencies in pupils’ home backgrounds in terms of income, social and educational background, and parental support for education. Pupils themselves were also characterised as being deficient in language, social skills, motivation and self-esteem and there were even some references to learning difficulties and special needs. Only about a fifth (22%) of the responses could be categorised as positive and terms such as “energetic,” “bright,” “happy,” “expressive,” “lively,” “enthusiastic,” were used. The term “appreciative” was the most frequently occurring of all. We will return to this issue below. Let it suffice to say at this stage that the apparent widespread focus on a ghetto conception of educational disadvantage may hide a great deal of
diversity and ambiguity among our respondents.

Presentation of Findings

Confidence in teaching: The vast majority of respondents (83%) identified that they were either confident or very confident about teaching in a non-designated disadvantaged school upon completion of the B.Ed. degree. A considerably smaller proportion (43%) expressed high levels of confidence about teaching in a designated disadvantaged school on completion of the B.Ed. degree. Over three quarters (77%) of respondents had completed at least one Teaching Practice (TP) in a designated disadvantaged school during their B.Ed. programme. There were no differences in the levels of confidence between respondents who had completed TP in a designated school and those who had not done so.

A similar pattern emerges in regard to graduates’ impressions of teaching in a particular type of school on completion of the B.Ed. Once again, a vast majority (76%) of graduates were either very positive or positive about teaching in a non-designated school. Less graduates were positive about teaching in a designated disadvantaged school, however, with just over half (52%) of respondents being either positive or very positive. Of note is the finding that respondents who had completed TP in a disadvantaged school held more positive impressions of teaching in such a school than those who had never completed TP in a disadvantaged school.

Respondents were asked about specific aspects of their preparation for teaching following completion of the B.Ed. degree. Graduates were extremely positive about the degree to which, on completion of the B.Ed., they had felt prepared to relate to their pupils and to develop aspects of the pupils’ own capacity (see Table 1).

A large majority (80%) felt prepared as a teacher to build relationships with pupils to a great or moderate extent. Similarly, over two thirds (77%) of respondents felt prepared to a great or moderate extent to develop pupils’ social skills, and four fifths felt prepared to a great or moderate extent to develop pupils’ self esteem. An even greater proportion (87%) of respondents felt prepared to motivate pupils to either a great or moderate extent. Over three quarters (76%) of graduates also perceived that they had felt well prepared to be a good listener to pupils to a great or moderate extent. Similarly, over two thirds (70%) felt prepared to be sensitive to pupils’ problems to a great or moderate extent. There was a slight difference, however, in the extent to which graduates felt prepared to cater for pupils’ problems, with 43% reporting having felt prepared to a great or moderate extent, while more than half (57%) reported that they had felt prepared to a slight extent or not at all.

| Table 1
| The extent to which you felt prepared as a teacher having completed the B.Ed. (in percentages) |
|---------------------------------|---------------------------------|---------------------------------|---------------------------------|
|                                 | Great extent | Moderate extent | Slight extent | Not at all |
| Build relationships with pupils  | 35            | 45              | 15             | 5           |
| Develop pupils’ social skills   | 23            | 54              | 17             | 6           |
| Develop pupils’ self esteem     | 37            | 43              | 17             | 3           |
| Motivate pupils                 | 35            | 52              | 13             | 0           |
| Be a good listener to pupils    | 34            | 42              | 17             | 7           |
| Be sensitive to pupils’ problems| 20            | 50              | 23             | 7           |
| Cater for pupils’ problems      | 5             | 38              | 39             | 18          |

Respondents were asked to rate their perceptions of various aspects of the B.Ed. degree in terms of whether they felt there had been too much, just the right amount or not enough emphasis and/or time devoted to that throughout the 3-year course.

A majority (59%) agreed that there had been just the right amount of teaching experience with a third (35%) feeling that
there had not been enough of this. Similarly, over half felt that there had been just the right amount of teaching experience in schools catering for pupils of varying socio-economic backgrounds while just under half (48%) felt that there had not been enough of this.

About half of all respondents felt that there had been just the right amount of ‘reflection on teaching experience.’ However, a comparison by year of graduation indicated that the group graduating in 2001 were more likely to rate that there had been ‘just the right amount’ (54%) or ‘too much’ (25%) reflection on teaching experience. This is consistent with an increased emphasis on reflective practice within the B.Ed. programme over the course of the intervening years.

**Educational Disadvantage:** Overall ratings on all four items relating to educational disadvantage reflected graduates’ view that there was not enough focus on this in their B.Ed. Specifically, about two thirds of graduates felt this was the case in relation to the following items: ‘discussion and debate surrounding problems of disadvantage’ (63%); ‘description of the range of educational disadvantage initiatives available’ (58%); ‘questioning of your own assumptions and expectations regarding disadvantage’ (69%); and ‘assignments focussed on educational disadvantage’ (67%). (It may be that this final item does not reflect a view that there should be more assignments, but instead reflects a view that more areas within the course should include a focus on disadvantage in their assessment).

A comparison by year of graduation revealed a difference between the 1999 and 2001 graduates on three items, with a slight overall shift in the ratings from ‘not enough’ to ‘just the right amount’ (see Table 2). This reflects an increase in addressing issues of educational disadvantage in various components of the B.Ed. in the intervening years.

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<tr>
<th>Item</th>
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<th>1999</th>
<th>2001</th>
<th>1999</th>
<th>2001</th>
</tr>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Too much</td>
<td>Right amount</td>
<td>Not enough</td>
<td>Too much</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discussion and debate surrounding problems of disadvantage</td>
<td></td>
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<td>31</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>8</td>
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<td>Description of the range of educational disadvantage initiatives available</td>
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<tr>
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<td>77</td>
<td>4</td>
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**Behaviour Management:** Perceptions about having felt prepared to deal with pupil behaviour were mixed. While almost two-thirds felt well prepared to deal with inattentive pupils to a great or moderate extent, about a quarter (26%) of graduates felt prepared to deal with pupils verbally abusing each other or the teacher to a great or moderate extent, while a large majority (74%) felt that they were only slightly or not at all prepared for this. Responses relating to dealing with pupils physically abusing each other or the teacher were slightly more negative. A fifth felt prepared to do this to a great or moderate extent, while four fifths felt slightly or not at all prepared to do this. A majority (69%) of graduates from both years felt that there had not been enough
‘theory and explanation of classroom management skills’ in the B.Ed.

Table 3

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Great extent</th>
<th>Moderate extent</th>
<th>Slight extent</th>
<th>Not at all</th>
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<td>49</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>11</td>
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<tr>
<td>Deal with pupils verbally abusing each other or the teacher</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>36</td>
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<tr>
<td>Deal with pupils physically abusing each other or the teacher</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>46</td>
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</table>

One might ask how important this perceived lack of capacity in relation to classroom management is to the new teachers in practice? Almost half the respondents (48%) agreed that ‘maintaining classroom management is one of the greatest pressures on me as a teacher.’ There was a tendency for slightly larger proportions of those teaching in designated schools to agree with this statement. Almost half (47%) of all respondents agreed that ‘pupils’ disruptive behaviour interrupts my teaching frequently,’ with no differences between those teaching in designated and non-designated schools.

Respondents were asked to rate the extent of their agreement with twelve statements about various aspects of the teaching/learning context. These ratings were compared across the type of school (i.e., designated disadvantaged or non-designated disadvantaged) in which the respondent was teaching at the time of completing the survey. While almost two thirds of respondents disagreed with the statement ‘oftentimes my principle priority during the day is sorting out pupils’ problems (e.g., emotional) and not teaching’, this shows a substantial minority (33%) who agreed or strongly agreed with this statement. Those in designated schools were more likely to agree with this statement. This is in keeping with evidence from elsewhere (Ryan, 1994) that teachers in designated schools often have to deal with such problems among their pupils.

Relations with parents: Having completed the B.Ed., a large but limited proportion (41%) of respondents felt prepared to a great or moderate extent for building parents’ trust in the teacher. Respondents felt relatively unconfident in regard to working and communicating with parents by involving them in the classroom. About a third (32%) felt confident about this to a great or moderate extent, while a majority (68%) had only slight or no confidence in this. There were no differences between respondents in designated and non-designated schools on any of these variables. The vast majority (73%) of respondents also felt relatively unprepared for ‘improving working relationships with community members outside the school’ with 44% feeling prepared to a slight extent and 28% feeling ‘not at all’ prepared for this.

This perceived lack of capacity to work with parents and other community members might be thought to play a role in preventing the development of positive views of parent’s role in their child’s education. Nonetheless a large majority (74%) of respondents agreed that ‘my pupils’ parents value education,’ even if the tendency was for less respondents in designated schools to agree with this (49%). Furthermore, while over two thirds (69%) of respondents agreed that ‘I experience a high level of support from pupils’ parents,’ there was agreement by a smaller proportion of those teaching in a designated school (50%).
A related issue is that of home-school discontinuity. Respondents were divided in their ratings of this with 65% of teachers working in designated schools agreeing that such discontinuity existed in relation to their school, while 33% of those in non-designated schools agreed that ‘there is evident discontinuity between my pupils’ home culture and that of the school.’ A sizeable majority (71%) of respondents identified that they felt only slightly or not at all prepared to deal with home-school discontinuity.

Working with other teachers: Similarly, while a large proportion of respondents (42%) felt prepared either to a great or moderate extent for working with other staff members, a majority (58%) felt that this was the case to a slight extent or not at all.

Analysis of Findings

The limitations of this study mean that we must be careful in interpreting the findings. Nonetheless, it is heartening to note the extent to which a sizeable majority of the students feel confident about teaching and feel prepared to engage in a range of pedagogic activities in their classrooms. It is also notable that while the experience of having completed a teaching practice in a designated disadvantaged school does not necessarily leave the students more confident about teaching in such a school, it does tend to increase the extent to which they have a positive impression of such teaching. This suggests that the very experience of engaging with children in designated schools may play a role in breaking down some of the preconceived notions about such children which students may bring with them into the course.

The respondents identify that there is room for greater engagement with the issues of educational disadvantage in the course of their B.Ed. programme. While it is clear that educational disadvantage issues were seen to be dealt with in the programme of both cohorts, and while it is clear that the extent to which it was seen to be dealt with increased over the 1999 – 2001 period, it is also clear that many students identify a need for greater discussion and debate around disadvantage issues and a greater questioning of their own assumptions regarding disadvantage. In this respect the respondents show quite a reflexive turn – they are aware of their own assumptions and expectations as assumptions and expectations and would find it valuable to have them questioned more often. As we noted above, it is unlikely that the identified need for assignments focused on educational disadvantage is actually a need for more assignments. It is more likely that this should be interpreted as a need for disadvantage issues to be integrated into the assessment frameworks of a wider variety of areas.

Classroom management issues also loomed large on the horizon of the respondents. For almost half of them maintaining classroom management is one of their greatest pressures. While most of them felt prepared to deal with run-of-the-mill classroom management problems such as maintaining pupils attention, fewer felt prepared to deal with outright conflict situations, of either the verbal or physical kind.

Given that the respondents often identified disadvantage largely in ‘ghetto’ and ‘deficit’ terms, it is the findings that relate to their capacity to work with parents and community members that are perhaps most interesting. Indeed, it may well be that their perceived lack of capacity to work with parents and community members plays a role in reinforcing some negative views of parents and communities.

About half of the respondents working in designated areas identified that they felt they did not experience a high level of support from pupils’ parents and that the parents of their pupils did not value education. It should be noted that, simply because our respondents report this, does not follow that this is the case in reality. Boldt (2000) found discrepancies between pupils’ and parents’ expressed value of education and teachers’ perceptions of this. Ryan (1994) found that the teachers’ reporting of the nature and degree of parental “support” was related to parents’ perceptions of the importance of such support. Parents who may not necessarily provide the support that teachers look to see (e.g., attendance at parent-teacher meetings) were, in fact, found to provide support for their children’s learning in other

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ways. For example, children stated the support of their fathers with completion of homework although very few fathers were actively involved in school-related activities of the home-school-community liaison (HSCL) scheme. HSCL co-ordinators found that activities were more likely to be supported by parents when they were understood by parents to directly impact on an individual child.

The extent to which our respondents may have fallen into the trap of reporting what they looked for, rather than reporting the reality may be related to their own stated capacity to work with parents and communities. A large proportion (73%) of respondents felt relatively unprepared to improve working relationships with community members outside school, while many felt unconfident in relation to communicating and working with parents through involving them in the classroom. From this, and from the items relating to working with other teachers, it would seem that the model of teaching with which graduates feel most comfortable is a more traditional role of classroom teacher working alone with children. It would seem that their experience of the B.Ed. degree (as it existed at the time these respondents completed it, and as they remember it) was perhaps focused more on the instructional delivery of curricula than on a broader sense of the teacher as part of the child’s learning and support community. It may well be that a greater focus on the role of parents and community in grounding the pedagogy of different curriculum areas may well provide future students with greater confidence in their ability to work with communities, and may enable them to overcome what may well be blind spots in relation to the communities and families with which they work. The capacity to engage with the community should not, however, be seen only as a characteristic of the individual teacher. Teachers’ ability to engage with parents will depend in part on the school climate and structures. Nonetheless, this does not detract from the need to deal with this issue in initial teacher education.

It should be noted that it would be a mistake to over emphasise the extent to which the respondents held universally negative views of the communities in areas designated as disadvantaged. Half of the teachers in designated areas identified that they felt they experienced a high level of support from pupils’ parents and that the parents of their pupils valued education. While these figures are lower than those of teachers working in non-designated schools, they still represent a substantial proportion of those working in designated schools. Two-thirds of those in designated schools saw cultural discontinuity between home and school as an issue. In this respect many respondents seem to work from a ‘cultural difference’ model of educational disadvantage. It is perhaps not unusual that these views can be expressed by those whose tendency in describing disadvantage is to reach for terms reminiscent of the ghetto model. The distinct borderlines which can be drawn between models in literature may not be reflected in ideology which is often less clearly thought out and categorised in practice. Indeed, it may well be that this ambiguity reflects the teachers’ conceptions of the diversity of those who are being educationally disadvantaged. While they find the language of the ‘ghetto model’ most appropriate for some cases (perhaps the ones that are for them the most pressing or the most obvious cases) they also find the language of cultural discontinuity appropriate in other contexts.

Conclusion

The data presented here is based on a survey of the graduate classes of 1999 and 2001 from the Mary Immaculate College B.Ed. programme. The data is largely comprised of the perceptions and opinions of the respondents, in hindsight between two and four years after leaving the college. While there are limitations with the data, and while care must be taken in interpreting the findings, it, nonetheless, provides a useful insight into how these cohorts viewed the their capacity to deal with some of the issues which might be regarded as related to educational disadvantage upon completion of initial teacher education.

The respondents generally feel confident about teaching and feel positive towards teaching. They largely feel capable of engaging in a range of pedagogical tasks. At the same time, they feel less confident in a number of key areas. These include their understanding of educational
disadvantage, their ability to deal with conflict situations in the class and their ability to work constructively with parents. It is possible that this latter finding is related to a conception of the role of the teacher as being one who focuses on the teaching and learning of curriculum content, rather than as one who is, with the child and her/his family, a part of a broader community.

One of the most interesting findings from this survey is the ambiguity of the respondents’ conceptions of disadvantage. Many feel able to recognise and identify cultural discontinuity as an issue, while at the same time readily utilising language drawn from a deficit, ‘ghetto model’ perspective. Many also show a level of self awareness about their own assumptions and expectations and suggest that (with hindsight) they would have welcomed an opportunity for greater questioning of these preconceived notions. It is also worth noting (although the implications of this finding should not be overstated) that those who experienced teaching practice in a designated disadvantaged school during their B.Ed. held more positive impressions of teaching in such a school.

The data presented here does not provide answers to the question as to how educational disadvantage can best be addressed through initial teacher education, but they do at least point us in some directions. The data suggests that educational disadvantage issues are being addressed, but that they can be addressed in a more widespread way. They suggest that greater opportunities to be challenged on their own attitudes and expectations in relation to disadvantage would be welcome. They suggest that there may need to be a greater focus on the place of the school in the community and of the community in the school.

Underlying all this may lie a need to think again about our conception of what the role of a teaching professional is. It is possible that we need to conceive of a teaching professional in relation to their community and to seek to equip teachers to relate to and play a role in their community. It may be that unless such a re-thinking takes place, our results will continue to be ambiguous and only partially successful.

References

CDU (n.d.) Evaluation of the Moyross Intervention Education Pilot Project. Limerick: Curriculum Development Unit, Mary Immaculate College
Dublin: Educational Research Centre.
In this brief presentation I am going to say a few words that will weave narrative and philosophical understandings of love.

To introduce this session I will ask that you consider in small groups the following question:

What do students need to learn in initial teacher education to enable them to contribute to promoting socio-economic equality in educational outcomes and experiences?

We need teachers who have *an empathy for difference* and who are committed to social inclusion in the classroom and beyond.

To answer that question initially, I would say that an essential ingredient in training future teachers should be their preparation to teach the most marginalized children in our rural and urban communities. In other words, rather than preparing student teachers to educate the ‘average’ child, our focus should be to ensure that our future teachers understand the diversity of backgrounds in the classroom and that they are capable of empowering the least privileged children to achieve their potential. We need teachers who have *an empathy for difference* and who are committed to social inclusion in the classroom and beyond.

Teaching is a relational art. Therefore, if we hold the understanding that teaching is about relationships and that teaching is a creative art, by putting those things together it will change how we shape teacher preparation. Furthermore, the dialogue of learning between teacher and student always takes place in a definite context, again the contextual nature of teaching could be more emphasised if we are to embrace diversity as an integral aspect of the Irish classroom today. In their excellent publication *Celebrating Difference, Promoting Equality*, by Neil Haran and Roland Tormey (2002), this latter point is well made.

Philosophers remind us that we are living in post-modern times. Our teaching must reflect this new era using the term ‘Post-modern’ as a descriptor that will help us to name new perspectives on diversity and difference. While we celebrate some differences, there are others that should be denounced and transformed. Poverty falls into this latter category. Poverty is a profound injustice and despite the discourse about our economic success in recent years, one in every five children in our State lives in poverty. A recent publication from Bernardos (2003, p. 3) reminds us that this translates into a figure of 90,000 children living in poverty in Ireland at this time. Furthermore, the gap between the rich and the poor has expanded during this period.

We have reached a point in the Western world of profound illiteracy in relation to the discourse of love.

To prepare teachers to educate in this twenty-first century Ireland, where disadvantage and poverty among children is growing, we need to ‘prepare them to love’. This is indeed a challenge and immediately calls us to examine the context of teacher training and ask: Are Colleges of Education communities of love? Are our learning institutions relational contexts where attention to emotional development and personal growth is central? How are Colleges of Education responding as the language of economics and competitive growth seeps into the academy? More and more institutions are required to engage in target setting, ‘Quality Assurance measures’, and productivity linked to benchmarking. The language of...
relationship and love are resoundingly dissonant to this 'business-like' discourse.

Today, the language of love is muted in public discourse apart from the 14th of February, when we experience each year a commercial extravaganza that is about economic love and commercial gain. It is time to break the silence and allow a new understanding of love in the public and private dimensions of our lives. 'To be' what we’re called to be as humans, is to be in relation. It is to be in relation with self, with others, with the world and with the divine, however we understand the latter. In summary we could say that 'To be human is to be in love'.

Mother Imelda sat in the cloakroom each morning and greeted each one of us with a big warm hug. This embrace of love has stayed with me as a symbol of the education I received and has shaped my imagination in the aspiration I hold for all children.

We have reached a point in the Western world of profound illiteracy in relation to the discourse of love. This illiteracy does not pertain to the private discourse about love that informs many people's intimate relationships, but it would seem that we have domesticated and privatised the language of love and when we speak the language of love in a public discourse there is a sense of disassociation and discomfort.

Last Spring (2003) in Dublin over 100,000 people took part in a peace march to protest the Iraq war. At each of the designated points along the march there were speakers. All spoke with passion, rage and anger. The word 'love' however was spoken only once in the whole afternoon and that was by Denis Halliday. He named the discourse of love as core to shifting the imagination and calling us beyond war. Training to love and going to war are clearly different agendas.

As mentioned earlier the narrative of our lives shapes our identity and informs our expectation of how things ought to be. Let me tell two stories which reflect very different backgrounds and very diverse experiences of education.

My schooling left me with a memory that has shaped my life, and has clearly informed my understanding of education as a relational art. I was in school in Loretto Foxrock, in Dublin for thirteen years. I loved school and hardly ever missed a day. My early childhood memories of school are shaped by the presence of the nun in charge of the Junior School. Mother Imelda sat in the cloakroom each morning and greeted each one of us with a big warm hug. This embrace of love has stayed with me as a symbol of the education I received and has shaped my imagination in the aspiration I hold for all children. From my earliest years I wanted to be a teacher and I have no doubt that the warmth and love I experienced at school informed that decision. Indeed my mother used to tell the story of how, as a very small child, I would wander the road gathering up children, some of whom were much bigger than I, and then I’d ‘teach’ them in the dining room at home!

As an aside, in this period where there is so much litigation and so much language of fear around sexual abuse, I wonder if we have lost some of the warmth of emotional expression and the potential of positive touch and loving embrace that is appropriate in education contexts.

Let me narrate another story, that of a friend of mine, Nuala Woods. Nuala has published her story so I feel free recount it. She is exactly the same age as me and we started school on that same day albeit in different areas of Dublin. When Nuala got to 6th class her mother had died and her father reminded her that, because of their financial circumstances, education was all she had. She was a very bright girl, and she recalls making a positive decision that for this last year in Primary School she would do her very best and maybe get a scholarship to continue. So in September 1958 on the opening day of school she got to the schoolyard early and stood at the front of the line. When she went into the classroom she sat in a front desk. Eventually the teacher came in and shouted, “Nuala what are you doing in the front desk? Don’t you know that the front is for the children from the bought houses, you are from the corporation flats, go to
the back of the room”. Nuala recalls to this day that walk to the back of the room as the end of her chance for any kind of exit out of poverty. Her abiding memory of school is not about the lack of resources in the school, but of the lack of love and empathy and of course the classism that permeated education. Classism and love can’t go together.

If teaching is a relational art it cannot be presumed that 440 points add up to the necessary human, social, relational and spiritual qualities that will be required for a life lived in the presence of children.

If we are going to build schools that are places of love and care then we must commit to an agenda of personal and creative development of student teachers and indeed of those, like ourselves, who work in teacher education for primary and secondary schools. Such an agenda will also call us to look at selection issues, to question whether the only criteria for entry to Colleges of Education should be the accumulation of a certain number of points in the Leaving Certificate along with Honours Irish. If teaching is a relational art it cannot be presumed that 440 points add up to the necessary human, social, relational and spiritual qualities that will be required for a life lived in the presence of children. These are matters that need to be prised open for dialogue. Perhaps at the end of the first year in Colleges of Education there could be a formal interview, and where appropriate, students could transfer into a BA programme? As we know, in the present situation once an unsuitable student starts a teacher education course the only exit route is failure.

Along with the development of relational qualities I would suggest that we should also focus on the development of the faculty of the imagination. Developing a faculty of imagination involves enabling us to develop images of the possible and then act towards the realisation of those possibilities. I think so many of the failures in education are failures of the imagination, we don’t imagine the possible. Our expectations of students are often related to the limits of our imagination. Let me tell another story:

In a school in Ballymun a few weeks ago, in a class of ten year old children, I noticed a boy standing alone at the back of the room. I asked the student teacher in the classroom at the time, why the boy was disengaged from the learning in the classroom. She replied, “the teacher has given up on him, he is left back there, his four brothers are in jail and the teacher says he is just passing his time now until he gets there too.” Surely this is a violation of the child’s right to education? While it is true that some children may test the patience of the finest educator, is it not a failure of the ethical imagination for any teacher to neglect a child’s development in this way?

The philosopher David Hume (1739-40) talks about the faculty of the imagination being the key faculty that develops our power of empathy, our ability to feel with the other, not to reduce the other to the same as our self, but this capacity to allow the other to be.

If the notions of deepening the ability to love and developing the creative imagination are to become integral dimensions of teacher education, changes need to happen. We need to revisit timetables in Colleges of Education that are crammed trying to include more and more contact hours in order to prepare student teachers for an ever expanding curriculum. Some students are in lectures from 9 a.m. to 6 p.m., leaving little time for their own reflection or their personal and creative development. When I did my undergraduate degree we had lectures in the morning from 9 a.m. till 1 p.m. and every afternoon was spent in the library doing one’s own thinking and writing. Today the rush and pressure that characterises initial teacher education is
driving students to live by external directives. There is very little time left for critical and creative reflection or opportunity to state one’s own internal human need. Students are being driven by outside pressures.

If we render future teachers voiceless in their teacher preparation how can we expect them to go out and empower children and enable children, especially those who live with the least advantage, to find their voice?

This is disempowering and silencing, there is no space or time for students to raise their voice. If we render future teachers voiceless in their teacher preparation how can we expect them to go out and empower children and enable children, especially those who live with the least advantage, to find their voice? It is a set of contradictions really and we need to name these contradictions and stand against them. The sense of being given space, being given one’s own power, being given time and space to voice one’s own internal directives and human needs, should be there. In training students we need to create space and time for them to develop their own sense of being political, and a sense of their own power to act for a transformation. This is all the more essential if we believe that teaching is a relational art calling for developed creative qualities.

Finally, I am very interested in the number of philosophers and psychologists writing about love today. However there are very few educationalists writing on this topic! Philosopher Julia Kristeva (1987, p. 5) writes in one of her books that: ‘Love is the time and space in which the ‘I’ assumes the right to be extraordinary.’

We need a new map of love in the way we are training teachers for teacher education. We need to remember that the essence of love is love and therefore it is free. When I hear the discourse of student teachers it is often a discourse of fear, not a discourse of love which renders them free. We need to address this and be courageous in the way that we address it. And finally to end with a quote from Seamus Heaney’s poem (1991, p .29), The Settle Bed:

‘What is can always be re-imagined.’

References


Selected Bibliography

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