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Tackling the Effects of Social Disadvantage in Education

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It is encouraging that the Minister of Education, Peter Weir, has established an Expert Group to advise on measures to tackle the long-standing problem of social disadvantage in education in Northern Ireland. The terms of reference for the Expert Group noted that achievement levels for pupils entitled to free school meals were going up year-on-year, but that the achievement gap between those entitled or not entitled to free school meals had remained fairly constant. It also noted that the mediating role of social background on achievement was long-standing, despite significant investment by the Department of Education and others, and numerous interventions which tried to reduce it. The Expert Group is tasked with developing an action plan, on the 'wide range of issues on which consensus can be found', but will be confined to pre-school, primary and post-primary education only.

The challenge facing the Expert Group is significant, not least because our school system in Northern Ireland has a number of core design features which exacerbate the link between social background and achievement levels.

Pre-school provision has advanced significantly since 1997, but a significant priority is to provide opportunities for parents/guardians to maintain employment. This economic imperative is important, but if we want to maximise the educational impact of pre-school provision, particularly among children from disadvantaged backgrounds, then that is where the focus of investment in pre-school provision should be aimed. In addition, investment to tackle the issue cannot end there: high quality pre-school provision can address some of the consequences of social disadvantage, but unless there is a comprehensive and effective anti-poverty strategy, those consequences will continue to impact on educational opportunity for too many young people, so support must be maintained.

The retention of academic selection at the end of primary school maintains a system which demonstrably exacerbates inequalities based on social background. This is so in terms of the impact of social disadvantage on test results, the widespread use of out-of-school paid-for tutoring, and the capacity of more affluent households to gain places for their children in grammar schools through the admissions processes. The educational theories underpinning early academic selection were conceived in the 1930s, applied from the late 1940s onwards, largely discredited by the 1970s, and abandoned virtually everywhere by the 1980s. There is

a huge social gap in attendance at grammar and secondary schools and the funding formula works to the advantage of the latter. Voluntary grammar schools have more 'high-value' post-16 students, greater control over their budgets and appear better placed to generate additional income through 'voluntary' contributions from parents.

The marketisation of education after the 1989 Education Reform Order also exacerbates inequalities. Competition between schools was meant to create general improvement – 'a rising tide lifts all boats' was the claim – but it didn't happen in Northern Ireland, or much anywhere else, in fact. Market competition between schools produces greater inequality. In the selective system of secondary education in Northern Ireland it has produced even greater inequality due to the unevenness of competition between grammar and secondary schools. This was most clearly demonstrated during the period of falling rolls when virtually the full effect was imposed on secondary schools.

The cruellest irony of this market-driven approach was that principals were to be allocated financial and administrative autonomy so they could 'position themselves in the market'. What has happened instead is a rising tide of accountability and scrutiny, and a dramatic fall in the real value of budget allocations, at a time when pupil numbers are rising. All of this makes the work of schools in addressing everyday concerns, never mind tackling the problem of underachievement, even more difficult.

And we now can see how the system of official examinations contributes to the process. The farrago over the use of algorithms to adjust centre-based assessments during the covid-19 crisis revealed the 'need' for a set distribution of grades, which implicitly means that some young people must be awarded grades that are of limited value. Consistency in grade profiles year-on-year seems to be more important than assessing what young people actually know or have learned, and some commentators are confusing consistency with accuracy. Evidently public examinations are not designed to test what young people know, but to act as an elaborate 'sorting-hat' to control progress to the next stage of the education system. In other words, a level of inequality is designed into the system, with the additional kicker that this inequality is heavily mediated by social background. One might ask why the algorithms are not used to 'design out' social background in qualification outcomes?

In the last published Programme for Government four of the twelve key indicators had an education component, though only one, on the achievement gap between pupils entitled and not entitled to free school meals, directly addressed the impact of social disadvantage of education. The outcomes delivery plan identifies 'positive movement' on this indicator, while not pointing out that the reduction was a consequence of the performance of pupils not entitled to free school meals going down more than the performance of pupils entitled to free school meals going up. This change is attributed to three things: the success of the extended schools and full-service schools programmes; media campaigns encouraging parental involvement in their children's education; and the wraparound service to reduce poverty levels. It is not clear how much investment was involved in these programmes as a figure of £9 million is provided only for the first component. There are at least two problems with this.

The first is that the measures are based on examination performance levels and success is claimed when they go up, but, if you look at the performance of school leavers since the 1960s, it has steadily risen year-on-year, irrespective of government ministers, irrespective of education policies, irrespective of the start or end of the Troubles, just a steady, inexorable line upwards. There are lots of reasons why this happens – some good, some not so good –

but in this context it means that the data is of limited value in determining whether a special intervention has made a difference. Add to this the fact that, on the measures used, some categories of young people have already reached a ceiling level of performance, that is, close to 100%, which makes me wonder why the measured 'achievement gap' has not declined more quickly.

The second problem lies in the reliance on special initiatives to tackle the effects of social disadvantage. Unless there is a plan for sustainability, special interventions will not make a change in the medium to longer-term. However, there is, in fact, a system measure already in place which was designed to tackle the issue of social disadvantage, but for some reason or other it does not feature in the Programme for Government or the outcomes delivery plan.

For about three decades schools have been funded under a formula in which the largest allocation is based on age-weighted pupil numbers. The formula has always included an element, entitled Targeting Social Need (TSN), to skew funding towards schools with higher levels of pupils entitled to free school meals as a strategic way of addressing the link between social background and educational opportunity. Between 2012/13 and 2019/20 the total investment through TSN is in excess of £570 million, far in excess of investment through special initiatives. Despite these significant funds there does not appear to have been any evaluation of the efficacy of this investment, the way the funds have been used by schools, any improvements that have been made as a consequence of the funding, or even to check if this level of funding is sufficient to make any difference. Inter alia there are plenty of reports which show a crushing under-funding of schools in NI generally. In England there is evidence to suggest that education is under-funded by several billion pounds annually (once the regulations and requirements demanded from schools are set beside the actual level of funding they receive), and we know that schools in NI at all levels receive less per capita funding than schools in England.

It is hard to escape the conclusion that either insufficient resources have been made available to break the cycle through which social disadvantage has had such an impact on the educational life-chances and opportunities of so many young people, or that resources made available were insufficient to break down the processes within the very design of our education system that exacerbate the effects of social disadvantage on life-chances and opportunities.

The issue about performance patterns has another significance: if a simple rise in the qualifications of school leavers gives us limited information on whether a specific intervention is working or not, how can we judge whether we are actually doing anything to tackle the consequences of social disadvantage? I would suggest that our focus is all wrong and that we should be looking at the outcomes of education, not the outputs. Although Year 12 marks the end of compulsory education, today a majority of young people stay in some form of education after this, either in school, further education or training. Most young people do not 'leave education' until a few years after that, but the Expert Group is being required to look only at the consequences of schools.

If we accept that qualifications are a means to an end in relation to the next stage of the education journey of a young person, that the education system embraces higher and further education, as well as other types of training, and not just time spent in schools, then the outcome of education relates to the longer-term opportunities it provides as young people become young citizens and participants in the labour market. This then poses the question on

the extent to which it is possible to look at the impact of social disadvantage on these longer-term outcomes and whether the education system as a whole is providing worthwhile routes and opportunities for young people. At the moment the data to make this judgement are largely not in the public domain. Understanding these outcomes, however, would provide much better insight into whether we are actually reducing the mediating role of social disadvantage; would allow for a more strategic assessment of the impact of our education system as a whole; inform a more balanced approach to where investment should be directed; and highlight the need to amplify those routes through education which lead to good outcomes, and disrupt those which do not. Recognising that there are many routes through and out of education might also free us from our fixation on a very narrow set of qualifications outcomes as if this was the most important purpose of education.

Finally, it is worth noting the role of self-fulfilling expectations. Significant change in educational outcomes generally follows changes in social values, assumptions and expectations, and these often emerge from the collapse of stereotypes and prejudice. When the system of academic selection was established after the Second World War, the assumption was that only a small proportion of the population was capable of abstract thought and hence able for the academic curriculum provided by grammar schools. In the 1950s and 1960s it was taken for granted that the curriculum for young boys and girls should be differentiated to reflect the assumption that most boys would go on to work in industry or trades, while most girls would become housewives and mothers. In the 1960s most young people left secondary school without any public examination qualifications, as it was assumed they were not capable of taking these examinations and failure would lower their morale.

All of these assumptions acted as barriers to the opportunities provided to young people, and almost invariably these barriers had disproportionate effects on children and young people from working-class or disadvantaged backgrounds. These barriers continue to exist – why else would the Expert Group be needed? In the debate over academic selection, some people talk about ‘academic’ and ‘non-academic’ children as if they all can be neatly packaged into these two pots. In 1987/88 359 young people left secondary schools to enter higher education, but by 2017/18 2,622 young people left secondary schools to enter higher education: what does the concept of a ‘non-academic’ child mean in this context?

We can choose to continue to address the challenge of social disadvantage by limited interventions, through add-on initiatives, while ignoring the design weaknesses of our education system and the failure of strategic measures to change the dial on social disadvantage in any meaningful way. We can continue to impose accountability on schools and teachers, while stripping them of the resources and capacity to use their expertise to address these challenges. We can choose to seek change through schools, when they now constitute only a part of the education system. And we can maintain a narrow focus on a narrow set of qualification outputs as our measure of change, while failing to seek data on the real life-chances and opportunities provided for all our young people. Or we could commit to breaking out of assumptions which have acted as exclusionary barriers and commit to working towards a future where every single young person can be guaranteed a good experience of education, have a range of choices in the routes they can take through education, and have positive outcomes once they become citizens.