
Policy Note

Economic Obstacles to Education in Ireland

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Abstract

This policy note highlights the costs of sending a child to school in Ireland and explores the extent to which these represent a significant economic barrier to schooling for low-income families. It also evaluates the efforts to reduce early school leaving and examines the increasing commodification of education in Ireland.

Keywords: economic accessibility; education; education costs; ; International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, Article 13; socioeconomic inequality in education

Introduction

Education is a fundamental human right. As stated by UNESCO (2019: 98), international human rights law ‘requires states to ensure that the right to education is economically accessible, through two primary measures: the introduction of free and compulsory education and the reduction of drop-out rates’. The Irish government—in accordance with Article 42 of the Irish Constitution and section 12 of the Education Act 1998—provides for education in the state, but this, it is argued, does not necessarily equate to a readily accessible education for all. Several interrelated factors may have some bearing on the right to education, including acceptability, adaptability, availability and accessibility. The latter encapsulates three fundamental elements: non-discrimination, physical accessibility and economic accessibility.

Article 13 of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR) outlines a hierarchical structure regarding the economic provision of education, with Article 13(2)(a) stating that primary education shall be available free to all, while Article 13(2)(b) requires the progressive introduction of free secondary, technical and vocational education. In recent times, Ireland has made important strides towards achieving the

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full realization of the rights guaranteed under Article 13 of the ICESCR, but economic barriers to education remain. This policy note will highlight the costs of sending a child to school in Ireland and explore the extent to which these represent a significant economic barrier to schooling for low income families. It will also evaluate the efforts to reduce early school leaving and examine the increasing commodification of education in Ireland.

Methodology

Research connections were established with key stakeholders in education and semi-structured, open-ended interviews were conducted with 30 interviewees. These participants included government and public representatives, parents, school principals, teachers and non-governmental organization (NGO) personnel with particular expertise on education rights, and provide a critical counterbalance to the ‘top-down’ reports of states. Each interview was carried out at a location nominated by the participant and the duration of the interviews varied between 40 minutes and one hour.

Education costs

Education costs can pertain to material items such as books, uniforms and other school supplies, although there are also additional expenses associated with school life, such as school trips and extra-curricular events. [Slade \(2008\)](#) emphasizes the importance of achieving social development and maintaining positive relationships within the classroom, but children who are not in a position to participate in extra-curricular activities outside the classroom are effectively being deprived of the ‘intellectual, social, cultural and ethical knowledge and skills’ afforded by these educational experiences ([Mizunoya and Zaw 2017](#)). This has been stressed by [Lynch and Crean \(2018\)](#) who argue that ‘rising economic inequalities means that children from poorer households cannot participate on equal terms with others within education as they do not have equal resources’. These concerns were also echoed by the Head of Participation and Rights of the Ombudsman for Children’s Office who stated:

You will have a cohort of children who just cannot afford to go on those trips, so that kind of wider cultural education, the learning of where they are going, learning . . . how to manage that process of being away from their family, which is all part of the whole educational experience, is denied to them because they simply cannot do it.

Unfortunately, costs of this nature not only deprive children of certain educational experiences, but they also have the ability to negatively impact upon a child’s self-esteem and sense of inclusion within the school community. Although teachers strive to ensure that this chasm is not visible in the school setting, some of the participants interviewed reported that children were aware from a very young age that financial inequality existed between themselves and their peers. One interviewee recalled:

They have known since junior and senior infants like ‘how come I don’t have what they have?’ and they shouldn’t be feeling like that in an educational setting, that’s where children should not have that heaviness on them, and they should be fully engaged like the rest of the kids.

A feeling of embarrassment and shame was felt by children due to their inability to contribute to school activities like bake sales or raffles. One parent stated that her child had chosen not to attend school on days where such events were upcoming:

I have had occasions where things come up like trips or bake sales and my child wouldn't have the money to bake a cake or buy one or whatever so she won't go to school because she would be embarrassed in front of her friends and the teacher is expecting her to have the money or bring something in.

Parents are required by law to send their children aged six or over to school in Ireland (Education (Welfare) Act 2000), but a survey conducted by Barnardo's Children Charity in 2018 revealed that they are 'stressed out, overburdened and fed up' by the mounting costs of sending their children back to school (Pope 2019). These costs appear to have subsided the following school year, but Barnardo's, in a survey of 1,402 Irish parents, still found that the associated costs of sending a child to senior infants in Ireland amounts to 340 euros, while the costs of sending a child to secondary school can be as high as 735 euros (Barnardo's 2019). These figures are comparable to an estimate given by one interviewee, a lone parent of two children, who is in receipt of the back to school clothing and footwear allowance. Broadly speaking, this allowance is payable to the parents or guardians of children aged between four and 17 years who are in receipt of certain social welfare payments, but this participant described how the 150 euros that she received for each of her two children was insufficient to cover the cost of sending her youngest child back to primary school:

I get close to 300 euros for the two girls but that's for everything and you're talking 400 euros all in for the child in primary so basically then I have to find all the money for the other child out of my own weekly money which isn't much because I am on one parent family [One-Parent Family Allowance].

The UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (CESCR) states that indirect costs are not permissible (Kalantry et al. 2010), but Ireland, in its third national report to the Committee (UN CESCR 2012), conceded that both primary and secondary education incur indirect costs. The need to address and remove these costs, where possible, has also been acknowledged in section 27C(h) of the Education (Student and Parent Charter) Bill 2019, which states that the Minister, when preparing the charter guidelines, shall have regard to the need for a school to 'foster and promote equality of access for students to, and participation by students in, education by seeking, as far as practicable, to reduce the costs to parents and students of such participation'.

In 2005 Ireland developed the Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS) Plan in an endeavour to address the 'educational needs of children and young people from disadvantaged areas'. The more recent DEIS Plan (DEIS 2017) builds on the 2005 provisions and was designed specifically 'to give tailored support to schools who have high concentration of disadvantage'. Anecdotal evidence from teachers working in DEIS schools has, however, shown us that the obligation to purchase a uniform, to buy school books or to contribute to a book rental scheme, not to mention school outings, or participating in the Transition Year programme (an optional one-year school programme that can be taken after the Junior Certificate), all put financial strain on families, especially where there is more than one child from the household in education at one time. While this constitutes a sizeable economic barrier to education, the qualitative research conducted for this study revealed that cultural factors may also pose a significant barrier to accessible education. A government minister interviewed noted the following:

I think the cultural factor is everything . . . trying to get them thinking long-term, that has been a struggle I think in many working class, eh, areas because there's a tradition of, of work, that

you leave school at 14 and you work and you know, having a long-term sort of plan as to what you want to do in five years' time isn't necessarily, you know, the mindset of people.

The aim of public education is to equalize access, yet it is clear that children from poorer backgrounds suffer educational disadvantage due to their inability to compete financially. However, one elected representative noted that some families take advantage of the provisions put in place which attempt to ensure equal access to education:

There are people who know how to work the system and will get every grant going or everything going and they will have disposable income for holidays, for over-the-top Holy Communion celebrations and so on. I mean, I saw it in my own school, where we used to have a book rental scheme for kids who were on social welfare, and I used to run the school tour, and yet they would come in with the money for the school tour which would be a few hundred euros, there would be no problem.

Furthermore, at the beginning of each year, parents are asked to provide a voluntary contribution towards the cost of the day-to-day running of the school. This request is due to the fact that public schools in Ireland are inadequately funded (Lynch and Crean 2018). The term 'voluntary' implies that parents have a choice as to whether they pay such a fee. However, some would argue that it is not voluntary but rather an expectation put on families who feel pressurized to comply with the request (Ferriter 2018).

The National Parents Council (2019) emphasizes the importance of parents' involvement in their child's education, but the CEO of the same organization suggests that for parents in financial difficulty the pressure of paying a voluntary contribution can lead to strained relationships between parents and schools:

When a child starts in a school at the beginning of September the first communication generally to that family is around money so if you think of a family who are financially struggling and the first communication they get is around money you have immediately put pressure on that relationship between the parent and the school.

Speaking in the Seanad (the Upper House of Parliament) on the Free Education (Prohibition of Fees and Charges) Bill 2018, Senator Aodhán Ó Ríordáin stated that:

The point of the Bill is to remind all of us that the relationship between a parent or child and the school the child attends should not be financial. It should be one of growth, beauty, education and learning, which should be all one speaks about in the corridors of a school with a parent, student or child. (Seanad Éireann 2019)

He specifically referred to voluntary contributions as 'fees in disguise' and called for a ban on such fees (O'Halloran 2019). A social care worker, interviewed as part of this study, discussed her interaction with a parent who claimed that her child was excluded from a school activity for non-payment of a voluntary contribution:

I had a case recently where the school was looking for a voluntary donation and because the mother wasn't able to pay her child wasn't going to be allowed to go on the school tour. So, it's kind of debatable, the whole voluntary donation.

Pimentel (2006: 6) has argued that the right to education is becoming increasingly determined by purchasing power 'as a part of a creeping privatization of education that causes the transference of education costs to poor families', but a former school Principal described voluntary contributions as:

just one of the many dilemmas faced by school principals and the school management team on a day-to-day basis. The collection of the voluntary contribution is an unwanted and stressful obligation on schools in order to simply keep the doors open. (Moynihan 2019)

Importantly, section 9 of the recently commenced Education (Admissions to Schools) Act 2018 prohibits the charging of fees, seeking payment or contributions for an application to or for continued enrolment in a school.

Socioeconomic inequality in education

Klees and Thapliyal (2007) have argued that the right to education has ‘fundamental social purposes’ and yet is distributed by the lottery of birth, a claim that carries substantial weight given that the relationship between social class and education has long preoccupied Irish educational research. The 1966 Investment in Education report, the first major inquiry into the education system, detailed substantial inequalities in the rates of access and participation in secondary education at that time, where only 54 per cent of boys and 54.4 per cent of girls from families of semi-skilled and unskilled manual workers transferred to post-primary. This compared to 87.1 per cent of sons and 89.6 per cent of daughters from professional, non-manual workers (Drudy and Lynch 1993). They also found that following the introduction of free post-primary education in 1967 ‘inequalities of access by social group actually sharpened’ (ibid: 142).

Tomasevski (2006) wrote that the ‘progressive liberalization of trade in education’ has seen ‘legally free but really for-fee’ education erode the progressive realization of economic, social and cultural rights. In Ireland, despite secondary education being legally free since 1967, commentators such as Lynch (1999) appear to agree with Tomasevski’s views on the commercialization of so-called free education. It could be said that circumstances have not improved substantially, with parents and teachers aware of the relative advantage to be gained in the private education market by those who can afford it (OECD 2011). In 2015, the UN Special Rapporteur on the right to education, Kishore Singh, observed that ‘education is being commercialized and for-profit education is flourishing as an attractive business, with scant control by public authorities’ (UN Human Rights Council 2015: 3), which further aggravates existing disparities in access to education and marginalizes the poor (ibid: 7). Education costs have increased worldwide and it is anticipated that these costs will continue to increase over time. This upward trend is closely linked to the concept of affordability (Wolff et al. 2014).

Other education systems have become characterized by the concept of marketization, such as Sweden, where a distinction is emerging between independent schools, run by private actors, and schools that are owned and run by municipalities (Magnusson 2020). The Abidjan Principles on the Human Rights Obligations of States to Provide Public Education and to Regulate Private Involvement in Education (Abidjan Principles) were adopted in February 2019 and have been welcomed by the UN Human Rights Council and the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights. The Abidjan Principles ‘unpack and compile existing provisions in international human rights law and provide guidance on how to put them into practice in the context of the rapid expansion of private sector involvement in education’, through ten overarching principles (Abidjan Principles 2019). These principles include respect, protection and fulfilment of the right to education including rights to equality and non-discrimination (Principle 1) and prioritization of the funding and

provision of free, quality, public education (Principle 5). In 2014, Kishore Singh described privatization as ‘aggravating marginalization and exclusion in education and creating inequities in society’ (UN General Assembly 2014: 8). Furthermore, he subsequently published a report (UN General Assembly 2015) linking privatization and public–private partnerships in education, whereby ‘States cease to be fully responsible for the provision of education directly to their citizens but rather assume the role of a contractor of services delivered by a range of private providers’ (ibid: 6). Singh stated that voucher systems which support private providers should be abolished and observed that some governments provide subsidies and financial support to private providers instead of investing in expanding educational opportunities in public education (ibid: 10). A Principal of a private school in Ireland, interviewed as part of this study, was questioned as to whether he felt that there is an educational advantage to be purchased by those who can afford it. He responded:

I don’t know if I’d look at it as they’re buying a Leaving Cert [the university matriculation examination in Ireland], they’re buying a result. I think they’re buying the chance, if that makes sense? . . . it’s not like ‘Well, it’s 50 euros if you want 400 points and 52 euros if you want 500’. Like that’s buying a Leaving Cert, you know. I think it’s more you’re buying the surroundings, you’re buying your, the type of student, an ambitious type of student who’s going to also buy into the system.

Another potential advantage of private education, as outlined by the same interviewee, is the benefit of smaller class sizes offered in these establishments:

I think that a large part of what goes on in the private school industry is dependent on what’s going on in the general situation at that time. Like if the Minister for Education decided tomorrow that they’re going to increase the pupil–teacher ratio to 35, well then obviously people are going to say ‘Well we want to be in smaller classes’ and our classes are a lot smaller, so therefore they move.

The current global pandemic, COVID-19, and the shift to remote learning appears to have further exacerbated these social inequalities (OECD 2020; UNESCO 2020; Wayman 2020). Orla Doyle (2020) has observed that a lack of physical resources, time constraints and parental literacy issues may be more salient in lower socioeconomic status households, while recently published research reveals that an estimated 10,000 Irish students ‘are at a disadvantage when it comes to access to technology’ (O’Kelly 2020; Social Justice Ireland 2020). Although the Irish government has allocated 10 million euros to allow schools to take steps—such as buying mobile phone credit or giving school computers to students—to help narrow the digital divide (O’Brien and O’Halloran 2020), the ‘evidence to date suggests that the negative impact on students’ learning has been greater for less highly motivated students and in particular those with less ready access to online provision’ (Government of Ireland 2020b).

Public education, financed through taxation, is supposed to equalize educational opportunities (Klees and Thapliyal 2007), but children from relatively poorer backgrounds still appear to be at an inherent disadvantage due to their relative inability to compete financially in an increasingly privatized market. Acknowledging a degree of unfairness with the current system, the Principal remarked:

You’d love a situation where every kid who has, you know, the drive and the will to want to do well that they actually get that chance, that surrounding factors don’t kind of silence it.

Ireland is not impervious to the ‘creeping’ international trend that views education as a tradeable service. Lynch (2014) pointed out that the protection of the right to education is

essential to the realization of other human rights, particularly at a time when education is increasingly defined as a market commodity that should be provided on a ‘pay as you go’ basis. A study conducted by Lynch and O’Riordan (2006) found that relative poverty was regarded as a principal barrier to equality of access to education for low income, working class students. This was reiterated by UNESCO (2019) which indicated that ‘poverty, which disproportionately affects marginalized groups, is the biggest barrier to accessing education’. This, of course, is not just an Irish phenomenon. The OECD (2018) reported that ‘there is no country in the world that can yet claim to have entirely eliminated socioeconomic inequalities in education’, while in Canada, to take one international example, the socioeconomic background of a student was deemed to have a statistically significant impact on their access to post-secondary education (Frempong et al. 2012). Regrettably, these economic barriers reinforce prevailing stereotypes, whereby ‘[r]ich people, as a salient societal group, are cross-nationally stereotyped as more competent than poor people, especially under conditions of greater income inequality. In contrast, poor people are stereotyped as lazy’ (Durante and Fiske 2017).

Tomasevski wrote that where direct, indirect and opportunity cost barriers preclude equality of access to education, it is incumbent upon the government to provide widespread subsidies and scholarships to poorer families in a bid to offset these barriers (Klees and Thapliyal 2007). Commentators such as Drudy and Lynch (1993) have observed that educationally ambitious families are predominantly middle class and have the economic and cultural resources to secure a relative advantage, while in 2014, the then Minister for State, Kathleen Lynch, wrote that education in Ireland is little more than a competition for advantage in an unequal society, where those with the greatest resources use their wealth to gain an advantage for their children in schools. This trend appears to have continued unabated, with the Principal of a private school noting a degree of ‘parental competition’, whereby parents willingly pay for private tuition in order to gain a potential advantage for their child in the Leaving Certificate examination:

You might have somebody who’s getting grinds to keep up with the Joneses and somebody else who’s getting grinds because they want an angle and the person who wants the angle, no matter how successful the grind is, they will not tell their next-door neighbour. They will not tell their cousins, they will not tell their friends, because they want their son, their daughter to have the edge. And they don’t want that edge spread out.

The European Commission (2019: 26) has concluded that ‘socio-economic status is not only a predictor of academic performance. It also strongly affects pupils’ educational expectations’. Early school leaving is a particular concern as it relates to economic barriers. Factors that contribute to early school leaving have been categorized into personal, familial and educational factors (Lundetrae 2011). In relation to family factors, single parent families and those coming from a lower socioeconomic background tend to have higher rates of early school leaving than those coming from higher income families.

In certain areas, the indirect costs associated with secondary school can contribute to early school leaving. This is a significant societal issue that is present not only in Ireland, but across Europe and the developing world (Flynn 2017). The EU average of early school leaving in 2018 was 10.6 per cent, a decrease from 11.9 per cent in 2013. The country with the highest rate of early school leaving was Spain with 17.9 per cent, while Croatia had the lowest rate at 3.3 per cent (Eurostat 2018). In Ireland, the 2018 percentage of early school

leaving was five per cent, decreasing from 11.8 per cent in 2009 (European Commission 2019).

In Ireland, initiatives such as the DEIS (2005) programme have helped to bridge the gap between social disadvantage and access to education at primary and post-primary levels. One of the primary motivating factors for the introduction of this strategy 'is the fact that the rates of educational under-achievement and early school leaving remain much higher for students from disadvantaged communities than for other children'. Indeed, it is estimated that one in ten children from disadvantaged backgrounds drop out of education before they reach second level (O'Mahony 2020).

The consequences of early school leaving have been well documented (D. M. Doyle et al. 2020). The Joint Committee on Education and Skills (2019) has acknowledged, for instance, that educational disadvantage can lead to issues such as unemployment, poverty and addiction, while figures from the Central Statistics Office (CSO 2017) show that the 'unemployed rate for people who had attained a primary education at most was 34.6 per cent'. This compares to an unemployment rate of 6.2 per cent for those with a third level degree or higher (Flynn 2017: 8). In this regard, the School Completion Programme, which forms part of the 2005 DEIS Strategy, has been instrumental in reducing early school leaving and in providing what one elected representative in Dublin believes is fundamentally an economically accessible education system:

I do think that everybody has an equal access to education. It mightn't be exactly what they want but everybody has access to primary school education, secondary education in this country and third level.

Noting that the cuts of approximately 30 per cent to the School Completion Programme had been raised with the Tánaiste [Deputy Head of the Irish Government] in parliament (Dáil Éireann 2015), this interviewee pointed out that she is evidently aware of the role such programmes play in keeping children in education and the consequent implications should they drop out. Again, this is not a case of Irish exceptionalism. In Italy, for instance, Borgna and Struffolino (2017) found that 'lower educated youth experience more volatile employment trajectories'.

Other positive developments aimed at improving educational outcomes include the pilot hot school meals scheme which was introduced in 36 primary schools across Ireland in September 2019, providing for over 6,600 children. The scheme entitles each child to a free daily hot lunch and endeavours to bring Ireland in line with other European countries such as Lithuania and the United Kingdom (McGuire 2019). The former Minister for Employment and Social Affairs, Regina Doherty, linked the provision of hot school meals to better educational outcomes for children:

A hot school meal is not just about nutrition, but it also guarantees a better education. The research out there shows us that children who benefit from a daily nutritious hot dinner have greater focus and better learning outcomes. (DEASP 2019)

The initiative, which is inclusive of all children, 'has the potential to be hugely transformative' (Holland 2019) and can be contrasted to the existing School Meals Programme, funded by the Department of Social Protection, which is aimed solely at children suffering from deprivation. The Zurich Cost of Education Survey 2019 listed school lunches as the second highest annual cost for children in Irish primary and secondary schools (Zurich

Ireland 2019), thus this programme could prove to be an important step in alleviating the associated costs of education should it be phased in across all schools in Ireland.

Despite the closure of schools in March 2020 due to the public health crisis, the continued provision of school meals to disadvantaged learners was considered to be an ‘essential service’. Moreover, the programme was extended in June 2020 to enable children who do not have access to nutritious food to receive meals during the school summer holidays (DEASP 2020). In its report, *Combating COVID-19’s Effect on Children*, the OECD (2020) observed that ‘20 per cent of income-poor school-aged children in European OECD countries lack good quality nutrition, which is around three times higher than among non-income poor children’, while staff in Irish schools expressed concern that the inaccessibility of school meals would not only affect pupils from disadvantaged areas, but also those whose economic circumstances may have changed as a result of the pandemic (Government of Ireland 2020a). Accordingly, the Department of Education and Skills (2020), in conjunction with the Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection (DEASP), the Department of Children and Youth Affairs, and Tusla (Child and Family Agency) Education Support Service, facilitated the delivery of 250,000 food parcels to children who avail of the School Meals Programme since the closure of schools in March 2020.

Conclusion

Undoubtedly the most significant finding of this policy note is the extent to which economic inequality is the fulcrum of educational inequality (Marsh 2011). While the creation of the DEIS initiative, the ring-fencing of funds for the School Completion Programme and the Hot School Meals Scheme, inter alia, are indicative of efforts at government level to eliminate economic barriers, the research undertaken for this policy note clearly reveals that the commodification of education, along with the costs associated with school attendance, impact negatively and disproportionately on the poorer members of society (Pope 2018). Furthermore, it appears that educational inequalities have been further exacerbated during the recent public health crisis. In 2019, the Irish government dedicated 10.8 billion euros to education which was an increase of seven per cent from the previous year. It remains to be seen, however, whether this investment has a positive impact in eliminating the economic barriers to education faced by some of the most disadvantaged in Irish society (European Commission 2019).

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