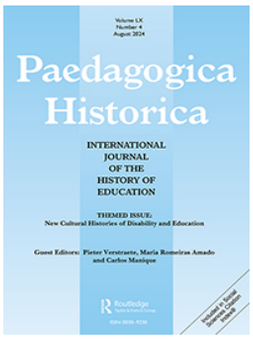
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Title	100 years of inequality?: Irish educational policy since the foundation of the state
Authors	Harford, Judith;Fleming, Brian;Hyland, Áine
Publication date	2024;2024
Original Citation	Harford, J., Fleming, B. and Hyland, Á. (2023) '100 years of inequality?: Irish educational policy since the foundation of the state', Paedagogica Historica, 60(4), pp. 726–741. https://doi.org/10.1080/00309230.2022.2155979
Type of publication	Article (peer reviewed)
Link to publisher's version	10.1080/00309230.2022.2155979
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Download date	2026-11-05 23:40:46
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International Journal of the History of Education

ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: www.tandfonline.com/journals/cpdh20

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To cite this article: Judith Harford, Brian Fleming & Áine Hyland (2024) 100 years of inequality?: Irish educational policy since the foundation of the state, Paedagogica Historica, 60:4, 726-741, DOI: 10.1080/00309230.2022.2155979

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/00309230.2022.2155979

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PAEDAGOGICA HISTORICA
2024, VOL. 60, NO. 4, 726–741
https://doi.org/10.1080/00309230.2022.2155979

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100 years of inequality?: Irish educational policy since the foundation of the state

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ABSTRACT

2022 marks one hundred years since the foundation of the Irish State, and thus an appropriate time in which to reflect on how educational policy has shaped the nation over the course of a century. This article examines one hundred years of education policy through an equality lens, asking how the concept of educational equality has been understood, fostered and mediated. Framing policy implementation across three defined periods, 1922–1959, 1960–1980 and 1981–2022, it argues that with the exception of a brief window which occurred during the 1960s, education policy has not been underpinned by rigorous policy formation based on considerations of social justice.[1]

ARTICLE HISTORY
Received 7 August 2022
Accepted 30 November 2022

KEYWORDS
Irish educational policy; Free State; equality; educational disadvantage

1922–1959: the Irish state and the framing of educational policy

Scholarship in the history of education tends to see the development of Irish educational policy as falling within a number of broad, inter-connected phases. The period 1922–1959, the early decades of the Irish Free State, is considered as one such phase which saw the reversal of the cultural assimilation and socialisation policies witnessed under British rule.[2] The Free State government inherited a system of education in 1922 which was controlled by the Churches and funded, albeit inadequately, by the state. This arrangement was copper-fastened in the 1937 Constitution, which clearly defined the system of education as state-aided rather than provided. Education policy at this time was extremely conservative, which suited the needs and thinking of the Church, politicians, and others in positions of authority. This consensus was based on the assumption that the state should exercise a limited role in providing education and in shaping policy, ceding control to private interest groups, in particular the Catholic Church, which enjoyed at this time "a grip on education of unique strength".[3]

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[1]We employ the term equality throughout as this was the term used by politicians and policy-makers in the period under review. While originally conceived of in terms of access, the 1990s marked a shift in emphasis towards equality of participation. Nonetheless, a rather limited application of the concept, narrowly understood in terms of access, still dominates to this day.

[2]John Coolahan, *Irish Education: Its History and Structure* (Dublin: Institute of Public Administration, 1981); Judith Harford and Brian Fleming, "Irish Educational Policy in the 1960s: A Decade of Transformation", *History of Education* 43, no. 5 (2014): 635–56.

[3]J.H. Whyte, *Church and State in Modern Ireland* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1980), 16; Judith Harford and Tom O'Donoghue, "Challenging the Dominant Church Hegemony in Times of Risk and Promise: Carysfort Women Resist", *Gender and Education* 33, no. 3 (2021): 372–84; and Tom O'Donoghue and Judith Harford, "A Comparative History of Church-State Relations in Irish Education", *Comparative Education Review* 55, no. 3 (2011): 315–41.

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Lynch has argued that Daniel O' Connell (1775–1847), "the Liberator" and widely acknowledged as the political leader of Ireland's Roman Catholic majority in the first half of the nineteenth century, established a pattern whereby political leadership is provided by the middle classes.[4] The leaders of the two main political parties in the early decades of the Free State, Eamon De Valera (1882–1975), the dominant Irish political figure in the first half of the twentieth century, and W. T. Cosgrave (1880–1965), were content to follow that lead and leave educational matters in the hands of the Churches. Indeed, the vast majority of politicians who emerged from the 1916–1922 period were fundamentally middle-class and conservative in outlook, albeit temporarily radicalised by the circumstances of the time. As Akenson notes: "In most matters of public policy, the Irish revolution was less a revolution than a change in management and in no area was the essential conservatism of the revolution more clearly exemplified than in the refusal of the new government to change fundamentally the school system inherited from the imperial administration".[5] Thus, there was little or no friction between the Catholic hierarchy and successive Irish governments, and such differences of opinion as arose were resolved, well away from the public eye. Any hint of a possible change in the power structure, from whatever source, resulted in a strong episcopal reaction, invariably accompanied by political compliance.[6] By way of illustration, an ongoing potential source of tension between the hierarchy and successive Irish governments was the poor condition of a vast number of primary schools. The hierarchy had steadfastly resisted government funding for Catholic schools while under British rule, fearing an erosion of their powerbase; this stance continued post-Independence. As a result, it fell to the individual school manager, invariably the local parish priest, to source the necessary funding for the upkeep of schools, many of whom failed in their endeavours. Towards the end of the 1920s the problem became acute, leading to the Minister for Education, John Marcus O'Sullivan, writing to the Archbishop of Dublin on the matter:

> Luckily, (or otherwise), for the moment the State is not in a position to shoulder a new burden. But if the financial conditions improve a future minister may find it difficult if not impossible to resist the attacks, unless the managers as a whole realise the importance of the issues at stake and take their responsibilities more seriously.[7]

The letter, written from the Minister's home as opposed to his governmental office, reflects his reluctance to force the issue, despite its potential to damage the government. Not surprisingly, the issue did not go away and indeed re-emerged in the decade of the 1940s. Yet again, on that occasion, the Minister for Education, Tomás Derrig, took a similarly deferential tone in his dealings with the hierarchy, merely suggesting that the Bishops should establish diocesan committees to address the issue. He noted privately some years later that in many cases no such committee had been established.[8]

[4]P. Lynch, "The Social Revolution that Never was", in *The Irish Struggle, 1916–1926*, ed. T.D. Williams (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1966).
[5]D.H. Akenson, *A Mirror to Kathleen's Face: Education in Independent Ireland, 1922–1960* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1975), 25.
[6]Tom O'Donoghue and Judith Harford, *Piety and Privilege: Catholic Secondary Schooling in Ireland and the Theocratic State, 1922–67* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021).
[7]The Byrne Papers, November 1928. Dublin Diocesan Archives.
[8]DT, S12891, National Archives of Ireland.

Reviewing the period up until the end of the de Valera era (1959), Whyte comments:

> the remarkable feature of education policy in Ireland has been the reluctance of the State to touch on the entrenched positions of the Church …. This has given Church-State relations in Ireland an unusual characteristic. Taking the world as a whole, one can say that education has caused more trouble between Church and State than any other single topic. In self-governing Ireland, it has only rarely been an issue.[9]

In similar vein, O'Donoghue observes that the evolution of educational policy in the first four decades of Independence reveals as much about the political class as it does about the hierarchy:

> The acceptance by successive Irish governments of the major influence which the Catholic Church had over secular education was one of the ways in which they demonstrated throughout the period 1922–62 that they did not espouse a revolutionary and secular republicanism.[10]

O'Sullivan identifies the important contribution to bringing about change that can be made by those whom he describes as '"cultural contrarians" … "those who, while indigenous to the culture, nonetheless think otherwise in some significant regard".[11] In relation to this period of Irish education, there were some very capable and committed contrarians, albeit few in number.[12] From Independence on, the Labour party articulated a case for a more democratic and equitable education system under Tom Johnson (1872–1963) as well as his successor T. J. O'Connell (1882–1969). However, the party, and the movement generally, was weak numerically and in disarray as a result of personality differences for the next few decades. John O'Meara, Professor of Latin at University College Dublin, and, for a number of years, Irish correspondent of the *Times Education Supplement*, emerged during the 1950s as a prominent critic who criticised "successive governments for not addressing themselves seriously to the problems of education in this country. Hardly more than a ripple or two has come to disturb that stagnant pond which is the Department of Education since the State was founded".[13] To a large extent, this political inertia with respect to education was the result of the attitudes towards education of the dominant politicians of this era.

The first generation of politicians failed to produce anyone with a commitment to educational reform equal to "Rab" Butler (1902–1982), whose determination and political acumen resulted in meaningful reform of the educational system in both the Great Britain and Northern Ireland. Even if such a figure had emerged in the Republic and had been appointed Minister for Education, the level of support available to him/her was not analogous to that enjoyed by their British counterpart. As Williams observes of de Valera "in social and economic affairs, he proved to be a leader of conservative government … he stood for social revolution on the basis of the status quo".[14] However, as Ferriter notes

[9]Whyte, *Church and State*, 21.
[10]Tom O'Donoghue, *The Catholic Church and the Secondary School Curriculum in Ireland, 1922–1962* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 1999), 134.
[11]Denis O'Sullivan, *Cultural Politics and Irish Education since the 1950s* (Dublin: Institute of Public Administration, 2005), 461–2.
[12]Judith Harford and Brian Fleming, "Agency and Advocacy: The Key Actors behind the 'Free Education' Initiative", in *Education for All? The Legacy of Free Post-Primary Education*, ed. Judith Harford (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2018), 55–84.
[13]J.J. O'Meara, *Reform in Education* (Dublin: Mount Salus Press, 1958), 6.
[14]T.D. Williams, "Conclusion", in *The Years of the Great Test*, ed. T.D. Williams (Mercier Press: Cork, 1967), 173–83.

"de Valera was by no means the sole villain in the destructive lack of ambition and vision that plagues the Irish educational system", rather that this lack of ambition and vision had "the tacit or even active assent of most of Irish society".[15]

A lack of courageous leadership coupled with an absence of insight and empathy in the period 1922–1959 thus resulted in an ignorance regarding the transformative and democratising potential of education. The Church State nexus, rooted in a male, middle-class, conservative world view, fostered an education system in its own likeness, privileging a minority and reinforcing hegemonic norms and ideals.

A period of modernisation and reflection, 1960–1980

The 1960s is largely regarded by scholars as a transformative decade in the history of modern Ireland, which witnessed a paradigm shift in education policy. Marked by a more interventionist, strategic policy approach, this period resulted in significant democratisation of education, particularly at the post-primary level.[16] Analysis of public policy as a discipline is dominated by a number of metaphors scholars have employed in order to make sense of policy-making. Chief among these are policy stages, cycles and streams.[17] For the purposes of this research, the authors draw in particular on the work of Kingdon, who frames policy-making according to three streams: the problem stream, wherein policy-makers identify an issue which requires action; the policy stream, wherein policy actors devise and advance possible responses to issues; and the politics stream, which involves changes in government as well as transformations in public opinion on key policy issues. For the most part, Kingdon holds that these three streams flow independently of one another, but result from time to time in a confluence which creates a window of opportunity for policy entrepreneurs to bring about policy change.[18]

The period 1960–1980 incorporated the one occasion when, in Kingdon's terms, a window of opportunity opened for Irish education. Largely triggered by the economic crisis of the late 1950s, the 1960s saw a move from a theocentric to a mercantile paradigm, with the economic imperative of education, influenced by international influences, driving the policy agenda.[19] Central to this policy shift was the OECD report, *Investment in Education* (OECD, 1965), which significantly informed the state's policy for educational expansion. The report formed part of a wider analysis of education systems across a number of countries. The survey team, under the leadership of a prominent economist, Paddy Lynch (1917–2001), began work in 1962 and its report was published in 1965. Among the key issues which the report highlighted were marked inequalities based on social class and geographical location and the high dropout rate after primary school.[20]

[15]Diarmaid Ferriter, *Judging Dev* (Dublin: Royal Irish Academy, 2007), 282.
[16]Brian Fleming, Judith Harford and Áine Hyland, "Reflecting on 100 Years of Educational Policy in Ireland: Was Equality Ever a Priority?", *Irish Educational Studies* 41, no. 3 (2022): 441–55.
[17]Michael Howlett, Allan McConnell and Anthony Perl, "Streams and Stages: Reconciling Kingdon and Policy Process Theory", *European Journal of Political Research* 54, no. 3 (2015): 419–34.
[18]John Kingdon, *Agendas, Alternatives and Public Policies*, 2nd ed. (London: Longman, 2011).
[19]O'Sullivan, *Cultural Politics and Irish Education since the 1950s.*
[20]Judith Harford and Brian Fleming, "Agency and Advocacy: The Key Actors behind the 'Free Education' Initiative"; Áine Hyland, "The Birth of the Free Education Scheme", in *Education for all? The Legacy of Free Post Primary Education in Ireland*, ed. Harford, 27–54.

The report was compiled at a time when the issue of equality of opportunity, heretofore narrowly understood, was now gaining traction. The Irish-American academic Eoin MacTiarnáin, in an address to the Conference of Convent Secondary Schools in 1960, condemned the "degree of class differences and an acceptance of the doctrine of class differences" which he found in the Irish system. In his view, education "should be made available on equal terms to all citizens".[21]

The Federation of Irish Secondary Schools also produced an influential report (1962) which provided a detailed statistical analysis of educational provision in Ireland vis-à-vis that of some neighbouring jurisdictions. The report noted, for example, that the financial provision for primary education calculated on a per capita basis was about 75% of that in England and Wales and, at secondary level, approximately one-third.[22] In an editorial, the *Irish Independent* broadsheet described the report as "refreshingly direct and incisive", endorsing its call for increased resources for education and the establishment of a permanent planning unit in the Department of Education.[23] The main opposition parties were contemporaneously issuing important policy documents. The Labour Party issued *Challenge and Change in Education* in 1963, which called for free post-primary education irrespective of social class:

> Education in Ireland today, despite the fact that increasing numbers of children are receiving post-primary education of one sort or another, remains essentially a part of a structure of social and financial class privileges which serve to prevent the full utilisation of the human resources of the community and which are in complete opposition to Labour's concept of a good society.[24]

In *Towards a Just Society* published in 1965, Fine Gael, the main opposition party, promised to "introduce a system to enable every child capable of benefitting from further education to proceed from national school right through to university irrespective of the financial circumstances of the child's parents".[25]

It thus became imperative that the government respond and take a position on the issue or otherwise political opponents could have seized the initiative. A newly appointed Minister for Education, Donogh O'Malley (1921–1968), took many by surprise when, in his first major speech since his appointment, he condemned the inequalities inherent within the existing system, describing the fact that one-third of young people received no education beyond primary level as "a dark stain on the National conscience". In the same speech, he announced plans to introduce a system of free second-level education: "I am glad to be able to announce that I am drawing up a scheme under which, in future, no boy or girl in this State will be deprived of full educational opportunity – from primary to university level – by reason of the fact that the parents cannot afford to pay for it".[26]

This was a defining moment in the history of education in Ireland, which saw not only significant structural change at second level, but also the expansion of technical

[21]Quoted in Eileen Randles, *Post-Primary Education in Ireland, 1957–1970* (Dublin: Veritas Publications, 1975), 56.
[22]Federation of Irish Secondary Schools, *Investment in Education in the Republic of Ireland with Some Comparative Statistics* (Dublin: The Federation, 1962).
[23]*Irish Independent*, 12 May 1962.
[24]*Challenge and Change in Education* (Dublin: Labour Party, 1963), 1.
[25]*Towards a Just Society* (Dublin: Fine Gael, 1965).
[26]*Irish Times*, 12 September 1966.

education and curriculum modernisation across all levels of the education system.[27] Insofar as a target of increasing *access* to second-level education, in the literal sense of that word, the claim could be reasonably made that this target was met. Having said that, fundamental structural change of a radical nature was not achieved. Coolahan described the approach taken at the time as one of "pragmatic gradualism".[28] He noted the reluctance of the state Department of Education to share its thoughts on policy matters with the public, instead approaching issues with "maximum scope for *ad hoc* planning and for changing directions easily without public controversy". Bill Hyland, the leading statistician whose work was central to the findings of the Investment in Education team, subsequently observed that while "some significant steps in the direction of equality of opportunity (however defined)" had been taken, the impact on the poorest sections of society had been limited:

> It is clear that the problem is more intractable than has been previously envisaged. In addition it has now become evident that the system works in most countries in such a manner that more public money is spent on the education of persons who start life in reasonably favourable situations than on those who start life in very unfavourable circumstances. Thus even the much lower objective of equality of expenditure per student is not likely to be achieved in most European countries in the foreseeable future. Secondly, data that are just now becoming available on the situation subsequent on recent advances in this area indicate that when the general run of society moves ahead in response to better opportunities the failure of those who are not able to benefit from these opportunities becomes more evident and also of more concern.[29]

Some years later Mulcahy expressed a similar view:

> To make adequate provision for increased participation and meeting the ideal of equality of educational opportunity for all, it is necessary to take account of the various needs, interests, aptitudes, and home and socio-economic background of all pupils. And in this regard the attempts of the 1960s were very limited . . . it was a failure to assess the full extent of that challenge. [30]

Those in authority were not disposed to listen. Towards the end of the 1960s, policy-makers clearly concluded that they had either done enough to resolve the issue of access to education, or there was no more that could be achieved at that time. There followed a period of equilibrium during which time only minor changes were introduced, with the exception of a fairly significant change to the primary-school curriculum. The balance within the proximate policy-makers was now slightly altered as between Church and State and a range of other bodies began to exercise some influence. There was also a noticeable decline in dissenting voices willing to challenge the status quo. While the passage of time had contributed in some cases to their disappearance from the scene, the fact that other individuals and groups did not replace them is significant. The general complacency of the period was reflected in a comment by the Minister for Education in 1972 when he resisted calls for the publication of a White Paper on education on the

[27] Hyland, "The Birth of the Free Education Scheme"; Harford and Fleming, "Agency and Advocacy: The Key Actors behind the 'Free Education' Initiative".
[28] John Coolahan, "Educational Policy for National Schools", in *Irish Educational Policy*, ed. D.G. Mulcahy and Denis O'Sullivan (Dublin: Institute of Public Administration, 1991), 62.
[29] W.J. Hyland, "Education and Irish society with Special Reference to Informational Needs", *Journal of the Staistical and Social Inquiry Society of Ireland* xxii, no. iii (1971): 74.
[30] D.G. Mulcahy, *Curriculum and Policy in Irish Post-Primary Education* (Dublin: Institute of Public Administration, 1981), 44.

grounds that such an initiative "could serve little purpose other than to delay the implementation of a policy which is both explicit and unambiguous".[31] Issues being identified in the newly developing policy stream did not attract enough attention to emerge on the active agenda, which by now was becoming dominated by security issues, the late 1960s witnessing the beginning of a volatile era of sectarian violence in Northern Ireland.

1981–2022 incrementalism

Analysis of educational policy in the period following the significant reforms of the 1960s illustrates a lean towards incrementalism or punctuated equilibrium in which administrators made minor adjustments in an effort to bring about some improvement without threatening the status quo.[32] The role of the Department of Education in the early years of the new state was minimal, playing very much a secondary one to Church authorities in the matter of policy formation. The O'Malley reforms changed that power dynamic but only gradually. In this final phase of our analysis, 1981–2022, the Department of Education was to assume a more prominent position. This shift was carefully managed and based on a partnership process with ongoing consultation with representative bodies including school patrons, management bodies, trades unions and representatives of parents and, more recently, students (usually referred to as the Education Partners). A distinguishing feature of this third era was the significant level of activity in the policies stream particularly throughout the 1990s. A Green Paper, *Education for a Changing World*, was issued as a discussion document in 1992. An unprecedented public consultative process ensued the following year in the form of a National Education Convention and its secretariat, a group of distinguished educationalists, subsequently issued a report on the relevant issues.[33] This initiative was the brainchild of the Minister for Education, Niamh Breathnach, and was especially significant as it marked a decisive move away from the tradition of one-to-one negations with the Catholic Church, carried out in secrecy. A White Paper, *Charting Our Education Future*, summarising the government's policy proposals, followed in 1995. In relation to equity the Green Paper of 1992 was more explicit in these matters than any government publication previously. The first aim, in a list of six, was "to establish greater equity in education – particularly for those who are disadvantaged socially, economically, physically or mentally".[34] Equality of opportunity was defined as an "overall national strategy for education".[35] The document was quite clear on the need to provide "a higher than proportionate allocation of resources" to be targeted at the problems of disadvantaged students.[36] This thinking remained central to both the NEC report[37] and the

[31]Dáil Éireann (DÉ), 2/03/1972, vol. 259, no. 6.
[32]Fleming, Harford and Hyland, "Reflecting on 100 Years of Educational Policy in Ireland: Was Equality Ever a Priority?", *Irish Educational Studies* 41, no. 3 (2022): 441–55; F.R. Baumgartner and B.D. Jones, *Agendas and Instability in American Politics*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009).
[33]John Coolahan, ed., *Report on the National Education Convention* (Dublin: NEC Secretariat, 1994).
[34]Government of Ireland, *White Paper, Charting our Education Future* (Dublin: Stationery Office, 1995), 6.
[35]Ibid., 7.
[36]Ibid.
[37]Coolahan, ed., *Report on the National Education Convention.*

White Paper (1995). Also published in 1995 was an important report entitled *Educational Disadvantage in Ireland*.[38] This report also favoured a targeted approach to tackling educational disadvantage but was keen to stress that the number of schools involved should not be large, "not more than 25 to 30 and should include the most severely disadvantaged schools in the country".[39] The policy momentum of the 1990s culminated in the passing of the Education Act in 1998, which represented a significant step in the framing of a wider legislative base for primary and post-primary education.[40] Section 6 (c) is most relevant to this piece, stating as one of the objectives:

> To promote equality of access to and participation in education and to promote the means whereby students may benefit from education.[41]

Significantly, the definition of equality of opportunity, which heretofore had been limited to access, was now extended to incorporate equality of participation. As part of an extensive section on educational disadvantage, the legislation included provision for the minister to appoint a committee to advise him or her on "policies and strategies to be adopted to identify and to correct educational disadvantage".[42] In the original bill the clause included the Minister *may* appoint such a committee but in the course of the parliamentary debate this was changed to *shall* on the proposal of the minister, Micheál Martin.

The following year Martin launched *The New Deal; A Plan for Educational Opportunity*, which was critical of previous provision, commenting that "resources should be targeted at those most in need. Thinly spread and broadly based interventions should be avoided".

Similarly, the plan acknowledged that educational disadvantage could already be "entrenched by the time children arrive at infant class" and noted that the Department had historically paid little direct attention to this. In this context, a comprehensive early education policy was to be developed and implemented. In essence, the document outlined plans to bring together various initiatives which had been introduced over previous years into a more comprehensive strategy. These included an early school-leaver's initiative, additional resources for guidance at second level, more rational identification of schools in need of assistance to address these matters, and the setting up of a support service to assist schools in implementing student retention plans.

The Educational Disadvantage Committee

The Educational Disadvantage Committee (EDC), as provided for in the 1998 Education Act, was appointed in March 2002 by the then Minister for Education, Michael Woods, for a term of three years. Unusually in Irish education it was designed as an expert rather than a representative group, with the legislation specifying that no more than half of the

[38]Thomas Kellaghan, Susan Weir, S. Ó hUallacháin and Mark Morgan, *Educational Disadvantage in Ireland* (Dublin: Department of Education/Combat Poverty Agency/Educational Research Centre, 1995).
[39]Ibid., 66.
[40]Dympna Glendenning, *Education and the Law* (Dublin: Butterworths, 1999); Judith Harford, "Teacher Education Policy in Ireland and the Challenges of the 21st Century", *European Journal of Teacher Education* 33, no. 4 (2010): 349–60.
[41]The Department of Education, The Education Act, 1998, s. 6.
[42]Ibid., s. 32 (1).

members were to be nominees of relevant groups. During its term of office, the group submitted four important reports to the Minister for Education on the issue of identifying disadvantage and targeting resources, teacher supply and staffing in disadvantaged areas, an integrated delivery service and priority areas for action in adult and community education. It concluded its term of office with a final report entitled *Moving Beyond Educational Disadvantage*,[43] in which it identified a number of principles which it felt should underline any national policy. This represented a rights-based approach to equality, inclusion of diversity, integration of strategies, structures and systems, coherence of provision, focussed target-setting, and measurement and monitoring of outcomes and results. This in turn led to a strategy based on three goals:

(1) Achieve educational equality in the broader context of achieving social inclusion.
(2) Provide inclusive opportunities for learning at all stages of the life cycle, from birth onwards.
(3) Improve the mainstream school system so that all young people aged from three to eighteen receive an education that is appropriate to their needs.[44]

In relation to each of its objectives, the committee recommended a course of action including priority investment in disadvantaged areas, which was to be carried out in a strategic manner; provision of adequate resources to the National Education Welfare Board; more integrated practice as between the various governmental departments, local authorities and agencies, both voluntary and statutory, involved in the provision of services to children and young people; the promotion of high standards of literacy and numeracy across all age groups; using schools as locations for before and after school education programmes; providing timely and effective support to ensure that no learner was left behind; recognising alternative provisions such as Youthreach as meeting the requirements for compulsory schooling; and preventing early school-leaving by providing appropriate intervention programmes in pre-school, primary and post-primary and in the community. In relation to implementation of the strategy which it had devised, the EDC set out a number of conditions that needed to be in place if it were to be successfully implemented. These included a clear focus on outcomes, availability of the necessary resources, effective communication of the strategy to all the relevant parties, and an emphasis on measuring and reporting outcomes.

The DEIS (delivering equality of opportunity in schools) programme

In May 2005, the Minister for Education, Mary Hanafin, launched the DEIS Programme. The DEIS plan introduced an objective assessment of schools to be incorporated in the programme and an integration of various initiatives was proposed. As regards post-primary education, extra funding was to be made available to about 150 designated schools, including an additional grant under the School Books Scheme, resources to fund a Whole School Literacy and Numeracy Strategy, and inclusion in the Home School

[43]Educational Disadvantage Committee, *Moving Beyond Educational Disadvantage: Report of the Educational Disadvantage Committee* (Dublin: EDC, 2005).
[44]Ibid., 28.

Community Liaison Scheme and School Completion Programme. A total of forty additional guidance counsellors were assigned and the Junior Certificate Schools Programme demonstration library project, which then incorporated eleven schools, was extended to another ten. As an essential part of the programme, school planning and target-setting measures were to be provided. The various initiatives which had previously been available in schools serving disadvantaged areas were to be integrated into a school support programme, and outside agencies such as the National Education Welfare Board were seen as important participants in ensuring this. Progress on the implementation of plans was to be reviewed on an annual basis. It is noticeable, however, that no effort was made to analyse the educational needs of particular areas, their extent, and the resources which would be needed to address them.

In their final report, the EDC welcomed the introduction of the DEIS plan. However, as they pointed out, their own plan went further. In particular, it was based on the belief that "schools alone cannot achieve educational equality", and so it stressed the role of other bodies, government departments and agencies, together with the voluntary sector, in working towards a bigger social and economic change agenda.[45] In particular it stressed the importance of encouraging marginalised communities to identify their problems and work towards their solution in tandem with agencies of the State. The DEIS plan had a narrower focus, essentially outlining actions that should be taken within the formal education system, thereby excluding in particular the possibility of intervention with pre-school children, whereas the EDC had identified that as a priority. In addition, the EDC called for "joined up action at both local and national level".[46] In its view the objective should be "not only equality of opportunity and equality of participation but equality of outcomes and equality of condition".[47]

The term of office of the first EDC, due to end in March 2005, was extended to June to allow it to complete its final report. The production by the Department of the DEIS plan in May came as something of a surprise to members of the committee. It seems that they were unaware that the Department was intending to take this step even though some senior officials had been attending meetings of the EDC. One member, with long experience in the ways of government departments, recalls feeling they were "gazumped".[48] In his view the representatives of the Department who attended EDC meetings never really engaged with the process but "made a pretence of doing so". Another member refers to officials engaging when a "pet" project was mentioned. The fact that various officials had different "pets", which were often in competition for resources, made the work of the EDC difficult. "I had a feeling that the EDC was considered by some to be an unacceptable intrusion into the decision-making role of the DES. The EDC could advise but the DES will do its thing."[49]

Subsequently, the final report of the EDC was printed but never officially launched. When the term of office of the first committee ended, it fell to the Minister for Education and the Government to appoint a new one as required by law. There is no evidence of any urgency on the part of the Department and the Minister to appoint members to

[45]EDC, *Moving Beyond Educational Disadvantage*, 26.
[46]Ibid., 2.
[47]Ibid., 19.
[48]Brian Fleming, *Irish Education, 1922–2007: Cherishing all the Children?* (Dublin: Mynchen's Field Press, 2016), 348.
[49]Ibid.

commence a new term of office. It was six months before the Department wrote to various organisations, in January 2006, seeking their views about the composition and future work of the committee. Just over a year later, the Minister indicated to Dáil Éireann (the lower house of parliament) that the views as expressed by the various groupings were being considered, following which "the members of the new committee will be appointed".[50] However, after a further twelve months had elapsed, the Minister for State at the Department outlined a new position:

> The government has decided as part of the decision on the rationalisation of agencies in the 2009 budget that a formal statutory committee is no longer required in order to advise on the issue of education and disadvantage.[51]

In the light of many controversial decisions announced in that budget in relation to education and other matters, the abolition of the EDC did not attract any significant attention.

As the setting up of an EDC was a requirement of the Education Act of 1998, legislation was required to abolish it. This came before the Oireachtas (Parliament) in 2012, seven years since it last met, notwithstanding the legislative requirement to have an EDC in the meantime. Minister Ruairi Quinn, Minister for Education (2011–2014), expressed the view to Seanad Éireann (the upper house of parliament) that the EDC "is no longer required since the establishment of DEIS" and that the implementation and evaluation of DEIS has been continuously supported by ongoing consultation with education partners and stakeholders.[52] Subsequently, in the Dáil he advised that the Education Research Centre and the Department's inspectorate had evaluated DEIS and that he was confident that the ERC and other research bodies would continue to provide much needed data on disadvantage and inform future policy decisions.[53]

These events are difficult to rationalise. More than three years elapsed between the end of the term of office of the first EDC and the announcement of its abolition. This delay suggests a marked reluctance to appoint a replacement EDC. The explanation that the decision was made on financial grounds is not persuasive even in stringent times as the annual cost was small, amounting to €50,000 per annum, as all the members were acting in a voluntary capacity. The Minister's comments in the Dáil and Seanad that consultation with education partners and commissioned research on DEIS was equivalent to the role of an independent statutory committee was not convincing. Rather, it would appear it was a case of the Department of Education re-asserting control over the agenda. As we have seen, the Department had exercised a limited involvement in policy-making for decades and maybe it was to be expected that the current generation of senior officials would resist any further diminution by conceding power to others. The other possible explanation is that for fear of more radical proposals emerging from the EDC, the Department of Education decided to bring forward its own policy document and subsequently decided to allow the EDC to lapse.

The DEIS approach has been in place for over fifteen years now. As previously mentioned, ongoing research commissioned by the Department of Education and carried

[50]DÉ, 29/03/2007, vol. 634, no. 6.
[51]DÉ, 4/11/2008, vol. 665, no. 4.
[52]SÉ, 25/01/2012, vol. 212, no. 13.
[53]DÉ, 29/02/2012, vol. 757, no. 2.

out by the Educational Research Centre has been a feature since the start. In addition, the Economic and Social Research Institute issued a report in 2015 entitled *Learning from the Evaluation of DEIS*,[54] in which it noted in research carried out on DEIS thus far the absence of any real discussion in relation to resourcing. This surely is a fundamental gap in any rational policy-making process. The other noticeable feature is that despite the ongoing evaluation and monitoring, the DEIS programme was not revised until 2017. Again, it is reasonable to ask why one would engage in ongoing research if the findings are not feeding back into the policy-making agenda. As it happens, the revision in 2017 was a limited one. Advantage was taken of more up-to-date and focused statistics from the most recent census to refine the model for identifying schools entitled to participate in the programme. The other main change was the adoption of some numerical targets to be used in the ongoing assessment of the programme. Similarly, the revision in 2022 consisted solely of admitting new schools to the initiative based on current data. However, even though more than fifteen years of the programme had elapsed since its inception, no fundamental review was evident in its provisions and the question posed in the ESRI report regarding the necessary resources was ignored.

The preservation of inequality?

DEIS remains the government's response to the reality of educational disadvantage. So how has it fared? Assessing the impact of the DEIS programme is far from straightforward for a number of reasons. The absence of a control group, citing improved literacy and numeracy scores as evidence of progress when for most of the period there was a separate initiative under those headings, and over-reliance on so-called SMART targets, when so much of what schools are trying to do is not measurable, are just some of the problems. Having said that, two recent studies shed light on the programme's impact. Weir and Kavanagh carried out the latest in the ongoing assessments of the DEIS programme by staff of the ERC.[55] As with the previous study they used data from achievement levels in the Junior Certificate examination (a national examination taken at about age fifteen) and retention levels to the Leaving Certificate examination (taken at the end of the post-primary cycle at about age eighteen). They suggest that there has been a small but significant closing of the gap in outcomes between those attending DEIS and non-DEIS schools. On this occasion, they also examined the social context effect, that is the presence in some schools of significant proportions of students from disadvantaged backgrounds based on figures from 2016. A strong social context effect was identified which was well in excess of the previous study by the ERC,[56] leading them to conclude:

> The existence of the social context effect in 2016, and the finding that it is stronger than identified previously, suggests that positive discrimination towards schools with concentrations of students from poor backgrounds should be continued, and that these schools should continue to be targeted for additional resources.[57]

[54]Emer Smyth, Selina McCoy and Gillian Kingston, *Learning from the Evaluation of DEIS* (Dublin: ESRI, 2015).
[55]Susan Weir and Lauren Kavanagh, *The Evaluation of DEIS at Post-Primary Level: Closing the Achievement and Attainment Gaps* (Dublin: Educational Research Centre, 2018).
[56]Nick Sofroniou, Peter Archer and Susan Weir, "An Analysis of the Association between Socioeconomic Context, Gender and Achievement", *Irish Journal of Education* 35 (2004): 58–72.
[57]Ibid., 25.

A recent study using data from PISA cycles, 2009–2018, notes that "students in DEIS schools have consistently achieved significantly lower average achievement than students in non-DEIS schools . . .. While the size of the gap has narrowed significantly in reading, it has not changed significantly in mathematics or science".[58] So, the best we can conclude is that limited progress has been made since the introduction of the DEIS scheme almost twenty years ago. Any judgement of the value of the DEIS initiative must take into account the possibility that it was launched as a pre-emptive strike against more radical proposals being suggested at the time. These included not just the reports of the EDC but also the very focused suggestions involving greater resource provision put forward in Kellaghan et al. (1995) and The Expert Group on the Allocation of Teachers to Second Level Schools.[59] Substantive progress has been stymied as a result of the under-resourcing of the programme relative to the challenges faced, the lack of a sophisticated model which has failed to account for different grades of disadvantage across DEIS schools, and the enduring mind-set that educational disadvantage is an issue for schools alone with a lack of recognition and response at a policy level of its fundamental, deep-seated relationship with wider economic inequalities across Irish society.[60]

Concluding thoughts

Equality of educational opportunity has been retained as a policy objective, and restated regularly since Independence. As regards this objective, three distinct phases are clear. In the early decades of the State, 1922–1959, no serious steps were taken to introduce the policies necessary to provide for a more equitable educational landscape. Phase two (1960–1980) was a period of intense activity followed by a decade or so of consolidation; nonetheless even then the initial and over-riding motivation was economic, rather than social. After 1980, incremental changes were introduced but not at a sufficiently ambitious or effective scale to fundamentally move the needle on educational disadvantage, the key question, of course, being why not?

The proximate policy-makers, initially the Church and State, joined in more recent years by the teacher unions, have not displayed a strong commitment to achieving this objective. Their priorities have historically rested, and indeed continue to rest, elsewhere. In the case of the Church, the over-riding concern has been one of control. In the case of the unions, conditions of service of members have always represented their paramount goal. The education partners, who have enjoyed significant consultation rights on policy development, have tended to favour an approach based on spreading resources thinly in order to keep their constituent members happy. As regards the State, the priority was to avoid conflict with the Church initially and, in more recent years, with the unions also, while at the same time lining up with international norms and standards and espousing a quasi-equality agenda. Furthermore, the regular turnover in the personnel serving as Ministers for Education has been a serious problem in Irish education in relation to long-

[58]Lorraine Gilleece, Sharon Nelis, Caitríona Fitzgerald and Jude Cosgrove, *Reading, Mathematics and Science Achievement in DEIS Schools: Evidence from PISA, 2018* (Dublin: ERC, 2020), xv.
[59]Seamus McGuinness, *Report of the Expert Group on the Allocation of Teachers to Second Level Schools* (Dublin: Department of Education, 2001).
[60]Brian Fleming and Judith Harford, "The DEIS Programme as a Policy aimed at Combating Educational Disadvantage: Fit for Purpose?", *Irish Educational Studies* (2021): doi: 10.1080/03323315.2021.1964568.

term strategic policy-making at political level. In the absence of a more stable political oversight, it is perhaps inevitable that the administrative role of the Department of Education has tended to be paramount. In addition, being deprived of a policy-making role for decades seems to have left a legacy in the Department of Education which has historically adopted a more managerial approach than a leadership one, although under some ministers this has varied. Policy initiatives have arisen at various junctures, but these have tended to arise as a response to global trends and the neo-liberal agenda of organisations such as the OECD.[61] Philosophical discussion on the value of education has rarely permeated the political discourse; rather the human-capital approach has dominated. It is apparent that the electorate's interest in the education system is confined to the school their child attends, and only for the period during which this takes place. While the dominant narrative for almost two decades has been that Ireland had a world-class education system, a narrative espoused by Ministers for Education as well as education partners, this claim has been damaged by uneven performances by Irish students in the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), an exercise which in and of itself has been the subject of considerable criticism.[62]

Educational disadvantage, a contested term, shrouded in assumptions, which as Urban notes is often the case with "the use of labels in educational discourse",[63] is a problem which transcends time and space[64] and one thus one not amenable to easy solutions. The 1960s in the Irish context was the one era when a window opened and meaningful reform was introduced which went a significant way towards democratising education. An active community of contrarians, access to and strategic use of the media, public awareness of and engagement with the issue of educational disadvantage, and an appetite for political reform all coalesced to bring about change. Yet, even those at the very centre of activity underestimated the intractable nature of the problem,[65] despite their efforts transforming the possibilities for generations of young people. The intractable nature of the problem of educational disadvantage continues to be underestimated. Admittedly, there are critics, but their concerns cover a wider range of areas including gender, disability and ethnicity. In this crowded arena, social class as an issue can lose out. The situation is far more complex now and whilst the media continue to cover educational topics as they arise, the diverse nature of the issues and critiques tends to dissipate the message to the general public. Having said that, the numbers of those

[61]Paul Conway and Rosaleen Murphy, "A Rising Tide Meets a Perfect Storm: New Accountabilities in Teaching and Teacher Education in Ireland", *Irish Educational Studies* 32, no. 1 (2013): 11–36; Jim Gleeson and Diarmaid Ó Donnabháin, "Strategic Planning and Accountability in Irish Education", *Irish Educational Studies* 28, no. 1 (2009): 27–46; Anthony Malone and Padraig Hogan, "Evidence and its Consequences in Educational Research", *British Educational Research Journal* 46, no. 2 (2020): 265–80; and Geraldine Mooney-Simmie, "The Pied Piper of Neo Liberalism Calls the Tune in the Republic of Ireland: An Analysis of Education Policy Text from 2000–2012", *Journal for Critical Education Policy Studies* 10, no. 2 (2012): 485–514.

[62]Regula Bürgi, "Systemic Management of Schools: The OECD's Professionalisation and Dissemination of Output Governance in the 1960s", *Paedagogica Historica* 52, no. 4 (2016): 408–22; Radhika Gorur, "Seeing like PISA: A Cautionary Tale about the Performativity of International Assessments", *European Educational Research Journal* 15, no. 5 (2016): 598–616.

[63]Wayne J. Urban, "What's in a name: Education and the Disadvantaged American, (1962)", *Paedagogica Historica* 45, no. 1–2 (2009): 251.

[64]A.R. Sadovnik and S.F. Semel, "Education and Inequality: Historical and Sociological Approaches to Schooling and Social Stratification", *Paedagogica Historica* 46, no. 1–2 (2010): 1–13.

[65]Hyland, "Education and Irish society with Special Reference to Informational Needs"; Mulcahy, *Curriculum and Policy in Irish Post-Primary Education*.

losing out in the education system are smaller than was the case previously, but is that good enough? There is no evidence of a Taoiseach (Prime Minister) taking a whole-of-government approach to tackling the issue as was the case with Seán Lemass in the 1960s. The same applies to the political establishment generally and, as a result, senior administrators naturally tend to follow this lead. Most if not all of those who assume decision-making positions in relation to Irish education, both political and administrative, and those who seek to influence them, are members of the "contented majority".[66] They have no direct or family experience of educational disadvantage. In their contentment, they tend to take a short-term view of matters, which, because of the nature of the political cycle, is the approach typically favoured by governments. The history of Irish education in relation to educational disadvantage illustrates that windows of opportunity which allow for policy entrepreneurs to bring about policy change (Kingdon, 1984; 2011) have been limited and that possibilities created through these openings have not been optimised. The possibilities of the advent of "free education" in the 1960s is a case in point.

The current government has undertaken to establish a citizen's assembly on education. The range of issues to be discussed is vast so the process will be difficult to manage. However, if successful, it could lead to a "window of opportunity" opening for the education system and those it serves for only the second time in a century. A more focused and targeted approach is required to achieve the objective of equality of participation as stated in the Education Act (1998). More than two decades have passed since the legislation was passed and progress has been extremely slow. Thus, total spending on education needs to be increased. Within that more positive discrimination in favour of the disadvantaged is necessary. This will require a generosity of spirit from the whole education community to support a more targeted approach to educational disadvantage. A more realistic, restructured and adequately resourced DEIS programme needs to be introduced urgently. However, relying on the Department of Education and schools, even if adequately resourced, to solve the problem of educational disadvantage is a flawed strategy. It is a problem in and of itself but also a symptom of deeper problems of poverty in various forms. Accordingly, it requires a whole-of-government approach encompassing a serious and robust policy response. The young citizens of Ireland, particularly those living in challenging circumstances, are entitled to expect nothing less.[67]

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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[66] J.K. Galbraith, *The Culture of Contentment* (London: Sinclair-Stevenson, 1992).
[67] Judith Harford, Áine Hyland and Brian Fleming, *Rethinking Educational Disadvantage*, Special Issue of *Irish Educational Studies* 41, no. 3 (London: Taylor & Francis, 2022).

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