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**Working with Schools in Disadvantaged Communities: A Case Study of Cork Learning Neighbourhoods**

Paper for Special issue of journal Revue Internationale d'Education de Sevres "Schools and their local communities" (No 98, April 2025), available on https://journals.openedition.org/ries/16386

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**Key words:** education inequality, Learning City, Learning Neighbourhood, schools in areas of deprivation

**Abstract**

This article documents the initiatives of Cork Learning Cities and Neighbourhoods with schools in disadvantaged communities in Cork City, Ireland's second largest city, to tackle the persistence of education stratification and inequality of education opportunities and outcomes. Through a community development approach, Learning Cities and Neighbourhoods works to create collaboration across learning sectors, including primary and secondary schools, community groups, and further and higher education institutions. The article explores the bottom-up, collaborative approach of Learning Neighbourhoods and shows how authentic partnerships between learning organisations and communities can be developed to enhance learning opportunities and pathways to further and higher education.

**Introduction: Education disadvantage and inequality in Ireland**

Inequality in education remains persistent in many parts of the world. For decades, education disadvantage and stratification has been documented in Ireland and globally in terms of access to, retention, and attainment in schooling and in further and higher education. There is a complex combination of personal, familial, socio-economic, cultural, and policy factors that impact on education pathways and outcomes. Social class and socio-economic status, poverty and deprivation, gender, disability, ethnicity, immigrant background, characteristics of educational systems, and school characteristics are among the key elements that shape and

affect the educational trajectories of children and young people (Gogescu, 2024; OECD, 2024; O'Sullivan et al, 2017). Inter-generational aspects are particularly highlighted in the research, especially parental occupation and education levels. As OECD findings from 'Education at a Glance' state (2024, p.4) "the most significant inequalities in education are related to parents' and students' socio-economic backgrounds". The OCED furthermore highlight how

> "Attainment passes down the generations: 30% of adults whose parents did not attain upper secondary education also failed to do so themselves, but only 4% of adults whose parents achieved tertiary education do not attain at least upper secondary education. Students whose parents have lower educational attainment are also substantially over-represented in vocational programmes in almost all OECD countries" (ibid).

For those most excluded who experience barriers to education, they can develop a sense of not belonging to education, which can lead to disengagement, early school leaving, and the closing of opportunities for further and higher education (Harwood et al, 2013). Research across OECD countries show that "even in the most equitable countries, the most disadvantaged students do not achieve the same level of performance in the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) as their more advantaged peers" (OECD, 2024, p.4). In Ireland, according to the 2022 Census, 8% of people aged 15 years and over (269,752 people) stated that they completed their full-time education before the age of 16. This has decreased from 10% in 2016 and 13% in 2011.[1] Lower levels of education are more prevalent among the older population as Ireland didn't introduce free secondary schooling until 1967. However, in 2022, just under 11,000 people with no formal education, or primary education only, were aged between 15 and 29 years. Regarding progression to higher education, figures from the HEA (2019) show the relationship between socio-economic group and entry to university with just 16.4% of student entrants from manual skilled or unskilled socio-economic groups, while 54.3% of entrants were from professional and non-manual groups. This inequality is also geographically concentrated; for example, some postal districts in Dublin have over 99% of 18–20-year-olds going on to higher education, while in others the rate is as low as 15%. Similarly in Cork City, there is a clear spatial component to educational attainment and disadvantage, with areas north of the city centre in particular having much lower education levels.

It is important to note that we are not suggesting that university education per se should be the aspiration of all learners, nor that technical and vocational education is a less worthy aspiration. What we see in the trends discussed above is a stratification of the educational system, such that socio-economic and other factors become the primary indicators of educational trajectory, rather than the learner's inherent capacity and life goals. There are potentially factors like status impacting the children of those with tertiary education not choosing vocational options, which is also a factor of this stratification. The central point we wish to make in this article is that those with pre-existing barriers are disproportionately inhibited from advancing within the education system.

**Cork UNESCO Learning City**

[1] Irish Census 2022 data on education is drawn from two profiles: Education and Economic Status and Level of Education.

Tackling education inequality and disadvantage therefore remains a priority in policy and practice. This article documents the initiatives of the Cork Learning Cities and Learning Neighbourhoods programme in schools in deprived and marginalised communities of Cork City, Ireland's second most populous city. UNESCO defines a learning city as "a city which effectively mobilizes its resources in every sector to promote inclusive learning from basic to higher education".[2] Cork was presented with the UNESCO Learning City award in 2015 by the UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning in recognition of its progress in delivering lifelong learning and annual vibrant annual Lifelong Learning Festival. The festival, which has been running since 2004, is a week-long celebration of lifelong learning, open to learners of all ages, interests and abilities. It brings partner organisations from public, private and community sectors together to offer over 425 free events that reached 28,900 participants in 2024. In 2024 Cork was the first city globally to be presented with a second Learning City award by UNESCO in recognition of its continued progress in developing lifelong learning policies and practices not only in Cork but throughout the island of Ireland and in other countries.

The Cork Learning City structure involves cross sectoral partnerships led by a steering group that includes Cork City Council, Cork Education and Training Board (CETB), University College Cork (UCC), Munster Technological University (MTU), the Health Service Executive (HSE), the National Association of Principals and Deputy Principals (NAPD), and Cork Chamber (of Commerce). The Learning City has a particular focus on SDG 4 to "Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all". Based on principles of access, of involving all stakeholders across formal, informal, and non-formal learning, and valuing all partners equally, the Learning City structure brings together Cork's extensive lifelong learning "eco-system". Including Cork's two Universities (UCC and MTU), and the CETB multi-campus Cork College of Further Education and Training,

> "with a wide range of primary and second level schools, early years education centres, complementary and second-chance education opportunities, initiatives tackling educational disadvantage in both formal and community settings and a thriving creative community, there is a well-developed and networked learning infrastructure in the city serving the surrounding region" (Cork Learning City Report, 2017, p.1).

**Cork Learning Neighbourhoods**

Cork Learning Neighbourhoods was formed in 2015 and piloted in two areas that face significant educational disadvantage. Taking a strengths and asset-based community development approach, a Learning Neighbourhood is defined as "an area that has an ongoing commitment to learning, providing inclusive and diverse learning opportunities for whole communities through partnership and collaboration" (O'Sullivan and Kenny, 2017, p.19). Learning Neighbourhoods are a deceptively complex concept that

> "can build on existing networks, assess local needs, promote collaboration within the community, make city-wide connections and through the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) engage with other learning cities; they are about trust building with local government, about autonomous actions and responsibility taking" (Ó Tuama, 2020, p.14).

Since the pilot, Learning Neighbourhoods has been extended to seven areas of the city. Although the areas vary demographically (for example, some have an older population than

[2] This quotation is from the website of the UNESCO Global Network of Learning cities on https://www.uil.unesco.org/en/learning-cities

the city average, and others a younger demographic; while the city centre Learning Neighbourhood has a particularly high proportion of non-Irish national residents), they are all characterised by persistent socio-economic deprivation, a significant proportion of their populations with no education beyond primary schooling, higher levels of early school leaving, and lower levels of further and higher educational attainment compared to the city as a whole according to Census 2022. Six of the seven neighbourhoods have been designated by government as RAPID areas, a programme for Revitalising Areas through Prioritised Investment and Development.

Although the neighbourhoods face social and educational disadvantage and inequality, all have active community and education organisations, with many collaborating through Community Education Networks. These "grass roots networks of learning champions" are essential to developing lifelong learning as they focus "on building relationships to support people into and through learning" (Sandbrook 2009, p.4). Many schools in the neighbourhoods are also part of the Department of Education school support programme Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS). At the pilot stage, there was concern that it may be challenging to get engagement between different education and learning sectors in the communities. The school system is part of a circumscribed, national, top-down framework. At second level there is a relatively inflexible curriculum, apart from the Transition Year, which allows greater flexibility. The curriculum becomes increasingly exam focused as students progress towards the exit/terminal state examinations (Leaving Certificate and Leaving Certificate Applied). Other organisations like libraries and community centres, while having an outward facing ethos, are often operating with constrained resources. However, the networks in place in both communities were highly enthusiastic about engaging in the process and saw it as a vehicle to localise the Learning Cities commitment and bring greater benefits to the population.

The design of Learning Neighbourhoods is informed by a community development approach that aims to build trust, embeddedness and community ownership of the programme, focuses on the assets of the neighbourhoods, and aims to engage a wide range of groups. In each area, Learning Neighbourhoods begins with local consultation with neighbourhood residents and stakeholders active in education and community organisations. These public engagement exercises are usually conducted in in public libraries, community centres, or primary schools in the early stage of each project to discuss on-going education initiatives – thereby providing a brief learning audit to gain an overview of the learning resources and needs of each neighbourhood – and to brainstorm new ideas that could be developed in the Learning Neighbourhood. This engagement through conversational workshops focuses on what excites and unites people and helps to build new relationships, share knowledge and information and open the possibilities for new areas of collaboration and mutual support.

Following the workshops, neighbourhoods form local coordinating groups comprised of primary and secondary schools, youth training centres, community development programmes, family centres, libraries, senior day centres, childcare projects, health groups, youth organisations, and community associations. The local coordinating groups are supported by a Learning Neighbourhood Coordinator, based in ACE, UCC, and a city-wide Learning Neighbourhood Steering Group (comprised of staff from CETB, the Cork Learning City Team in Cork City Council, ACE in UCC, MTU, and representatives from the neighbourhood

coordinating groups). The Learning Neighbourhood Coordinator works closely with the Cork Learning City Coordinator, based in Cork City Council. This collaboration enables the on-going building of relationships and new networking and connections to emerge over time and facilitates communities to identify their own needs and direction for the programme in dialogue with the local universities and other educational providers. This cross sectoral partnership working also enables "horizontal integration", i.e. "fostering education in all its forms, formal, non-formal and informal…and the relationships between schools and other social institutions and structures that provide an educational platform" (Nash, 2020, p.11). As Willie McAuliffe, Co-Chair of Cork Learning City since 2013, Former Second Level Principal and Further Education College Deputy Principal, states:

> "Schools are in integral part of any community and of any city. The Learning City creates a common landscape or ecosystem where schools are a valued partner. All schools in Learning Neighbourhood areas have immense potential to be learning hubs for their communities, where their doors are open for formal, non-formal and informal learning."

The Learning Neighbourhoods programme supports and promotes on-going neighbourhood learning and events and involves the development of new initiatives, as described in the following section on the initiatives in schools in their communities.

**Initiatives with schools in disadvantaged areas**

Each Learning Neighbourhood offers different activities. From the outset Learning Neighbourhoods sought to adopt an approach to learning as diverse, life-wide, and lifelong, and an appreciation that the process in each neighbourhood would be organic and bottom-up based on principles of equality, inclusion, and co-creation. One of the large-scale events that several of the Learning Neighbourhoods have developed (including Ballyphehane, Mayfield, South Parish, and Togher) are learning expos and community open days, often held during the city's annual Lifelong Learning Festival. These expos aim to showcase and celebrate the learning achievements and collaborations of the area and consist of performances by local education groups and primary and secondary schools, talks and display stands by education providers including the city's further education colleges and universities. Held in large community spaces, hundreds of people of all ages attend to experience the learning opportunities on offer in their area and the city.

The goal of some of the Learning Neighbourhoods has been to create a closer association between schools in their area and the university sector. Knocknaheeny Learning Neighbourhood identified the area of STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics) education as a focus for collaboration since Ireland faces gaps in the education system and a shortfall of highly qualified STEM graduates, especially from disadvantaged backgrounds. The local coordinating group secured sponsorship funding to run a science education programme in collaboration with STEAM Education, a UCC start-up. A ten-week programme 'Engineering in a Box' was rolled out in five primary schools in the northwest of the city reaching over 130 children, delivered by graduate engineers. On completion of the programme mini-graduations and a campus tour were held in UCC. The STEAM engineering programme was found to be an empowering process for the children in relation to their attitudes to higher education. According to Dr Chrys Ngwa (Insight Centre for Data Analytics, Tyndall UCC, and volunteer to the STEAM programme):

> "When I first met the girls, I asked the whole class how many were interested in going all the way to university with their studies. I was so moved that no more than three kids were interested in university

> studies...I repeated the question at the end of my third class with the girls and I was so happy to find that almost all wanted to earn a third level certificate" (quoted in O'Sullivan and Kenny, 2017, p.17).

As Harwood et al (2013, p.33) state "being unable to imagine a university education is intricately bound up with a sense of not belonging to education, a sense that is linked to the experience of poverty and disadvantage". Learning Neighbourhoods aims to enhance neighbourhood connections to third level through promoting familiarity with both university staff and the university as a place, thereby normalising the university environment (Harwood, 2013). Along with dedicated schools-based programmes, Learning Neighbourhoods also established *The Free University, A Conversation Café on pathways to education,* and the *Neighbourhood University College programme*. Many of the DEIS schools in the Learning Neighbourhoods partake in UCC's *Free University* during the Lifelong Learning Festival, with a specific programme of free talks designed for a younger audience from the Learning Neighbourhoods to ensure their active participation. In the *Conversation Café* in Mayfield Learning Neighbourhood in 2024, young people aged 16 to 22 from community training centres, youth projects, and local schools heard a series of speakers on accessing further and higher education in the city. They then engaged in informal discussions with the guest speakers in a world cafe style setting and received information on access programmes and support services.

Launched in 2022, The *Neighbourhood University College programme* is a free, eight-week, part-time educational initiative to provide participants with a taste of various community, further, and higher education subjects in a convenient local venue. The local co-ordination groups undertake research in the local area to ascertain the subject of interest in the community and past selections have included psychology, taxation, fossils, healthy eating, Shakespeare, local history, and mindfulness. The lecturing team includes educators from community education, further education and training (FET) colleges, and higher education institutions and the programme concludes with a visit to local colleges and universities, where participants tour the campuses and attend an information session on educational pathways. By offering this programme within the Learning Neighbourhoods (including Mayfield, The Glen, Knocknaheeny, Togher, South Parish), residents can experience third level education in an accessible, community-based environment, providing a pathway to further learning, and empowering participants to explore future studies. Participants include recent school leavers to older generations.

Within Cork Learning City, the Cork Access Network (CAN) also works on a cross-sectoral basis to develop pathways to tackle educational disadvantage through enhancing linkages between partner organisations. A CAN coordinator is based in the Learning City team in Cork City Council and works with the CAN Steering Group to organise a series of cross-sectoral events that bring partners together and strengthens progression pathways for the most vulnerable learners, endeavouring to meet the mission of the SDGs to leave no one behind. In this inter-agency approach, partners work on tackling under-representation and under-achievement in education or training across four broad pillars of access through further and higher education, community, the workplace, and schools by reducing barriers and enhancing progression pathways. CAN works to build connections between these sectors, enabling partners to share information and knowledge, and to identify and create access, transfer and progression routes between partners. Recent work has included the network supporting members of the

Traveller Community (an ethnic minority) to hold a high-level conference, disseminating a newly released educational policy with people from senior government positions in attendance, to promote a more inclusive and supportive learning environment for Traveller children in schools in Cork.

A developing focus within the Learning Neighbourhoods is on special education needs and accessible and inclusive education. In 2024, the Home-School Liaison Officer of a primary school in the Togher Learning Neighbourhood initiated a support group for parents of children with special needs, responding to their requests for guidance and resources to more effectively support their children's educational and developmental journeys. During an initial meeting, parents expressed the specific topics they wanted to address, and the Learning Neighbourhoods Coordinator worked with lecturers from UCC to create and provide customized information sessions based on the parents' interests. These monthly sessions provide parents with access to expertise and supports, knowledge and resources, to advocate for and support their children.

Another important focus in the Learning Neighbourhoods is culture and the arts. Education in and through the arts is a significant part of inclusive education, stimulating cognitive development, an individuals' sense of creativity and initiative, imagination, a sense of autonomy, emotional intelligence, reflection, and freedom of thought and action. Creative arts within community development and lifelong learning create an environment and practice where the learner is actively engaged in creative experiences, processes, and development. Learning Neighbourhoods also promote intergenerational exchange, which is a critical element in building community resilience, in a context where the bookend generations, in particular, often have little engagement. Many arts activities in Learning Neighbourhoods have been intergenerational in focus, bringing together school children with older people in their area. For example, during a Ballyphehane Learning Neighbourhood open morning, an interactive art workshop was held on the theme, *How to Build a Learning Neighbourhood*, and the creative pieces were worked into the design of a poster that was distributed throughout the community and the city (O'Sullivan and Kenny, 2017). Other projects involved the Ballyphehane/Togher Community Arts & Crafts Initiative (BTCACI) and *Touching Tales*. The BTACI project saw a group of older women, skilled in traditional crafts, working with transition year second level school students (teenage girls) which developed into a deep inter-generational exchange of mutual learning and greater inter-generational respect and recognition. *Touching Tales* was developed by an artist, who used art as a means to explore relationship building between older adults and second level transition year students (boys and girls), which also animated the inter-generational groups to appreciate and value one another.

Celebrating learners is also central to Learning Neighbourhoods, and the Learning Neighbourhoods steering group developed a portrait series of local learners entitled *Faces of Learning*. In this series, professional photographic portraits are taken of learners of all ages and from all places of learning including schools, workplaces, and community organisations. As Sandbrook (2009, p.7) highlights, "recognition is fundamental to any discussion of learning and lifelong learning. Learning is invisible until it is recognised." Other Learning Neighbourhoods have developed innovations on this concept with the South Parish Learning Neighbourhood creating a *Lifelong Learning Trail* for the public to discover learning locations throughout the parish. Togher Learning Neighbourhood developed a *Places of Learning*

*Directory* in 2024 that incorporated *Faces of Learning* with information of local and wider Cork City education providers. The directory lists schools, further and higher education institutes, community groups, and support services and serves as a comprehensive guide to learning provision to help residents of all ages access education, training, and personal development opportunities.

In the first few years of the Learning Neighbourhood programme, each year culminated in a Learning Neighbourhood awards evening. Since 2021, this has been subsumed in the annual Cork Celebrates Lifelong Learning Awards held in the City Hall. This draws on the vision of Learning Cities outlined by Sandbrook (2009) that they should celebrate community and culture, encourage people to recognise their learning and develop a sense of themselves as learners, and support the collaboration of networks of providers and other organisations involved in learning to enable the pursuit of learning pathways. The Learning Awards showcase and integrate the work in and with schools to the wider model of lifelong learning, valuing all aspects of education. The award ceremony provides recognition and celebration and is an important part of consolidating the experience for the Learning Neighbourhoods and other organisations, recognising the commitment of all those who participated in the programme from schools, residents, community groups, further education colleges and universities, and providing opportunities in making learning public. As Willie McCAuliffe highlights "On the occasion of the Awards, all aspects of learning and education are present and visibly acknowledged and celebrated on the same stage in City Hall."

**Conclusion**

Learning Cities and Neighbourhoods, founded on an asset-based community development approach, seeks to open-up opportunities for positive change for residents. In this innovative approach, local people are decision makers in their own right and their skills, knowledge, and identity are the strengths that communities can activate to create futures grounded in a communities' own distinct value. In a community evaluation held at the end of the pilot year, benefits of the Learning Neighbourhoods programme centred on how the programme has fostered new collaborations within the communities, raised awareness of learning, and forged links between schools, the community sector, higher education, and other education providers. There are also challenges for sustaining and developing Learning Neighbourhoods, in particular mobilising funding and non-financial resources. Many of the initiatives in Learning Neighbourhoods are supported through multiple funding sources including from Cork Learning City, sponsorship, fundraising, and grant aid. None of these are guaranteed year to year. Along with funding, participants in Nash's (2020, p.66) evaluation of Learning Neighbourhoods identified maintaining momentum and time commitment as significant concerns as members of local coordinating groups take on Learning Neighbourhoods roles in addition to their daily work, and community leaders can be lost "due to burnout, feeling overstretched or moving on".

Overall, however, Nash's (2020) research identified many benefits of the programme's collaborative and inclusive method, that has enabled the development of a shared vision, and recognition of the many contributions that different groups, schools and organisations bring to learning. For Ide Ni Dhubháin, Principal of a Gaelscoil (an Irish language-medium school)

and a member of the judging panel for the Cork Learning City Awards representing the Irish Primary Principals Network) in Mahon Learning Neighbourhood:

> "Schools and their Learning neighbourhoods are intertwined. Their common goal is to highlight all the opportunities the community affords its people to develop new skills and expand their potential. This leads to a greater sense of identity, of place, a sense of belonging and a healthier way of living. 'Ar scáth a chéile a mhaireann na daoine'"[3]

Through a bottom up, partnership, and participatory approach, Learning Cities and Neighbourhoods seeks to promote and showcase learning, celebrate and award good practice, enhance the links and partnership between further and higher education and disadvantaged communities, drive familiarity with the university and generate a sense of expectation rather than exclusion. By collaborating, they can develop strategies to foster resilience, address ongoing inequality and create new imaginaries for a society where everyone can participate fully, including accessing education, a larger portion of economic resources, demands for improved services and opportunities, and acknowledgment as equal citizens within the community (O'Sullivan et al, 2017).

Learning Neighbourhoods is just one element in a broader canvas of responses to education disadvantage and inequality, that necessitate consistent and ongoing efforts from all stakeholders for transformative change. However, Learning Neighbourhoods has particular strengths in being both bottom-up and transversal vis-à-vis key institutional actors and the community. It significantly normalises and demystifies engagement with educational and governmental institutions and aims to develop authentic partnerships between schools, those working in the wider community, and at further and higher education. This can enhance the appreciation of learning as a catalyst for both individual and community transformation and help reduce cultural obstacles to accessing university education and other educational opportunities. It has the potential to play a crucial role in empowering individuals and communities with new voices, confidence, and experiences to confront the ongoing issue of educational disadvantage and inequality that affects them across generations.

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[3] The literal translation of this Irish phrase is 'It is in each other's shadow that people live'. More broadly, it conveys a sense of interconnectedness and community.

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