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Book Review

Brian Fleming, *The Lived Reality of Educational Disadvantage* (2020)

(Review by Áine Hyland for IES – Nov. 2021)

This 160-page publication entitled *The Lived Reality of Educational Disadvantage* is an important addition to the literature on educational disadvantage in Ireland. Its author, Brian Fleming, was principal of a second level school in one of the most disadvantaged areas of Dublin for 25 years and in 2016 he published *Irish Education 1922 – 2007: Cherishing All the Children*? (Mynchen's Field Press). Formerly a TD, Dr. Fleming has wide political experience and understands better than most how educational policy is formed and implemented.

He has spent a lifetime highlighting the inequalities that have been endemic in the Irish education system since the foundation of the state. He refers to the mismatch between stated government policy on equality of educational opportunity and its implementation and provides a comprehensive overview of various initiatives taken by successive government to address education inequalities. He focuses in particular on the work of the Educational Disadvantage Committee (chaired by this reviewer between 2002 and 2005) and provides an excellent summary of the work and the findings of that committee. He describes the origins of the *Delivering Equality of Opportunity in School* (DEIS) programme introduced by Minister Mary Hanafin in 2005 and analyses the various reviews of this programme.

The research which he carried out in 2019 and which led to the publication of this book sets out to provide an up-to-date evidence base for the development of policies for DEIS schools by drilling down into the microclimate of six case study schools, through the lenses of school leaders, teachers, parents and pupils. The study captures the complexity of life in DEIS schools, foregrounds the challenges and delivers policy recommendations on the supports which are deemed necessary to affect meaningful change.

In addition to providing a comprehensive overview of policy and practice in regard to education disadvantage in Ireland, the publication also includes an excellent review of the international literature on educational disadvantage. In measuring educational success, Fleming cautions against an undue emphasis on quantitative indicators such as the OECD's Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA). He quotes from a number of sources, one of which reminds us (if reminder is necessary) that "LSAs (large-scale assessments) are incapable of measuring the broad spectrum of valuable education outcomes and the unique combination of talents, knowledge, skills and personal qualities of individual human beings…. What we need to do is to remember the saying: what can be counted may not count and what counts may not be counted". He analyses issues such as the role of leadership, of teachers, of pupil attendance as well as family context and explores the concepts of trust, accountability and agency. In particular he emphasises the difference between schools, differences in culture, relationships and approaches and

stresses that these differences should be recognised and respected, especially by policy makers and the inspectorate.

He dedicates a full chapter to the Irish school evaluation model, which he suggests has many of the characteristics of new public management theories. He is critical of Whole School Evaluation, especially the model where government provides the template. He quotes John MacBeath who says that "the more governments provide the template, the less inventive and spontaneous the process at school and classroom level becomes. Self-evaluation all too easily becomes a ritual event, a form of audit in which senior leaders assume the role of an internal inspectorate applying a set of common criteria …".

As part of his study, Fleming interviewed forty three staff members in six DEIS schools on topics which included teacher training, child welfare and protection, pupil attendance, the curriculum and inspection. The views of the teachers and of some of the principals on school inspection are particularly disconcerting. To quote Fleming: "By a wide margin, the topic that elicited the most trenchant commentary during this research project was the current inspection regime". Every single teacher he interviewed expressed a view on inspection and the vast majority were highly critical. The practicality of inspectors reaching a verdict on a complex issue in a short space of time, the partial nature of the exercise, questions regarding the expertise of those making judgments and doubts about the integrity of the process were all raised by participants. One principal was particularly critical of the damage which had been done to the morale of one young member of his staff by an unsympathetic inspector. He (the principal) had to address the fallout in the staffroom which continued for many months after the inspection. According to Fleming, while such negative episodes may be infrequent, they should give everyone serious cause for concern.

Another issue of which principals and teachers were critical was the transfer of the School Welfare Services (school attendance, the home school community scheme (HSCL) and the school completion project (SCP)) from the Department of Education to TUSLA. In the view of those working in schools, the transfer of responsibility to TUSLA resulted in a marked increase in bureaucratic procedures. The general impression emerging from the interviews with teachers involved in the HSCL scheme was that the programme had changed under TUSLA so that the needs of the organisation were now the priority. More time was being spent on paperwork – and as one respondent commented: "TUSLA likes everything to be measurable".

On the basis of his findings, Fleming makes five main recommendations:

1. Policy response needs to recognise that that different schools experience different grades of disadvantage and he argues that additional supports should reflect this.
2. In relation to student well-being, he recommends that multi-disciplinary teams whose personnel should be available to DEIS schools should be set up
3. The WSE and accountability regime should be reformed to achieve genuine school-based self-evaluation with the inspectors fulfilling a supportive role.
4. There should be an equitable and transparent system of school funding across all sectors.

5. An independent Statutory Educational Disadvantage Committee should be set up under the Department of the Taoiseach. Its function would be to compile and issue reports on all issues of social and economic policy that are relevant to educational disadvantage and to foster independent research on the topic.

Other proposals refer to issues of child protection, school attendance, student well-being, second-chance education, professional support, selective admission practices as well as to informal education or alternatives to school.

Overall, the findings of Fleming's research are a most valuable addition to the literature on educational disadvantage. The responses of teachers and principals shine a light on the challenges faced by staff in DEIS schools. They also highlight the differences between schools – not just between DEIS and non-DEIS, but between individual DEIS schools in different locations. The research highlights the fact that here are various degrees of disadvantage - and one is reminded of the famous quotation in George Orwell's book *1984:* "All animals are created equal – but some are more equal than others". It would be great to think that policy-makers and decision-makers in the Department of Education, Department of Children, TUSLA, ETBs etc. would read this book and reflect on the issues raised in it. The book will also be an invaluable resource for school leaders, teachers and student-teachers as well as for researchers and anyone interested in educational disadvantage.

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