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Reflecting on 100 years of educational policy in Ireland: was equality ever a priority?

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ABSTRACT

The year 2022, one hundred years since the foundation of the State, provides an opportunity to reflect on the development of policy in relation to educational equality over the course of the last century, including promises made and opportunities lost. This article looks back at one hundred years of education policy through an equality lens, asking whether or not the state has delivered on promises made and whether or not commitments to fostering equality espoused at key junctures have been realised. It concludes that despite the incremental and sophisticated evolution of policy, achieving equality has not been to the forefront of policymaking in Irish education since the State was founded, with the exception of a brief period during the 1960s.

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The section of the 1916 Proclamation that is most frequently referenced is that which states:

The Republic guarantees religious and civil rights, equal rights and equal opportunities to all its citizens, and declares its resolve to pursue the happiness of the whole nation and all its parts, cherishing all the children of the nation equally ...

For its time, the document was progressive in social and economic terms, largely due to the influence of republican activists James Connolly (1868–1916) and Pádraig Pearse (1879–1916). By 1917, of course, both were deceased and other voices held sway. Threats to the *status quo* in social and economic terms were seen as ‘potentially disruptive issues’ (Lee 1989, 38) and so became less prominent. The sentiments included in the Proclamation were, however, restated in the Democratic Programme of 1919, largely the work of the Labour leader and trade unionist Tom Johnson (1872–1963), the inclusion of which, according to Farrell (1994, 61), had the potential to ‘transform the independence project into a social revolution’. However, there is fairly compelling evidence that the contents did not accurately represent the views of the entire independence movement, or indeed those most influential within it (Garvin 1994). The vast majority of politicians who emerged from the 1916–1922 period were fundamentally middle-class and

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conservative in outlook, *albeit* temporarily radicalised by the circumstances of the time. As Akenson observes, nowhere was this 'more clearly exemplified than in the refusal of the new government to change fundamentally the school system inherited from the imperial administration' (1975, 25). Throughout the nineteenth century, the churches, most particularly the Catholic Church to which the majority of the population belonged, controlled all aspects of education policy and practice. This remained the position for decades, the only exception being the Vocational Education Act (1930) which placed the provision of technical education on a legislative footing. This act established vocational education committees, the purpose of which was to administer continuation and technical education for 14- to 16-year-olds. The emphasis on vocational and technical education, coupled with the fact that vocational schools did not charge fees, meant that these schools catered predominantly for the less well-off. The middle and upper classes patronised secondary schools run for the most part by religious orders, though some of these orders also engaged in provision for the lower classes. Aside from controlling the management of these institutions, the church dominated daily life within them, most powerfully through dedicated personnel who advanced its regime. Even as late as 1961, over half the teaching staff in secondary schools were clerics (O'Donoghue and Harford 2021, 42).

The notion of equality of opportunity in Irish education was espoused periodically over the next four decades, but no significant steps were ever really taken to achieve it (Harford, 2018). This was largely down to the political élite and those who served in government at this time. This period in Irish history (1922-late 1950s) is widely recognised by scholars as one of conservatism and insularity crystallised by a symbiotic relationship between the state and the Catholic Church, which promoted a mutually reinforcing agenda of Catholicism and nationalism, 'a static system for a static society' (Garvin 1994, 171). The Catholic Church's control, through the provision of key services, including education, allowed it to position its values and ethos at the centre of the nascent political system (Fleming and Harford 2014; O'Donoghue and Harford 2011). According to Dunn (1988, 89), Irish society under the Free State government was 'deeply rooted in a complex and apparently inseparable mixture of nationalism and Catholicism', which resulted in what Breen et al. (1990, 29) refer to as 'mutually reinforcing political and episcopal visions', affording the church a powerful role in framing public ideological discourse. The social and cultural values embraced by the Irish State were 'at least in theory, the obverse of those embraced by a modern industrial, anglicized world' (Daly 2016, 1).

The 1960s, however, was 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. A key development at this juncture was the OECD report, aptly titled *Investment in Education* (1965), which significantly informed the state's policy for educational expansion.¹ Heretofore dominated by private interests, in particular the Catholic Church, within the space of less than a decade, Irish education policy and provision had altered so much that subsequent provision was almost unrecognisable. Scholars have, to date, largely considered this paradigm shift the result of a move from a theocentric to a mercantile paradigm, with the economic imperative of education, influenced by international influences, driving the

policy agenda (Fleming and Harford 2014; Harford and Fleming 2018; O'Sullivan 1992, 2005; Walsh 2009).

The key development at this time was, of course, the introduction of free second-level education, announced in September 1966 by then Minister of Education Donogh O'Malley. As Lee (2018, ix) observes:

For all the vicissitudes of the past fifty years, it is clear that the 1967 free education scheme remains one of the most important developments in the history of independent Ireland. Although it is clear that much remains to be done, the initiative opened up unprecedented opportunities for further education beyond primary school to generations hitherto condemned to an educational system that equipped the vast majority of the population for an existence as only hewers of wood and drawers of water at home, and often not all that much better abroad for many first-generation emigrants.

Whilst the abolition of fees is foremost in the public memory of the time, the reality is that the introduction of a free school transport system probably contributed more to opening up access to post-primary education (Harford and Fleming 2018). The 'O'Malley reforms' resulted in greatly increased numbers continuing their education beyond the primary level. This was the one and only time that education policy became a primary focus of government and not just that of the line minister. However, despite the potential for the free education scheme to democratise post-primary education and usher in a level of equality heretofore unknown in the education system, it is important to recall that O'Malley's reform package was not implemented in its totality. The Minister realised that abolishing school fees was a necessary but not sufficient condition to opening up education beyond the primary level to all young people. His submission to the government included a proposal that a special grant of forty pounds *per annum* be paid to the families of 'very poor pupils' who continued beyond the minimum school leaving age, which was then fourteen but due to be increased a few years later. It is clear that O'Malley had a similar proposal in mind to support such families in cases where their children went on to university. The Cabinet deferred consideration of O'Malley's proposed grant scheme to help young people from poorer families stay in school longer, pending the details being worked out between his office and that of the Minister for Finance, Charles Haughey. This was one argument O'Malley lost, and no such scheme was ever introduced. In arguing the position that home circumstances and the socio-economic background, as well as pupils' aptitudes and interests, had to be taken into account in devising a response to educational disadvantage, Mulcahy (1981, 48) considers that 'the attempts of the 1960s were very limited' and concludes that 'it was a failure to assess the full extent of that challenge'. This is a fair summary in the case of the political and administrative élite, other than O'Malley and those working closely with him on the reform package. Furthermore, as growing evidence began to emerge of the reality of educational disadvantage, most notably in an address by the noted statistician Bill Hyland (1971), the problem continued to be ignored. The attention of the government quickly moved to other issues and that, together with O'Malley's death, meant that educational reform was no longer on the active policy agenda. It was not so much a failure to assess the extent of the problem but rather an unwillingness to act.

The situation at the school level changed quite significantly after the reforms of the 1960s. Increased progression rates created a demand for new schools. New models of patronage emerged, including comprehensive, and community schools and, in various formats, community colleges. The latter were part of the VEC structure and were now allowed to provide courses up to Leaving Certificate level. Schools across each of these models almost invariably operated on a co-educational basis and offered similar curricular provision. Unfortunately, this led to competition between students at the local level and various discriminatory admissions policies which were inimical to equality. Whilst the Department of Education has tried to end these practices, it has not been totally successful. The latest effort is in the form of legislation, the Education (Admission to Schools) Act (2018), which includes provisions to limit the discretion of individual schools in relation to the selection of pupils, but it remains to be seen how successful this legislation will be.

A window closes: educational equality side-lined

In theorising about the policymaking process Kingdon (2011) notes how ‘windows of opportunity’ occur when three separate ‘streams’ converge. The streams of problems, politics and policies, often operating independently of one another, must come together in order for a policy change to occur. Events in Irish education during the 1960s are a prime example of this window of opportunity in which the streams of problems, politics and policies converged (Harford and Fleming 2018). The window was a relatively brief one, however, and for the next decade or so, no attention was paid to the educational equality objective by successive governments. Indeed, a government publication, a *White Paper on Educational Development* (1980), the first in the nation’s history, included just one sentence on the issue and recommended that it be examined by a working party. By contrast, the research community was quite active in exposing the fault lines in the existing system, generating a series of key reports and papers throughout the 1970s (see, for example, Kellaghan and Brugha 1972; MacGreil 1974; Fontes and Kellaghan 1977; Tussing 1978).

Eventually, these and other publications bore some fruit when Gemma Hussey became minister for education in 1982. Hussey was the first minister to acknowledge that the reform of the 1960s, while significant, had not led to the introduction of an equitable education system. In 1984, she produced *The Programme for Action in Education* (1984–1987), in which the issue of disadvantage figured prominently: ‘priority in the use of resources available for education must be given to removing barriers to equality of opportunity faced by the educationally, socially and economically deprived’ (Government of Ireland 1984, 3). Hussey subsequently secured funding which facilitated the introduction of a separate budgetary heading in the annual allocation to the Department of Education for initiatives to tackle disadvantages. In the subsequent fifteen years, various programmes were introduced to tackle the problem of educational disadvantage. These included the Scheme of Assistance to schools serving disadvantaged areas (1990), the Home-School Liaison Scheme (1991) and the School Completion Programme (2002). Under these schemes, schools serving disadvantaged areas were allocated additional teachers *ex-quota* and received additional funds for books and materials. Efforts were also made to meet the curricular needs of the disadvantaged with the introduction of the

Vocational Preparation and Training Programme (1984), afterwards replaced by the Leaving Certificate Applied Programme (1995), and the Junior Certificate Schools Programme (1996). Whilst valuable and progressive in themselves, this pattern illustrates that Irish education was now in an incremental phase. Successive Ministers for Education introduced initiatives to tackle aspects of educational disadvantage, however, no cohesive, comprehensive and well-resourced reform package emerged. The window of opportunity had effectively closed.

The 1990s: grounds for optimism

The 1990s was a key period in the development of education policy, prompted to some extent by the OECD's Review of National Policies for Education (1991). Whilst somewhat limited in its attention to issues of equity, it did highlight a problem of underachievement among a significant percentage of students and noted that the great majority of these were living in economically deprived areas. At government level, a Green Paper, *Education for a Changing World* (1992), was published in order to encourage discourse on a range of issues in which six aims for the education system were listed, the first of which was: 'To establish greater equity in Education – particularly for those who are disadvantaged socially, economically, physically or mentally' (Government of Ireland 1992, 5). The document was quite clear on the need to provide 'a higher than proportionate allocation of resources' to address the needs of disadvantaged students (Government of Ireland 1992, 7).

The following year the Education Minister, Niamh Bhreathnach, initiated a National Education Convention, to explore the issues prompted by discussions on the Green Paper and beyond. Wide ranging submissions were received, and discussions ensued in public sessions at the convention. The Secretariat, consisting of seven distinguished educationalists, produced a report in due course (Coolahan 1994). Again, the issue of educational disadvantage figured prominently: 'The individual and social costs of educational failure are now so great, the effects on individuals, the economy and society so serious, that it requires urgent attention' (Coolahan 1994, 106). The report emphasised the importance of taking the common good into consideration when devising arrangements for the provision of education and called for the 'resourcing of disadvantaged schools to be increased significantly' (Coolahan 1994, 115). In addition, it recommended the development and implementation of a coordinated plan of intervention in the case of disadvantaged children and families involving a range of government departments.

Reflecting all these discussions, the government produced a White Paper, *Charting Our Education Future*, in 1995. Again, the issue of educational disadvantage featured: 'Where participation and achievement in the education system are impeded by physical, mental, economic or social factors, the state should seek to eliminate or compensate for the sources and consequences of educational disadvantage' (Government of Ireland 1995, 6). Following the reforms in the 1960s, equality of opportunity in Irish education had typically been described in terms of access. The White Paper expanded this thinking to an important degree: 'A sustaining philosophy should seek to promote equality of access, participation and benefit for all in accordance with their needs and abilities' (Government of Ireland 1995, 7).

The main difference between the Green and White papers issued by the government and the *Report on the National Education Convention* was the greater emphasis in the latter regarding the need for a whole of government approach to tackle educational disadvantage and its underlying causes, as well as the requirement for increased resource provision. This point was also emphasised in an important research publication, produced jointly by the Combat Poverty Agency and the Department of Education, *Educational Disadvantage in Ireland (1995)*, which advocated an approach based on targeting resources ‘on a limited number of schools in which there is a high concentration of pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds’ amounting to 25–30 across the country and additional funds to be made available to education more broadly (Kellaghan et al. 1995, 66). The same report noted that the existing schemes in place to tackle educational disadvantage lacked co-ordination and that outcomes were falling below expectations. It also raised questions regarding the selection of schools for the scheme. Much of the information on which this was based was supplied by individual school principals, necessitating considerable guesswork on their behalf in the absence of the requisite information under various headings, including, for example, students’ home and family circumstances.

The Education Act (1998), the Educational Disadvantage Committee (2002) and DEIS (2005)

Following protracted consultation and discussion in the 1990s, the Education Act was finally passed in 1998. This was the first time in over 165 years of state-funded education in Ireland that a comprehensive act, which included all aspects of schooling at primary and second levels, was passed. It was an all-encompassing act, which aimed

to make provision in the interests of the common good for the education of every person in the State including any person with a disability or who has other special educational needs and to provide generally for primary, post-primary, adult and continuing education and vocational education and training ...

Section 32 of the act stated that the Minister shall establish a committee, referred to as the ‘educational disadvantage committee’, to advise him or her on policies and strategies to be adopted to identify and correct educational disadvantage. Educational disadvantage was defined in the act as ‘the impediments to education arising from social or economic disadvantage which prevent students from deriving appropriate benefit from education in schools’. The term of office of the committee was to be three years, following which the minister could reappoint members or appoint new members. Up to half of its membership would come ‘from nominees of such voluntary and other bodies which have objects which the minister considers relevant to the work of the committee’. In the original draft of the legislation the provision was that the minister ‘may’ appoint such a committee. The change to the legislative imperative ‘shall’ was agreed, during the discussion in the Dáil, on the proposal of the then minister, Micheál Martin.

There was considerable interest in and enthusiasm about the Educational Disadvantage Committee (EDC) when it was established by Minister Michael Woods in March 2002. The committee comprised twenty-one members, including senior staff of the inspectorate and of the relevant administrative section (the Social Inclusion section) of

the Department of Education. The committee was chaired by Áine Hyland, one of the authors of this paper. In addition to the committee, an Educational Disadvantage Forum was also set up, which included a wide range of education and community partners. At the first meeting of the Forum in Dublin Castle in November 2012, more than 300 people attended, including the then Minister for Education Noel Dempsey and the Minister for State for Education, Síle de Valera. In addition to oral statements at the forum, seventy written submissions were received. Subsequent meetings of the committee and forum focused on a wide variety of issues, including international research on educational disadvantage, the education of the Traveller community, teacher supply and staffing, literacy and numeracy issues and adult and community education. During its three-year life, the committee met thirty-three times and made four written submissions to the Minister for Education as well as a report from the Educational Disadvantage Forum. The submissions covered a variety of topics, including how educational disadvantage might be identified and defined for the purpose of targeting resources. The first of the submissions, made to the Minister in December 2002, focused on the need for more integrated and effective delivery of school-based educational inclusion measures.

As it was coming to the end of its three-year term, from early 2005, the committee discussed and planned the focus and content of its final report, which it proposed to submit to the Minister by the end of the summer. There was general agreement that schools alone would not achieve educational equality and that the report should move the debate beyond school-based education. It was also agreed that there was a need for a re-examination of the fundamental assumptions of the approach in Ireland to addressing educational disadvantage, in line with the government's commitment in the National Development Plan 2000–2006 to adopting 'a comprehensive holistic approach' to tackling social inclusion.

By April 2005, the committee had agreed with the outline of its final report. The same month, the Minister for Education, Mary Hanafin, announced at the Irish National Teachers' Organisation conference that she intended 'shortly' to announce a new plan for alleviating educational disadvantage. She stated that this plan would integrate ten existing school-based programmes and would ensure greater co-ordination of DES-funded initiatives. This came as somewhat of a surprise to the committee as the civil servants who were drafting the report had made no mention of it at the meetings of the EDC, which they regularly attended.

The DEIS (Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools) plan was launched by Minister Mary Hanafin in May 2005 as a new integrated school support programme 'to bring together, and build upon, existing interventions for schools and school clusters/communities with a concentrated level of educational disadvantage'. While the plan stated that the advice provided by the Educational Disadvantage Committee and the Educational Disadvantage Forum 'had been central' to the development of the action plan, it referred only to the first submission made by the committee to the Minister twenty months earlier. It addressed none of the issues which had been raised in subsequent EDC submissions and ignored the overall recommendations of the EDC, which were about to be published and which were known to the Department officials who had drafted the DEIS plan. Despite this, and also despite concerns felt by some members of the EDC that they had been 'gazumped' (Fleming 2016, 348). *Moving Beyond Disadvantage* (the

final report of the educational disadvantage committee) was sent to the minister on 19th August 2005. The report acknowledged that a great deal had been done within the education system to support social inclusion but pointed out that since the initiatives focused only on the formal school context, this had led to an unnecessary fragmentation in policy, and a failure to gain maximum benefit from the various programmes and initiatives.

The report called for a rejection of a deficit model of disadvantage and an embracing of a more enlightened approach to educational inclusion and equality based on fundamental principles of human rights and social justice. It stated that the emphasis should be on recognising and accommodating diversity in a positive sense and on achieving not only equality of opportunity and equality of participation but equality of outcomes and equality of condition.

The report pointed out that the optimum approach to addressing educational disadvantage would be to formulate a coherent policy framework at a national level and to implement this through local and regional consortia with co-ordinating structures at county and national levels. A radical reform of systems and structures was required, based on setting clear and unambiguous targets for improvement at national, local and individual school levels, on supporting the achievement of these targets and on monitoring outcomes consistently. The report also emphasised the need for the various government departments and agencies to work in closer collaboration with one another to achieve these targets, providing concrete examples of the specific objectives and actions that might be taken to 'move beyond educational advantage'.

Having completed its report and submitted it to the minister, the EDC disbanded. The DES initiated steps to establish a replacement committee as required by law. The various education partners were invited to make suggestions regarding the work which the replacement EDC should undertake. While responses were submitted promptly, it is noticeable that the department allowed two years to elapse before the Minister for State at the DES announced that the views submitted were being considered. Clearly, at senior levels in the Department of Education, the existence of an expert group on educational disadvantage with statutory authority was not viewed with enthusiasm. This became absolutely clear when an announcement was made that the government had decided that 'a formal statutory committee is no longer required to advise on education and disadvantage' (Dáil Éireann, 4/11/2008, c. 1069). The work of the Educational Disadvantage Committee was not recognised in any formal way. Almost none of the report's recommendations were implemented, and educational disadvantage was quietly taken off the agenda of the DES. While the chair of the EDC ensured that all of the committee's reports were uploaded onto the Department of Education website at the time, it is interesting to note that these, including the final report, *Moving Beyond Educational Disadvantage* have been removed.² In 2012, when the Education Act (1998) was being amended, a single sentence was inserted into the amended act which simply stated: 'Section 32 of the Act of 1998 is repealed'. This sentence went unnoticed at the time, and it was many years later before the Oireachtas Committee of Education adverted to the fact that the section had been repealed.

While the DEIS Plan did not address the lack of integration across government departments as referred to in the report of the EDC, it went some way towards providing a somewhat more integrated approach to the delivery of educational supports for designated schools in disadvantaged areas. However, fragmentation continued to exist even

within services reporting to the Department of Education. For example, the Home-School-Community Liaison (HSC) and the School Completion Programmes (SCP) continued to operate separately and in isolation, as did the National Education Welfare Board (NEWB), the National Educational Psychological Service, the National Council for Special Education as well as other education councils and agencies. When the child and family agency, Tusla was set up in 2014, responsibility for the NEWB, HSC and SCP was transferred from the Department of Education to Tusla.³ However, this did not improve the situation and arguably led to greater fragmentation of services.

Fifteen years after the publication of the report, the Department of Education continues to provide additional resources only for schools that have a very high proportion of pupils from socially and educationally disadvantaged backgrounds. Of course, some schools will fall marginally outside the qualification criteria. There is a strong case for a tapered version of the DEIS supports to be made available in such circumstances depending on the level of need. Moreover, policy decisions taken in relation to educational disadvantage continue to focus almost exclusively on school-based initiatives with little or no engagement with other government departments or local and community groups (Fleming and Harford 2021).

Even though the DEIS programme has been subject to ongoing evaluation, twelve years elapsed before any changes were made. A census taken in 2016, which facilitated a more precise analysis of school catchment areas, together with the development of a deprivation index, led to the development of a more refined mechanism for admitting schools to the scheme. This resulted in additional schools being added to the DEIS programme in 2017 and 2022. However no fundamental change in the nature of the programme has been introduced since the scheme was launched in 2005. The complex, intractable nature of educational disadvantage, along with the absence of any comprehensive review of the DEIS scheme, are such that it is difficult to be definitive as to its impact. In the most recent of the on-going studies by the Education Research Centre, Weir and Kavanagh (2018), using data from the Junior Certificate results and figures for retention rates, observed that there has been a small but significant closing of the gap between those attending DEIS schools and their peers elsewhere. On the other hand, Gilleece et al. (2020, xv), using data from PISA cycles, 2009–2018, note 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’. Thus, while marginal progress has been made since the introduction of the DEIS scheme in 2005, ‘educational disadvantage’, (a disempowering label that has an objectifying effect), continues to be viewed as a school-based issue, with a lack of recognition and response at a policy level of its fundamental, deep-seated relationship with wider economic inequalities across Irish society.

In the last thirty years, there have been a number of other important developments in the legislative and institutional areas. Ratification of the UN Convention on Human Rights, the Education Welfare Act (2000), the establishment of the Office of the Ombudsman for Children and the setting up of a separate Department of Children and Youth Affairs were all positive initiatives. The EPSEN Act (2004) has improved somewhat the situation for those with additional educational needs, albeit from a very low base, but much more needs to be done.⁴ Whether the introduction and passing of this legislation reflected a genuine commitment to the young citizens involved or a reaction to

a number of high profile legal cases taken by courageous parents against the Department of Education is a separate question. The focus of this paper is on those children and young people whose access to and participation in educational provision is hampered greatly by the effects of poverty in its various forms. The picture, in their case, is a good deal less positive. The Equal Status Act (2000) lists nine grounds on which discrimination is outlawed. The decision to exclude socio-economic discrimination from the list was an extremely retrograde step and raises serious questions regarding Ireland's commitment to equality. The abolition of the independent Combat Poverty Agency in 2009 was another backward step, and there are obvious parallels between this decision and actions in relation to the Education Disadvantage Committee.

Recent policy in relation to educational disadvantage

In May 2019, a report on education inequality and disadvantage and barriers to education was published by the Joint Committee on Education and Skills of the Houses of the Oireachtas. Its conclusions mirrored the findings of the EDC 14 years earlier. It stated that 'the education system as it currently stands is unfair and unequal and that the consequences of this are stark', adding that 'Travellers, lone parents, people who have disabilities, who are homeless, or who are in the care of the state, asylum seekers and those who are from less affluent backgrounds are destined to struggle'. It stated that the current structure, where there is an unequal distribution of income and wealth, is being legitimised through the ideologies of meritocracy and is acting to reproduce social class related inequalities. It was critical of the ongoing policy focus on equality of opportunity rather than equality of condition and stated that 'equalising opportunity is inadequate and has not worked: we need to move to an approach that equalises the conditions in which our children are living and growing'.

The most recent programme for the government *Our Shared Future* (2020, 94), reiterates the government's commitment to tackling educational disadvantage, stating 'we will continue to develop our educational system to meet the needs of all students and to tackle disadvantage from an early age'. However, how exactly this will be achieved is unclear although a section of the programme headed 'An Inclusive Vision for Education' which states that 'Inclusion in and access to education is the foundation of a more just and equal society' indicates that 'the new DEIS identification model will be completed, ensuring the extension of DEIS status to schools which are identified as suitable'. This objective has been achieved but there is no indication of an intention to undertake a fundamental review and reform of the programme. Moreover, there seems to be no appreciation of the need to resource it adequately. Since the introduction of DEIS, many researchers have pointed to the need to provide a tapered form of the programme to take account of those schools which fall just outside of the qualification criteria for full inclusion (Smyth, McCoy, and Kingston 2015; Fleming 2020, 2021). The programme for government and the recent announcements by the Minister for Education have, however, shown no awareness for the need for a policy response in this regard. There is no mention of additional support for children or families who cannot avail of the supports provided in DEIS schools, nor is there any overall vision of a new and more inclusive model of intervention.

Concluding thoughts

In theorising policy shifts, Kingdon (2011) notes how ‘windows of opportunity’ emerge at key junctures when a range of variables or ‘streams’ converge. Baumgartner and Jones (2009, 5) describe episodes of ‘punctuated equilibrium’ in which stability in the policy-making arena is preserved by ‘structural arrangements that support strong policy stances, usually reflecting the core values of the proximate policymakers’. They further note, however, that events that attract public attention or significant new information may cause ‘waves of enthusiasm [to] sweep through the political system as political actors can become convinced of the value of some new policy’ (Baumgartner and Jones 2009). Hall (1993) suggests that policy failure over a prolonged period of time often acts as a catalyst for radical reform. Certainly, the impetus for much of the policy formulation of the 1960s was the economic crisis of the late 1950s, which profoundly impacted key aspects of Ireland’s political, social and economic development. T. K. Whitaker, the noted economist and Secretary of the Department of Finance from 1956, described the period as one of stagnation, emigration and high unemployment, during which ‘the mood of despondency was palpable’ (2006, 8). A window of opportunity emerged in the late 50s and early 60s, prompted by economic considerations and the promulgation of the human capital theory by the OECD. The confluence of a set of ideas promoted by a range of policy actors, along with the socio-economic climate in which such an agenda was being articulated, resulted in the introduction of significant reform (Harford and Fleming 2018; Hyland 2018). A growing awareness of the link between education and the economy meant that the education portfolio was viewed from the late 1950s as a prestigious cabinet post (Ó Buachalla 1988). The economic policy reorientation, which had commenced in the 1950s, was gradually translated into education policy under a series of younger ministers born or raised after Irish Independence (Fleming and Harford 2014; Walsh 2009). There is no doubt that *Investment in Education*, which crystallized the link between education and economy in its very title, provided the catalyst which brought the ambition for reform to the public consciousness. *Investment in Education* was, according to Lee (1989, 361) ‘the key contribution’ and, in O’Connor’s view, its importance could not be ‘over-emphasised’ (1986, 120). The report provided an irrefutable case for reform. As well as their obvious expertise, each member of the survey team brought with them a strong sense of social justice.

Although hugely significant, the reforms of the 1960s did not, however, achieve the objective of bringing about equality of education opportunity. The fact that the grant for pupils from extremely poor families was never introduced undoubtedly contributed to this, but the reality is that the problem was more complex than had been initially envisaged. From his work on the Investment in Education team, Bill Hyland was well aware of the challenge involved in opening up post-primary education to all. In 1971, in a paper delivered to the Statistical and Social Inquiry Society of Ireland, he addressed, among other items, the issue of equality of opportunity (Hyland 1971). His analysis stemmed from his consideration of the educational statistics gathered as part of the 1966 census. Acknowledging that ‘some significant steps in the direction of equality of opportunity (however defined)’ had been taken, he argued that the impact on the less well-off had been quite limited (Hyland 1971, 74). By this stage, the window of opportunity in

Irish education had closed. The government's attention was focused elsewhere and the voices of the contrarians in Irish education were being ignored.

As Baumgartner and Jones point out, after a period of 'punctuated equilibrium', the system settles into an era of incrementalism when administrators tinker with arrangements in an effort to bring about some improvements without threatening the status quo. This describes precisely the pattern in Irish education since the 1960s. Some ministers, who wished to shepherd in a period of reform, introduced useful but relatively minor changes. During their tenures, Gemma Hussey and her immediate successors, Mary O'Rourke and Niamh Bhreathnach, introduced initiatives targeted at addressing educational disadvantage. At a policy level, Micheál Martin ensured comprehensive legislation was adopted, though a large part of its vision is far from being realised. Mary Hanafin launched the DEIS programme, which also brought about some limited improvement, albeit a lot less than could have been achieved if the approach of the EDC had been followed. Regular reports on the DEIS initiative show that the attainment gap in Irish post-primary education is being narrowed but at a very slow pace. Yet, no fundamental changes in approach have been introduced (Fleming and Harford 2021). Most recently, it has been widely acknowledged that those students living in circumstances where home learning resources are limited have been most severely impacted by the pandemic (Harford and Fleming 2021).

As we celebrate the centenary of the state's foundation, it is reasonable to expect that our policymakers and society generally would engage in some reflection. Hopefully, the pandemic has proven to be a wake-up call. We have seen the important and varied role schools play in society, and the many weaknesses and inequities in the system, which have existed for years, have been exposed for all to see (Harford 2021).

Over the course of the twentieth century, equity in Irish education was seen purely in terms of access. Just one serious effort was made to bring that about and, as we have seen, the reform in the 1960s failed to achieve the stated objective despite the many improvements that ensued. The 1998 Education Act expanded the objective to include the notion of equity in terms of participation. However, the fundamental policy changes necessary to bring that about were never introduced. Indeed, the DEIS programme, as is designed and structured, will ensure the preservation of social class advantage for decades to come (Fleming 2020). We know that the educational experience of young people has a hugely significant impact on their life trajectories under various headings. The costs to the individual and society of failures in our provision can be hugely significant. Surely in a mature and just society, the fact that a child has been born into poverty should not ensure that s/he has little or no chance of fulfilling her/his full potential. If we are to break the inter-generational nature of poverty in many communities, an equitable, inclusive and well-resourced education system is a *sine qua non*. For the vast majority, the Irish education system proves to be more than adequate. As a result, there are powerful forces happy with the *status quo*. So, to bring about fundamental change, political leadership and courage will be needed. Happily, Seán Lemass has left us a template.

We need a Taoiseach who prioritises education in the context of a comprehensive anti-poverty strategy and remains committed to reform. Part of this commitment will be to ensure that a greater proportion of the state's expenditure is devoted to education. Also essential is an equally committed Minister for Education who is given time to bring about change in the context of a whole of government approach. The striking nature of

O'Malley's announcement has tended to overshadow the essential preparatory work put in place by Patrick Hillery during his tenure as Minister for Education (Harford and Fleming 2018). Nowadays the education portfolio is little more than a staging post, with the average tenure being two years.

In the Education Act, we committed ourselves to ensuring that we have a truly inclusive education system in which the needs of all students must be addressed effectively. This objective was restated when we signed up to the UN Sustainable Development Goals in 2015 and is part of the current Programme for Government. A serious effort to achieve this objective is long overdue.

Disclosure statement

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Notes

1. 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, began work in 1962. Members of the group also included Martin O'Donoghue, a Trinity economist, Bill Hyland, a statistician on secondment from the United Nations Statistics Office in New York and Pádraig Ó Nualláin, a member of the Inspectorate in the Department of Education. Two department officials, Charles Smith and Áine Hyland (then Áine Donlon), acted as secretary and researcher for the group. 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.
2. A copy of the report *Moving Beyond Educational Disadvantage* is currently available on the following website: http://www.drugsandalcohol.ie/10217/1/edc_moving_beyond_educational_disadvantage%5B1%5D.pdf
3. Tusla is the dedicated State agency responsible for improving wellbeing and outcomes for children.
4. 18 years later, a number of the provisions of the EPSEN Act have yet to be commenced.

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His other books include:

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Irish Education 1922-2007: Cherishing All The Children?

County Dublin VEC, 1930-2013: Responding to need.

Irish Education and Catholic Emancipation, 1791-1831: The Campaigns of Bishop Doyle and Daniel O'Connell.

Heroes in the Shadows: Humanitarian Action and Courage in the Second World War.

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