

Educational Policies that Address Social Inequality

Ireland case study report 2 Giving Children an Even Break: Support in areas of socio-economic deprivation

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Giving Children an Even Break: Support in areas of socio-economic deprivation

Summary

This case study reviews the Irish government's Giving Children an Even Break (GCEB) initiative. GCEB is designed to reduce educational inequalities by offering additional support to schools with high concentrations of socio-economically disadvantaged pupils. This case study explores the background to its creation, its implementation process and the outcomes for young people.

Legislative Background

GCEB is the latest phase of a series of government interventions aimed at reducing educational inequalities between advantaged and disadvantaged groups by discriminating positively at schools in socio-economically deprived areas. The first of these schemes the Disadvantaged Areas Scheme or DAS was launched in the early 1990s. DAS provided special teaching assistance and/or extra funding to primary schools in designated areas of disadvantage.

The DAS scheme fed into another initiative called the Breaking the Cycle of Educational Disadvantage Project. Breaking the Cycle launched in 1996 and focused on urban and rural schools with large populations of socio-economically disadvantaged young people at risk of not reaching their potential in the education system. The cornerstone of this project was to increase staffing in disadvantaged schools. In rural areas the scheme provided grants for books, teaching materials, continuing professional development for teachers and a special fund for extra curricular activities. The financial assistance was backed up by cluster coordinators who helped networks of participating schools to develop strategies to improve educational outcomes in their local area. Schools in Breaking the Cycle also participated in the Home School Community Liaison (HSCL) scheme aimed at integrating schools into their local communities and increasing parental engagement in their children's education.

In 1999 the Irish government created a new funding stream aimed at reducing educational inequality, entitled the "New Deal: A Plan for Educational Opportunity". The New Deal had a budget of £194 million to spend over a three-year period on a range of initiatives aimed at tackling educational disadvantage of which £29.5 million was to be allocated to addressing disadvantage at primary level. The Giving Children an Even Break project was designed to better identify and target resources to disadvantaged schools at primary level.

The Project Aims and Objectives

GCEB aimed to refine the identification of schools with high concentrations of disadvantaged pupils and to target resources more effectively. The Department of Education and Science (DES 2008) lists the projects aims as follows:

Key principles underlying Giving Children an Even Break:

- Participating schools are selected on the basis of the findings of the independent survey of educational disadvantage in primary schools carried out by the Education Research Centre
- Schools already in receipt of additional resources under disadvantage schemes will retain these entitlements and may be eligible for additional entitlements under the New Programme

- The additional resources that will be allocated will be related to the level of concentration in each school of pupils who have background characteristics that are associated with educational disadvantage and early school leaving
- A reduced pupil teacher ratio in the early years is an effective intervention for pupils most at risk of educational disadvantage
- The additional teaching and financial resources must be targeted at those pupils most in need if they are to make a difference.
- Implementation of the New Programme should be planned and reviewed and the Programme will be subject to independent evaluation
- The effective delivery of educational and other necessary services should be assisted locally through collaboration by both voluntary and statutory agencies
- A programme of school and teacher support will be put in place by the Department of Education and Science so that the pupils concerned receive the maximum benefit from reduced class sizes and the additional financial allocations.

(DES 2008)

Implementation of the project

Phase 1: Surveying Levels of Disadvantage in Primary Schools

In February 2000, the Education Research Centre received funding from the Department of Education and Science (DES) to work on the first stage of GCEB - identifying primary schools with a high proportion of students facing socioeconomic disadvantage. The ERC sent a survey assessing the socioeconomic background of pupils to every school in the republic. The results indicated a greater need to examine rural and urban disadvantage separately as certain urban identifiers (eg single parenthood) were not as reliable a predictor of disadvantage in the rural context. The low incomes associated with farming also meant that this became an important indicator.

Phase 2: Targeting Resources

The results from the survey were split into rural and urban categories (as the characteristics of each type of school were too disparate for comparison. Urban schools were school ranked from the most disadvantaged to the least disadvantaged and the ministry of education used this to allocate funding and extra teachers to the most disadvantaged schools. Rural schools were ranked but also mapped to track disadvantage geographically and to see which schools were already participating in Breaking the Cycle (a previous government initiative to increase resources in disadvantaged schools). The project focused on reducing class sizes for the most disadvantaged and increasing the training and expertise amongst teachers serving disadvantaged communities.

The second phase was the implementation of the resource allocation under GCEB. Its targets were to reduce the staff pupil ration in disadvantaged primary schools to a 20 child per class maximum. The top-scoring 238 schools (about one quarter of all urban schools) were eligible for funded teaching posts.

Project Outcomes and Evaluation

The 238 most deprived schools (about one quarter of all urban schools) received funding for new teaching posts, and the schools with no Traveller or special needs children had staffing allocated to them in order to implement class sizes of 20:1 in all junior classes. However, where schools had Traveller or special needs pupils enrolled, these pupils were did not receive GCEB posts as a resource had already been provided for them.

Schools that were not part of previous schemes received more posts than their already designated counterparts and reflect the DES commitment to discriminating positively towards schools serving pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds. In terms of rural schools the most deprived rural schools were eligible for additional staffing in the form of shared co-ordinators serving clusters of schools (normally 5 schools per cluster).

- 161 teaching posts were required to implement the small class sizes in 2000/2001, by 2003/2004 the number had risen to 249.
- Including the posts funded under Breaking the Cycle, 323 new posts have been funded.
- In the case of rural schools, two days in-service training was provided for rural co-ordinators.
- Of the 79 rural posts that were funded, 24 (30 percent) remained unfilled in 2003/2004.

Although the distribution of financial grants was fairly equal for urban and rural schools (urban schools received 52 percent and rural schools 48 percent) urban schools were allocated more posts (the ratio was between 5:1 and 6:1 in favour of urban schools).

Although the formal evaluation has yet to be published, the commentaries on project note that finally, the scheme suffered as a result of a lack of in-service training for teachers of classes in which sizes were reduced, and a failure to provide a support team for participating schools. Although in-service training was offered in rural schools less was given to teachers in urban schools (where more posts were funded). The project continues to receive funding and remains a key component of the republic's education policy.

References

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