Overview of the Second-Level Education Sector in 2021

This article provides an overview of the second-level education sector in Ireland as the Covid-19 pandemic hampers progress towards important reforms. Touching on major themes that feature in the chapter as a whole, it shows how ongoing inequality and underinvestment in education are intrinsically connected, and it argues that, instead of returning to 'business as usual', we now need to make the investment necessary to ensure inclusive and equitable education for all.

A return to 'business as usual'?

In *Ireland's Education Yearbook 2020*, Taoiseach Micheál Martin highlighted the creation of a dedicated Department of Education focusing exclusively on schools as an opportunity for innovation. He envisaged 2021 as a year beyond Covid-19, when important initiatives to develop our education system could be commenced or continued, and highlighted the Leaving Certificate as a key area for reform.

One year on, Covid-19 remains a central focus for all of us, deeply affecting our lives, our work, and our schools. Politicians and civil servants remain in crisis mode, as do most of those working in the education sector, limiting capacity for strategic planning and development and hampering progress towards important reforms. Contributions to the present *Yearbook* reflect this ongoing focus.

Eamonn Carroll and Selina McCoy highlight how the pandemic has laid bare the deficiencies in our social structures and services that leave schools bearing the weight of responsibility for combatting educational inequalities. They urge us not to accept the inequities that have now been made visible, but to reimagine our system as we return to 'business as usual'.

Other contributions include potential tools and approaches that might be of benefit as we navigate a course to less stressful and more 'normal' times. We are invited to consider the roles played by the informal education sector, European collaboration, universal design for learning, language learning, and more focus on children's rights and participation, in making our sector more equitable and effective.

Second-level sector in 2021

The profile of our second-level sector continues to develop slowly. Enrolments have risen steadily

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in recent years, putting pressure on teacher supply and infrastructure. In 2020 the total number of second-level students reached 380,000, with the largest increases in the counties surrounding Dublin (Department of Education, 2021). Forty-five new post-primary schools have opened since 2013 to cater for population growth, and overall trends are towards more students attending larger, mixed, multi-denominational schools. Nevertheless, the sector in Ireland continues to be an outlier internationally, with a higher proportion of small, single-sex, and denominational schools than other OECD countries.

Alongside growing enrolments have been increases in provision for students with additional needs. There has been a significant rise in the number of dedicated classes for autistic students in second-level schools, for example (NCSE, 2021), but provision still falls short of demand in many areas. In the absence of systematic planning, a disproportionate number of classes open in new and developing schools, leading to an imbalance of provision and many students having to travel long distances.

Falling birth rates since 2020 mean that student numbers at second level are projected to peak in 2024 at around 410,000 (Department of Education, 2020). While new schools will continue to be needed in areas of housing development, enrolments in other areas may fall. This means that the potential to rebalance provision through new schools will reduce, and we will need to explore other ways to meet growing demand for mixed and multi-denominational schools and specialist autism provision. It will hopefully also enable a renewed focus on ensuring that schools that have opened can move into permanent buildings.

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Retention rates continue to be high in international terms: the proportion of young people aged 16–18 not enrolled in education is just 2%, compared to an EU average of 5% (OECD, 2021c). Although gaps in reading ability between the highest and lowest socio-economic groups in Ireland are lower than in many other countries, socio-economic background continues to have the strongest influence on learning outcomes for our young people (OECD, 2021a).

Research by UNICEF shows that young people in our second-level schools rate highly in academic and social skills, but worse in physical health and mental wellbeing. On life satisfaction, children in Ireland rate themselves among the lowest in the OECD/EU, with 28% marking a score of 5 or lower on a scale of 1–10. Issues contributing to these low scores include body image, pressure to succeed in school, bullying, and sense of meaning or purpose in life (UNICEF, 2020).

We continue to lag behind in investment in education: just 3% of our GDP is spent on educational institutions here, compared to an OECD average of 4.5%, with 1.1% going to post-primary (OECD, 2021b). This underinvestment impacts negatively on students, school staff, and communities. While wealthier families and communities can – and do – compensate through fundraising and paying for out-of-school supports, underfunding of our schools impacts most on poor and working-class students and those with

additional needs. Kieran Christie argues in his contribution that this is economically short-sighted as well as socially indefensible.

Covid-19 and socio-economic inequalities

Around the world, Covid-19 has exacerbated existing socio-economic inequalities. The pandemic continues to have a disproportionate negative impact on those with less resources, and the poorest have suffered most in terms of health, employment, and social outcomes. The effects of school closures have also been worse for children and young people from lower socio-economic groups (Thorn & Vincent-Lancrin, 2021). Emerging research from across the world has identified specific issues, including lack of space, poor access to technology, and limited family support, that have impeded remote learning for students from poorer families, and there are serious concerns of increased drop-out and early school leaving.

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In Ireland, Covid-19 has shone a bright light on deficiencies in our social services and digital infrastructure as well as our education system (Darmody et al., 2021). A shortage of community services means that children and young people with disabilities rely heavily on schools to gain access to social and therapeutic supports, as well as respite for families. The sharp decrease in referrals to Tusla during our relatively long periods of school closure (Clarke, 2020) reminds us of the vital role our schools play in identifying signs of neglect and abuse and protecting the most vulnerable in our society.

The fact that reimagining school lunches became the immediate priority for so many school leaders in DEIS schools when closures were announced reminds us that far too many families in Ireland struggle to meet their children's basic needs without support. All of this prompts us to reflect on the crucial role of schools, not only in ensuring that all students can reach their potential while at school but also in engaging in the broader societal imperative to reduce enduring social, economic, and educational inequalities.

Where to now?

Inequalities arise at national, sectoral, school, classroom, and individual levels. The pandemic has drawn actors at every level into crisis mode, with considerable energy and time necessarily focused on seeking practical solutions in a constantly changing landscape: short-term problem-solving, rather than long-term planning. As we emerge, it is important to step back and take a wider view, bringing together what we have learned in the past 20 months with what we know about how education works, and placing children and young people firmly at the centre of our planning and decision-making. I want to offer two frameworks that might help us to do that.

Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG4) calls on us to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and to promote lifelong learning opportunities for all by 2030. UNESCO research and analysis over a number of years has identified barriers to equity as well as successful approaches towards

achieving this goal. This research points to four key practices that promote equity and inclusion for all:

- Schools and other learning centres have strategies for encouraging the presence, participation, and achievement of all learners from their local community.
- Schools and other learning centres provide support for learners who are at risk of underachievement, marginalisation, and exclusion.
- Teachers and support staff are prepared to respond to learner diversity during their initial training.
- Teachers and support staff have opportunities to take part in continuing professional development (CPD) regarding inclusive and equitable practices. (UNESCO, 2017)

The 2020 Global Education Monitoring report (UNESCO, 2020) charts progress towards SDG4 and makes recommendations based on current challenges. These include targeting investment on those left behind; sharing expertise and resources; empowering and motivating the education workforce; consulting with parents, communities, and NGOs; and applying universal design.

> *Central to equitable approaches in education is recognising that learners have multiple, intersecting identities and that no one characteristic is associated with any predetermined ability to learn. (UNESCO, 2020)*

This may seem obvious, but in a world where neoliberal discourses of meritocracy and individualism dominate, we need to constantly remind ourselves that patterns of underachievement among certain 'groups' of students result from the barriers in our system, not from students themselves.

> **Are we doing enough through initial and continuing teacher education to support school staff to respond to learner diversity?**

In considering how we want to develop our sector to become more equitable post-pandemic, SDG4 is a good place to start. Do our schools have specific strategies to encourage the presence, participation, and achievement of all learners from their local community? Patently they don't, since so many children and young people with autism travel long distances to school. So we need to ask what infrastructure, supports, resources, and cultural shifts are required to make this happen.

Are we doing enough through initial and continuing teacher education to support school staff to respond to learner diversity? Unlikely, since so many teachers report a lack of confidence in teaching students with additional needs (Rose et al., 2015) and from minority ethnic backgrounds (Brown et al., 2017). Are we targeting investment to those who are marginalised? The DEIS programme sets out to do this, but reviews have shown considerable shortcomings (Smyth, 2015; Fleming, 2020), and many students with significant needs fall outside the net because they are in the wrong school.

A second framework that can help us think about how to rebalance our system to become more equitable is that devised by Kathleen Lynch and John Baker in their groundbreaking work on equality of condition (Lynch & Baker, 2005). They ask schools to go further than equalising access

and participation, and to actively analyse and challenge socio-economic inequalities through curriculum, practice, and school culture.

By analysing the unequal distribution of resources, respect, recognition, and relational power within and between our schools, and by taking concrete actions to redistribute these, we can make real differences in young people's lives and in society. In practical terms, taking an equality-of-condition approach means widening curriculum and assessment practices to encompass the full range of human achievements, democratising decision-making, and fostering the emotional development of students and teachers.

Addressing inequalities post-pandemic

We can see some seeds of the types of changes that are needed in initiatives and reforms that had begun pre-Covid-19. There is recognition of the need to move towards a more inclusive system, where students of all abilities have the option to attend their local school. But we need a much more realistic view of the supports that are required, and we need a clear strategy and roadmap of how to get there. Similarly, there are government targets to improve access to multi-denominational and equality-based schools, but a plan is needed to effect this change.

> **It is crucial that we overhaul the entry system to third level.**

It is vital that we take full advantage of the opportunity presented by the current review of senior cycle to broaden both the learning we assess and the way we assess it. It is also crucial that we overhaul the entry system to third level. The increased focus on wellbeing in schools is welcome, but increased curriculum time must be accompanied by support for CPD in trauma-informed and nurturing approaches, as well as access to professional counsellors and therapists and improvements in wider social services. There are opportunities also with the implementation of Languages Connect to make our schools more supportive of multilingualism, and this must be accompanied by increased support for high-quality English as an Additional Language provision.

All of this is important, and none of it can be achieved without investment. As we emerge from the Covid-19 pandemic, countries across Europe are investing in education to address learning loss and achievement gaps. In our smaller neighbour Wales, GBP 150 million has been announced so far, and in England the figure is approaching £5 billion.

In Ireland, where the need for recovery is arguably greater, because of chronic underfunding and longer school closures, just €100 million has been announced. This includes €50 million for additional 'CLASS' teaching hours, which are for all schools rather than targeting the greatest need, and which many schools will be unable to avail of because of the ongoing teacher shortage.

Investment is key

It is likely that reading back through Education Matters' *Yearbook* archives since 1987, we would find in every issue at least one article referring to

educational inequality, and one referring to underinvestment in education. These are not unconnected. For too long we have papered over the cracks in our system with voluntary initiative and fundraising, to the detriment of students with the greatest needs. The title of the Taoiseach's article in *Ireland's Education Yearbook 2020* was 'Vision of Ireland's Future through Investment in Education'. As we emerge from the pandemic, instead of returning to 'business as usual', let's seek the investment that is required to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education for all.

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