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Responding to Educational Disadvantage in Ireland: A Review of Literature, 1965–2020

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Abstract

The term educational disadvantage represents a circumstance where some persons benefit less than others from the educational system, manifesting in fewer opportunities for engagement in education, lower levels of participation in formal education, and poorer educational outcomes. While complex factors underpin educational deprivation, international research is in broad agreement that economic deficiency and social isolation contribute to underachievement at school which, in turn, perpetuates the cycle of poverty. Based on a review of literature, this paper examines the response from the education authorities in Ireland to educational disadvantage between 1965 and 2020, highlighting responses from the Department of Education that have focused on increased funding in digital and information technology and on projects providing equality of access to education from preschool to third level. Notwithstanding the growth in retention and participation rates in education over the past 55 years, it is contended that the continuance of poverty demonstrates both the multidimensional aspect of socio-economic disadvantage and the requirement for greater interdepartmental and community collaboration in its amelioration. Finally, the paper draws attention to shortcomings in the official digital and information technology strategy for schools shown up by COVID-19 – a time of sudden school and college closures, resulting in virtual classrooms becoming a forum for learning. A wide variation in response, throughout primary, post-primary and third-level education suggests that, after 25 years of investment in digital technology, the embedding of information and assistive technology necessary for delivering lessons on line has not occurred.

Key words: Educational disadvantage, socio-economic status, digital and information technology

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Responding to Educational Disadvantage in Ireland: A Review of Literature, 1965-2020

Educational disadvantage has been identified as a problem requiring attention in state legislation and key policy documents issued by the Irish authorities over many decades. The Education Act (1998) defines educational disadvantage in terms of 'impediments to education arising from social or economic disadvantage' (Education Act, 1998, p.32). The 1998 Green Paper on adult education emphasises the role of continuous education in ameliorating intergenerational poverty (Department of Education and Skills, DES, 1998). The Education (Amendment) Act (2012), Part 2 (4a), defines educational disadvantage in terms of socio-economic deprivation, the consequence of which, the act states, will create barriers to learning, preventing students from reaching their potential. Successive White Papers issued by the Department of Education express a commitment to enable each individual, from childhood to adulthood, to achieve their full potential (DES, 1995, 1999, 2000), alongside the objective to provide 'a skilled workforce to meet the needs of a knowledge society, and in promoting prosperity, employment and growth' (DES, 2000, p.29).

The current paper explores the Department of Education's response to educational disadvantage in Ireland during the period from 1965 to 2020.[1] Section one describes the socio-economic profile that is associated with educational advantage and disadvantage. The commitment by the Department of Education, evidenced in policy documents between 1965 and 2020, to address educational disadvantage and inequality is outlined in section two. Section three examines the investment made in interventions to address disadvantage in education. Section four explores the growth in educational participation and attainment, while the impact of advancements in education on resolving issues of poverty at a societal level is investigated in section five. In conclusion, the paper discusses what can be learned from the Department of Education's response to educational disadvantage during this period which may potentially contribute to addressing some of the issues identified.

Section 1: Socio-Economic Status and Educational Advantage and Disadvantage

The concept of educational disadvantage emanates from the 1960s and its existence, according to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD, 2012), is a consequence of accumulated social, economic, cultural and educational factors. There is much evidence in the international literature to support the theory that social class plays an important role in determining continuity in education between primary, secondary and third level, along with the subsequent success in securing

1 Disadvantages experienced by persons with special and additional educational needs are not examined.

lucrative career opportunities (Ishida et al., 1995; Duncan & Murnane, 2011). A literature review by Field and Morgan-Klein (2013) of the RANLHE project, based on interviews carried out with 83 undergraduates at three Scottish universities, led the authors to conclude that social class and economic status play a very significant part in everyday life and are the strongest determinants of educational and occupational prosperity. An analysis of original empirical data by Cooper et al. (2003) on the impact of poverty on educational achievement in London led the authors to deduce that multiple complex and cumulative links exist between low social and economic class, under-educational attainment and poor employment prospects. Research conducted by Stephens et al. (2012) at 50 national universities and 25 liberal arts colleges in the US showed that the dominant cultural norm of US universities was one of independent status and personal responsibility which, according to the authors, represents the values of middle-class students and is contrary to the predominantly interdependent values of students from working-class families. The study concludes that a cultural mismatch creates barriers to education and compromises the academic performance of first-generation students (i.e., those whose parents do not have a third-level degree). In qualitative research involving 20 families living in extreme poverty in the UK, MacDonald et al. (2020) identified adverse social and cultural environmental circumstances as barriers to enhanced opportunities in education, living and working conditions.

Considerable work has also been undertaken by researchers in Ireland to examine the relationship between home background and educational outcomes (Smyth, 1999; Loftus, 2017). Kellaghan (2001) describes educational disadvantage as the discontinuity in the values and experiences that children have between home and school which results in their inability to achieve success in learning. In a study conducted by Lynch and O'Riordan (1998), it was found that economic, social, cultural and educational constraints, experienced by students from low-income families, impede both progression to, and success in third-level education. Comparing home-learning environments, Kent and Pitsia (2018) found that families from areas designated as having a low socio-economic demographic are less likely to engage in home-learning activities with their preschool children than those from areas of affluence. Devine and Cockburn (2018) draw attention to the fact that while migrant children receive financial support to enable school attendance, they are prone to marginalisation if they fail to conform to, or work within, the confines of the educational system. Irish Rural Link (2016) equates the hidden nature of rural poverty with educational disadvantage, low-paid jobs and unemployment. Drawing from the research literature on educational disadvantage in Ireland, Frawley (2014) concludes that a child from a low socio-economic community is more likely to experience literacy problems by the end of primary school, has an increased probability of exiting post-primary school without sitting the Leaving Certificate Examination, and has a very low prospect of attending third-level education. Results from the study 'Growing up in Ireland' (Watson et al., 2014) also demonstrate a clear link between social, cultural and economic background

and educational success. The 2019 report from the Higher Education Authority (HEA, 2019) in Ireland shows that, in that year, 20% of third-level students studying medicine, business, finance and engineering were from affluent families, while only 3% were from disadvantaged homes.

Section 2: The Commitment to Address Educational Disadvantage and Inequality in Department of Education Policy and Legislation, 1965–2020

As far back as 1965, the 'Investment in Education' report (OECD & Department of Education, 1965) acknowledged the pervasive nature of educational inequity and identified poverty as its source. At this time, second- and third-level education was fee-paying and widely regarded as the domain of the middle classes (Bhreathnach, 2016). In 1980, the White Paper on educational development acknowledged the negative schooling experiences of young people from areas of economic deprivation and concluded that special provision would be required to redress this inequality. Principles underpinning Ireland's education policy, in response to educational disadvantage, are manifest in the Education Act (1998, 2012), the Education Welfare Act (2000), and White Papers issued by the Department of Education (DES, 1999, 2000). The Education Act (1998), amended in 2012, posited the duality of educational disadvantage as both arising from and contributing to poverty. Policies contained in a White Paper on early childhood education, 'Ready to Learn' (DES, 1999), are underpinned by the principle of equality of educational access and focused on early intervention as a means of achieving this goal. The Education Welfare Act (2000) secured a legal framework for the promotion of school attendance. The subsequent establishment of the National Education Welfare Board, with responsibility to increase and elongate school participation, created an expectation of a reduction in early school leaving. Also in 2000, the Department of Education issued 'Learning for Life', a White Paper on adult education (DES, 2000) signalling the adoption of Human Capital Theory, a global concept formulated in the 1960s which placed a strong emphasis on the knowledge economy and the reciprocal relationship between education and economic growth (Mincer, 1958). The vision espoused in 'Learning for Life' is one of an egalitarian and inclusive society, enhanced early school participation, and a reduction in school drop-out rates. The persistence of poverty as a barrier to educational achievement was recognised despite earlier educational interventions to redress this disparity.

In 1997, the Department of Education issued its first information and communication technology (ICT) policy framework document, 'Schools IT 2000' (DES, 1997). Its purpose was to enhance and extend access to all curricular areas, through the development of computer literacy for teachers and students at both primary and post-primary levels. In 2006, a social partnership agreement, 'Towards 2016', published by the Department of the Taoiseach (2006), reiterated the government's commitment

and investment in human capital within the framework of a life-cycle approach that required flexibility in meeting the literacy (including ICT), numeracy, vocational, social and economic needs of children, young adults, people in employment, older people, and those with disabilities. A report by the Department of Education Inspectorate in 2008 on ICT in schools stated that 'ICT skills have become as fundamental to living a full life as being able to read, write and compute' (DES, 2008, Forward, xi). The report 'Smart Schools = Smart Economy' (DES, 2009), issued by ICT Ireland in conjunction with the Department of Education in 2009, emphasised the importance of digital literacy in expanding educational access through a variety of strategies that included the establishment of virtual learning platforms. In 2016, backed by international research (Moore & Taylor, 2000; Kariyawasam, 2007), the European Commission's 'Open Education Framework' (2016) recommended the integration of ICT into the educational system as a means of equalising access to both formal and informal teaching and learning. Contemporaneously, the Department of Education issued the Digital Strategy for Schools 2015-2020 (DES, 2015) for primary and post-primary schools with the dual aim of providing equality of educational access through digital technology and delivering digitally skilled students to the workforce.

Section 3: Investment in Interventions to Address Educational Disadvantage

Legislation and policy documents introduced by the Department of Education between 1965 and 2020 created the framework for investment in educational initiatives, aimed primarily at expanding opportunities for children in areas designated as disadvantaged. In 1967, free secondary education was introduced. The scheme, announced by the Minister for Education at the time, Donogh O'Malley, included financial assistance for families living in poverty to enable the purchase of books, and a state-supported transport system to provide equality of opportunity for students living in rural Ireland (Fianna Fáil, 2016). In 1969, the Rutland Street Project in Dublin's inner city was established, as a joint project between the Government of Ireland and the Van Leer Foundation, to provide intensive pre-primary education to young children in the area. Department of Education spending on this project in 2001, exclusive of teachers' salaries, was €204,000 (DES, 2003). In 1984, the Disadvantaged Areas Scheme (DAS) was introduced to support 33 schools in regions of deprivation and was expanded when more funding became available (Government of Ireland, 2006). Department of Education spending on the scheme for primary and post-primary schools in 2001, exclusive of teachers' salaries at primary level, was €6.3m (DES, 2003). In 1990, the Home School Community Liaison (HSCL) scheme was launched in primary schools and extended to post-primary schools in 1991. Its purpose was to maximise the participation of children considered at risk by supporting parents to become involved in their children's education. The estimated cost of the scheme

in 2001, provided in the summary of initiatives report, for teachers' salaries in primary and post-primary schools, was €14.8m (DES, 2003). Early Start, a preschool programme, was established in designated areas of urban disadvantage in 1994 to meet the needs of children aged between three and five years considered at risk of not reaching their potential in school. An approximate €4.8m, inclusive of teachers' and child care workers' salaries, was spent on this project in 2001 (DES, 2003). Free third-level education was introduced in 1996, replacing what the then Minister for Education, Niamh Bhreathnach, later described as an ineffective grant scheme that had been designed to support students from low-income families to access third-level education (Bhreathnach, 2016). In the same year, the Breaking the Cycle of Educational Disadvantage scheme was initiated in urban schools (Weir & Eivers, 1998). This was superseded in 2001 by the Giving Children an Even Break programme at an estimated cost of €33m which included both urban and rural schools designated as disadvantaged (DES, 2003).

A report by the National Economic and Social Forum (NESF) in 1997 identified a clear link between early school leaving, unemployment and the perpetuation of poverty. In spite of the establishment of the Education Welfare Board (2000), which has the specific purpose of supporting students to remain within the school system, the statistics on early school leavers remained relatively unchanged. In 2002, the School Completion Programme (SCP) was introduced in both primary and post-primary schools, combining aspects of best practice from, and replacing, the Early School Leaver Initiative (1998) and the Stay-in-School Retention Initiative (1999) (DES, 2003; Kennedy & Clarke, 2018). In 2005, DEIS (Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools) was launched (DES, 2005) incorporating previous schemes (HSCL and the SCP) into one coherent strategy that included an evaluation component to be delivered by the Educational Research Centre in Dublin. In 2017, DEIS was revised by the Department of Education with new schools included and specific goals set for school retention and progression to further education. As indicators of achievements for the schools involved (DES, 2017), targets were established in literacy, numeracy and science through the use of the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA). Fleming (2017) claimed that the revised programme had the potential to produce gradual change but questioned whether the resources underpinning it would meet the multifaceted and substantial needs of the students, families, communities and schools experiencing socio-economic disadvantage. DEIS has a budget of €150m for 2022 (Department of Public Expenditure and Reform, 2021).

Section 4: Growth in Participation and Educational Attainment, 1965–2020

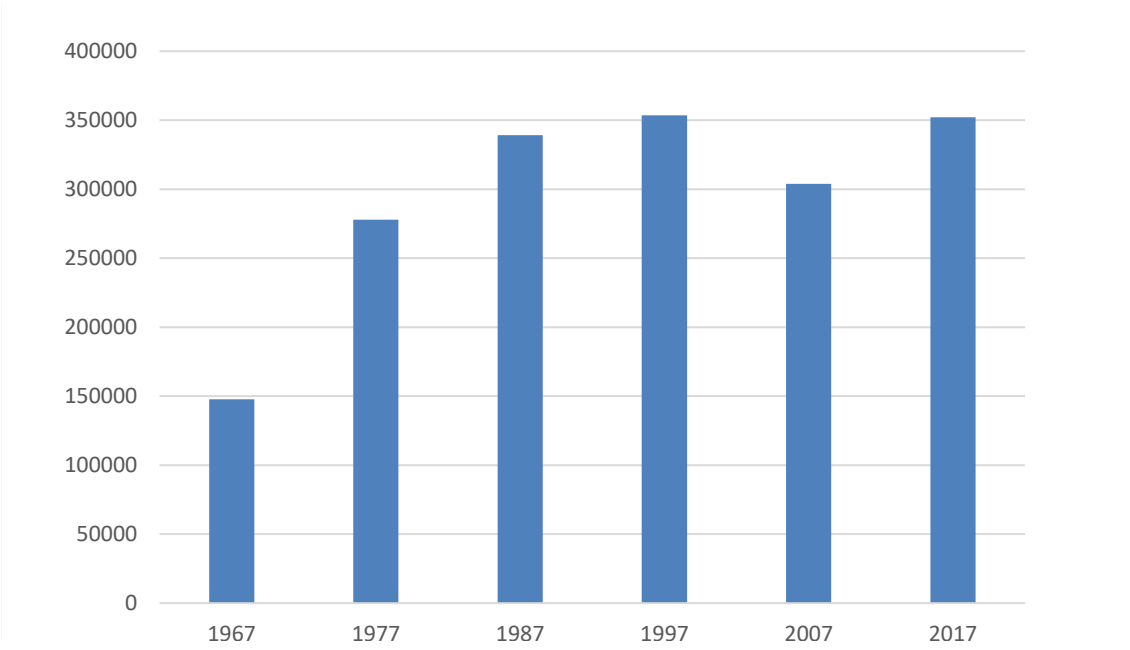
The OECD report, 'Equity in Education' (2018), cites evidence to show that the gap in academic performance between disadvantaged and advantaged students in OECD countries has reduced over many years and accordingly deduces that inequality is reversible. One measure of the success of Department of Education interventions to redress educational disadvantage is the extent to which participation and retention in formal education have increased. A second measure relates to whether extended continuance in school and college has resulted in higher academic outcomes for students from homes experiencing poverty.

Statistics from the Department of Education and the Central Statistics Office (CSO) demonstrate a significant improvement in educational participation, retention and progression from primary to post-primary and from post-primary to third-level education over the last 55 years. Figure 1 shows that between 1967, when free secondary education was introduced, and 2017 the numbers attending secondary school more than doubled from just under 150,000 to 350,000. Figure 2 illustrates the gradual increase in student enrolment in third-level colleges from 20,000 in 1967 to 180,000 in 2017 with the largest increase of 40% occurring between 1997 and 2007, following the abolition of fees for third-level education in 1996. Figure 3 shows the introduction of Post Leaving Certificate courses in 1997 and the gradual increase in enrolment numbers over the following 20 years.

A survey on the retention rates of students in secondary education, carried out by the Department of Education (DES, 2015), found that 96.89% of students who entered post-primary education in 2008 sat the Junior Certificate Examination in 2011 or 2012, and that 90.56% of these sat the Leaving Certificate Examination, including the Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA) programme and the Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme (LCVP), two or three years later. This represents an increase of 14% in the retention rate since 2001.

FIGURE 1

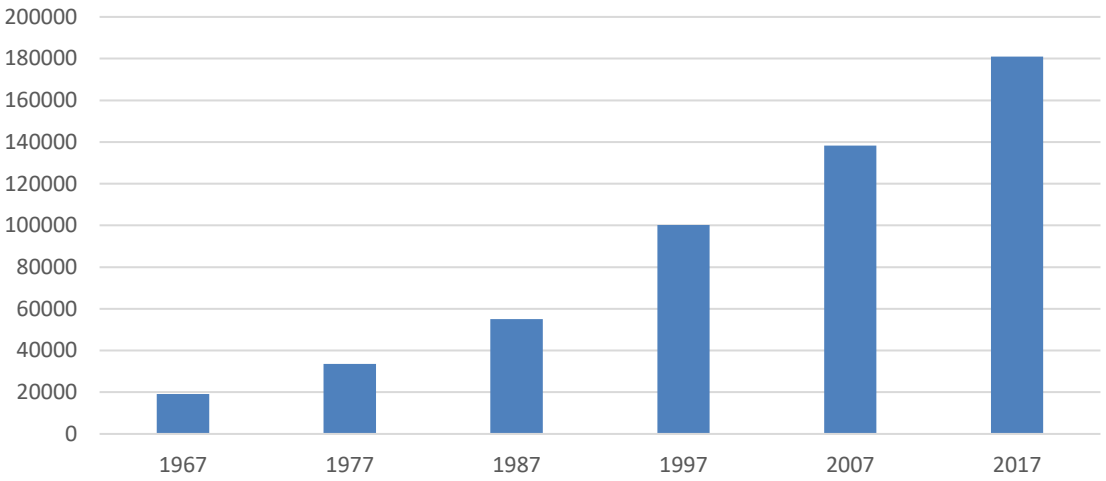
Numbers of Students Enrolled in Second-Level Education 1967-2017



From *Enrolments of Full-Time Students* by the CSO in association with the Department of Education and Skills, 2021 (https://data.cso.ie/table/EDA37). In the public domain.

FIGURE 2

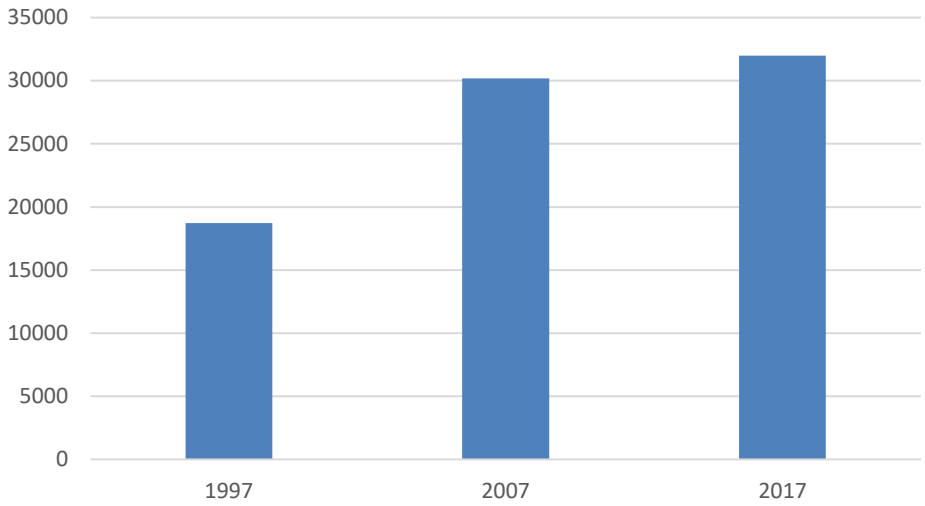
Numbers of Full-Time Students Enrolled in Third-Level Education 1967-2017



From *Enrolments of Full-Time Students* by the CSO in association with the Department of Education and Skills, 2021 (https://data.cso.ie/table/EDA37). In the public domain.

FIGURE 3

Numbers of Students Enrolled in Post Leaving Certificate Courses 1997-2017

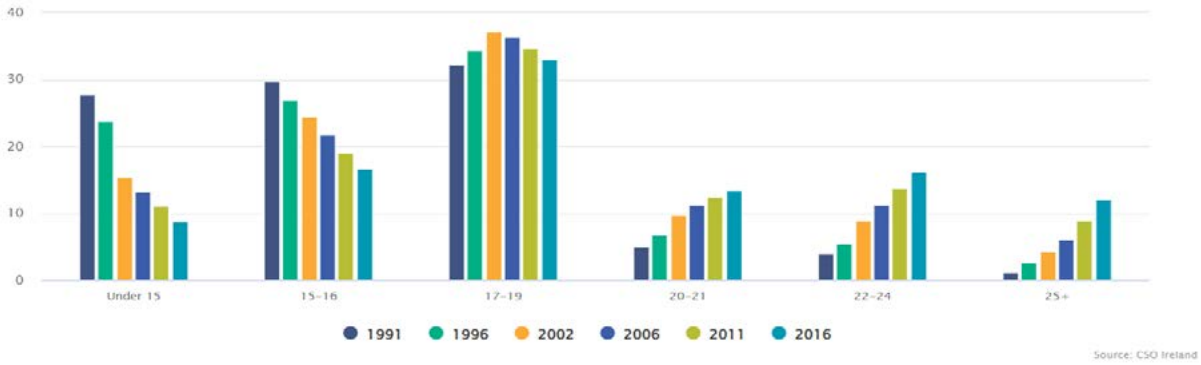


From *Enrolments of Full-Time Students* by the CSO in association with the Department of Education and Skills, 2021 (https://data.cso.ie/table/EDA37). In the public domain.

Figure 4, containing data from the CSO 2016 Census of Population, shows that the proportion of people continuing in education beyond the age of 22 increased substantially between 1991 (5.2% of the population) and 2016 (28.2%).

FIGURE 4

Age at Which Full-Time Education Ceased, 1991-2016

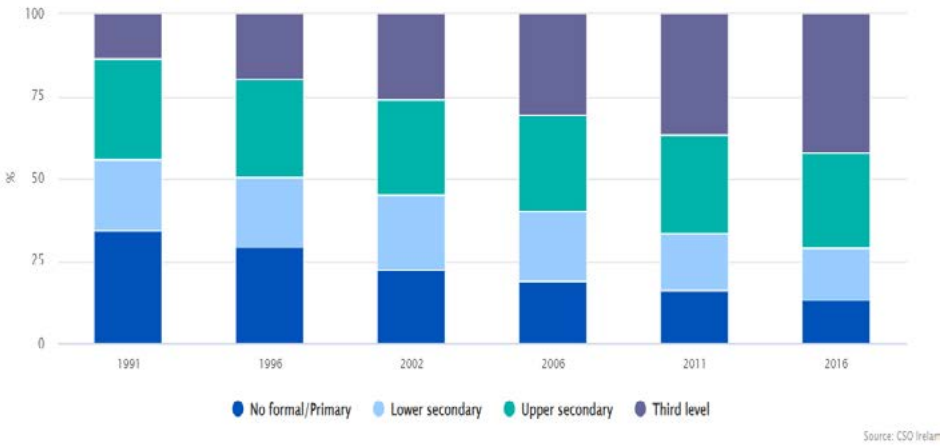


From *Census of Population 2016 - Profile 10, Education, Skills and the Irish Language* by the CSO, 2021a (https://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/ep/p-cp10esil/p10esil/le/). In the public domain.

Figure 5, also based on the 2016 Census of Population, illustrates that the number of people (over the age of 15) with a third-level qualification had increased from 13.6% in 1991 to 42.0% in 2016.

FIGURE 5

Highest Level of Education Attained, 1991-2016



From *Census of Population 2016 - Profile 10, Education, Skills and the Irish Language* by the CSO, 2021a (https://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/ep/p-cp10esil/p10esil/le/). In the public domain.

Academic Outcomes for Students in DEIS Schools

The triennial study, PISA, compares results for 15-year-old students in Ireland, in literacy, numeracy and science, with those for other OECD countries, and between students in DEIS and non-DEIS schools in Ireland. PISA allows for this comparison, but with some caveats, as it is not designed to measure DEIS outcomes (e.g., DEIS schools are not oversampled). A report by Nelis et al. (2021) on PISA 2018 points out that in the academic year 2016/2017 over one fifth of 15-year-old students in Ireland attended DEIS post-primary schools. In the same year, the report recorded a similar percentage in ownership of smart phones, laptops or tablets and home computers for use for school work by students in DEIS and non-DEIS schools. However, respectively 13% and 17% of students in DEIS schools indicated that they did not have a desk or a quiet place to study at home. Reporting on academic performance from the PISA study (2018), Gilleece et al. (2020) point out that students in DEIS schools achieved significantly lower points in reading, mathematics and science literacies. Compared to non-DEIS schools, the study found that in all three subject areas there was a substantially higher percentage of students in DEIS schools below Level 2, which is regarded by the OECD as the most basic level of proficiency in literacy to accommodate independence and a considerably lower percentage at Level 5 or above.

Section 5: The Continuance and Extent of Poverty in Ireland, 1965–2020

A further measure of the success of Department of Education in its goal to provide a highly educated workforce for the creation of prosperity can be gained by looking for evidence of a reduction in levels of poverty that might be expected as a result of increased participation and retention in education.

The UK Government report, 'Opportunity for All' (Department of Social Security, 1999), describes the multifaceted nature of poverty in terms of barriers to education, employment, housing, health, and living conditions, all of which, the report contends, contribute to the continuance of deprivation. Nolan (2001), however, argues against the definitive use of poverty indicators, giving the example that those living in standard housing conditions may be experiencing poverty, while the circumstances of those living in more modest conditions, with few possessions, may not always constitute dearth.

In the absence of CSO statistics on poverty and living conditions in the 1960s, data on emigration and migration studies provide an indicator of the economic climate of the time. Table 1 shows the population and estimated emigration from Ireland in 1961. The Commission on Emigration and Other Population Problems (Ireland, 1956), reporting on the period from 1948 to 1954, states that emigration was primarily driven by economic necessity and had become part of Irish culture and tradition. It proposed that the State had a duty to create social and economic conditions that would cause a decline in emigration and an increase in Ireland's population. FitzGerald (1999) explains that emigration in the 1950s and '60s was driven by mass unemployment, with the majority of emigrants educated to just primary level. Figure 6 shows the migration pattern of Irish nationals from 1941 to 2021 with the population reaching its lowest ebb, due to emigration, in the 1960s. Glynn et al. (2013) point out that while emigration occurred in the 20th Century due to poverty and lack of employment, in the 21st Century, it provided opportunities for a well-educated workforce to gain experience with a choice of returning to Ireland or remaining in lucrative employment abroad.

TABLE 1

Census of Population, 1961

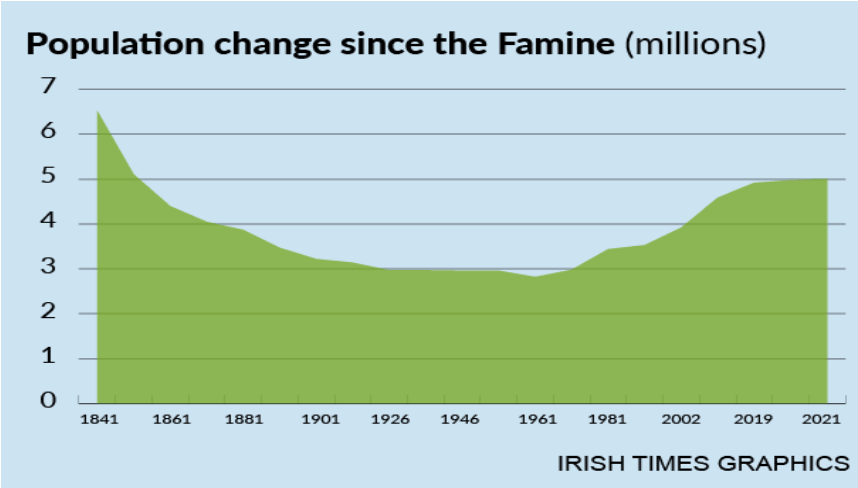
TABLE 1:- POPULATION OF EACH PROVINCE AT EACH CENSUS SINCE 1901; MARRIAGES, BIRTHS AND DEATHS REGISTERED, NATURAL INCREASE AND ESTIMATED NET EMIGRATION IN EACH INTERCENSAL PERIOD SINCE 1891.

Total Population		Figures for the Intercensal Period mentioned in last column						Intercensal Period
Year	Persons	Marriages Registered	Births Registered	Deaths Registered	Natural Increase (Births minus Deaths)	Decrease in Population (+ = Increase)	Estimated Net Emigration	
				Total				
1901	3,221,823	148,134	737,934	588,391	149,543	246,871	396,414	1891–1901
1911	3,139,688	153,674	713,709	534,305	179,404	82,135	261,539	1901–1911
1926	2,971,992	230,525	968,742	731,409	237,333	167,696	405,029	1911–1926
1936	2,968,420	136,699	583,502	420,323	163,179	3,572	166,751	1926–1936
1946	2,955,107	159,426	602,095	428,297	173,798	13,313	187,111	1936–1946
1951	2,960,593	79,231	322,335	197,281	125,054	+ 5,486	119,568	1946–1951
1956	2,898,264	79,541	312,517	178,083	134,434	62,329	196,763	1951–1956
1961	2,818,341	76,669	302,816	170,736	132,080	79,923	212,003	1956–1961

From *Census 1961 Reports: Volume 1,* by the CSO, 2021b (https://www.cso.ie/en/census/censusvolumes1926to1991/historicalreports/census1961reports/). In the public domain.

FIGURE 6

Population Change in Ireland Since the Famine



From 'Republic's Population Over 5m for First Time Since 1851', by E. Burke-Kennedy 2021, *The Irish Times* (August, 31) based on CSO data (https://www.irishtimes.com/business/economy/republic-s-population-over-5m-for-first-time-since-1851-1.4660967). Reprinted with permission.

Further evidence of deprivation in Ireland in the 1960s is provided in a study by Holohan (2016) on poverty in Dublin, leading the author to conclude that the British model underpinned the concept of minimum subsistence which was to be provided as a last

resort. The dominant role played by voluntary and religious sectors in responding to dearth, according to Holohan, contributed to a lack of information on the extent of paucity and to an absence of clarity on where the responsibility for welfare provision lay.

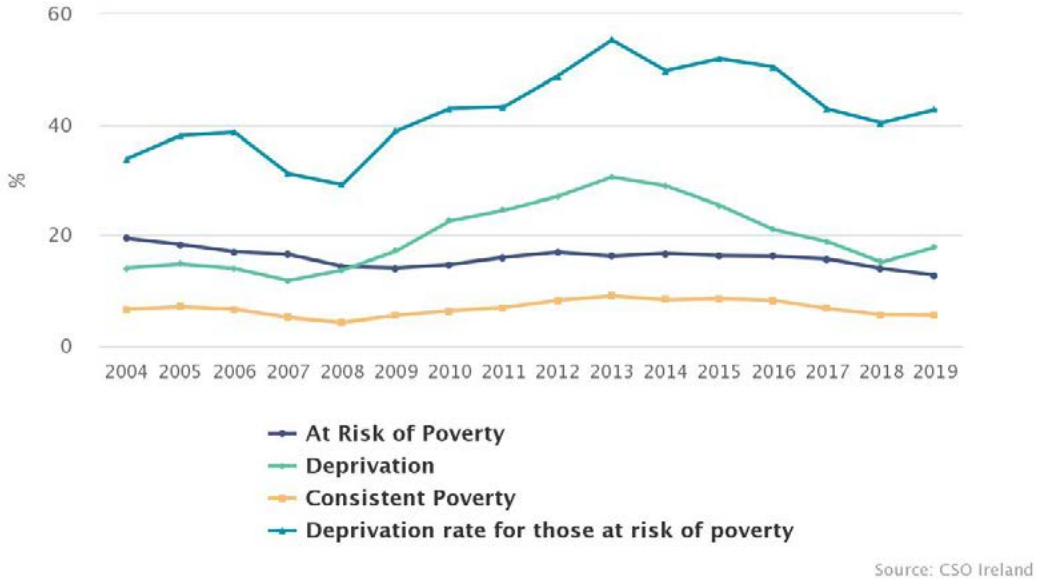
Fitzgerald (2000) points out that while Ireland's entry into the EU in 1973 was heralded as the start of a period of economic prosperity, it did not protect Ireland from the economic recession and widespread unemployment of the 1980s. The presentation of a paper on poverty by Ó Cinnéide (1972), at a conference in Kilkenny in 1971 where he proposed that one quarter of the Irish population lived in poverty, created a renewed awareness, at governmental and EU level, of the extent and persistence of the problem in Ireland. It spurred the establishment of pilot schemes in 1974 by the Irish Government and the European Union to combat poverty. The publication of a report by the National Committee on Pilot Schemes to Combat Poverty (1981) accentuated the complex and widespread nature of poverty and the challenges faced by communities and policy makers, in both the short and long term, in its amelioration. Analysing data on the extent of poverty in the Republic of Ireland, Nolan (1987) and Callan and Nolan (1999) provide evidence of increased deprivation between 1973 and 1987, and point out that the percentage of persons falling below poverty lines was higher in Ireland than in most other EU countries.

The CSO (2019) identifies deprivation as the inability to afford eleven basic items, four of which include new clothes, two pairs of strong shoes, a substantial meal every second day and home heating. Key findings from a report by Roantree et al. (2021) for the Economic and Social Research Institute, examining the period 1987 to 2019, reveal that while the overall rate of material and income poverty declined over this period, it remained consistently high for families with lone parents and those in households of working age where there was not paid employment. Further findings in the report reveal that the average income of young working adults born in the 1990s was equivalent to that of those born in the 1960s and less than that of those born in the 1970s when both of these cohorts were in their early to mid-twenties.

Figure 7 provides information from the CSO (2021c) on poverty and deprivation rates by year, from 2004 to 2019.

FIGURE 7

Poverty and Deprivation Rates by Year, 2004-2019

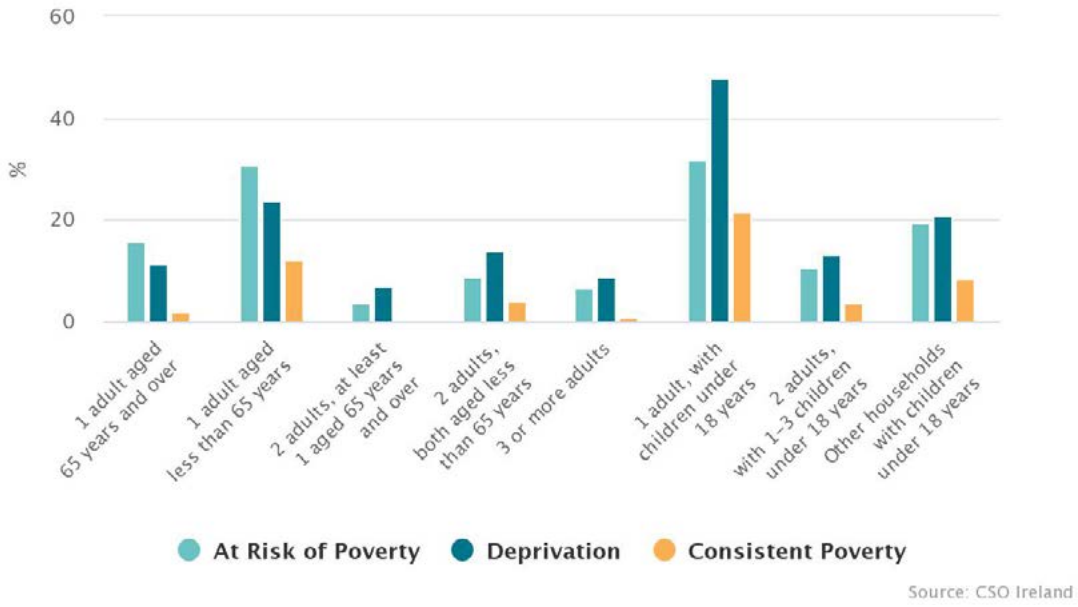


From *Survey on Income and Living Conditions (SILC) 2020,* by the CSO 2021c (https://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/ep/p-silc/surveyonincomeandlivingconditionssilc2020/povertyanddeprivation/). In the public domain.

Figure 8 provides information on poverty and deprivation status according to household occupancy.

FIGURE 8

Poverty Status According to Household Composition, 2020



From *Survey on Income and Living Conditions (SILC) 2020,* by the CSO 2021c (https://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/ep/p-silc/surveyonincomeandlivingconditionssilc2020/povertyanddeprivation/). In the public domain.

A report from the OECD (2021) points out that the stagnation in earnings in middle-income homes in advanced countries such as Ireland since the 1980s indicates a decline in living standards and an increase in inequality. The Household Finance and Consumption Survey, carried out in 2018 (CSO, 2020a), demonstrates that the age cohort of 65 plus was in the top 50% of net wealth due partly to inheritance and home-ownership rates.

Results from the survey on income and living conditions (CSO, 2021c) reveal a deprivation rate of 17.8%, with 37.5% of people in this category unable to work due to illness or disability and a further 35.4% unable to work due to unemployment. Breakdown of the data shows that households with one adult and one or more children under the age of 18 years had the highest consistent poverty rate – at 17.1 percent. Data from Focus Ireland show that in July 2020 there were 2,651 children homeless in Ireland, and living in emergency accommodation (Focus Ireland, 2020), demonstrating an increase of 348% from July 2014. Children in families who are homeless and placed in 'own door', i.e., self-contained accommodation, are not included in these figures (CSO, 2020a). Darmody et al. (2020) highlight the possibility that the COVID-19 pandemic may intensify poverty among the population already experiencing inequality in education, health and employment.

A report issued by the Irish National Teachers' Organisation (INTO, 2004) during the economic boom points out that, even during a time of economic prosperity in Ireland, educational disadvantage persisted due to sustained poverty and deprivation. In their analysis of data in 'Growing up in Ireland' (Watson et al., 2014), the authors note the changing, though not diminishing, societal shape of economic vulnerability following the economic collapse in 2008. During the economic boom, the main caregivers in families living in poverty had typically accessed primary education only. During the recession, there was a significant increase in the number of families exposed to poverty, including more families with primary caregivers who had accessed second-level and frequently third-level education (Watson, et al., 2014). Statistics from the CSO, that reveal an increase in student numbers completing second-level and attending tertiary education, do not show a corresponding decrease in poverty, deprivation rates and homelessness (CSO, 2020b).

Research studies carried out in Ireland and internationally demonstrate that the move to virtual platforms for teaching and learning, as necessitated by the COVID-19 pandemic that took hold globally in 2020, was far from seamless (Luong & Arnold, 2020; Scully et al., 2021; van Cappelle et al., 2021) while, according to Colman et al. (2021), the pandemic has further emphasised the challenges faced by learners in striving to achieve equality of educational access. Symonds et al.'s study (2020) conducted during the pandemic on the experiences of remote teaching in 149 primary schools in Ireland, 33.6% of which have DEIS status, shows a wide variation in the experience of digital technology across schools and very limited use of technology prior to lockdown. Darmody et al. (2020) found that the move to distance learning negatively impacted students from disadvantaged areas because the ICT infrastructure was not in place and children had limited or no prior experience in using digital technology for educational purposes. Conversely, the PISA report for 2018 by Nelis et al. (2021) found a similarity in percentage ownership of digital technology among students from DEIS and non-DEIS schools. However, it should be noted that while the overall sample was nationally representative, the sample of DEIS students was (relatively) small. A report by Feerick et al. (2021) based on a longitudinal evaluation of the Digital Framework shows that the concept of embedding digital technologies into teaching, learning and assessment was understood differently across schools at all levels. Citing remarks from Department of Education Inspectors, the report states that digital technology was part of just over half of the lessons observed in both primary and post-primary schools and proposed that, if used more widely, it would have enhanced both teaching and learning in a greater number of lessons.

Conclusion

Throughout the period from 1965 to 2020, the profile of both education and poverty changed radically in Ireland with surveys carried out over the past 55 years demonstrating an ambiguous relationship between education and economic prosperity. An indication of the success of Department of Education strategies to provide life-long learning (Figures 1-5) is illustrated in the increase in the number of students remaining in full-time education and in achieving a third-level qualification. There is clear evidence to suggest that the growth in Ireland's educated workforce has contributed towards Ireland's wealth (OECD, 2021). The OECD report also states, however, that the poorest 20% of Irish households earn 8.6% of total income, placing inequality in Ireland on a par with that in other OECD economies. Unemployment and poverty are no longer regarded as the main reasons for emigration (Glynn et al., 2013), with CSO (2021d) figures on migration published for 2021 demonstrating that, while 22,800 Irish nationals left to live abroad, over 32,000 returned to Ireland during the same period. Despite the wealth that has been created and the opportunities that have been provided in education, deprivation rates and the level of those at risk of poverty have remained consistently high (Figures 7 and 8).

Bourdieu's social reproduction theory (1984) explicates that when new social groups access higher education, students from privileged backgrounds increase their investment in higher-level qualifications which are designed to lead to increasingly profitable and esteemed occupations. Smyth and Hannan (2000) contend that even though the introduction of free secondary education in Ireland in 1967 saw a steady rise in school attendance in the mid-90s (CSO, 2021a), inequalities between the classes remained in accessing both second- and third-level education. A qualitative study conducted by Gray (2010) on poverty in Ireland in the 20th century led the author to conclude that social class, alongside socio-economic policies, plays a significant role in predicting vulnerability to economic deprivation at all stages of the life cycle. Frawley (2014) suggests that a model for change requires a combination of social and economic justice, in order for it to impact positively on equality of access to, and participation in, education and quality of life.

In her preliminary remarks in the 1981 Combat Poverty report (National Committee on Pilot Schemes to Combat Poverty, 1981, Preface iii), founder of Focus Ireland (1985) and leading advocate for homeless people in Ireland, Sister Stanislaus Kennedy reiterated the complex nature of poverty and proposed that its perpetuation lies in how 'income, wealth, educational and employment opportunities and social esteem are distributed in our society'. Hurley (2015) proposes that the idea of equality, within the paradigm of life-long learning, extends beyond the perimeters of education and contains a connotation of radical social and economic structural change in society. The contention that there is discontinuity between the socio-economic lifestyle of homes experiencing deprivation and the predominately middle-class culture of schools

(Kellaghan, 2001) further suggests that educational and economic disadvantage are connected at the level of social status and class structure.

The significance of education in providing enhanced opportunities at an individual level is, according to Lynch and Crean (2018), largely undisputed. The authors argue, however, that as inequality exists in the social and economic structure of society, it cannot be surmounted within the educational sector alone and requires instead a strong interdepartmental approach from government with an emphasis on policies that alter the structures sustaining privilege. O'Sullivan et al. (2021) emphasise the significance of digital technology in enhancing quality of life and the educational and career opportunities of ordinary people in everyday life. They propose that for its potential to be experienced globally, in a fair and just manner, it is necessary to introduce an equitable digital framework, in the form of equal access to digital management, infrastructure, knowledge and resources. It will be of interest to observe the extent to which the new 'Digital Strategy for Schools' (Department of Education, 2022) will have an impact in this regard.

In future research, it is important that the views provided by people from the diversity of areas in which they live are recorded in the format in which they are expressed, so that the consultation process is rigorous, incorporates the reality of people's lives and reflects the extent of the change required.

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