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POVERTY AND EDUCATIONAL PROVISION IN IRELAND*

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In a study of persons whose duties lay in combating poverty, 393 respondents (social workers, home assistance officers, parliamentary representatives) answered questions concerning the relationship between poverty and education. Respondents considered that children were likely to remain or become poor if they had not stayed in school until the age of 16 years and had not received three years second-level education to the level of Group or Intermediate Certificate. Three main proposals emerged for improving the educational system: compulsory home economics, structural integration at second level, and smaller classes at first level.

Public attention in recent years has been aroused by the nature and incidence of poverty in Ireland despite postwar economic progress. An inquiry into the Home Assistance scheme (22) was followed by the estimation in 1972 that about 25% of Irish people were materially poor (23). (Home Assistance is the residual form of social welfare system like its equivalent Supplementary Benefit in the United Kingdom.) A working group of the Economic and Social Research Institute charted the research required (7) and the National Committee on Pilot Schemes to combat poverty was founded in 1974 with assistance from the European Economic Community Social Fund (19).

With the rising tide in unemployment over the decade, and hence the increase in those dependant on social welfare, attitudes towards the poor tended to harden (cf. 5). These attitudes naturally affect government policy towards income transfers including, for instance, diversion of educational resources to the deprived.

* R. Kavanagh was responsible for the original conception of the study, the formulation of its aims and the technical details involved in administering the fieldwork. On his departure in December 1975 for Australia, he entrusted his files to one of the authors (J. MacAirt) so that the survey could be concluded and anlaysed.

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An interdisciplinary study of poverty was begun in 1973 at Trinity College Dublin, consisting of three phases: discussion groups with invited participants in selected locations (13), a survey by personal interview of samples of middle and working class households in ten major cities (14), and a postal survey of persons whose duties lay in combating poverty by social work. The report of the final phase (15) did not include data on four items dealing specifically with education, and it is these which form the subject of this paper.

METHOD

Questionnaire

Four items dealing with education were included in a questionnaire which dealt with a variety of aspects of poverty. The items concerned the minimum standard of education that a person should be required to attain, the minimum school-leaving age, educational issues related to poverty, and general comments on the educational system.

Question 1a read 'It has been said that a person below a certain standard of education is more likely to be poor. Which of the following should be the minimum standard of education that a person should be required to complete?' A choice of five options was provided in the answer: (i) sixth class primary, (ii) three years second level to Group or Intermediate Certificate, (iii) five years second level to Leaving Certificate, (iv) third level at university or higher education institute, and (v) none of them. In question 1b, respondents were asked to specify the reason for their choice.

Question 2 read: 'What age should be the minimum school-leaving age?' The response options included 'don't know' and 'no minimum'.

Question 3 listed eight statements about aspects of education related to poverty and asked respondents the extent to which they agreed with each. The statements, which arose from the group discussions (13), were: (a) adequate facilities should be provided for adult education; (b) the secondary/vocational split should be reduced; (c) the state should provide nursery schools for deprived children; (d) reduced pupil/teacher ratio at primary would help compensate for deprived homes; (e) children from poor families should be encouraged to remain at school by subsidies to parents to offset loss of earnings; (f) home economics and money management should be compulsory for schoolboys and girls; (g) remedial teaching should be provided for all with educational difficulties; and (h) a person's suitability for a job should be based primarily on his education level. Agreement was measured on a five point scale: 1 = agree strongly, 2 = agree,

3 = neither agree nor disagree, 4 = disagree, 5 = disagree strongly.

Question 4 read: 'Give your comments on the educational system.'

Sample

The target population was defined as those sufficiently conversant with some aspect of poverty to hold an 'informed opinion.' Probation Officers, part of that population, had to be omitted when the Department of Justice declined to supply a list. The survey population then comprised three groups: social workers (n = 413), home assistance officers (HAOs) (N = 315), and elected parliamentary representatives (TDs) (n = 143). The sampling frame for social workers was specially constructed, supplementing the membership list of the Irish Association of Social Workers by employers' lists. The Health Boards provided lists of HAOs.

All population members were mailed the survey questionnaire in June 1974 and three requests to return the questionnaire were sent at five-week intervals. Completed questionnaires were received from 393 persons: 216 social workers, 144 home assistance officers, and 33 Dail deputies. Thus response rates for the three groups were 52%, 46%,and 24% respectively. Overall, this was moderately satisfactory for a postal survey, the questionnaire length and complex nature of many questions being much in excess of those used in British mail surveys achieving higher response rates (29).

Two features of respondents and the population were examined for factors that might have militated against response. These were residence (inside or outside County Dublin) for all respondents, and in the case of social workers, whether they were lay or religious. No association was found between these characteristics and nonresponse. Further, a random sub-sample of nonrespondents was contacted by telephone, and no obvious difference was discovered that might bias the results. The high nonresponse from Dail deputies is not surprising (cf. 8, 31 for previous experience); it seems they require a more intensive approach than the postal survey permits. Mean ages of respondents were 37 years for social workers, 50 for HAOs, and 48 years for TDs. Mean age gives an indication of the average distance respondents stood from the end of their personal experience of formal education, usually university degree level for the social workers and Leaving Certificate for the others.

RESULTS

Minimum education required and minimum school-leaving age

Sixty-seven percent of respondents prescribed three years second-level

education as far as Group or Intermediate Certificate as a minimum for all. Opinion was more varied on the minimum school-leaving age; though 16 years was the mode (45% of respondents), ages as low as 14 and as high as 18 had minority support. A recurrent theme in the reasons for these minima was the relation between educational level and future employment (cf. 18). The natural progression from school to occupational category was perceived as primary level to unskilled manual, Group Certificate to skilled manual, and Leaving Certificate to white-collar jobs (cf. 30). Some respondents (22%) prescribed no minima, for as one TD wrote: 'The question bears no relation to reality, since all depends on the individual, a primary certificate being harder for some than a higher degree for others.' Some respondents too claimed that pupils who achieved little at school often went on to be successful at business afterwards (cf. 25). In this context, one social worker raised the influence of employers: 'Once a person is literate, the level of formal education is unimportant. It derives importance from the insistence of many employers on minimum levels like Leaving or Intermediate Certificate that bear little relation to the job'.

Educational issues related to poverty

All the surveyor's precoded statements were strongly supported except for the one that asserted that a person's suitability for a job should be based primarily on his or her educational level. Indeed, all were about equally popular. Three of the statements – those relating to the secondary/vocational split, the pupil-teacher ratio, and teaching of home economics and money management – appear again in the general comments of respondents on the educational system.

General comments on the educational system

Comments on operational conditions. Four distinct themes appeared: undue emphasis on examinations (n: 63), inordinate class size (n: 62), the academic bias of curricula (n: 48), and the binary nature of second-level education (n: 27).

In the comments of respondents, the secondary level was seen as having only one goal – 'to produce species capable of achieving A and B grades'. Good results were needed 'to boost the image of the school'; hence 'the bright pupil is helped while the slow learner is left to himself'. Parents reinforce this pressure 'so it has now come about that a pupil failing an exam is a disaster'. Hence 'secondary schools practise streaming and the categorising of pupils by ability' so that 'subjects are learned parrot-wise to achieve pass standard.' Streaming by ability is seen as an inevitable result of the emphasis on examinations (cf. 4, 24) and teachers are perceived as being graded according to their reputation for obtaining good results.

The educational system was seen as producing pupils with isolated pieces of knowledge, without relevance to 'their life-style, values, and culture' (cf. 17). Apart from being nonpractical, education was 'not oriented towards personal and social awareness' (cf. 12, p. 175). The 'large numbers of unemployed BA and BComm graduates' was considered a sign of this irrelevance, as was the 'massive school absenteeism in deprived areas' (cf. 10).

The pupil-teacher ratio was considered 'too high in primary schools, especially up to age seven – a bad start being hard to remedy later'. 'Children who don't achieve educationally are too discouraged to have a constructive approach to further learning' (cf. 24). Despite the 'heroism of some individual teachers and schools, there is a gross lack of remedial facilities for primary children slow on whatever basis'.

The division between the vocational and secondary sectors was termed 'disastrous, and perpetuated by the selection process for the secondary sector'. 'Snobbery of parents' led to some pupils 'attending secondary though more suited to vocational'. Co-operation between the sectors was inadequate, and undue emphasis was 'placed on social class in secondary education, i.e., whose children attend which school'.

Socioeconomic comments. One home assistance officer gave a coherent picture of experience by the poor: 'they are discriminated against at national school, then pass on, weak, to vocational school, drop off after one year in many cases, hence leave without any skill'. This inability to cope from age 5 to 15 was 'due to factors such as lack of parental interest or home stimulation as well as excessive class size' (cf. 1, 3, 4, 26). Since political priorities were 'for the third level, those children initially advantaged benefit continuously throughout their formal education, whilst the deprived become more deprived'.

State expenditure systems based on capitation principles inevitably work to the advantage of those pupils who remain longest within them; they discriminate against those who drop out at a low level (cf. 16). Smaller schools also suffer by enforced restrictions in staffing and hence the range of curriculum offered (cf. 20). Research elsewhere shows that the gap in attainment between poor and nonpoor widens as children grow older, producing a 'cumulative deficit' (1, 6, 9, 27, 28).

One Dáil representative praised the Rutland Street Project (11) but insisted that 'whatever is provided for the deprived must also be provided for the nondeprived'. He seemed unsure as to whether pre-schooling is a good thing or not. To be on the safe side, he demands it for all his

constituents, both deprived and nondeprived. This attitude, logical for one who regards all voters as equally important, amounts to maintaining existing inequalities (cf. 15).

Miscellaneous comments. Two respondents implicitly raised the criterion of a good education, the first writing 'privately sponsored schools or those managed by religious provide a better education than state schools'. The quality of education is not easy to assess. As far as examination success is concerned, there is as much variation within the two groups of schools as between them (21).

A second respondent raised the question of the ability of schools to help people to think for themselves, raising doubts about schools' success in this area.

Proposals for improvement. Respondents made a number of proposals for the improvement of education. To remedy the academic bias of curricula, compulsory home economics was urged (cf. 12). It was also argued that 'more career guidance at secondary level would prevent pupils entering higher education with the wrong motivation' (cf. 2), while, for teenage absentees and young offenders alternative forms of education were proposed, 'including workshop centres and projects.' It was suggested that one burden on poor parents could be relieved by 'adopting the American system where pupils rent their books yearly, paying the full price in the event of damage.' Finally, research was called for on 'subsidies to poor parents to maintain children at school beyond the minimum leaving age' (cf. 16).

CONCLUSION

One gains from the responses of participants in this survey a general impression of strong dissatisfaction with the educational system as it operates. This appears also when respondents listed causes and remedies for poverty in answering the remainder of the questionnaire (15). Yet, considering the number of respondents, few specific proposals emerged. This could be because of their lack of knowledge of the technicalities of the system, or because of the low level of popular participation in the formulation of educational policy. One contradiction was an unquestioning acceptance of 'credentialism' combined with an unwillingness to accept that a person's suitability for a job should primarily depend on his educational achievement.

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