

Introduction

Barnardos welcomes the opportunity to input into the NESF Child Literacy and Social Inclusion report. Barnardos predominantly works with children and families living in disadvantaged areas and encounters many children who experience educational difficulties through this work. We see the intergenerational cycles of poverty, educational disadvantage and social exclusion that are the daily lived experience of too many families.

Educational disadvantage can take many forms including literacy difficulties and early school leaving. Experiencing literacy difficulties at an early age negatively impacts on a child's learning and their overall school experience. It can then continue to blight their adult life through reducing their employment opportunities and locking them into the cycle of poverty.

Child Literacy and Social Inclusion

Literacy and numeracy difficulties among pupils are a matter for serious concern with around 1 in 3 children in disadvantaged areas experiencing significant difficulties. In fact, overall standards have not changed since 1980¹. The Department of Education and Science study² reveals that a comparison of 1998 data with 2004 data shows no change in national reading standards, despite the reduction in class sizes and an increase in the number of learning support teachers available.

However, Ireland's literacy standards compare favourably internationally; Ireland has the fifth best literacy rates out of 27 OECD countries. Both the Department of Education and Science and OECD reports highlight that while the majority of pupils do well in Irish schools many are left behind. Social class remains the principal determinant of educational outcomes such as duration of schooling, educational performance and access to grinds³.

'My child's maths teacher understood that he needed extra one to one support but told me that she could not afford the time with him because of the other pupils in the class so she gave him a colouring book instead. But the previous year my child's maths really improved because the teacher was able to give him more one to one support,' Mother of three, Limerick.

These figures must be seen against the backdrop of the Government's own National Action Plan for Social Inclusion 2007-2016 target to reduce the proportion of pupils with serious literacy difficulties from the current 27-30% to less than 15% by 2016.

While targets are useful in focusing policy direction, there have been many literacy targets set over the years which have not been met despite significant levels of investment in initiatives and programmes. This begs the question of the effectiveness of these interventions. Barnardos would share the view of the Educational Disadvantage Committee that many of these initiatives, while frequently beneficial to the small number of pupils affected, have been too school based and that to combat

¹ Department of Education and Science (2006) *National Assessment of English Reading in 2004*, Education Research Centre, Dublin

² Ibid

³ Barnardos (2008) *Tomorrow's Child*, Dublin

educational disadvantage the focus must be on integrating the school based responses with a whole child approach to educational and social inclusion⁴. A whole child approach means taking all the influences which impact on a child's life in and out of school (i.e. their family home and community) into account in policy design and implementation. The current Departmental programme to combat educational disadvantage, Delivering Equality of Opportunities in Schools (DEIS) is again predominately school based in its supports.

Delivering Equality of Opportunities in Schools (DEIS)

This strategy, launched in 2005, aims to build on the strengths of previous initiatives and to consolidate them into the School Support Programme. The supports, including extra teachers and literacy programmes, are to be distributed to 640 primary schools and 200 secondary schools in varying amounts depending on the level of disadvantage identified.

While initially welcoming the strategy Barnardos has a number of concerns about its progression. These include:

- The budget allocated for the roll out of the DEIS strategy has been minimal.
- The number of schools benefiting from specific supports is very low e.g. the reading recovery programme is being rolled out in only 147 schools.
- The identification process used to identify the schools for inclusion in the strategy resulted in some schools that were previously designated as disadvantaged losing this status and the accompanying supports with little compensation. This loss is even more pertinent as Budget 2009 saw these schools lose further supports including the Home School Liaison Officers and the capitation funding for Traveller children.
- For those DEIS schools currently in receipt of supports, should their schools improve in pupil performance and educational outcomes they are likely to lose their designated disadvantage status and the corresponding supports with no compensation. With no compensation the schools could revert to the original situation with the next set of pupils thereby perpetuating the cycle of educational disadvantage.
- While initially welcoming the family literacy initiative that was envisaged as it recognised that child literacy can progress when the family literacy levels are improved, the format, content and scale of this initiative is unknown as yet.

Budget 2009 and roll out of DEIS

The overall budget given to the Department of Education and Science increased to €9.6 billion in 2009 resulting in primary schools receiving a small increased capitation grant of €21.42 per pupil, bringing it to a total of €200 per pupil. In post-primary schools the capitation grant will be increased by €14 per pupil to €345 per pupil.

However, Budget 2009 scaled back or withdrew some services, which will have a negative impact on children's educational experience and performance. As mentioned above, some of these cutbacks also affect non-DEIS schools and will have an impact on the education of all children. These budgetary decisions include:

- Increasing class sizes at primary level from 27 to 28 and secondary school level from 18 to 19, despite commitments in Programme for Government to decrease the class sizes. This move could see the loss of up to 1,200 teaching posts.
- A reintroduction of the limit of two language support teachers per school with unspecified additional help being provided for schools with a high concentration of foreign pupils.

⁴ Educational Disadvantage Committee (2005) Moving Beyond Educational Disadvantage, Dublin

- Abolition of library grants to school libraries.
- Aid for school books will be restricted to DEIS schools only.
- Cessation of the roll out of the early childhood education component of the DEIS programme.
- Capitation funding for Traveller pupils and capitation grants for schools that are not in DEIS but continued to receive top-up funding provided under previous disadvantage schemes will be reduced.

Impact of Budget cutbacks on child literacy

These cutbacks both individually and collectively will have a negative impact on children especially those who are struggling or falling behind. If children are struggling at primary level and fail to grasp the basics of reading and writing they will struggle throughout their school days. Other impacts of the budgetary cutbacks include:

- Teachers will find it more difficult to give one-to-one tuition to pupils given that the overall number of pupils will increase. While the primary curriculum aspires to educate through hands-on, creative, active learning, large class sizes will seriously weaken delivery. Not only is the full potential of the curriculum hampered, but the individual needs of children, particularly those with special needs and learning difficulties, are - and will increasingly be - negatively affected by overcrowded classrooms.
- Some schools may become segregated as Irish parents take their children out of schools with a high proportion of foreign national children "because they would fear those with weak English were holding their children back", (English Language Support Teachers Association, 18th October 2008).
- Participation in early childhood education and care (ECEC) is very beneficial for children as it prepares them for school, enhances their literacy skills and improves their social skills. At present, access to quality ECEC services for those on low incomes is quite restricted so the failure to roll out the ECEC component of DEIS will result in these vulnerable children starting school at a disadvantage.
- With fewer resources to assist parents with the costs of school books, it will place further financial pressure on the household budget which could result in children not getting access to the required books and materials.

Ways to Improve child literacy

Parental Involvement

Through our 2006 Educational Disadvantage Campaign – Make the Grade and through our daily work with children and families, it is apparent to us that increasing and improving parental involvement is central to a child reaching their potential. Addressing a parent's negative experiences or perceptions of school can lead to increased partnership between parents and schools leading to parents being able to assist children with their homework and raising parental expectations for their children. Different initiatives that have been conducted either in schools or at community level include mentoring programmes which support parents to teach each other literacy skills and involving parents with their children in English language classes.

Access to Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC)

Participating in quality ECEC is beneficial for all children particularly those who are disadvantaged. Yet issues around quality, accessibility and affordability remain. Barnardos wants every child to have access to a guaranteed, quality, regulated

ECEC place for one year, staffed by well-trained individuals capable of providing for the development and wellbeing of each child in their care. ECEC greatly improves a child's ability to adapt and be ready for school while enhancing their educational potential. In Barnardos' early years services, the High/Scope curriculum is used, which is an established approach to ECEC. It is proven to be beneficial to children from areas of disadvantage achieving real and lasting outcomes including; achievement of their developmental and learning potential; improved school readiness; improved and continued engagement with school and economic independence as adults.. A specific component of this curriculum now being rolled out in many Barnardos services is the Tús Maith programme. Its overall outcome is to ensure that children are ready for school. It integrates the High/Scope curriculum with the REDI programme in order to maximise the developmental outcomes for children. REDI (**RE**search based, **D**evelopmentally **I**nformed) is a programme which has been shown to enhance the High/Scope curriculum and achieve added outcomes in the domains of social and emotional competence and emergent literacy for 3-4 year olds. It addresses children's pro-social skills; emotional competency; self-control and social problem-solving. It also has a language and literacy component which addresses children's vocabulary; syntax; phonological sensitivity (exposure to oral) and print awareness (exposure to written word). Barnardos are currently running a demonstration pilot of Tús Maith in order that we can test the suitability of the model within an Irish disadvantaged community setting.

Access to Out of School Services

In Ireland the access to out of school services is largely restricted to parents' ability to pay. However, services such as home work clubs, English language clubs, arts and crafts and sports offer children an alternative way to enhance their literacy skills and improve their overall school experience. Such diversity of opportunities should be available to all.

Wizards of Words (WoW)

This initiative, led by Barnardos, operates in 4 schools involving 90 pupils and is an intergenerational paired reading programme whose purpose is to improve children's overall reading achievement. The programme pairs 1st and 2nd class students who are nominated by classroom teachers for extra reading support with an appropriate older volunteer (55 years+). The trained volunteers meet with their child/ren at least twice weekly for 30-40 minute sessions during school hours to provide individualised reading instruction and support. WoW uses a guided reading approach which focuses on four key areas of reading: phonics, vocabulary building, reading comprehension and reading fluency. WoW supports current Department of Education and Science (DES) reading initiatives and English Curriculum expectations. The programme has already shown widespread benefits to children through the individual attention that is focussed on their reading and also from the development of a positive relationship with an adult. These have led to increased reading ability, improved attitudes to reading and greater confidence in the classroom. The WoW initiative is to be rolled out in the Limerick region in 2009.

Conclusion

Literacy skills form the basis for all future learning. Without these skills all children fall behind; poor literacy affects every aspect of their life academically and their future employment opportunities. All children deserve to have an equal opportunity to learn this skill and their ability to succeed should not be determined by their family's financial situation. The long term cost implications of educational underperformance in both human and financial terms should be the driving force in implementing Government policy in this area, not the short term difficulties faced by Government in the current economic crisis. Failure to adequately invest in initiatives tackling education disadvantage helps to perpetuate the cycle for those children experiencing difficulties in this area.

Recommendations:

- Reverse the numerous cutbacks announced in the Budget and honour commitments to reducing class sizes.
- Enhance parental involvement at school and community level through practical initiatives such as mentoring schemes.
- Improve access to quality ECEC services for all children to improve their school readiness.
- Develop a comprehensive network of Out of School services for all school going children.
- Invest in successful school based initiatives, such as WoW, to facilitate mainstreaming.