

## Important first steps

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Primary education is the best point at which to tackle educational disadvantage and to encourage the growth of the knowledge economy, yet its funding seems to be systematically neglected by Government.

The Government constantly reiterates its commitment to the importance of education for the future of economic growth and the development of a knowledge economy. However, there are blatant contradictions between such statements and the Government's actions, particularly in the recent Budget.

Even before the latest cuts, the 2008 OECD figures revealed education spending in Ireland has been insufficient to match rapidly rising student numbers. Many OECD countries spend 6.2 per cent of their Gross Domestic Product (GDP) on educational institutions. In Ireland this figure is 4.6 per cent of GDP.

The figures show that in Ireland the proportion of GDP spent on education actually decreased between 1995 and 2005. Over the so-called Celtic Tiger period, it seems the island got richer, but education got poorer.

School running costs, such as energy, insurance and cleaning, are not paid for by the State and often individual school fundraising must make up this shortfall. Teachers are relatively well paid on an EU scale, but school facilities are in very bad shape.

The issue now is dealing with how money translates into educational provision.

Primary education in Ireland has changed significantly over the past decade. The increasing focus on investment in "human capital" is reflected in the many laudable aims of the 1999 revised primary school curriculum.

The curriculum emphasises a child-centred approach to learning, where the pupil is envisaged as "an active agent" in their own education. The idea of self-directed, developmental learning is embedded in the primary curriculum's aims and objectives, fostering life-long learning capabilities. The curriculum has also expanded into science, drama and social, personal and health education. All teachers received in-service and curriculum support through the Primary Curriculum Support Programme (PCSP) and School Development Planning Support (SDPS). Despite this, key problems within primary education still exist. The most evident is overcrowding.

For all the recent protests, it's worth repeating the fact that six years ago, a promise was made by Government to reduce class size to fewer than 20 per class for children of less than nine years of age.

Ireland's classes in primary school are currently among the most overcrowded in the OECD, with an average of 24 pupils, compared to an OECD average of fewer than 20. Recent figures show that almost 100,000 children in Ireland are in classes of 30 pupils or more.

Needless to say, in a primary curriculum that aspires to educate through hands-on, creative, active learning, large class sizes 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.

School accommodation is another indictment of a passive governmental attitude. Many schools are still reliant on temporary accommodation. This "prefab phenomenon" exists at primary, secondary and tertiary levels of education. Not only are such prefabs an inefficient use of funds, but they are often physically unsuitable for the task at hand.

The recent cancellation of the Summer Works Scheme, coupled with the failure to construct promised school buildings for this year, seriously threatens the veracity of ministerial statements on making school construction a priority. The benefits of early intervention in education have long been broadly accepted. Nobel laureate James Heckman found that early intervention programmes are far more cost-effective than late intervention. In addition, they play a key role in retaining pupil numbers, reducing criminal activity and tackling educational disadvantage.

These findings are not reflected in spending trends in Ireland, however, where for every €5 we spend on a primary school pupil, we spend €7 at second level and €10 at third level.

There are 471,519 students currently enrolled in first-level education. This form of education represents the most direct and accessible way to ensure equality of education and social inclusion.

There have been some positive approaches to tackling education disadvantage in recent years. Initiatives such as Breaking the Cycle, Giving Children an Even Break, the School Completion Programme and the Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (Deis) programme have ensured a much-needed focus on educational disadvantage, as well as providing vital funding and resources to disadvantaged schools and pupils.

A Deis report in 2006 identified that 84 per cent of the total resources are provided in the form of teachers and home support liaison co-ordinators. The predominant use of the additional funds was to reduce class size.

The over-riding view among the schools surveyed was that smaller classes were an effective use of funds to counter disadvantage. One must wonder, then, what could be achieved if designated disadvantaged schools did not have to use vast amounts of their resources in efforts to reduce class size and instead could target the funding directly for pupils and pupil-centred initiatives?

With such an array of agencies, programmes and schemes addressing educational disadvantage, there is a danger of a lack of joined-up thinking. Relevant outside agencies such as the HSE and the National Educational Welfare Board are often disconnected from disadvantage initiatives and schools. An overall partnership approach needs to take place in order to ensure that resources are being used in the most effective manner.

Siobhan Masterson of the Irish Business and Employers Confederation (Ibec) believes that information and computing technology (ICT) investment in education is "vital to Ireland's strategy to facilitate the development of knowledge-intensive sectors".

The Government claims to envisage a tech-savvy, highly skilled, knowledge-based workforce to drive our economy forward, yet investment in ICT in education is currently compromised.

The National Development Plan outlined €252 million to be spent on ICT in first- and second-level education. This commitment is now no longer secure. This failure to invest in ICT illustrates a complete lack of strategic focus on the Government's part.

This, along with increases in class sizes post-Budget, has worrying implications in a country that is already lagging behind in the integration of technology in teaching and learning. A

National Centre for Technology in Education (NCTE) report revealed the average spend on ICT per student in Ireland was €40 per year, compared to €110 in Britain. The report also found that three out of 10 computers at primary level are more than six years old. Where does this leave Ireland's competitiveness?

One of the main strengths of the primary education system lies in the quality of its teachers. The CAO points for primary teaching remain high, which means that Irish primary teachers are drawn from the top quarter of school-leavers in the country. Prof John Coolahan of Maynooth asserts that "Ireland can be seen to have a highly educated, well-trained, committed and caring teaching force".

While investment in primary education is essential, Ireland must also examine the way we link primary and secondary education.

In *Moving Up: The experiences of first-year students in post-primary education* the study showed that there can be a 'mismatch' between the primary and post-primary curriculums, and this mismatch can cause difficulties for students".

In addition to the apparent lack of dovetailing taking place between the primary and secondary curriculums, the report also states that the secondary system, even at the "shop floor" level, is deeply disconnected from the primary education system. It is clear that there is a need for a more integrated approach to primary and secondary education. The Irish education system, in curriculum, approach and design lacks integration at every level, beginning with primary level and continuing all the way to fourth level.

Primary education is the most important phase of education, with the essential elements of cognitive and non-cognitive ability being delivered at or before the age of 12. The work of teachers can only gloss over the basic strategic and institutional cracks for so long.

Adapted from *The Irish Times*. Monday 3<sup>rd</sup> November 2008. <https://www.irishtimes.com/business/important-first-steps-1.904821>. (Accessed 5<sup>th</sup> March 2019).

Failing to invest in the early stages of education is short-sighted. Primary education should always be viewed as a top priority in any society that wishes to remain competitive.

High-quality teachers - coupled with an inspiring curriculum, functional facilities and a comprehensive education strategy - are vital ingredients for a world-class first-level education system.

What Ireland needs now is the means and the political will to achieve this.

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