



**Opening Statement Submission to the Oireachtas Joint Committee on  
Education, Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science**

**Marginalised students in Primary and Post Primary DEIS Schools and other  
settings: System Gaps in Policy and Practice and the Priority Issues for  
consideration, with reference to the impact of Covid 19.**

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## About DCU Educational Disadvantage Centre

<https://www.dcu.ie/edc>

Founded in 2000 by the late Dr. Ann Louise Gilligan, the DCU Educational Disadvantage Centre, located in its Institute of Education, engages in interdisciplinary research, policy and practice regarding poverty and social inclusion in education at global, EU and national levels, as well as local community contexts. Dr. Paul Downes, Associate Professor of Education (Psychology) is its Director since 2004.

Many of the Centre's reports are published on the EU Commission's School Education Gateway and have been cited in a range of official EU Policy documents in areas of early school leaving, key competences for lifelong learning, transitions, inclusive education and future of learning. The Centre has been involved in European comparative research projects on parental involvement for marginalised groups across 10 European cities, access to education across 12 countries and has led an EU Commission published report on inclusive systems in and around schools that devised a [structural indicators self-evaluation tool](#) for inclusive systems for schools and policy makers across Europe, officially translated by the EU Commission into 22 European languages, and published by the Commission.

The Centre's Joint INTO/EDC DEIS National Conference (2015) was the largest consultation process for the National DEIS Action Plan 2017 on Social Inclusion in Education. The EDC's Roundtable on combining multidisciplinary teams with community lifelong learning centres attended, by the EU Commission, the then Minister for Children and Youth Affairs Katherine Zappone, Cedefop and European Parents' Association (2017) directly led to the Romanian EU Presidency International Policy Forum on this theme in Brussels, 2019, together with Cedefop and the Lifelong Learning Platform for Europe. With various funded projects by the EU Commission, Higher Education Authority (HEA), Department of Education and Skills, Irish Prison Service, Pobal, McVerry Trust, Local Area Partnerships and the North East Inner City (NEIC) Programme, the EDC has also led the establishment of:

- HEA funded, DCU community outreach hubs to promote access to the teaching profession in Darndale, Coolock and Kilbarrack, launched by then Minister for Education and Skills Richard Bruton in 2017;
- Familiscope community based multidisciplinary team (including school based speech and language services), linked with Ballyfermot schools since 2005, funded by DES, HSE & DCC (now Familibase);
- A National Working Group on Hunger Prevention in School with INTO and FORSA Trade Unions, the Irish Primary Principals Network (IPPN), National Parents Council, Barnardos, Focus Ireland & the Children's Rights Alliance since 2013;
- A national network, QDOSS (Quality Development of Out of School Services), hosted by the EDC, that influenced the National School Age Childcare Action Plan 2017 and the 2020 National Quality Guidelines for the sector;
- A National Working Group on the holistic educational needs of Children in Care;
- A global network, the [International Research Network for Equity in Education and Training](#) International Research Network for Equity in Education and Training (IRNEYET) (301 members, 30 countries)

The Centre's work has been disseminated through over 20 international conference keynote presentations, including invited presentations at 10 Countries' National Ministry Conferences, as well as the EU Parliament Working Group on Quality of Childhood, European Network of Education Councils (EUNEC) and UNICEF.

## **Marginalised students in Primary and Post Primary DEIS Schools and other settings: System Gaps in Policy and Practice and the Priority Issues for consideration, with reference to the impact of Covid 19.**

### **System Gap and Priority Issue 1: Emotional Counselling/Therapeutic Supports in and around Schools to address Trauma, Anxiety, Mental Health Difficulties of Vulnerable Children**

Trauma and adverse childhood experiences manifest themselves in many different forms, such as any of the following experiences: Domestic violence, Substance abuse in family, neglect, Mental illness in family, Loss of parent through divorce, death or abandonment, abuse, Incarcerated family member, Consistent Poverty, Experience of suicide, Childhood homelessness, Bullying in School, Placed in State Care. The Joint Oireachtas Committee Report on Early School Leaving (2010) identified trauma as distinctive risk factor in early school leaving. Our Educational Disadvantage Centre's child-centred school and community wide consultations in Ballyfermot (Downes 2004), Blanchardstown (Downes, Maunsell & Ivers 2006) and South West Inner City Dublin (Downes & Maunsell 2007) all identified needs for emotional counselling/therapeutic supports in and around schools for vulnerable students experiencing emotional distress and major gaps in these services – themes reiterated in a recent Carlow County Development Partnership study on early school leaving (Brady 2020) and at the INTO/Educational DEIS Conference 2015 (Nunan & Downes 2016).

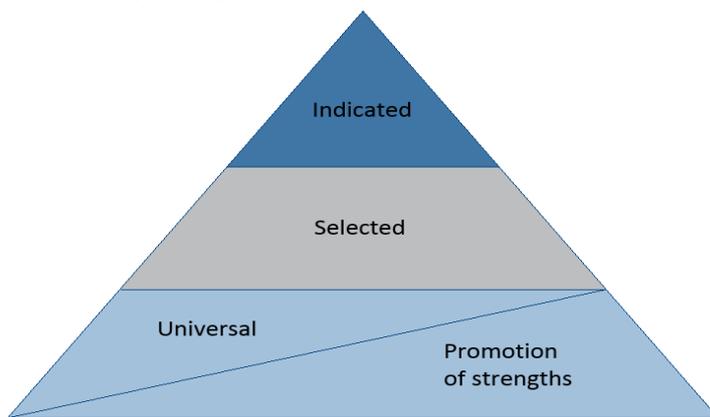
Over the past decade especially, international research has highlighted the key issues of trauma and mental health for early school leaving. For example, Esch et al.'s (2014) review of mental health dimensions to early school leaving found that mood disorders (e.g. depression) were significantly related to early school leaving. Among anxiety disorders, after controlling for potentially confounding factors, social phobia was a strong predictor of poor educational outcomes, as indicated by early school leavers themselves, such as feeling too nervous in class and being anxious to speak in public. Quiroga et al.'s (2013) research involving 493 high-risk French-speaking adolescents living in Montreal observed that depression symptoms at the beginning of secondary school are related to higher dropout.

Our Educational Disadvantage Centre's report on homeless men's experiences of school for the McVerry Trust (Murphy, McKenna & Downes 2019) was based on a sample of 51 men, almost a third of those in total in temporary/emergency accommodation in McVerry Trust. 34 of 51 questionnaire participants indicated that they had experienced 'traumatic childhood events' while 18.4% reported having been permanently excluded or expelled from school.

Trauma and adversity impacting on mental health of our children and young people are exacerbated in this Covid 19 pandemic, including the additional emotional and financial strain of lockdown on so many families. This requires a heightened awareness of policy makers about a key strategic gap in supports in Irish schools that places Ireland out of step with many European countries regarding emotional counsellors/therapists in and around every school. The recent evaluation for the EU Commission of the 2011 Council Recommendation on Early School Leaving highlighted that emotional counselling supports in and around schools are widespread in many EU countries (Donlevy, Andriescu, Day & Downes 2019). There needs to be emotional counselling and therapeutic supports, such as play and art therapy, available in all DEIS schools and arguably beyond, as a key support for the mental health strain and trauma experienced by so many of our children. Ireland is radically out of step with many European countries who provide these services in schools.

*This is not addressed by NEPS (National Educational Psychology Service) or Career Guidance increases as neither provide or are suitable to provide ongoing individual therapeutic supports for trauma and complex emotional needs.* The National Wellbeing in Schools Policy 2018 of a teacher as ‘One good adult’ is no substitute for qualified emotional counsellors/therapists. The complexity of emotional need in students at the indicated prevention requires supports that an individual teacher is not in a position to provide.

*These play and art therapy and emotional counselling supports can build on the Programme for Government’s 2020 commitment to ‘Improve access to supports for positive mental health in schools’ p.96. Public health models of need recognise different layers of complexity (Suldo et al., 2010; Reinke et al. 2009; Downes & Cefai 2019).*



**Universal – All**

**Selected – Some, Groups, Moderate Risk**

**Indicated – Individual, Intensive, Chronic Need**

Social and emotional education interventions, such as Incredible Years, which have come into the Irish system over the past decade are *no substitute for specialised emotional counselling/therapeutic supports* for the indicated prevention, trauma level of need.

### **System Gap and Priority Issue 2: Multidisciplinary Team Alternatives to Suspension, Expulsion and Reduced Timetables**

The American Academy of Pediatrics Policy Statement (2013) recognises that ‘the adverse effects of out-of-school suspension and expulsion can be profound’ (p.e1001); such students are as much as 10 times more likely to leave school early, are more likely to be involved in the juvenile justice system and ‘there may be no one at home during the day to supervise the student’s activity’ (p.e1002) if the parents are working. The policy statement continues, ‘They can also be very superficial if, in using them, school districts avoid dealing with underlying issues affecting the child or the district, such as drug abuse, racial and ethnic tensions, and cultural anomalies associated with violence and bullying’ (American Academy of Pediatrics, p. e1002).

Suspensions and expulsions are a real risk factor for later homelessness, at least for men in Ireland (Murphy et al. 2019). Our Educational Disadvantage Centre’s McVerry Trust study (Murphy et al. 2019) found that: 24.5% of homeless men in McVerry Trust Accommodation said that they had been temporarily excluded in the form of suspensions; 12.2% had experienced multiple or ‘rolling’ suspensions; 65.5% of permanent exclusions were due to

non-violent behaviour; 37.9% were due to difficult relationships with teachers; 27.6% were due to poor attendance. 34 of 51 questionnaire participants indicated that they had experienced ‘traumatic childhood events’.

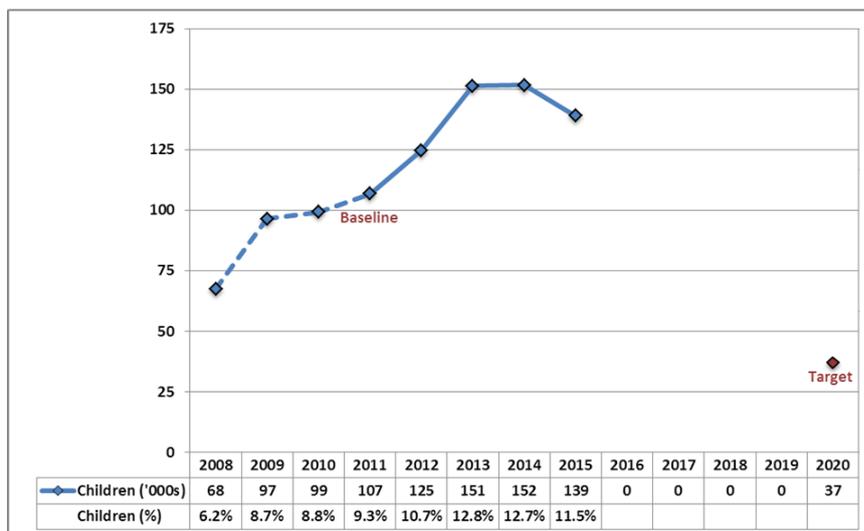
*Removal from class does not have to require removal from the school, with the availability of multidisciplinary supports as part of an individual education and wellbeing plan. Trauma requires emotional counselling/therapeutic support services in and around schools, not a strategy of exclusion through suspension, expulsion and reduced timetabling. Reduced timetabling is now being monitored by the DES in light of the DEIS 2017 Action Plan but this is not a substitute for multidisciplinary team supports.*

The notable commitment in DEIS 2017 to expand the NCSE Inclusion Service (formerly the National Behavioural Support Service, NBSS) to primary schools requires adequate resourcing to ensure children with complex needs are supported through multidisciplinary teams of emotional counsellors/therapists, occupational therapists, & speech and language therapists. The Programme for Government 2020 commitment to ‘Expand and enhance the in-school speech and language and occupational therapist pilot, given its success p.81’ is a hugely welcome development requiring corresponding strengthened resources.

It is to be noted that Ireland is far from the Danish standard of one multidisciplinary team for each school. A policy goal needs to provide such teams for clusters of schools in a given area, prioritising areas of highest need and poverty. Direct frontline delivery multidisciplinary teams are needed in and around schools for supporting students at the indicated prevention level involving multifaceted complex needs and individual, intensive supports as alternatives to suspension, expulsion and reduced timetables.

### System Gap and Priority Issue 3: Adequate Hot Meals Provision in Schools

Diagram 1: Progress on the child-specific social target



Source: SILC, various years

The AROPE indicator is defined as the share of the population in at least one of the following three conditions: 1) at risk of poverty, meaning below the poverty threshold, 2) in a situation of severe material deprivation, 3) living in a household with a very low work intensity. From 2008 to 2011, the AROPE for children rose in 21 EU Member States. According to Eurostat:

the largest increases in the AROPE since 2008 were in Ireland (+11.0 percentage points (pp) up to 2010) and Latvia (+10.4pp), followed by Bulgaria (+7.6pp), Hungary (+6.2pp) and Estonia (+5.4pp). In other words, *uniquely in Europe, Ireland placed the burden of poverty in the last economic crash most substantially onto its children*. This was a clear policy choice and far from being an inevitable consequence of the last recession. The official child poverty statistics graph of the Irish Department of Social Protection (above) marks the further extensive acceleration of child poverty between 2011 and 2014.

Is history going to repeat itself – or will the Irish State take proactive efforts to protect its children from the poverty impact of the recession induced by the pandemic ? These concerns are being somewhat addressed in initial terms through the highly significant commitment of successive Irish governments in the recent and previous budget to expanding hot meals in schools to 35,000 more children in 2020 - and again in 2021 at an extra cost of €5.5million - building on the initial almost 7,000 children receiving such hot meals the first year. This is hopefully evidence that a different national policy strategic response to the burden of poverty on our children will take place in this decade.

Hot meals in schools need to be a routine, unremarkable part of Irish school life, as they are in many European countries, such as Finland (Pellikka et al. 2019), France, UK, Lithuania, Slovakia, Spain, Slovenia, Austria etc (Polish Eurydice Unit 2016). The explicit commitment in the Programme for Government 2020 to “Continue to review and expand the roll-out of the new Hot School Meals initiative” (p.96) is a welcome and vitally important one. However, there is need for a much more substantial financial commitment to expand this across DEIS and other schools nationally so it is not simply a hit and miss approach depending on which schools can or cannot avail of this national scheme. Records released under the Freedom of Information Act show that the Department of Social Protection turned down 470 primary schools who applied to the scheme (McGuire 2019). The related significant commitment in the Programme for Government to ‘Work across government to address food poverty in children and ensure no child goes hungry’ p.75 requires addressing also of the issue of hot meal provision for families in poverty and also outside of school times, such as holiday periods. This all needs to be part of a wider anti-child poverty national strategic approach to face up to this economic crisis in light of the Covid-19 pandemic.

#### **System Gap and Priority Issue 4: Expand DEIS School Funding Provision to Add New DEIS Schools without Cutting Existing DEIS Schools**

Over the past decade Ireland is one of the countries in the EU with the sharpest decrease in early school leaving, going below our national ET2020 target of 8% and the EU target of 10%. We must ensure that the Covid 19 lockdown impact does not dismantle this progress. Against the backdrop of the major child poverty increases since the 2008 economic crash, the highest increases in Europe between 2008 and 2011, the DEIS schools have demonstrated remarkable success in that time with regard to key educational outcomes – early school leaving decreases (Donlevy, Day, Andriescu & Downes 2019), improved attendance (ESRI 2015), reading and maths scores (Weir & Denner 2013). It can be concluded that the DEIS school system has provided a key societal glue to somewhat protect children from the excesses of the last economic crash, at least regarding educational outcomes. It is vital that this is recognised to protect, support and enhance DEIS schools against the backdrop of the current economic downturn in light of the pandemic.

There is a lack of clarity regarding the policy purposes of the new proposed tool for assessing need for designation of a school's DEIS status, the HP (Haase Pratschke) index of deprivation (combined with DES Primary and Postprimary data supplied by schools). It is clear that the DES does not intend to punish schools for their success. It is less clear whether a consequence of the new allocation model does precisely this, that schools may lose teachers and other resources if they attract a broader mix of pupils or if the educational attainment of local parents is developed. An unintended consequence of the proposed new model is that it risks a double bind for schools, where to receive the teachers and resources, pupils' levels of need, including educational need, will need to be high, while if a school then brings improvements to such need they may receive reduced staff and resources.

The following statement in the DEIS Plan 2017 is causing much concern: 'The new model may reveal that some schools currently included in DEIS have a level of disadvantage within their school population much lower than that in some schools not included within DEIS. If this turns out to be the case, then we must consider whether it is fair that those schools continue receiving these additional resources, using resources that may be more fairly allocated to the schools with greater levels of disadvantage' (p.19). This appears to envisage cuts to a notable number of DEIS schools based on application of the new tool. This proposed shifting of resources rests on a highly questionable notion of fairness. Put simply, taking from the poor to give to the poorer is not a tenable ethic or public policy approach. Is the consequence of this new allocation tool to basically pass the parcel of teaching staff and resources across schools ? Is it a rotation principle based on relative not real need ? Without clarification, it appears to envisage a zero sum game where for one new school to enter the DEIS scheme or increase resources within it, other schools must lose out in future.

A related concern is the vagueness on the additional financial commitment in DEIS 2017 which was of €5 million for 2017, plus €15 million for 2018. The original DEIS plan offered an additional *annual* investment of €40 million, on full implementation over a 5 year period. More clarity is needed over the envisaged funding of this scheme over the next 5 years. There is clearly a need to add more schools to the DEIS scheme to reflect the realities of the economic recession in light of the Covid 19 pandemic and lockdowns. However, this adding of schools must not be at the expense of existing DEIS schools.

With regard to the proposed use of this tool, a further difficulty is that it may have the unintended consequence of undermining stability in schools, to create a destabilising flux. How will much this more fluid, changeable system of resource allocation, depending on factors frequently outside the control of schools, impact on staff turnover, morale and permanent contracts ? There is a need to minimise not promote staff turnover in DEIS schools to promote a positive school climate and collaborative institutional culture. And how are parents to make informed decisions where to send their children to school, if the school resources may shift significantly over a 1-2 year period based on this tool ?

The Trutz Haase index tool may be a helpful way of identifying new schools' levels of need to join DEIS rather than for existing DEIS and DEIS legacy positions in schools. A strength of this is that it examines streets and not simply areas. However:

- the index does not address key dimensions of poverty and social inclusion, such as mental health needs, both at clinical levels and at prior levels of risk from intergenerational poverty, as well as levels of crime in an area, gangland issues, homelessness or parents in prison
- the role of grandparents is not directly addressed, often key in intergenerational poverty

- the index tool does not distinguish between current poverty and the cumulative effects of persistent poverty over a child's life; cumulative effects of poverty are associated with more detrimental educational outcomes (Perkins 2018).

### **System Gap and Priority Issue 5: A National Strategic Commitment to the Arts for Social Inclusion, involving Afterschool Services for Marginalised Groups**

The Arts can engage a wide cohort of students who are otherwise disaffected from the school system. There is currently no Arts and social inclusion in education strategy at national level. (IMPACT DEIS Review submission 2015). DEIS schools that are currently providing afterschool arts activities are mainly funding them through the School Completion Programme (Smyth, 2016). Recent decrease in funding for this programme and the restructuring of the methods of targeting measures would need to be reviewed in order to ensure equality of access to quality arts education and afterschool provision.

In the Irish context, Smyth (2016) found that differences occurred with regard to access to the arts, levels of engagement with cultural activities and socioeconomic status. A key contribution of the arts is that it overcomes fear of failure as there is no 'right' or 'wrong' answer (Ivers, McLoughlin & Downes 2010). The arts in afterschool settings needs to be part of a community strategy for overcoming prejudice through a) intergroup contact on b) structured cooperative tasks. Stronger investment in afterschool arts services is a key strategic limb to help inclusion of, for example, Travellers and Roma.

### **System Gap and Priority Issue 6: A National Strategic Policy to recognise children's geographies and support participatory outdoor learning for marginalised communities**

'Children's geographies' is the study of places and spaces of children's lives, characterised experientially, politically and ethically (Holloway and Valentine, 2000). It includes children real, imagined and online worlds, local through to global. It recognises children as intrinsic to the life of their local environments (Bourke, 2017). 'Participatory outdoor learning' refers to a range of learning in and through the most local of these worlds, the locality.

There is currently a system gap in Ireland the recognition of children's geographies and their potential for participatory outdoor learning in their localities. Despite policy and curriculum statements, children's opportunities in their localities are often thwarted. In Ireland marginalisation is strongly associated with children spending less time outside and more on sedentary, indoor activity (Growing Up in Ireland, 2011). The use of local outdoor spaces can help support children to develop as engaged citizens. Pike explored examples of this with children in primary schools in Finglas and Coolock, with research revealing children increased their sense of place and belonging, as well as knowledge of their local community through carrying out action projects (Pike, 2016; Pike 2020).

Using the locality for learning has the potential to provide opportunities for enhanced community participation for young people (Bourke, 2017; CRN, 2018; Pike, 2020). And the growing body of research in Ireland backs this up, whether in large scale national studies or smaller scale qualitative projects. All of it reveals the agency of the young citizens in DEIS settings to be active, creative and learned in their local outdoor environments.

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