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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to investigate and compare steps taken in the United States and Ireland to prevent students leaving school without sufficient qualifications. The study focuses on the context and attitudes towards educational disadvantage in the two countries and the subsequent policies. The Bridging the Gap (BTG) project supported by University College Cork highlights an exemplar case study through which educational leaders in both countries have opportunities to learn from each other. Both educational systems face two endemic questions: 1) How to make the best use of educational research bridging policy and practice? 2) How to incorporate the voice of disadvantaged youth in the decision-making systems that impact their lives? The US system can learn from the Irish in the use of the arts in schools as a motivational tool for and of the use of ICT with disadvantaged populations. Recommendations for Irish schools include investigation of the US model of full service community schools, to work with other offices within Irish government whose policies have implications for educational practice and to base evaluation of school level outcomes on a more rigorous methodological model.

Introduction

How do educational systems in the United States and Ireland address problems of educational disadvantage and early school leaving? As much as one might expect such a comparison to be disparate, these two English-speaking countries have much in common.

Neither educational system works with a centralized, legislatively mandated curriculum. Both face economic prosperity that causes great division of resources between those students coming from advantaged and disadvantaged homes. In both, technology plays an increasingly important role in work, at school and as part of the home life of students. When the exploration goes deeper it becomes obvious that questions faced by both systems also have positive relation to each other. Educational research is expanding on "both sides of the pond," both systems under-funded and struggling to make the most of the potential for research to bridge to both policy and practice (Levin, 2004). Another struggle, one that is still on the horizon in Ireland, is

inherent in the difficulty educators have, trained as they are to "help" young people, in changing paradigms to include those same young people in decision-making. Sectors in the US have discovered this is a key issue in building resiliency in disadvantage youth populations (Benson & Pittman, 2001; Bernard, 1990).

Family life is the first obvious difference. In the US schools, any given cohort of students will have many students from divorced and/or single parent families (US Bureau of Census, 1992). In addition, it is increasingly likely that many families include members with multiple ethnicities and racial backgrounds (US Bureau of Census, 2000).. Children and parents frequently spend their free time in separate pursuits and families move frequently (Long, 1992) In Ireland, divorced and single parents are still in the minority, less than 10% as reported in informal interviews with Irish families (James, 2004a; UK National Statistics, 2002). Family members are consistently Caucasian, and family life centers on the raising of children. Finally, the Irish seldom move and frequently many generations will live within short distances or on the same property (James, 2004a; Long, 1992).

Differences in the two countries are also evident in the philosophies and values that influence decisions made by educational leaders faced with disadvantaged populations. To grow up in the United States is to grow up in the "richest country on earth," whereas until very recently Ireland has seen itself as a poor country; one that was frequently the recipient of other's charity. This, mixed with a strong Catholic heritage of social justice, plays out in a strong Irish ethic to help the disadvantaged and to put resources towards assuring access or opportunities to that population.

Comparison of Two Educational Systems and Two Understandings of Risk

As Table 1 outlines, the education systems in the two countries are not that different. There are more layers in the Irish system for the early years, inclusive of early childhood, junior infants, and senior infants. The Irish system also has two high stakes tests. The first, the "Junior Leaving Certificate" ends compulsory education and the outcome of which may leave some youth towards vocational training. The score received on the "Leaving Certificate" determines what Universities and which fields will be open to the student in the future. Due to the stress of a single test that determines so many choices, Ireland has seen a rise in teenage suicide in recent years prior to the time students take this test. In a similar but less drastic manner, in Florida, a statewide test allows graduation if passed, but for those not passing, the students receive a "Certificate of Attendance." Lack of a diploma in the US and of the Junior Leaving Certificate and Leaving Certificates in Ireland marks a student as unqualified for consideration in most job markets.

Table 1: An outline of the two educational systems

United States	Ireland
▪ Early childhood education ▪ Elementary education (grades 1-5) ▪ Middle School (grades 6-8) ▪ High School – (grades 9-12) compulsory through 16 years or 9th /10th grade ▪ Certificate of Attendance, Diploma or GED	▪ Early childhood education ▪ Junior infants 4-5 years ▪ Senior infants 5/6 years ▪ Primary education (grades 1-6) ▪ Second Level education (grades 7-9 through junior cert) and (10-12 and leaving certification) ▪ Compulsory through 16, or three years post primary usually junior certification and grade 10

Comparisons between the US and Ireland show that both countries are concerned with growing numbers of young people who are leaving school without qualifications. In the US in 2000, there were 3.8 million youth, 16- 24-years old, who, although not enrolled in school, had not yet completed a high school program. Overall, 10.9 percent of the 34.6 million 16- 24-year-olds in the United States were dropouts. Although there have been year-to-year fluctuations in this rate, over the past 29 years dropout rates have gradually decreased in a pattern with an average annual decline of 0.1 percentage points per year (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2001). Referred to euphemistically as "leaks in the educational pipeline", recent research analyses points out that dropout figures may be significantly higher than usually calculated. The Manhattan Institute found that only 28% of student enrolled in Cleveland City in 1998 could be found as graduating from high school (The Forum for Youth Investment, 2004).

Educational disadvantage in Ireland links closely to poverty and it is believed that lack of education is a factor in perpetuating intergenerational poverty. The cause and effect nature of this issue is one reason for it to be a major focus for Irish policy. Educational disadvantage is a relative term pointing to students who obtain less advantage from education than peers – commonly due to disadvantages in familial context such as socio economic standing, family dysfunction, substance abuse, etc. Approximately 1,000 pupils do not transfer from primary to post primary education each year. In 1999 (the last year for solid statistics), 2400 young people or 3.2 percent did not complete their Leaving Certificate. One in ten children left primary school with significant literacy problems (Combat Poverty Agency, 2003). Approximately 33% of children who came from homes where the father is unemployed or unskilled did not continue school after Junior Leaving Certification (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2001).

Table 2 demonstrates a comparison between the risk factors pointed to in the analysis of the issues of educational disadvantage and early school leaving. . It becomes obvious that researchers in both countries define the lives of the students at risk of dropping out in similar terms, occasionally using slightly different language to refer to

similar situations. Minority status is a concern in both places but in Ireland, it refers primarily to the Caucasian ethnic minority group of the Travellers and a growing number of "asylum seekers". The list in the US includes teenage pregnancy whereas that risk factor would not be common enough in Ireland to create a population worth noticing.

Table 2: Risk factors identified in both countries as leaving to dropping out

United States	Ireland
1. Poor school attendance 2. Have repeated one or more grades 3. Low self-esteem or self-efficacy 4. Poor academic achievement 5. Primary language other than English 6. Attend school in large cities 7. Low socioeconomic backgrounds 8. Move or change schools frequently 9. Friends or family members that dropped out 10. Minority status 11. Illness or disability 12. Pregnant (Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction, Bergeson, & Heuschel, 2003)	1. Poor school attendance 2. Age variance where a student is older than the rest of their class 3. Poor self-image 4. Low motivation and family support 5. Father's employment record 6. Cost of education may be prohibitive 7. Family households where father is unemployed 8. Minority status: 75% of Traveller children leave school 9. Twice as many boys leave early as girls 10. Lack of family/community tradition in education 11. The failure of school curricula to reflect and validate the cultural backgrounds and learning styles of all learners. (National Youth Council of Ireland, 2001)

It is common in the research of both countries that, due to widespread economic growth, there is a widening gap between "those better off and the less well off," and "the haves and have nots"(Combat Poverty Agency, 2003; National Youth Council of Ireland, 2001; Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction et al., 2003). Where there is greater socio-economic inequality, there is an increased likelihood of educational inequality. In both countries there is a correlation between the head of household economic status and the degree of educational attainment in children (Combat Poverty Agency, 2003; US Bureau of Census, 1997).

Policies that Affect Practice

The United States is addressing issues of educational disadvantage with legislation, resources, and assessment. These include the many "Title's" of No Child Left Behind and high stakes testing in states. Simultaneous to the work of the US Department of Education, there is a growing push from informal leadership in youth development organizations to address the whole child. These philosophical outlooks work together in full service community schools where formal education embraces community programming and expands the resources available in the school to disadvantaged children and parents (Dryfoos, 1994).

The Republic of Ireland is addressing issues of educational disadvantage through a series of policies that embrace philosophies, similar to the youth development movement in the US, located under the Minister of Education. They include emphasis on making education accessible at all levels/to all groups and consistently include an element of youth work and vocational training. Inherent in and underlying these policies is a push by government to encourage education to develop partnerships and coordinate programs with other governmental and voluntary sector organizations (Boldt & Brendan, 1998). A brief synopsis of these policies follows, and demonstrates the range and tenure of the response to the issue of educational disadvantage in Ireland (Irish Department of Education and Science, 2003).

Youth Work Act, 2001:

This act provides a legal framework for the provision of youth work programs and services by the Minister for Education and Science and the Vocational Education Committee that manage outlay of funds and development of programs in each county. This act establishes localized guidance through the mechanism of youth work committees and councils that advise on matters related to development of services and programs.

Educational Welfare Act, 2000

One aspect of this act requires schools to make provisions for links with community organizations for the benefit of disadvantaged young people. This agency is just beginning to work on this issue (James, 2004a).

National Children's Strategy

Managed by the National Children's Organization, financed under the department of health, this strategy is based on adopting a "whole child" perspective as outlined by the United Nations strategy on children. This policy is grounded in six operational principles that guide action: 1) child centered, 2) family oriented, 3) equitable, 4) inclusive, 5) action- oriented, and 6) integrated holistically with all aspects of the child's life. This strategy outlines three goals:

  a) Children have a voice in matters which affect them;

  b) Children's lives will be better understood and their lives will benefit from evaluation, research and information into their needs; and finally,

  c) Children will receive quality support and services that promote their development.

White Paper on Voluntary Activity

This white paper, published in October 2000, outlined a cohesive framework of support for the Community and Voluntary Sector across Government Departments and Agencies. An advisory group, established in 2001, first addressed budgetary issues. Work towards the development of principles of best practice and the deepening of the relationship between government and the voluntary sector is on going.

National Drugs Strategy, 2001-2008

A major initiative of this strategy has been to establish the Young People's Facilities and Services Fund, which targets young people at risk.

US Recommendations for Drop Out Prevention

The Forum for Youth Investment points out, "We know more about the about the scope and nature of this problem than we do about the effectiveness of interventions. We should not underestimate the power of positive social relationships; school connectedness is a powerful protective factor" (The Forum for Youth Investment, 2004). Similar to the continuum of opinions on education from the USDOE to youth development organizations, there are an equally wide range of opinions as to what steps should be taken to prevent students from dropping out of school prior to graduation. The box below lists several tracks of research outcomes that address this question. The list has been shortened to those that compare or contrast with those seen in the exemplar Irish program, Bridging the Gap.

An overview of drop out prevention strategies in the US
Comprehensive school improvement: - Increasing students' sense of belonging and engagement   - Making schools more personal by establishing smaller and more supportive learning environments   - More meaningful student-teacher connections   - Using meaningful curriculum and effective instruction will help engage students in the learning process and reduce the boredom that can lead to dropping out.   (National Dropout Prevention Center/Network, 2004) Systemic renewal of school environments   - School-Community Collaboration   - Safe Learning Environments   - Family Engagement   - Early Childhood Education   - Early Literacy Development   Basic Core Intervention Strategies   - Mentoring/Tutoring   - Service-Learning   - Alternative Schooling   - After-School Opportunities   Making the Most of Instruction   - Professional Development   - Active Learning   - Educational Technology   - Individualized Instruction   - Career and Technical Education (CTE)   (Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction et al., 2003)

Bridging the Gap

To address the question, "How does educational leadership in Ireland address problems of educational disadvantage and early school leaving?" this study uses the multi year program in Cork known as Bridging the Gap (BTG) as a case study for its comparisons. The goal of BTG, an innovative, multi year project, is to enhance the educational experience of young people in Cork City. Running from 2001 through 2006, the project aims to "bridge the gap" between the educational opportunities and achievements of pupils attending schools in disadvantaged areas of Cork city and those in more affluent areas. The University College Cork coordinates the project, funded jointly by the Department of Education and Science and by private funding obtained by UCC. The core philosophy of the project is that systemic growth to address disadvantaged education will occur when schools understand the issues they face and have the resources they need to build local programs. The project follows five major strands of activity: research, school-level initiatives, networks, dissemination, professional development, and research. As the project enters its fourth year, the experience of project managers is that these strands have become less distinct. Bridging the Gap adopted a "community approach" to gathering and analyzing data. This form of information gathering was chosen because they believed it supported both collaborative effort and enhanced ownership of project outcomes (Deane, 2003).

During 2003-2004, 36 participating schools in the area of Cork City received a total of €110,000 ($139,000), averaging €3,000 ($3807) each plus access to special projects such as theater tickets and professional development opportunities. All of the schools had received a national designation as disadvantaged. Professional development opportunities included special events, IT courses and, for a few educators, scholarships to a summer program at Harvard program (Deane, 2004).

Table 3 charts the activities reported by BTG schools in the 2004 Report of Findings. An outstanding feature behind the data in this table is not only the number of schools (21 of 36) that chose to employ art a medium of engagement with disadvantaged students, but also the connectedness of art with other goals in those same projects. As an example, parent involvement with learning connected to their attendance at music performances by their children. Another outstanding feature comes in the comments in the 2004 final report that many sites reported that expectations of teachers raised, as their students were successful with art. These choices grow naturally from a strong Irish tradition of honoring the arts, especially music.

Table 3: Goals and activities of Bridging the Gap projects

	Primary	Post Primary
Using arts to improve school bonding, concentration, understanding of other cultures or academic skills	18	3
Group activity	17	5
Deepen parent involvement in learning	12	2
School wide activity	12	2
Increase teamwork and cooperation	10	2
Improve attendance	9	3
Improve literacy, oral language and reading	7	1
Action learning/action research/data driven	4	
Develop computer skills	3	2
Increase involvement in science or numeracy	3	
Stay in school/pass Junior cert		1
After school programming/homework club	4	
Drug awareness or prevention	1	
Nutrition and health	1	

In general, the programmatic choices made by BTG schools have much in common with those made by schools in disadvantaged areas of the United States. As in the US, Ireland may be supporting silos of good ideas with little cross communication. The Youth Work Act and the Educational Welfare Act, 2000 both directly mention schools working with community organizations "for the benefit of disadvantaged young people." This would seem to lead to the opportunity for implementation of partnerships similar to full service community schools (Dryfoos, 1994). However, when a person looks closely at the seven schools separated in the BTG report into schools "responding flexibly to the needs of learners and community", two who were put in that category mention a school community liaison working with parents and one worked to involve parents, pupils, staff and the local community in an effort to promote good health. That full service community schools might be of interest here is suggested in the story of Scoil Mhuire Na Nmgras, Greenmount NS, Green Street. An aspect of how they evaluate their own success is seen in the "use of the school building this year, after school hours, by The Barrack Street Band for their own school of music. The success of the project has put pressure on the Band, space wise, to provide for all who want classes" (Deane, 2004). The process of opening full service community schools often begins in the US by meeting community needs, similar to these (Dryfoos, 1994).

Ideals established by the work of the National Children's Office (similar to youth development ideals in the US stressing the importance of the child's voice in deciding the direction of the services they receive) are not evident in BTG reports from schools. This is also a similarity between educational practices in the two countries. In the US school, administrators report an understanding of youth development principles and activities only after implementation of a successful program in their schools.

Similar to school efforts in the US, evaluation of projects like these is difficult. The "community approach" to evaluation has so far not produced what educational research would consider valid or reliable results, reflecting instead self-report impressions of success from teachers and parents involved in the projects. The difficulties inherent in this issue issues of training and implementation. Issues of training involve engaging educators in measuring their successes in a valid manner so that their voice can be part of the landscape of educational policy development (Boldt & Brendan, 1998; James, 2004b). 2) How to empower educators in the field to take ownership of their data gathering efforts in a way that produces valid results without taking away time from their work with students. Practitioner of participatory action research, when practiced with an eye on rigor and achieving valid results, have a history of wrestling with these issues (Brennan & Noffke, 1997; Carr & Kemmis, 1986; Elliott, 1991; Zuber-Skerritt, 1991, 1992).

The use of technology for educational purposes (ICT) in schools with disadvantaged populations is an area of research targeted by special interest groups in British Educational Research Association and the American Educational Research Association. The schools in BTG mention use of ICT use for interactive reading instruction; enhancing teacher instruction; enhancing student presentation skills; and use with digital cameras.

Recommendations

Seven recommendations flow from this investigation into the similarities and differences between US and Ireland. Both educational communities have valuable insights and best practices to share with the other and there is room for further investigation.

The first three recommendations group together as separate, similar steps recommended to educational leaders in Bridging the Gap. They aim at strengthening the collaborative work by suggesting community groups similar to those frequently used by US schools to help bolster resources in disadvantaged schools.

1. Encourage collaborative involvement with Voluntary Youth Council to coordinate efforts for disadvantaged youth in given areas of the city between voluntary organizations and schools. The Cork Local Voluntary Council Guide lists 32 voluntary agencies that have, for at least some part of their mission, the work with disadvantaged children.

2. Send principals from some of the most disadvantaged schools to visit full service community schools in the United States. This could become part of the trip for those attending the Harvard program. The advantage to full service schools is that they typically have many activities during the summer months. Of special interest to the Irish community might be the adult education classes, such as computer and

language classes, Irish community schools presently do similar work and might appreciate such collaborative potential.

3. Encourage outreach to adult voluntary organizations such as Rotary or Lyons clubs, both active in the Cork area, to help schools find both volunteers and sustainable resources for BTG programs. There is also a Rotaract or young Rotarian group in Cork City, with a mission to do service and those young people might enjoy the opportunity to work with some of the BTG schools.

The next two recommendations would add to the field of educational leadership and be of special interest to educators in the United States.

4. Work with sites to obtain cross-site quantitative evidence on school attachment and motivation before and after attending one of the arts-based programs. Several BTG schools mentioned that children's attendance was 100% during days they had music and that the majority of parents had attended musical events at their children's schools. For those interested in the advantages of art education, linking school bonding and attendance to music would be fascinating.

5. Encourage cross communication in final years of BTG with National Children's Strategy, the National Drugs Strategy and others working to benefit children's lives in Ireland. Because Ireland places both the policies concerning public education and those following the UN direction about children having a say in their own lives under the auspices of the Minister of Education and Science, there is an opportunity for the filtering of youth development (to use the phrase from the US) ideals to be put to work in schools. Research shows that disadvantaged youth respond well when they participate in decisions that influence services around them. There is an opportunity for those ideals to have influence in keeping these students motivated to attend school. This may also offer opportunities for collaboration with Departments of State in the US, who have wrestled with the challenges inherent in incorporating similar ideas. For instance, the youth council for the Advisory Council on Adolescent Health at the Colorado Department of Health has a motto: "nothing about us without us".

6. The opportunity for in depth study of ICT for disadvantaged populations (targeted by five BTG schools) might provide an area for study by Masters or Doctoral students in education.

7. BTG might consider the use of a rigorous participatory action research framework, especially for the school principals, as a vehicle to tighten the data driven aspect of the projects, and give clear research questions, the results of which would lead to the next cycle of actions. This should narrow the range of results and help coordinate project goals and the data.

Conclusion

Disadvantage has much the same look and feel in the small country of Ireland as in the United States. In addition, Irish educational leaders respond to the issues in their

schools with similar interventions. The US can learn from the Irish use of the arts and willingness to promote youth development at the level of national policy.

The Irish may choose to investigate full service community schools and develop more in depth collaboration with service organizations to support their programs with volunteers and financial assistance. Finally, educational leaders in both Ireland and the United States can further their agendas with the use of more rigorous, data driven, methods of studying their own practice.

These are not easy or short term solutions and require educational leadership that has both the long range vision to see potential outcomes, but also the dogged determination to make it happen. Governmental organizations and schools do not easily build collaborative practice with organizations in the voluntary sector. At first, they speak different languages and appear to work from different professional ethics (Dryfoos, 1994). In a similar fashion, it is not an easy task for educators, trained as they are to tell children and youth what to do, to make an "about-face" and suddenly include these same youth in making decisions about the services that impact their lives (National Children's Office, 2000). Cross-cultural exchange of research and practice, such as BTG has begun with Project Zero at Harvard, is a great beginning.

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